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Doing dignity at the Grace Café: An ethnographic exploration of a homeless outreach program

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Doing Dignity at the Grace Café: An Ethnographic Exploration of a Homeless Outreach
Program

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Sociology
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Courtney Glover

ABSTRACT

Homeless outreach programs vary widely in their approaches to client treatment. At the Grace Café, an organization that serves daily meals to people who are homeless, the concept of dignity is central to guest treatment. According to the café's ideology, the importance of providing food is secondary to serving with dignity. This research explores dignity as an ideal of client treatment at the Grace Café. Based on ethnographic research, this paper explores how dignity is communicated to volunteers, implemented in service, and challenged at the Grace Café.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Homelessness is a problem for millions of people in the United States. While the existence of homelessness as a social problem is not a matter of dispute, researchers are divided on defining the causes and solutions to this problem. Some researchers describe homelessness as a problem of social structure. Social policy, the lack of affordable housing, and the absence of well-paid employment are all structural forces that can be cited to explain the problem of homelessness. From this perspective, those who fall to the bottom are the victims of an unfortunate intersection of social structure and life circumstances. On the other hand, the prevailing tendency is to describe homelessness as the result of individual deficiencies. Researchers cite high incidents of substance abuse and mental illness among the homeless population. From this perspective, those who fall to the bottom of our society are there because of personal pathologies and/or choice.

The prevalence of this individual deficiency perspective is consistent with our society's emphasis on individualism. In a system where people are held individually responsible for their success and failure, it is assumed that those who do not succeed have done something wrong. Sympathy is not available for people who are evaluated as personally responsible for their situations. It follows that most agencies serving homeless people offer discipline and reform, not sympathy. However, this is not always the case. I

conducted research at the Grace Café,¹ an organization that emphasizes dignity and respect instead of discipline and reform.

The Grace Café is a non-denominational religious program that serves meals to homeless people five days a week. Founded in 2001, the café operates under the supervision of a board of corporate and political leaders. The daily functioning of the café relies on a combination of regular, committed volunteers and a revolving base of volunteers who come from churches, local universities, or to fulfill court mandated community service.

My research at the Grace Café is ethnographic. Therefore, my primary research purpose is to explore the daily functioning of this organization. Specifically, because the emphasis at the café is dignified service, how is an image of dignity constructed at the café, and how is this image maintained in the face of contradictory everyday practice?

To place the research questions into context, I will first review the literature on the problem of homelessness and the social services serving people who are homeless. Then I will describe my method and findings at the café, focusing on the concept of dignity and how it is applied to service. Returning to the larger problem of homelessness, I will explore how my findings fit within the image of the provision of social services to homeless people.

¹ In order to conceal the identity of the organization, its volunteers, and its guests, pseudonyms are used for all individuals, and the organization itself. Additionally, all other geographically identifying details have been omitted

Chapter 2: Homelessness and Service Provision to Homeless People

In order to situate my research, I will examine the literature defining and examining the social problem of homelessness, and the provision of social services to homeless people. Then I will explore how this fits into the cultural context of individualism and its consequences.

Defining and Exploring the Social Problem of Homelessness

It seems as if it would be relatively easy to define homelessness. At its base, homeless is simply a condition of “being without a home.” Yet social researchers do not find it so simple to define the topic. For example, Anthony Marcus (2006) asked “Who are the homeless, really?” and spent the first chapter of his book expounding on the difficulty answering this question. While he never actually answered the question, explicitly his sample was people living in shelters. While other researchers (Leibow, 1993; Marvesti, 2003; Spencer 1994) likewise narrow their conceptualization of “the homeless” to shelter clients, still others include people living in shelters as well as those living on the streets (Dordick, 1997; Timmer, et al 1994). Another approach to the problem of conceptualizing “the homeless” is found in a footnote in Wagner’s book, Checkerboard Square. He addresses the problem of defining “the homeless” and feels that, because he studied individuals who frequent a small area serving as a networking spot for homeless people, his sample would better be described as “street people.” Yet this complicated his research: “Although I use this term [street people], for more theoretical and comparative statements I return to the term homeless and the recent

literature on homelessness since street person is still a very imprecise term and remains less recognized as a social science term” (Wagner,1993:20).

What emerges from this confusion in defining who is “homeless” is evidence that researchers are not describing an objective condition, because a definition of who “the homeless” are cannot be agreed upon. Instead, researchers are focusing on a “type” of person, and dis-embodied “types” of people do not necessarily translate easily into real-life experiences (Loseke, 2007). In this way, research is not really about the *condition* of homelessness, it is about the *people* who are homeless.

This leads to the most common question asked in the literature about homelessness: Why are people homeless? For sociologists, homelessness is a structural problem (Breakey, 1997; Leibow, 1993; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Timmer, 1994) created by the absence of well-paid employment, the limited availability of low-income housing (McCasney, 1990), and government policies (Shlay and Rossi, 1992). Yet this sociological focus is quite uncommon in the literature, which primarily attends to examining the individual causes of the condition of homelessness. A considerable body of literature has been dedicated to exploring the prevalence of a history of childhood poverty, instability, and abuse among the homeless (Bassuk et al., 1997; Susser, Struening, & Conover, 1987). This is an instance of ‘blaming the victim.’ Although individuals may be homeless because of childhood trauma, and therefore out of one’s control, the problems of poverty are still seen as existing inside them, not as a result of external structure. Further research explores what characteristics are most likely present in an individual who remains homeless, and in an individual who will move out of

homelessness. Again, this assumes that homelessness is an individual problem. (Morrell-Ballai and Boydell, 2000).

Focusing on individuals, the dominant tendency among Americans in general as well as in academic work is to conceptualize homelessness as a result of individual pathologies or choice (for a full review, see Shlay and Rossi, 1992). It is very common, therefore, to see homelessness conceptualized as a consequence of mental illness and substance abuse, although whether these are a cause or consequence of homelessness is sometimes questioned (Fischer, et al, 1986; Wright and Weber, 1987). Research from this perspective is abundant, creating an image of homelessness as a condition caused by problems of dysfunctional individuals.

Social Services

Schneider and Ingram (1993) discuss the relationship between the social construction of target populations and the implementation of public policy. They illustrate how the social construction of “types” of people as “good and moral” or “bad and immoral” has a strong impact on the nature of policies directed toward the actual people in these groups. Positively constructed, powerful groups, for example, are often the target of positive, beneficial policy. Examples include policy directed toward the elderly or veterans. On the other hand, public officials are pressured to “devise punitive, punishment-oriented policy for negatively constructed groups” (334). For instance, rehabilitation programs directed toward drug users or criminals include many rules of behavior and violations of these rules carry heavy sanctions.

Academic literature on homelessness largely depicts “the homeless” as deficient and personally responsible for their situation. Given this, it is expected that researchers

have found that many programs for homeless people can be characterized as punitive and reformative. People who are seen as responsible for their troubles, predictably, do not get respect.

For example, when discussing narrative constructions of “the homeless” at a shelter, Amir Marvasti (2003) found a common theme among workers: They all saw the situation of clients as a result of personal failures (110). The evaluation of clients as deficient individuals translated into a remedial attitude towards the homeless. Marvasti notes: “It is evident that “discipline” and “learning one’s lesson” are intended goals of the shelter policies...” (95). Marvasti found that clients at the shelter were not evaluated according to their needs, but on their compliance with shelter policies, and the main focus at the shelter was changing clients. This makes sense: Schneider and Ingram (1993) describe policy directed toward powerless, negatively evaluated populations as punitive. In social services oriented toward the homeless, clients are expected to comply with the rules and to “pay,” or be punished, for their situation.

Rebecca Anne Allahyari (2000) found a similar theme at The Salvation Army, where clients were regarded as “morally suspect” (99). This evaluation of clients is evident in the shelters rules: residents were prohibited from drinking, drugs, violence and stealing. An 11pm curfew was strictly enforced. At The Salvation Army, “the homeless” are a group of people who need to be controlled. Accordingly, The Salvation Army emphasized rehabilitation and redemption through sobriety and hard work. The Salvation Army is a strong example of how pathological depictions of “the homeless” translate into remedial, disparaging treatment of homeless clients.

Likewise, in his research at a homeless assistance program at River City, Spencer (1997) found that an individualistic evaluation of “the homeless” meant that people seeking service were expected to prove they were “service worthy” in order receive assistance. This required clients to cast themselves simultaneously as not responsible for their situation, and as “taking responsibility” for getting themselves *out* of their situation (161). Spencer found that prospective clients seemed to understand this and framed their stories in line with such expectations. Spencer’s work illustrates the strength of the cultural expectations of homeless people: Homeless people are aware of common constructions of “the homeless” as deficient people. They know that to get assistance, they must prove that they deserve services.

