

The Rationalized Compassion: Participant Observation in Two Soup Kitchens in New York City

Shen Yang, Pace University New York Campus

Field of Study: Sociology & Anthropology; Research Paper

Soup kitchens in New York City are providers of compassionate care for people who suffer from poverty or food insecurity. However, they are facing challenges from daily service provision. As the pressures of serving the number of diners beyond their limits, the kitchens have to make sensible compromises between efficiency and normative considerations. Although both kitchens adopt a rational system to make the procedure controllable and predictable, it aggregates particularly the diners' alienated social identity. This research adopts the methodology of William Foote Whyte's classic study of Boston's Italian North End, which he calls "street corner society" (1981). Since then, his work has given a rise of the field of Urban Studies. In a highly heterogeneous urban environment like New York City, sentimentality will be swept away, and compassion will be rationalized. Drawing on the collected research data, the paper hopes to offer a theoretical analysis of human behaviour and a framework for a more accurate picture of normative sensibility.

Key words: Alienation; Charity; Ethnography; Poverty; Rationality; Urban Studies

1 Introduction

One day in the Greenwich Village soup kitchen, a female diner stopped by and talked to one of the short-term volunteers Debra¹:

Diner: "Do you feel dignified to be here?"

Debra: "I don't know."

Diner: "I don't think it feels dignified to be here because . . ."

The diner did not finish the sentence as other volunteers cut in the line. Debra later continued the conversation:

"We want them to feel like we are serving them as guests, but I think that reminds them of what they cannot do . . ."

In the United States, unlike other food charity programs such as food banks and food pantries, soup kitchens prepare free and fresh, hot meals for the diners who suffer from food insecurity. They aim at providing compassionate care for people struggling with

¹ All the names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.



poverty, helping diners reconnect and reintegrate into the society. Although the diners could enjoy the free meal in Greenwich Village kitchen, their actions apparently were regulated by certain procedures. In the spice station, for example, the diners had to wait for the volunteers to pick up the spice, because the staff in the kitchen was afraid the diners would take too much if they were allowed to move first. Near the recycling point, the diners had to hand over their trays to the volunteers instead of recycling by themselves, since the kitchen decided it would be more efficient than teaching the recycling rules to all of the diners. However, we have to ask whether the community service actually dignifies the individuals, or whether it just aggregates their degraded social identities. In an interview, Debra articulated the dilemma:

“They cannot choose the food they like . . . they are not allowed to take spices from the spice station by themselves . . . they cannot even recycle the leftover properly . . .”

While 12.8% of the New York City population suffered from food insecurity in their households, the demand for food pantries and soup kitchens increased by serving 5% more diners in 2018 compared to the previous years (Hunger Free America, 2018). For instance, according to the same report one in nine residents living in Manhattan was facing food insecurity in their households. Meanwhile, food programs across Manhattan responded that they had to “turn people away, reduce the amount of food distributed per person, or limit their hours of operation” because of resources scarcity (Hunger Free America, 2018: 14). With such higher demands and societal pressures, the food service agencies have come to a critical time, facing challenges from daily service provision. Therefore, they have to make sensible compromises between efficiency and normative considerations. In a highly heterogeneous urban environment like New York City, sentimentality will be swept away, and compassion will be rationalized. Drawing on the data I collected, I hope to offer a theoretical analysis of human behavior and a framework for a more accurate picture of normative sensibility.

This research adopts the methodology of William Foote Whyte’s classic study of Boston Italian North End, which he calls “street corner society” (1981). Since then, his work has given a rise of the field of urban studies. Adapting his ethnographic methods which involves participant observations and informal interviews, I volunteered in two soup kitchens, one in Greenwich Village and the other in Chinatown, obtaining qualitative data through participation in meal services and conversations with people. Drawing on the data I collect, I have compared their similarities and differences in terms of exploring the institutions’ dynamic. Accordingly, the scenes address the specific challenges and sensible normative consideration of street-level work faced by frontline workers in the institutions (Zacka, 2017). This research sheds light on how reinforcement of rationality might aggregate the diners’ degradation at street-level institution.