The Cultural Code of Individualism and its Relation to Social Service Provision

Individualism, according to Bellah and colleagues, “lies at the very core of American culture” (1985, 142). Americans live their lives, fail, succeed, and are evaluated on an individual basis. The power of the cultural code of individualism can be seen clearly in how Americans judge sympathy-worthiness. According to Clark, (1987) the giving and receiving of sympathy is subject to an elaborate set of rules. In order to claim sympathy, individuals must be evaluated as morally worthy and not complicit for their plight.

The codes of individualism and the rules governing sympathy are pervasive themes; the power of individualism can be seen in how Americans judge sympathy worthiness. For example, Loseke (1995) illustrated that in order to be evaluated as “deserving,” poor people must be evaluated as experiencing, through no fault of their own, a temporary condition, and be evaluated as actively working to improve their

condition. So, for example, when people on welfare are depicted as “lazy” people who accept government “handouts,” they are criticized and receive no sympathy or its behavioral expression of help. Given beliefs that homelessness is created by individual behaviors, homeless people also receive little sympathy or help. “The homeless” are simply another example of how the relationship between individualism and sympathy plays out.

Evaluated as individuals, homeless people are “failures.” In academic literature and in cultural portrayals, “the homeless” are frequently depicted as lazy, mentally ill, substance abusers, and so on. Due to the primacy of individualistic explanations of homelessness, structural analyses of homelessness are often cast aside. In their failure to overcome their problems, homeless people are deficient.

When social researchers, and the general American public, view homelessness as a result of personal failure, homeless people can easily be evaluated as “undeserving” of sympathy and help. Instead, many social service agencies treat homeless people as problematic and in need of control. This is, after all, what many people think ‘they’ need. Remedial programs fit well into Loseke’s (1997) analysis of how the morality of charity is constructed: with worthy clients, benevolent volunteers, and without disturbing the capitalist order. The treatment homeless clients receive in remedial social service agencies makes sense, and the morality of these institutions is easily defended within this paradigm. Although this picture fits together nicely, this is not the whole story. Not all service agencies follow the remedial model of offering services to people who are homeless.

Variations in Social Service Agencies for the Homeless

In the sections above, I constructed a consistent picture of relationships among individualism, homelessness and social service agencies. Research about homelessness focuses on homeless *people*, and describes high rates of personal pathologies, such as mental illness and substance abuse, among homeless individuals. In our culture of individualism, the conclusion is clear: homeless people are deficient individuals. Therefore, they need to be punished, controlled and repaired. As I have demonstrated, there are many social service agencies that do this. However, while this is prevalent, other social service agencies complicate this relationship.

In addition to her research at The Salvation Army, Allahyari (2000) also conducted research at Loaves and Fishes, a Catholic charity in the same city. There she found a completely different “vision of charity.” Instead of condemnation and control, clients were treated with mercy. Indeed, according to Allahyari, Loaves and Fishes does not serve “clients,” it serves “guests,” with a goal not to reform guests, but to serve them with grace and dignity. Absent are discussions of how to fix the homeless. There are no rules, no discipline, and no punishment. Guests do not need to prove they are worthy of sympathy and assistance.

Loaves and Fishes and The Salvation Army serve the same clients in the same city, but do so in very different ways. This relates to how homeless clients are viewed. At The Salvation Army, and other service agencies, clients are “morally suspect” and therefore expected to prove their worthiness and to earn the assistance they receive through hard work and discipline. At Loaves and Fishes, Allahyari (2000) found constructions of clients as “worthy” or “unworthy” to be notably absent. Attention is not

given to constructing an image of the client, but rather to constructing an image of the service provided. Loaves and Fishes is evidence that remedial, punitive social services may be common, but other approaches do exist. The unique approach to service provided by Loaves and Fishes is particularly important, according to Miller and Keys's (2001) research. With the premise of Snow and Anderson's (1993) findings that the need for meaning and self-worth are equally as important as survival needs, Miller and Keys explored the concept of dignity in the lives of people who are homeless. In interviews with 24 homeless people, Miller and Keys found several external events that influence individual senses of dignity. These events, often provided by outreach programs, enhanced individual feelings of self worth. Given these findings, the service provided by Loaves and Fishes is more than just an exception to the usual treatment of homeless people. The service found at Loaves and Fishes is possibly an important positive force in the lives of homeless people, but it is still limited to the level of the individual.

Despite the notable exception of Loaves and Fishes, I began my own research at the Grace Café as a sociology student. I was critical of individualistic solutions to social problems, and expected to find a punitive organization engaged in placing blame and trying to reform homeless clients. I chose the Grace Café as a research site, not to learn about the café itself, but to analyze the construction of "the homeless" in this particular setting. What I emerged with was completely different. I found my initial focus to be unobtainable because I could not describe the construction of "the homeless" at the Grace Café, because people at the café did not generally talk about clients, and volunteers' days did not leave time to speak with homeless people themselves. Instead, volunteers and organizers talked about providing quality service with an emphasis on treating guests

with dignity and respect. Finding this, my research question shifted. Instead of evaluating the construction of clients at the cafe, I explore how the concept of dignity is framed and sustained at the Grace Café.

Chapter 3: Methods and Setting

Methods

My primary data set consists of ethnographic fieldnotes collected over a period of 3 months. I volunteered at the café 10 times and stayed for about 3 ½ hours each time, writing approximately 60 single-spaced pages of fieldnotes. I spent eight of my ten visits serving tables upstairs. On two of my visits, I worked taking tickets at the gate downstairs, where guests were admitted to the café. My experiences at the two locations were quite different. When I worked upstairs, many of my fieldnotes are focused on the time spent before and after service, because the actual time I spent serving was repetitive and forgettable. In order to maximize the before and after time, I arrived at least 45 minutes before service began and stayed through the clean-up period.

On the other hand, my fieldnotes on the days I was downstairs at the entry gate are rich from beginning to end. During these times, I could talk to and interact with café guests, in contrast to the quick and rushed time I spent serving them upstairs. Additionally, I had time with the volunteer I was working with, giving me an opportunity to hear their reflections, opinions of, and experiences at the café.

I left a pad of paper in my car for jotting immediately after leaving the café, when necessary. Because jottings were impractical while inside the café, I learned to rely on car jottings and on the immediacy of writing my fieldnotes. My fieldnotes were written immediately when I arrived home from the café.

Also included in my data is information from the café's website, which includes details about the café, volunteer testimonials, and the café's mission statement. In addition, I have information from the café's quarterly newsletters, which are posted online and distributed at the café.

Reflections

My Role at the Grace Café

Conducting research as a participant/observer, it was important to pay close attention to my personal characteristics and biases, and the effect these had on my research process and outcomes. As a white woman, I was more similar to volunteers at the café than to guests, who were primarily men, and often black. It is possible that these characteristics could have been a force behind the shift in my focus from guests to volunteers.

While the effects of my gender and race on my research experience are subtle, in contrast, I became acutely and unexpectedly aware of how being a young college student affected my research. Most volunteers my age at the café are college students, and many guests and volunteers correctly assumed that I was from the local university. Volunteers at the café are divided between regular and sporadic, and volunteers from the university comprise a large portion of the sporadic group. Therefore, as a young college student, I was faced with the task of overcoming the expectation that I would not appear on a regular basis or become involved to any degree at the café. This was an issue of access.

These expectations also affected my exit from the café. Because I felt I was expected to be unreliable and uncommitted, I took care to exit slowly. Instead of simply disappearing, I informed volunteers and coordinators that I would be coming less often.

Although I no longer volunteer on a regular basis, I still return periodically, and make sure I always come when I say I will.

Access and Immersion

Acquiring access to conduct research at the café was a relatively straightforward process. I contacted Ben, the volunteer coordinator. Ben and the café's board of directors approved my research, which enabled me to acquire approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). In accordance with IRB guidelines, I disclosed my research to those I worked with at the café.

Although the process of gaining access to the café was straightforward, the process of gaining access to data that were rich and relevant was much more complex. When describing the fieldworker's goal, the authors of *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* stress immersion:

The ethnographer seeks a deeper *immersion* in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. With immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so. (Emerson, et.al, 1995:2)

Achieving this vision of immersion was a daunting goal, particularly given the limitations of my research. My opportunities for participant observation were limited to one or two visits per week, for the short period of time that the café operated. Additionally, volunteers at the café are generally divided between those who appear regularly and those who appear sporadically. With the goal of immersion, it was important for me to break out of my perceived role as a sporadic volunteer. In achieving this end, there were two things in particular that worked well for me.