2 Field Description: the Soup Kitchens

The first kitchen that I volunteered for is located in the heart of the busy Greenwich Village streets, surrounded by fancy shops where college students like to hang out. The church's support had played an important role, lending the basement and allowing the staff to fulfill their mission in whatever way they wanted. According to the volunteer coordinator, the kitchen tries to maintain "a restaurant setting" for the people who come here to eat, offering a full menu from appetizers to desserts. They even had a small black board painted with beautiful chalk pictures of food on display.

The organization was proud of its all-volunteer based policy; all of them including the regulars, who were mostly church members and came on regular basis, were working here for free ever since the establishment first opened. The regulars dominated the kitchen tasks such as cooking for the main dishes or cleaning the equipment. Sometimes they would allow some short-term volunteers, who are usually young men, to do heavy lifting or cleaning.

Most of the volunteers would choose either the morning or the lunch shift. Two volunteer coordinators were responsible for the short-term volunteers, giving them instructions and advice. The procedures on each shift were *always* the same: there would be an introduction session at 10 am for short-term volunteers, introducing the kitchen's general information while the regulars started to prepare the food. After that, the volunteers would be asked to put on hats and aprons. They would also need to change their gloves every time when they were assigned to a new task. Then, they would move the furniture, allocate the culinary and prepare for sandwiches. The lunch would not begin until 1:30 p.m.

The second kitchen was another church-oriented institution, located next to the busy Chinatown. However, during the time I volunteered, I rarely saw Asian or Chinese diners come to the kitchen. Although it had more capacity, somehow there were not as many diners as it was expected. While the Greenwich kitchen served over 200 people per hour on Saturday, the Chinatown kitchen only served around 180 people per hour on Sunday.

There were differences in volunteering too; the institution required volunteers to sign up online. Whenever I visited their website, all 12 slots for each shift were already full. In reality, the institution was never sure how many short-term volunteers would actually turn up. Unlike in Greenwich Village, the Chinatown kitchen hires long-term staff to avoid labor shortage. They also have people from their male residential program to help in the kitchen for heavy duties such as culinary cleaning or storage sorting, in exchange for free food and residence; they liked to refer themselves as "man on the program."

There were lesser short-term volunteers in the kitchen. They were usually women and came as individuals rather than organized groups. The kitchen is tight and the number of volunteers is small, so the regulars and the short-term volunteers have to work together at the same time, which offers them the opportunities to socialize. Moreover, the tasks assigned to the volunteers largely depended on the chef, who was in charge of food preparation as well as volunteer supervision.



3 When Charity Meets Poverty

During the industrial revolution, the working class developed the habit of mass sugar consumption as this was the most convenient and cheapest way to gain energy under heavy-work conditions. In “Sweetness and Power”, the anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1985) argues that the consumption of sugar is connected with different social meanings of human behavior and identity, implying “what people eat expresses who and what they are, to themselves and to others” (1985: P13). Correspondingly, even though they don’t labor in factories, contemporary diners in the soup kitchens, who most likely have dental issues, also become “firmly habituated to a large, regular and dependable supply of sweetness.” Adapting Mintz’s theory to my own work, I argue that obtaining food in soup kitchens also carries with it new meanings, indicating, for example, that the diners are subordinated to their condition of material deprivation (Jankowski, 2008).

In pursuit of the story of sugar in the soup kitchens, I observed that the Chinatown kitchen offered only one cup of juice to each community diners, but the diners frequently made excuses to see if they could have more. Once, a man approached me and asked for one more cup of juice because “there [was] a kid waiting [in the canteen].” While I told him that the kid had to come and pick up the juice by himself, he left claiming that the kid would be disappointed. Of course, “the kid” never came for the juice. The kitchen specifically instructed the volunteers to hand the cups directly to the diners. When a young man quickly picked up two cups from the table without permission, the shift coordinator shrugged and said to the volunteers: “That’s why we have to hand it to them instead of letting them touch the cups.”