I met Butch on my first visit to the café, which was his second day. He immediately became heavily involved at the café, volunteering five days a week. Because of his dedication and outgoing personality, Butch quickly became acquainted with most regular volunteers and guests. He was also very interested in my research, and eager to participate. Butch volunteered to talk with me, and we spent the day together, sitting by the river, feeding ducks, and walking through the downtown area. From that point on, we became close and he helped me make contacts among volunteers and homeless guests. He also kept me informed of current events and issues at the café, and was a very useful source of information in general.

My friendship with Butch was very important, particularly in light of how some 'regular' volunteers viewed and treated volunteers from the university. According to Lofland and colleagues (2006), one strategy to gaining access in the field is to "identify key gatekeepers and develop ties with them" (42). Butch represented the gatekeeper between me and the 'regular' volunteers, and developing a tie with him was one important step toward ethnographic immersion.

My second point of entry was Dusty, the head busser. Dusty works four days a week with the day's coordinator to get the café ready for service. He is also in charge of cleaning up the dining room after the day's service. One day, I decided to stay and help Dusty sweep and mop the floors, the final task of the day. This brought surprising results:

Dusty and I are done sweeping, and I ask him if there's anything else I can do. He says no, and he thanks me profusely for my help. As I'm getting ready to leave, the café is almost empty. I say goodbye to Linda and start to head for the elevator. Dusty calls after me, "Come back soon!"
It is amazing to me the reaction I got from Dusty simply after helping him sweep. I think this is a product of the many volunteers cycling through the café: in order

for some to bother talking to me, they need a reason – the fact that I'm there isn't enough. (Fieldnotes V)

From this point on, Dusty greeted me with a handshake every week. With Dusty's sponsorship, I also was treated with respect by other regular volunteers who previously had ignored me. Helping well beyond the time that most other volunteers left set me apart, and facilitated my acceptance into the 'inner' group of the café.

My Expectations

I began my research at the Grace Café with a set of expectations. In my mind was a Salvation Army model of homeless outreach, where clients are treated as deficient individuals in need of repair. This is what I expected to find at the Grace Café. Because the café is a religious organization, I also expected that religion would be pushed onto guests and onto me. These expectations were inaccurate. I found the café to be a much different organization than what I anticipated, and the direction of my research changed accordingly.

In her article "Grounded Theory," Kathy Charmaz describes grounded theory as a research methodology where data collection and analysis have a strong, cyclical relationship:

Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis means that the researcher's emerging analysis shapes his or her data collection procedures. Such simultaneous involvement focuses grounded theory studies and thus not only directs the researcher's efforts, but also fosters his or her taking control of the data. The early analytic work leads the researcher subsequently to collect more data around emerging themes and questions. (2000:336)

With an emphasis on a relationship between data collection and analysis, I was able to respond to differences between what I expected and what I found. I originally came to the Grace Café to explore the narrative construction of the homeless identity, through the

volunteers and guests at the café. However, this was not the story told at the cafe. I found that volunteers do not talk about the guests; they talk about themselves and one another. As a volunteer at the café, opportunities for interaction with homeless guests are limited. Instead of stories by and about the homeless, what emerged was a story of the organizational and rhetorical structure of the café itself, with a focus on the quality of service provided to the clients. This is the story told in my fieldnotes. By maintaining an analytical perspective of my data, I was able to turn my attention to what was most compelling at the café. My research findings, therefore, are a result of the grounded theory methodology.

The Setting: Grace Café

In October, 2001, the Grace Café began serving meals 5 days a week. As a non-profit organization, the café relies on grants, donations and sponsorships for its funding. Unsurprisingly, budget concerns are constant. The café is governed by a board of directors, comprised of corporate executives and one state representative. The café occupies the second floor in a building owned by the Salvation Army. As part of this arrangement, The Salvation Army does not have to worry about serving meals because volunteers and clients are sent up to eat at the café. Although the roles of both organizations are clear, relations between the two are strained, and volunteers at the café say this has always been the case, although no one sufficiently explained why.

The café is a non-denominational, faith-based ministry. While religion is a central theme in the café's conceptual construct, it is not an essential component of daily functioning. Religion appears in the café's official rhetoric, such as its mission statement, its quarterly newsletter, and its website. Before each service, volunteers

‘circle up’ for announcements and a prayer. Religion is a frequent topic of conversation among volunteers, particularly when discussing reasons for volunteering. However, strong religious orientation is not necessarily an expected characteristic of volunteers. I am not religiously oriented, and I expected this to be a point of discomfort while serving at the café. However, I found that aside from bowing my head during prayer, I could avoid religious activity without sacrificing full participation at the café.

The café’s aim is to serve quality meals to “the homeless and hungry” in a restaurant setting. The café’s physical aspects are designed to represent this mission. The dining room is set up to convey the image of a restaurant:

The dining area is a small room with many windows. The room fits eight round tables with an aisle in the middle. The tables were set with checkered tablecloths, silverware wrapped in paper napkins, salt, pepper, and large cylindrical squirt bottles filled with hot sauce. In the middle of each table is a display of artificial flowers and a tall sign with the table number. The ‘drink station’ - a counter with two tea urns, a bus tub full of ice, and stacks of plastic cups – is on the right side of the room, next to a window leading to the dishwasher. To the left are doors marked enter and exit and two large free-standing shelves, where guests drop their bags on their way in. (Fieldnotes I)

The walls of the dining room are decorated with framed quotes such as “We should live our lives as if Christ were coming this afternoon. – Jimmy Carter.” The quotes mirror the café’s themes of service, charity, and compassion, and authors range from Mother Theresa to Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr. Moral messages, such as “Love one another,” and “Respect your fellow man” appear as graffiti on walls in the bathrooms, and outside the café. Like the restaurant-style layout, these messages reinforce the café’s emphasis on dignity and respect.

Meals are served upstairs, but guests² spend the majority of their time waiting outside to be let in. When service begins, guests are let in through a chain link fence downstairs. They move up a ramp and wait outside a door leading to the café. Aside from moral graffiti on the walls, the outside area is bare.

People

Freddie, the chef, is the café's only full-time paid employee. There are a few part-time employees, who help Freddie set up in the morning and clean up after meals have been served. Service itself is run by volunteers, who are largely white and appear middle-class in dress. The café has many regular volunteers, many of whom have volunteered with the café for several years. There is a coordinator every day, who is also a volunteer. Aside from the regulars, the café relies on a constantly changing volunteer base, which includes students from the local universities, church volunteer groups, volunteers from other sources in the area, such as local companies, and other individuals, some of whom volunteer to fulfill community service requirements.

Volunteers at the café are sorted mainly into bussers and servers. One volunteer, Dusty, is head busser Tuesday through Friday, and is in charge of organizing the bussers, who are almost always men. Homeless café guests are welcome to volunteer, and they are always assigned to bus, never to serve. On the other hand, non-homeless volunteers are usually assigned to serve, but the men may be *asked* to bus if Dusty is short on bussers that day:

When we circle up and are being told the menu, Travis finds that we don't have enough bussers. He asks Mark if either of the men in his volunteer group would be willing to bus. One says yes. The other (George), a young man with light

² Diner volunteers referred to those who ate in the diner using several different terms, including guests, customers, and 'the homeless and hungry.' I will use the term guests, simply because that is the word I heard used most often.

brown skin and dark hair, wearing a small backpack and constantly holding the hand of his girlfriend, says no. (Fieldnotes VIII)

The majority of the café's guests are men. Guests range widely in age, from early twenties to quite elderly. Every week, volunteers were informed that special portions are available for children, but I never saw a child eat at the café. Many guests appeared regularly, and were familiar with one another and with regular volunteers at the café. These guests would sit together and talk, but there were also guests who would sit with their heads down and eat silently.

Guests and volunteers at the café vary from regular to unfamiliar, but the daily procedure at the café is predictable and repetitive, due to a strong emphasis on routine and order.

Daily Functioning

The café's organizational structure allows it to function smoothly on a daily basis. Regular volunteers and coordinators uphold this structure, which new volunteers are able to pick up quickly. The daily functioning of the café changed little over the period of time I spent there.

Most volunteers arrive at the café around 11:15 am. At this time, we circle up for announcements and prayer, and service begins shortly afterwards. Volunteers are assigned to tables in pairs when possible, and the coordinator makes an effort to pair new and experienced volunteers together. Volunteers are responsible for serving each course to the guests at their table, as well as keeping drinks and bread baskets full. After circling up, volunteers wait for their tables to be filled.

To gain entrance to the cafe, guests need a ticket are handed out between 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. At 11:30 a.m., the café opens, and a volunteer from the café lets guests in

through a gate downstairs. At the gate, the volunteer takes the guests' tickets, and they move upstairs and wait again, this time outside of a door leading directly into the dining room, where they are let in as space becomes available.

Guests are seated seven to a table, and each guest receives a glass of tea to begin. After their first glass of tea, guests' glasses are refilled with water. Bread is unlimited and served from a basket in the center of the table. The meals, which volunteers refer to as "dinner," are served in courses, beginning with soup or salad, followed by a main course, and finished with dessert. The meals are plentiful, and always include meat or fish, a starch, and vegetables. Desert may be candy, cookies, or cake, accompanied by fresh seasonal fruit.

After they eat, guests are welcome to stay as long as they like, but most leave as soon as they are done, commonly taking their desert with them. Service ends at 12:30 and volunteers are encouraged to grab a plate of food and eat in the dining room. Some volunteers sit together, others sit with guests remaining in the dining room. While volunteers and guests finish their meals, other volunteers such as Dusty work on cleaning up the dining room, while Freddie cleans up the kitchen. Everything is taken off the tables, which are wiped down. When everyone has finished eating, the dining room is swept and mopped. Volunteers are not generally asked to participate in this process, and most leave when they have finished their meal. Dusty and other core volunteers, on the other hand, do not leave until the dining room is clean.

Chapter 4: Findings: The Message of Dignity at the Grace Cafe

The Grace Café serves food to homeless guests five days a week. Meals are bountiful; many guests fill up before desert and leave with leftovers. The meals are so large they could easily provide a full day's substance. The importance of this service is illustrated by the men and women who line the streets every morning, waiting for the café to open. The daily appearance of many regular guests is another indicator of the import these daily meals hold in guests' lives. The value of food, provided in ample quantities, therefore should not be discounted.

Yet, while the importance of the food at the Grace Café is obvious, this simple morality is underemphasized. The emphasis at the cafe is not food, but on serving high-quality food in a warm manner with a focus on dignity. An example of this appears in the Fall, 2007 Newsletter:

At Grace Café, we feed one person at a time. Chef Freddie, a five-star culinary expert, personally prepares each plate and expects nothing less than excellence. There are not "assembly line" approaches! Soup is not served until the guest is welcomed, and seated. There are periodic thermometer checks by the chef to make sure that each bowl is served at precisely his specifications (Grace Café Newsletter, Fall 2007)

This same message re-appears in the Summer newsletter:

We serve a well balanced meal to our guests at Grace Café. However, our greater mission is creating an atmosphere and environment that nurtures love, care and dignity. (Grace Café Newsletter, Summer 2007)

In brief, the primary service provided by Grace Café is not the provision of food; it is the dignified manner in which food is served.

As Loseke (1997) notes, “Charity achieves morality through productions of its kindly treatment of its clients” (435). At the Grace Café, this is achieved by an emphasis on dignity. The concept of ‘dignity’ was used to embody the café’s standard of service. References to dignity permeated the café’s newsletter and website, and also appeared in daily conversation. In the pages that follow, I will describe the concept of dignity, its appearance in the café’s rhetoric, and how volunteers applied dignity to their daily service. Then, I will explore common violations of the dignity message, and how these violations were kept from unraveling the dignity concept.

The Message of Dignity: Official Rhetoric and Café Policies

The message of dignity appears clearly in the café’s official rhetoric, such as in the examples above from newsletters stressing the dignified service provided to guests. Another example appears on the café’s website, where anyone seeking information about the café, including a potential volunteer, is directed:

We serve free meals to homeless, poor and anyone wishing to receive a meal. The meals are prepared by a professional chef and served by volunteer waiters. The guests sit at cloth covered tables set with china dishes and silverware. They are asked for nothing in return - no mandatory religious services or counseling or work... Grace Café is a place of love, compassion, and dignity... a true lifeline to those in need. (Organization website)

Such official statements emphasize the importance of dignified service. With references to cloth covered tables, china, and silverware, the application of dignity in the structure of the café is made explicitly clear. Further, according to the quote, the Grace Café is not a program seeking to reform its clients. Rather, an essential component of the dignity message is that guests “are asked for nothing in return.”

While the message of dignity appears repeatedly in the café's official publications, these publications also make clear that dignity is not simply a rhetorical buzzword. The expectation is that the dignity message will be practiced throughout the organization on a daily basis:

It [Grace Café] is an organization that does things right and in a first-class way. There are never moments when the mission of Grace Café dissolves. Every volunteer, every supporter, and every guest believes it. The mission is not preached. The mission is practiced. (Grace Café Newsletter, Fall 2007)

Explicit in this message is the expectation that all volunteers participate in the provision of dignity to café guests. This expectation is communicated to volunteers through the café's website, and also through daily announcements to volunteers. These announcements, communicated during 'circle time' before each day's service, comprise the second level of the emphasis on dignity.

The Message of Dignity: Teaching New Volunteers

The dignity message, stated clearly in the café's official rhetoric, is transmitted daily to volunteers through statements from the coordinators. This is the second level of the communication of the dignity message. Every day at the Grace Café begins with all the volunteers joining in a circle for the day's announcements. Because so many volunteers each day will be new, the day's coordinator describes the café's functioning, while emphasizing the expectation that volunteers will provide dignified service. For example, Travis, Friday's coordinator, prepares volunteers for the upcoming lunch:

Travis begins his announcements by welcoming everyone and thanking us for being here. He says "Here at the Grace Café, we feed the hungry. We are not a soup kitchen; we don't rush people in and out. We are a dignified café." He tells us that Grace Café is a Christian faith-based ministry, but people of all different faiths serve here. He tells us: "There is an eighth chair at every table, where we sit and join our guests while they eat. We call them our guests, because that's

what they are. They are guests in our restaurant.” ‘We say sir and ma’am, because we are happy to see our guests. We welcome them with open arms, and this is a blessing because not many people are happy to see our guests. We are. This is because we want to be an island of hope in the misery of their culture.’ (Fieldnotes IV)

In this example, the emphasis on dignity encompasses all aspects of service. For example, in accordance with the dignity message, people who come to the café to eat are called ‘guests,’ “because that’s what they are.” Notice also how Travis does not present dignity as a “suggestion” to volunteers, rather this is simply how things are done. A similar message was given during circle time by Gene, Thursday’s coordinator:

After thanking everyone for coming, Gene begins his speech: Grace Café is a non-denominational program with a divine mission. We provide meals to the hungry and homeless. We serve with dignity and patience. Our tables have eight chairs, but we only seat seven. The eighth chair is for us to sit and chat, if we have time. We offer an ear – these people may never have anyone to talk to. We can’t solve their problems but we can give them someone to talk to. (Fieldnotes V)

In the coordinators’ daily messages, the official rhetoric of the café is transmitted to volunteers. For example, the official café rhetoric emphasizes that, consistent with the dignity message, the Grace Café is not a remedial program. Similarly, in an above quote, Travis contrasts Grace Café with a soup kitchen by emphasizing dignity. Dignity is used on both levels to construct the café as a different kind of organization that is more humane than other services for homeless people.

A further example of the link between the dignity message presented by the café’s official rhetoric and by the café’s coordinators is the use of symbols to exemplify dignity. In the official rhetoric, these symbols include tablecloths, china, silverware, and quality

food. In the coordinator's messages, the "eighth chair" is a commonly referenced symbol of dignity:

[Travis reminds us:]We serve with dignity and patience. Our tables have eight chairs, but we only seat seven. The eighth chair is for us to sit and chat, if we have time. We offer an ear – these people may never have anyone to talk to. We can't solve their problems but we can give them someone to talk to. (Fieldnotes V)

The same message appeared in Gene's Thursday speech:

He [Gene] goes through all the rules, and encourages us to take advantage of the eighth seat at the table, to give our guests ' the only sympathetic ear they may get all day.' He tells us that we 'can't solve their problems, but we can listen.' (Fieldnotes VI)

The 'eighth chair' the coordinators refer to is a daily symbol of the dignity message.

Each table at the café is surrounded by eight chairs, but guests are only supposed to be seated at seven, so that volunteers can sit with the guests and chat whenever they have a chance. The opportunity for volunteers to engage personally with guests is an extension of the dignity message, symbolized by the "eighth chair."

Dignity is an important ideology at the Grace Café. The message of dignity, presented in the café's official rhetoric, is passed to volunteers through the café's organizers, and built in to the café's structure. The message of dignity can also be seen in the daily talk and actions of the café's volunteers.