In Greenwich Village, the kitchen used to store sugar in glass bottles, but since the diners were in the habit of sugar-consumptions, the condiments station, or the “spice station” as the volunteers called, changed into small packages and only offered two bags of sugar. However, it was difficult to count how many bags the volunteers actually gave out, as the diners kept coming back and asking for more. Meanwhile, some diners came to ask for spice and wrap it up within a piece of tissue, saving it for the upcoming cold weather. The focus on obtaining food can take its act on new meanings, implying the subsequent transformation of the diners’ social identity. Although both kitchens have stated the control of the quantity of sugar delivered as it is not healthy for the diners, sweetness has become the cheapest substitutes of nourishment for the diners daily.

In “Cracks in the Pavement,” the scarcity of resources has been the dominated principle for individuals who are materialistically deprived (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2008). The same holds for the diners in the soup kitchens. Poverty has deprived the diners of the resources that the public takes for granted. Therefore, they had to make the best out of what the kitchens could provide. The kitchens were not just places for eating but also played important roles in the diners’ social life: they chatted with other acquaintances, used the bathroom for washing up, or took a nap. Once, I even saw a person take a piece of kitchen napkin to write his application for a position in the shelter. Although the two kitchens also ran the residential programs in parallel of food serving, the chances of getting in are very slim. In Greenwich, there were diners approaching the volunteer coordinators to see if they could negotiate for a place to stay. In Chinatown, the institution asked the “men on the program” to work voluntarily in the kitchen as long-term staff in exchange for shelter.



The amount of protein given during lunchtime can reflect how material deprivation has conditioned the diners' behavior. When I accidentally removed a small portion of turkey stew from the plate, the man waiting and watching me shouted: "What are you doing, you Chinese!" The chief stepped in and defended the volunteers, so the diner immediately withdrew the "complaint", and I was spared from the "fight." Most of the diners did not express their frustration openly. Instead, they would protest in a passive aggressive way such as giving a cold glare or remaining silent the whole time. Their anxiety towards food distribution indicates the diners' concerns about their degradation, expressed through the daily pressures in obtaining nutrition. Material scarcity not only constitutes the diner's social behavior but also symbolizes their degraded social positions; they have to depend on charity kitchens regarding their daily needs, which indicates their subordinated status associated within the institutions.

4 The Charity Meets Rationality

Both kitchens' staff, especially the short-term volunteers, were constantly changing and unstable, while the amount of work kept growing. Located in New York City, one of the most diverse cities in the world, where its heterogeneity "tends to break down rigid social structures and . . . [displaces] personal relations" (Wirth 1938: P1), the soup kitchens too had to cope with unpredictable situations and avoid risks. Therefore, both institutions I studied, adopted a rational system to "[set] the stage for an attractive and parsimonious model of accountability" (Zacka, 2017: P42). The Greenwich Village kitchen enforced the same rules on the volunteers each time before the shift started, whereas the Chinatown kitchen presented their food quality control as their effort in reducing the chance of troubles. Although in soup kitchens the whole "performance ought to be controllable and predictable" (Zacka, 2017: P39), the rational system aggregates particularly the diners' degraded social identity, despite the kitchens' efforts in offering compassion.

4.1 Rationalization

The arrangement of the volunteers in both kitchens resembled the factory production line. The volunteers were engaged in specialized roles as a means for achieving the maximum efficiency through organized groups (Wirth, 1938). For instance, when the lunch service began in Greenwich Village, the regulars automatically filed into their usual positions. Most of them stayed behind the counters and assembled the food. There would be one or two regulars who stood at the end of the assembly line dealing with the diners' requests; another one or two staying at the corner and cleaning the trays. Compared to the regulars, short-term volunteers were assigned to the remaining tasks randomly.

However, such arrangement did give a feeling of impersonality and strangeness. Although the Greenwich volunteer coordinator asked some of the short-term volunteers to look around and "interact" with the diners, there was little opportunity in having conversations, as the volunteers were constantly in a hurry for their tasks. The process effectively restricted the volunteers' movements to limited spaces and discouraged their engagement with the diners. In Chinatown, since the diners had to come to the counter and pick up the food themselves, the volunteers had some opportunities to share a few moments of interaction.