The Message of Dignity: Talk and Behavior of Committed Volunteers

The message of dignity is presented strongly by the café's publications and organizers, but it does not end there. Volunteers at the café repeated the dignity message and practiced it daily. While at the café, I observed how volunteers *did* dignity.

On my first day at the café, Dolly, who has been volunteering with the café for several years, approached me to tell me how the cafe works:

She [Dolly] gives me a run-down of how things are done (this information is already becoming monotonous – you hear the same speech from everyone). We serve one course at a time, soup or salad (today it's soup), then entrée, and finally dessert. There is an extra chair at each table and then we are encouraged to sit and visit with the patrons. (Fieldnotes I)

In this example, Dolly discusses the practical applications of the dignity message, emphasizing the structure of service and expectations for volunteers. While Dolly focused on practicalities, other volunteers emphasized the ideological importance of the dignity message. Mark, a volunteer from the local university, felt that the dignity message sets Grace Café apart from other services:

I ask him [Mark], since I see him here every Friday, if he goes to any other places to volunteer. He tells me no, he just volunteers on Fridays and he picked the Grace Café because he found it online, and looking over the website, he liked the idea of 'dignity' He says he wouldn't like to work at a soup kitchen, where there are a lot of rules, and discipline. He prefers this setting, because they treat the homeless people like human beings. (Fieldnotes VI)

For Mark, the dignity message is an important ideology: it's what makes the café special, and what attracted him to volunteer. Dignity, then, is not simply something that is important to the café's organizers. Dignity is also important to some volunteers.

Similarly, Butch, who was formally homeless, discussed how the Grace Café is different from other agencies he has encountered as a client:

“I’ve been to the Salvation Army; I was there for five days for free. You know, it wasn’t pleasant. They treat you like...the people treat you like dirt they don’t treat you well. They’re there for a paycheck they don’t have the heart; it’s just for a paycheck. And I think that’s so important, you know, so important. It’s different at the café...I can honestly say that their mission statement, as far as the love and the dignity, they [Grace Café] expressed that to me well. And that made a big difference.”

These examples of Butch and Mark illustrate that the concept of dignity, as it appears in the rhetoric of the café, can carry meaning for volunteers. Volunteers then apply this meaning to their service. On a daily basis, volunteers use techniques to incorporate dignity into their interactions with guests.

At the café, an important aspect of dignity is having an everyday conversation with guests. Each week, Travis emphasized that we should not pry into our guests’ lives, but instead focuses on similar points of interest. When I worked with Travis downstairs at the gate, I watched him do this:

Travis talks to the group, asking them how they are and mentioning how beautiful the weather is. The crowd seems very upbeat, talking to me, Travis, and one another. Travis starts asking people where they’re from, and they listen to each other. One man says he’s from Memphis, and another asks what part, and they compare stories of living in Memphis. (Fieldnotes IX)

And later:

After letting a group of ten go up, there is a man at the front of line who Travis knows. He greets him by name and shakes his hand. The man is tall, with dark hair. He is wearing a black cowboy hat, with a black t-shirt tucked into jeans, which are tucked into black cowboy boots. Travis asks him how the trucking is coming, and the man says, ‘Just getting my cell phone turned on today. I’m free to work now, just got to wait for a call.’ Travis says that that’s just wonderful. ‘Gotta watch out for those accidents,’ Travis says. The man says Yeah, that accident just went off his record, so now he can work again. (Fieldnotes IX)

Travis's normal conversations were a key strategy in bringing dignity to guests. His interactions illustrate how the café's concept of dignity appears in volunteers' daily service. I also observed other volunteers, especially 'regular' volunteers, applying the dignity message to their daily interactions with simple friendliness:

Table 3 fills up quickly, and I watch with admiration how Dolly interacts with her customers. She sits down immediately with them and chats while they get bread. The whole table is involved in the conversation. (Fieldnotes II)

Dolly has been volunteering at the café for several years, and takes pride and pleasure in the relationships she has built with guests. These relationships exemplify the respect and warmth associated with the dignity message. The example above is typical of many interactions I observed between guests and regular volunteers. During service, a friendly and amicable atmosphere prevailed. Many volunteers could be seen laughing, touching, and sitting with guests.

Volunteers also applied the dignity message as it related to standards of service:

Although everyone else was putting salads down before their guests arrived, Annette did not want to do that, because she did not want our table wondering how long the salads had been sitting. Annette asks if everyone is ready for dinner as she sets down her salads, and returns, telling me that all but one wants their meals. (Fieldnotes IV)

In this example, Annette sets high expectations for her the quality of service she provides to her table. At the café, dignity means providing meals in a restaurant-style environment where clients are treated as guests in a restaurant, enjoying high-quality food and respectful treatment.

The café's official rhetoric, appearing in its newsletters and on its website emphasizes the importance of providing dignified service to guests. The dignity message

is transmitted to volunteers at the café through daily announcements. While the dignity message was pervasive throughout the organization, in daily practice, this ideal was not always visible.

Chapter 5: Findings: Disjunctures Between Ideals and Practices

In organizers' messages to volunteers, the consistent message is that the Grace Café provides a restaurant-quality, dignified food service to homeless and hungry guests. However, in practice, the Grace Café is not a conventional restaurant; it is a non-profit charity organization operating under extremely limited conditions. This reality results in disjunctures between the ideals presented in the dignity message and the practical workings of the cafe.

During my first few weeks, I was particularly struck by the contradictions between the proclaimed quality of service and its implementation. The importance of serving guests in a dignified manner is repeated in official rhetoric, by organizers, and by volunteers, but upholding the standards of service is not always easy.

Disjunctures Between Ideals and Practice: Service and Beverages

The rhetoric of the café emphasizes a high-quality meal served in a restaurant style. However, when comparing the café to a restaurant like Carrabba's, for example, the café is not like a restaurant at all. I began to see this on my first day:

Annette and I are serving table two together, and immediately after we've brought our soup to the table, Travis comes up and tells us that we can probably start bringing the 'dinners.' I am confused and a little irritated; because he just told us that part of the dignity of the café is that we serve one course at a time.
(Fieldnotes I)

And later...

Annette and notice that everyone around us has served desert already, before their customers have finished dinner. I feel like the service is rushed and workers are

focused on getting people served and on their way, despite a previous emphasis on serving in a slow, dignified manner. (Fieldnotes I)

Although individual guests are never explicitly rushed at the café, workers are expected to rush through service. Meals are served in courses, but each course comes quickly after the next. When I first started volunteering, I was often reminded to bring out the next course before my guests had finished the first. This violation of the dignity message does not only affect the volunteers who serve: while guests are never asked to rush; the effect of rushed service is that subtly, guests are encouraged to hurry through their meals.

The provision of beverages is another example of disjunctures between the dignity message and the café's practices. The café offers iced tea to each guest, but not in the way experienced by guests at traditional restaurants. That is, while café guests can enjoy one glass of tea, and even sweeten it with sugar or sweetener, they do not get a second glass. Iced tea is limited to one glass per guest, after that, they get water. While this is different from other restaurants, what is most surprising is the manner in which the water is provided. I experienced this working with Annette on my first day:

Some of our guests are out of water and I go to the drink station to get glasses of water. There are trays filled with glasses of tea but no water. I return to Annette questioningly and she tells me that we fill water from a pitcher and just pour it on top of the remaining tea in the glass, if the patron wants water. I look at her with surprise and a touch of disgust. She says, 'I know, it's weird,' but we both go grab pitchers of water and fill the empty tea glasses. (Fieldnotes I)

Instead of bringing a fresh glass of water to each guest when they have finished their tea, servers at the cafe simply pour water on top of the tea. In subsequent weeks, when I worked with newcomers, many of them reacted to this like I did. This practice is quite shocking, largely because it results in a murky-looking, very unappetizing beverage.

In practice, the rushed service and tea policy contradicted the restaurant-quality claim made by the Grace Café. However, as is the case with other disjunctures between ideals and practical applications, justifications for these contradictions can be rooted in practicality. The café serves 175 meals a day, but only between 11:30 am and 12:30 pm. With a dining room that only seats 56, each table must turn over at least three times in an hour. As a result, volunteers must rush service. In addition, as with any non-profit organization, the café operates with limited resources. Given these constraints, guests' tea consumption is limited, and it makes practical sense to only use one glass per guest, instead of using separate glasses for water and tea.

While the reasons for these limitations to the dignity message were not extensively discussed, they are possibly due to time and budget constraints. These contradictions troubled me initially, but it is possible to neutralize these by referencing limited resources. The ticket policy, however, is a much more striking contradiction between the dignity message and the café's daily functioning.

Disjunctures Between Ideals and Practice: Tickets

The café serves meals from 11:30-12:30. However, in order to gain admittance, guests must have tickets, which are handed out between 9:30 and 11:00 the morning of service. This means that guests lose their morning getting tickets and then waiting to get in. Implementation of the ticket policy also often creates an atmosphere at the downstairs gate that is strikingly inconsistent with the dignity message promoted by the organization.

Before they come into the café, guests line up behind a gate with their tickets. At 11:30, the gate is unlocked and guests with tickets pass through in groups. After going through the gate, guests wait outside the door to the café, where they are individually let

in when chairs become available. On my sixth day at the café, I went downstairs with Butch and we let people through the gate. This experience was entirely different from working upstairs in the dining room.

Despite the rushed service, the atmosphere in the café's dining room is generally upbeat and pleasant. Working downstairs, on the other hand, is not pleasant. It is usually warm outside and guests wait, crowded together, shifting uncomfortably on their feet. This is not how guests wait at Carrabba's. In addition to the uncomfortable wait, the ticket policy often causes conflict between the guests and volunteers:

Butch and I are taking tickets, but at one point, while we are letting people in, a man comes up saying he doesn't have a ticket. He is talking to Butch, and Butch tells him to wait with the others who don't have tickets, but the man will not move. He tells Butch he can't come during ticket times, because he's at school. He says that 'everyone knows that' and demands to be let upstairs to verify. Butch refuses, and when he puts his hand on this man's shoulder, the man yells at Butch not to touch him. As this goes on the line is held up completely. Several people are lining up behind us to leave (the entrance is also the exit) and I interject to ask the man to step out of the way a bit to let people out. Someone in the crowd outside shouts, 'Yeah get out of the way!' The man continues to argue with Butch, and seems to come close to trying to push past us, when someone comes down the ramp with a ticket and hands it to the man. This de-escalates the situation a bit, but now Butch tells him that he needs to go to the end of the line. The man ignores this and tells Butch, 'See, I got this ticket. Now what are you going to do? And I'll tell you what; you better not touch me again, because I'll knock your shit out.' This restarts the argument, which goes on for quite a bit, with the man threatening Butch, and Butch trying to maintain composure. (Fieldnotes VI)

The situation Butch experienced was a consequence of strains created by the café's ticket policy. When I talked to other people who worked downstairs, they told me that such confrontations and struggles were nearly an everyday occurrence. Between the discomfort and the conflict that occur daily at the gate, the ticket policy is a striking violation of the dignity message. Further complicating the ticket problem is the fact that not all volunteers strictly enforce the policy.

For example, when Butch opens the gates, he instructs all guests without tickets to stand to the side while those with tickets are let through. At ten or fifteen minutes to close, if 175 guests have not been admitted, he lets in guests without tickets, up to 175. This procedure enables Butch to admit guests without tickets without the knowledge of Freddie, the chef, who expects guests and volunteers to strictly adhere to the ticket policy.

Butch is not alone in his failures to enforce the ticket policy. Travis, Friday's coordinator, had a similar procedure:

He explains his system, which is similar to Butch's – he lets people in with tickets, keeping track of how many go in. If he lets in 175 with tickets, and there are still people without, he asks Freddie if he has enough food for all of them. If not, he turns them away, which is difficult. However, if he lets in less than 175 with tickets, and there are some without, he lets in people without tickets, up to 175, without telling Freddie. The only problem with that, he says, is that he's afraid that someday he will let in a dozen people without tickets, and then get a group of latecomers with tickets, and have to let them in too. If that ever happens, he says, 'Then the game's up. Freddie will know I'm letting in people without tickets without permission.' So far, he says, he's been able to feed everyone successfully. (Fieldnotes XI)

Like Butch, Travis has developed a system to dodge the ticket rule. Later that day, I found that even Alice, the head volunteer coordinator's wife, did not enforce the ticket policy:

When we have taken the last of the tickets, we are at 140 people, and Travis lets in people without tickets, still keeping count. Alice, Ben's wife, comes down to chat. While we're talking, a man comes up and says he doesn't have a ticket. Travis says that he will need to go upstairs and ask Freddie if he can let him in. Alice tells Travis quietly that he should just go ahead and let him in. She reveals to us that she lets people in without tickets at the end, only when she goes over 175 does she ask Freddie. Travis confesses that he does the same thing, and they talk about how 'it just makes sense' to let people in, regardless of tickets, if they know there is plenty of food. (Fieldnotes XI)

Alice, Butch and Travis each developed a method for sidestepping the limitations of the ticket policy. Between these three volunteers, evidence accumulates that the ticket policy is negotiated, not upheld, by volunteers. This raises a question: why sustain a policy that creates conflict and is not enforced by volunteers? Instead of emphasizing procedure, the volunteers I worked placed importance on making sure as many people were served as possible. This practice is more consistent with the dignity message than the official ticket policy.

At the Grace Café, the ticket policy is burdensome and a constant source of conflict. However, like all the other disjunctures between ideology and daily execution, the ticket policy is rooted in practicality. On a daily basis, guests appear in consistent numbers. But what is the café to do if someday, demand for meals surpasses 175 people? Tickets are a logical way to deal with this realistic constraint. The ticket policy ensures that, in the face of high demand, the café can admit guests on a fair, first-come, first-served basis. But after hearing the dignity message, the ticket policy didn't seem to fit, and as we've seen, volunteers have found ways to practice dignity even when the policy itself is undignified. Another disjuncture between the café's projected ideology and practical application was the lack of commitment among many of the café's volunteers.

Disjunctures Between Ideals and Practice: Uncommitted Volunteers

In the café's dignity rhetoric, volunteers are the café's ambassadors, never forgetting the dignity message. I met many volunteers like this, but I also met volunteers who were at the café for a variety of other reasons. Many volunteered to fulfill community service requirements, for class projects, or with the local university's volunteer organization. These volunteers were often unreliable. At some times, the café

would have an unexpected shortage because volunteers who were expected to be there never showed up. At other times, so many people would show up unannounced that the room would swell with volunteers, who stood along the wall with nothing to do.

These infrequent volunteers, who often appeared unexpectedly, seemed less concerned with the dignity message than did the café's core volunteers. Some seemed content with simply showing up, and did not show interest in the café at all:

I've arrived at the café early today, and there is nothing to do yet. I take a seat at a table and introduce myself to John and Jimmie. Jimmie tells me he busses here frequently. John says today is his first day. Jimmie begins to tell John how things work 'around here.' Jimmie mumbles softly, and I can barely understand what he's saying, even though I'm sitting right next to him. I look at John, sure that he can't understand, because he's sitting all the way across the table. He's looking at Jimmie occasionally, but also looking around the room. He doesn't seem to be trying to hear. (Fieldnotes I)

The message of dignity and its application to everyday service is of utmost importance to many volunteers at the café. Many new volunteers were very eager to learn on their first day. Some told me that they chose Grace Café specifically for its unique message of dignity. Others, like John, showed less aspiration to take part in the dignity mission.

John was not the only volunteer who acted indifferent to the dignity message:

While I'm getting ready for service, a young man approaches me and introduces himself as Bob. I ask him if he's volunteered here before and he says no. I tell him that he will hear how it goes plenty, but if he wants, I can tell him now. He answers with a 'Nah' and asks me if I've seen any of his friends. I tell him I don't know who his friends are. He says he is here for a class project, but he missed last week. I ask him if it's for Intro to Anthropology. He says yes, and I tell him last week they all rode together, so they should be here soon. He shrugs. (Fieldnotes III)

Bob made clear that he was not as interested in the café as he was in finding his friends and completing his class project. Volunteers like John and Bob did not fulfill the expectations of volunteers in reflecting the café's ideology. In contradiction with the

projected image of the café, many volunteers were unreliable and unconcerned. Instead of emphasizing their role in serving guests in a dignified manner, these volunteers gave other reasons for their time spent at the café:

Before service begins, I am talking to Allen and Justin. Today is their first day at the Café. They tell me they are from a volunteer organization at the local university, and that is how they found the Grace Café. Justin tells me that they are competing because at the end of the year, his organization holds a banquet and awards the member with the most volunteer hours. The rest of his group arrives, and he breaks away to talk to them. There are four other volunteers, and Dusty asks me to show them where they can find aprons and nametags. I help them get ready, and they ask me if I can take their picture. I do so, and they move to a table, where they sit and talk until Travis calls us to circle up (Fieldnotes VII)