When I was in charge of juice station, at first I would greet the diners personally, asked how they were doing before handing over the cups. When the line was getting longer, and more diners were waiting, I found myself cutting the greetings from “How are you doing?” and “Would you like to have a cup of juice?” to one short phrase “Juice?” or sometimes just raising up the cup without saying anything. As the food distribution resembles the production line as well as the specialized division of labor, the interactions turned out to be impersonal regardless of personal efforts of the kitchen staff.

The serving in both kitchens exemplifies the rationalization of the conduct in urban life. Every volunteer has a specialized role associated with increasingly rational, instrumental actions that took efficiency into account (Weber, 2010). As the rationalization regulates all spheres of kitchen work, it left little room for sentiment and might result in impersonality among the individuals. Despite their claims in offering compassion, the staff in soup kitchens played segmented roles during the shift, which reinforced the impersonality between the volunteers and the diners. The difference in the kitchens’ attitudes towards the diners reveals the characteristics of relationships in urban environments: superficial, transitory, and segmental (Wirth, 1938).

4.2 Alienation

The rational system granted the kitchen staff power to calculate and determine what food the diners would be entitled to have, and the diners did not have as much power in decision-making like regular restaurant customers, which implied the diners’ inferiority and powerlessness. In other words, the institutions failed to treat the diners with the compassionate care that they claimed to maintain. In Greenwich Village kitchen, the food quality was nowhere near the “restaurant standard” that the kitchen claimed to maintain, since there was not much variety and the food tasted quite bland. They also used cheap foods like canned fruits for budget control.

Similarly, the Chinatown kitchen also restricted the diners’ choices. The food donation from supermarkets and café chain stores exemplifies the diners’ loss in autonomy. While the kitchen prepared the meals, one volunteer complained that the staff threw away too much food, particularly the pastries. A man working in the institution explained:

“They [the pastry] don’t look [good] . . . they apparently stayed overnight in the storage . . . sure, we can still eat them, but we don’t want to take risks . . .”

The supermarket got rid of the leftovers in order to provide fresh pastries for their customers, yet the almost expired food ended up on the tables of the people who were not the usual consumers of the supermarket. Ironically, the labels claimed the sandwiches “Made today, Go today”, but the volunteer did find several packages were already rotten or went moldy. No one in the kitchen seemed to know the exact expiry dates of those sandwiches, because the stores intentionally did not label them. I even felt relief that the diners would be unable to find out the expiry date of the sandwiches.



Over the course of my fieldwork, my views changed. I used to think that the diners in soup kitchens should be grateful for what they have considering their circumstances; but in the meantime I still treated the diners differently from general public. It all comes back to the question: Do the diners ever have the choice? As the chef in the Chinatown kitchen once said, they did not. But why? If a college student is allowed to have a particular diet, why can the soup kitchens' diners not have the same choice?

The priority of administrative staff is to make rational decisions on how to run the kitchens sustainably and effectively. However, such rationality may unintendedly strip off the normative sensibility as well as “[disposing] of the physical, psychological and moral entity ‘man’ attached to that tag” (Author, 1944: 101). The projection of the diners in the kitchen implies that they lost control on parts of their lives and suffer from the alienation (Marx, 1848: 2010) of being subjugating into charity.

5 Conclusion

Compassion, as an important factor of human emotions, is considered as the irrational and emotional part of human life. However, the considerably calculated activities I observed in both kitchens signify how the rationalized conduct of the life sweeps away the sentimentality (Weber 1930) in the urban environment.

The operation of food serving in both kitchens resembles the factory production line in terms of maximum efficiency. Such arrangement centralizes the volunteers' activities in the kitchen areas and subtly draws a line between the volunteers and the diners. Thus, it limits the opportunities for these two groups of individuals to interact with one another and reinforces the impersonality among them, meaning it fails to reintegrate underprivileged diners back into society.