Allen and Justin were competing for volunteer hours, and spent their time in a small group with their friends. This group was not the first to take pictures of themselves while volunteering at the café. Picture-taking was a common practice among new and infrequent volunteers, and gave the impression that these volunteers were simply enjoying a ‘day at the zoo.’ Instead of subscribing to the guest-centered mission of the café, many new and infrequent volunteers stayed in their social groups, spending most of their time visiting with one another. Once, this interfered directly with my own experience at the café:

Since we’re done serving, I get my plate and find a place to sit. I sit at a table with a guest who is picking at his desert. He is dressed very nicely, in a suit and tie. He asks me if I mind if he sits for awhile, because he has somewhere to be, and he’d rather leave from here. I say no, of course not, and ask him how his meal was. He says everything was great, and we’re talking about the nice weather today, when Mark interrupts and asks me what I was for Halloween. He and two other people from the university’s volunteer organization have sat at the table, in the seats to the right of me. The man I am talking to is on my left. I tell Mark quickly about my costume, but he continues to talk to me as I’m trying to continue talking to the man to my left. He tells me about his costume – he dressed as a banana and says it was his most clever costume ever. He tells me about the parties he went to in the past week, and his plans to go to one more party this weekend. Mark continues his conversation, and as I struggle not to listen, the man to my left gets up and leaves. When he’s gone, I look at Mark and

tell him, 'I was talking to that guy.' Mark says, 'Oh, I didn't notice,' and apologizes. He then continues talking about himself. (Fieldnotes XI)

In this example, the dignity message and attention to guests was lost in Mark's conversation about himself. The indifference he showed guests also affected my interaction. However, I did not have many examples like this: indifferent volunteers did not usually interfere, they simply did not show interest.

Because new volunteers were notoriously undedicated, regular volunteers often treated them with the same indifference these volunteers showed the café. The indifference of regular volunteers was applied to all new volunteers, not only those who did not show interest. This dynamic detracted from the unified volunteer community described in the café's rhetoric. Unfortunately, there are simply not enough regular, dedicated volunteers to keep the café running daily. Because of this, the café must rely on and tolerate infrequent volunteers in order to consistently have enough people to function. Although this contradicts the projected image of the café, it makes sense.

While most volunteers who violated the dignity message at the café were new, uncommitted volunteers, this was not universally true. Jackie, who has been with the café for over a year, also breached the rules of dignity while I was working at the gated downstairs:

As we're standing downstairs, Jackie comes out of the café, shouting at the guests in line. She leans out over the edge, and says, 'Goddamn, I am so tired of these people!' I look back to the waiting crowd, to see if anyone else heard her, and I see some raised eyebrows, but no one appears to be as shocked or offended as I am. One man says, 'Oh, we're so sorry to trouble you, lady. It must be rough, waiting on homeless people one hour a day. I wouldn't know; I'm always standing in line.' The crowd laughs, and they continue talking about Jackie. (Fieldnotes IX)

Jackie's outburst was rude and inappropriate, but I seemed to be the most surprised by this violation of dignity. Her comment was quickly neutralized by a guest's sarcastic remark, but the example remains: the dignity message, which entails that guests are treated with warmth and respect, relies on volunteers' implementation. However, volunteers sometimes violated the expectations of the dignity message, as in the examples above.

I have discussed many disjunctures between the café's stated ideals and how service is executed daily. Perhaps the most striking, and most disappointing, example of disjunctures is the eighth chair.

Disjuncture between Ideals and Practice: The Eighth Chair

Each table is to be surrounded by eight chairs, but guests are only to sit at seven. The eighth chair is for volunteers to sit and visit with guests whenever the opportunity arises. The eighth chair is a central element in the connection between volunteers and guests. Café leaders and organizers emphasize the importance of the eighth chair in providing the opportunity for friendliness and conversation between guests and volunteers. This connection is a key part of the dignity message. However, the practical applications of the eighth chair often do not meet the stated ideals. I was made aware of this on my first day:

Dolly discusses how things are done at the café. After discussing the course of service, she tells us about the eighth chair. There is an extra chair at each table and after bringing out the meals we are encouraged to sit and visit with the patrons. However, she says, no one does this anymore. Her lips become thin and I sense disapproval. She tells us everyone used to do this, but not anymore, but she says that's a whole other story. (Fieldnotes I)

Dolly was right. Opportunities for using the eighth chair were often swallowed up by the fast pace of service at the Café. I quickly learned that finding time to sit and chat was not

easy. Sitting down while I worked a table alone was impossible. Sitting when working with a partner meant that my partner had to do all the work. Occasionally, I would see Dolly sitting in her eighth chair. However, she was the only volunteer I saw do this more than once, and I also watched her partner scramble to serve all their guests alone. In addition from it being impractical to sit during service, sometimes I found that this opportunity disappeared altogether:

Most of my customers have left and been replaced by new ones. I notice that the eighth chair (where we are supposed to sit and visit) is gone and wonder when I am supposed to have time to do that with lunch being so rushed (Fieldnotes I)

On many occasions my eighth chair would disappear. At other times, someone would simply sit in it:

Seeing that I have a moment, I return to the table to sit, but there is someone in my eighth seat. I get this man his dinner. After I set down the dinner, Dusty (a regular volunteer,) asks me if this is my table. I tell him yes, and he says there are too many people sitting. I tell him I know, but I don't know what to do about it. He tells me this person didn't go to the table he was told to, and next time I need to just tell the person to go to the table they were sent to, but I know I won't have time to do that. (Fieldnotes III)

Because service is rushed at the café, sitting and chatting with guests is impractical for volunteers. In the examples above, sitting down was impossible because the eighth chair was unavailable. In these cases, the eighth chair became nothing more than an empty symbol. The opportunity to sit and chat with guests was emphasized to volunteers by the café's official rhetoric and its organizers, but on an everyday basis, implementing this ideal was not possible. Eventually, I stopped wondering where my eighth chair had gone. Keeping up with the fast pace of service meant that the opportunity to connect with guests was lost.

The eighth chair is one example in a list of instances where the ideal model presented by the café's organizers unravels. Rushed service, indifferent volunteers, and the disappearance of the eighth chair are all instances of disjunctures between the café's stated ideology and everyday practices that challenge the validity of the café's dignity message. Although many of these disjunctures can be attributed to time and budget constraints, repairing these disjunctures is essential to maintaining the image of dignity. This is done by ignoring practical realities and focusing on ideals.

Keeping the Faith: Repairing the Disjunctures Between Ideology and Practices

In small and large ways, the everyday execution of service at the café does not match the image of dignity projected in the café's rhetoric. However, this does not stop the café's organizers from upholding the image. Nor does it stop volunteers from subscribing to the dignity message and applying it to their service.

Sometimes, volunteers repaired the disjuncture between ideology and practicality by ignoring the café's practical constraints and implementing their own versions of dignity. One example of this is volunteers such as Butch, Travis, and Alice, who let guests through the gate without tickets, as long as the chef did not catch on. For these volunteers, feeding as many people as possible was prioritized over accepting practical constraints and following the rules.

Another example of volunteers breaking the rules in order to practice dignity occurred when Butch and Dusty disagreed over what to do about moldy bread:

Butch is looking at the loaves carefully, and finding mold in some of them. He sets the moldy loaves aside, saying he will feed them to the birds. Dusty comes up behind him, inspecting the loaves he is setting aside. Dusty is an extremely soft talker, so I can't hear what he's saying, but Butch responds, "You would say that, Dusty. Think about it for a second. Would you eat moldy bread?" Butch continues talking about the impropriety of serving moldy bread; I assume Dusty

suggested he serve some of the less moldy loaves. I can see that some of the loaves he is tossing aside have only one or two spots of mold. It is my guess Dusty suggested serving the other slices. (Fieldnotes VI)

In an organization operating under a limited budget, discarding an entire loaf of sliced bread because of a few spots of mold can be seen as financially irresponsible. But for Butch, dignity means not taking the risk of serving moldy bread. The situation above is an example of a direct clash between ideology and practicality. Butch broke the rules of frugality, preferring to risk throwing away good food rather than serve bad food.

In the examples of volunteers who break the rules in order to uphold the dignity message, volunteers take personal responsibility for repairing the disjuncture between ideology and practicality. At other times, the café's organizers and core volunteers repaired the disjuncture by simply ignoring contradictions.