Furthermore, the rationalized food management in the soup kitchens not only causes further frictions in individual interactions but also constitutes alienation of the diners. The occasional frustration the diners let out during food distribution voices their concerns about subjugation (Marx, 1848) to the condition of poverty. Therefore, the further the rationalization of compassion develops, the more alienated the diners are likely to feel in the soup kitchens. The dinners in the soup kitchens become an accessory of poverty (Polanyi, 1944), because they have lost individual characters once they relegate themselves to the charity; the current market-oriented social system that does not take sentimentality for granted.

With tight budget and time control, the street-level soup kitchens have to face and cope with various challenges and difficulties to serve the people in need. Thus, “in order to be perfectly integrated into . . . its precise choreography of moving parts” (Zack, 2017: 19), the individuals — whether it is the volunteers or the diners — constantly engage in the increasingly rational and instrumental routines of the kitchen. As a result, they are left with little room for sentimental consideration. However, since the scarcity of resources has conditioned certain social behavior of the diners and deprived them of previous social identities, the lack of sufficient normative consideration might lead them into further alienation.



6 Further Research

So far, the paper has demonstrated how deprivation of resources and rationalization of compassion in the urban environment can aggregate the diners' degraded status, but the individual agency is missing in this picture. Like the diner who brought up the conversation of "[feeling] dignified", how individuals react to the operation of soup kitchens can be another exemplification of how people resist or embrace the rationalistic influence upon them. It might suggest the amount of food thrown away by the diners in Greenwich Village, is a representation of individuals' passive resistance to subordination.

The gender differentiation in both kitchens is also worth further investigation. In the Green Village kitchen there were "always more male than female" diners, but nobody seems to know the reasons:

"Good question . . . why? Maybe females are more cling to families and friends . . . We also always need more men's clothing donation than women's . . ."

(Andrea, the Green Village Soup Kitchen volunteer)

The gender differences not only exist among the diners, but also among the volunteers. There tend to be more female than male volunteers in both kitchens' staff. Correspondingly, their roles are also different. Once I offered to sweep the floor in the backroom, Adam, who was in "the program" of the Chinatown kitchen went to find me a better broom and said, jokingly, because I am "a woman." Similarly, when we were assigned to break the cardboard boxes in terms of better recycling, a female volunteer stated that she never worked at the backroom and thought "this [was] a man's job". Nonetheless, the gender issues addressed can provide another interpretation of urbanism in the soup kitchens.

Finally, the empirical data presented here only includes two kitchens from Lower Manhattan; the paper does not wish to make a quick judgement that all the soup kitchens fail to provide compassionate care. As Andrea one of the regulars in Greenwich Village kitchen stated, she felt volunteering in the kitchen could help build community. Indeed, while I worked in the spice station and talked to the diners a little more, I felt less impersonal. One of the diners even asked if he could take pictures with the volunteers and send them to his families in Puerto Rico; others stopped by to socialize more often, comparing their experience of volunteering in other stations. In addition, it might be argued that the socialization in soup kitchens does help reduce social isolation and reintegrate the diners into the society, although the pressures of poverty are the clouds that wander through the sky.



7 Reference List

- Hunger Free America. (2018). "New York City Hunger Report." *HungerFreeAmerica* website. Retrieved from https://www.hungerfreeamerica.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/NYC%20and%20NYS%20Hunger%20Report%202018_0.pdf on May 19, 2019.
- Jankowski, S. (2008). *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1848). "Manifesto of Communist Party." In: Edelman, M. and Haugerud, A. (Eds.). (2010). *The Anthropology of Development and Globalization*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2010
- Mintz, S. (1985). *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: N.Y. Viking.
- Polanyi, K. (1944). "The Self-Regulating Market." In: Edelman, M. and Haugerud, A. (Eds.). (2010). *The Anthropology of Development and Globalization*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2010
- Weber, M. (1930). "The Evolution of the Capitalist Spirit." In: Edelman, M. and Haugerud, A. (Eds.). (2010). *The Anthropology of Development and Globalization*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2010
- Whyte, W.F. (1981). *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wirth, L. (1938). "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1), 1-24.
- Zacka, B. (2017). *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 111-151.