Infrequent and unreliable volunteers posed a challenge nearly every week. Sometimes there were too many, sometimes there were too few. Volunteers had to be taught how things were done at the café and how to keep service running smoothly. Because occasional volunteers were so hard to rely on, the café's daily service relied heavily on the work of a core group of regular volunteers, who did the important work of letting people in the door, preparing and arranging food, serving tables, and working downstairs at the gate. New volunteers filled spots around the regulars: assisting with serving a table, preparing drinks at the drink station, rolling silverware, or bussing.

As a new volunteer, I felt like an outsider and a bother. New volunteers at the café are ignored and dismissed, but many regular volunteers also keep a very close eye on them. For the first several weeks I volunteered, I often got defensive with other

volunteers who I felt were watching me too closely. My first week, I shared these feelings with Big Steve, who was also a new volunteer:

Big Steve is standing next to us, and he asks me how I like it so far. I tell him I feel like I have a lot of bosses. He says, “Yeah, everyone around here thinks they write your paycheck.” (Fieldnotes I)

I was not the only volunteer who noticed I was being monitored. Big Steve reflected my feelings, while ironically drawing attention to the fact that we were treated as employees rather than volunteers. Feeling as if I was under surveillance was coupled with the impression that regular volunteers did not expect new volunteers to be around for long:

At the end of my first day, there are many people I haven't met yet. But I know, from conversations with Ben, comments about “always new faces” and remarks about volunteers who never return, that many of the people I see today (except for the ‘regulars’) may not be here next week. They're probably thinking the same thing about me. (Fieldnotes I)

The regular volunteers deal with unreliable new volunteers by correcting and monitoring their behavior, while doing their best to work around them. As a new volunteer, I was very aware of this attitude. Only after appearing regularly and lending an extra hand after the guests had left, did I begin to feel like a part of the ‘in’ group. From this perspective, I saw how other new volunteers were ignored:

As soon as I walk into the dining room, I see a large group of people sitting around one of the tables. They are talking among themselves; there are about 12 of them. I also see Butch and Dusty, and go over to say hi. As I walk up to them, Dusty approaches me and shakes my hand firmly, patting me on the back with his other hand. He says 'good to see you' and asks me how I am today. We chat briefly, but Dusty is always looking for something to do, so he leaves me quickly. I say hi to Butch and ask him who all these people are. He tells me he's not sure - the coordinator is not here yet; maybe Ben scheduled them. *I wonder if Butch has even talked to them. From Butch's dismissive attitude this seems to be the responsibility of the coordinator and not something he has even given any thought to.*

While we are talking, Dusty comes up and says, 'they look about sixteen.' Butch and I look. They do seem young. (Fieldnotes VI)

In this example, Butch and Dusty did not interrupt their routine to acknowledge the presence of new volunteers. New volunteers could be literally ignored. Such transient volunteers also were ignored in the café's rhetoric, which highlighted the regular volunteers as the café's heroes. For example, Dolly is a veteran volunteer. Although often impatient and snappy with other volunteers, she is extraordinarily friendly with guests:

He [Ben] shows us the eighth chair at each table, and tells us that when we get a second (which, he adds, may be difficult because there are not a lot of volunteers today,) we are to sit at the eighth chair and visit with our guests. He turns our attention to Dolly, and tells us that she is very good at this: watch how she does it and learn from her. (Fieldnotes X)

Here, Dolly is highlighted for exceptional friendliness to guests and is presented as a role model for volunteers who should strive to be equally friendly. Similarly, Dusty, a long-time volunteer is highlighted in the café's newsletter:

Every once in a while someone comes along that exemplifies the meaning of service. Dusty is that someone! Ask any of the guests or volunteers at Grace Café about him and the response is always preceded with a big smile! (Café Newsletter, Fall 2007)

This excerpt appeared in a four-paragraph section of the newsletter praising Dusty for his long-term unwavering dedication to the café. Other heroes appear throughout the newsletters in photos with captions praising their service. These heroes "give [their] heart and much of their time," (Grace Café Newsletter, Fall 2007) "cheerfully serve with gratitude for the opportunity," (Grace Café Newsletter, Holidays 2006) are "always ready to serve with a warm plate and a smile," (Grace Café Newsletter, Winter 2007) and

“inspire volunteers with their friendly personality and smiles” (Grace Café Newsletter, Summer 2007).

By focusing on heroic volunteers and ignoring unreliable volunteers, the café prevents practical constraints from interfering with its dignity message. Similarly, organizers at the café continue to emphasize slow service, a restaurant-style atmosphere, and the eighth chair, even though these ideals can crumble in daily service.

The constructed image of the café is upheld by a focus on regular, heroic volunteers. These volunteers reciprocate with their stories about the extraordinary impact the Grace Café has on their lives and the lives of those served. On the café’s website, and in its quarterly newsletter, the divergent experiences of volunteers and the disjunctures between reality and practicality are homogenized into the image of a Grace Café volunteer who experiences the joy of making a difference in the lives of those they serve:

I get such pleasure out of helping these folks and interacting with them. They are the invisible people in our society, and to get them talking at the table is very rewarding. To see them appreciate being treated with dignity is incredibly satisfying. It’s very important to keep reminding them that they are worthy, and that’s what our Monday group does. (Grace Café Newsletter, Holidays 2006)

This excerpt exemplifies the dignity message projected by the café’s rhetoric and organizers. Instead of focusing on daily challenges experienced every day at the café, volunteers share their success stories:

We treat each and every visitor with dignity and respect and in turn we get much more than we ever give. We are told thank you for everything we do for them. When we smile at them, we receive a smile in return. When we sit down and share a joke or funny story, we are told one too. (Grace Café Newsletter, Summer, 2007)

This volunteer describes an experience at the café free of practical constraints. On the café's website, volunteers are asked to share their testimonials. When a volunteer's experience aligns with the café's projected image, it is shared on the website and in the newsletter. In this manner, the café's organizers and its volunteers co-construct and perpetuate the idealized image of the café.

In summary, the concept of dignity is used to frame the importance of the work done at the Grace Café. This concept is emphasized in the café's official rhetoric, and transmitted to volunteers on a daily basis. However, the constraints that the café operates under create disjunctures between the dignity message and its daily execution. In order to sustain the dignity message, volunteers sometimes break the rules, but more often, practical limitations are simply ignored and success stories are highlighted. As a result of these strategies, volunteers and organizers are able to 'keep the faith' in dignity.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

This study has explored the concept of dignity as it appears at the Grace Café. Here I have highlighted how the idea of dignity is of primary importance. The importance of dignity is emphasized in the café's official rhetoric, in the speeches of the café's organizers, and in the daily efforts of many volunteers. Dignity is built into the structure of the café, through the provision of quality food in a restaurant-style environment. Further, an essential component of the dignity message is that volunteers treat guests with respect and friendliness. According to café policy, each table has an extra chair, where volunteers are to sit and chat with guests during service. The eighth chair represents both an opportunity and an expectation for volunteers' personal connection with guests.

However, practical constraints challenge the execution of the dignity message. Service is rushed, resources are limited, and not all volunteers can be relied on to incorporate dignity into their service. In daily operation, disjunctures emerge between the café's dignity ideology and the execution of service. Yet, volunteers and organizers at the café emphasize success and ideology. Instances where the dignity message is powerfully executed are highlighted, committed volunteers are spotlighted and others are ignored. Thus, volunteers and organizers manage to 'keep the faith' in dignity.

My research is limited, of course, to the Grace Café. The value of ethnography is in exploring the experiences and understandings of people in a limited social context, and

for this purpose, my research is strong. This study cannot be used to draw conclusions about other social service agencies, or charity in general. Further, because interviews with guests and volunteers are not included in my data, my research does not explore the personal meanings the dignity message carried for individuals. This is a separate research project. What emerged as most compelling from my research is how dignity is *done* and talked about by volunteers and organizers at the Grace Café.

The Grace Café operates within a society where the problem of homelessness is a result of structural inequalities. Structural forces create the café's clients. Although the café tries to serve homeless guests as guests in a restaurant, it remains that the café is not a restaurant. The café's ticket procedure and limits on tea and food choice are notable contradictions to the café's dignity message. Café organizers talk about the 'eighth chair' as an opportunity for volunteers to sit and visit with guests, but service becomes so rushed and hectic that volunteers rarely do so. These disjunctures between ideology and practical application are a result of limited resources. If we ask why the café operates with such limited resources, we are taken back to social structure. The homeless are seen as deficient individuals. People hate 'handouts.' It's not surprising, then, that pouring money and time into the café is not a priority for most people.

Given that homelessness is a problem of social structure, the treatment of people who are homeless, whether positive or negative, has no effect on the root causes of homelessness. The problem remains that social service agencies, which endeavor to soothe the problem of homelessness on an individual level, still divert attention away from real solutions to homelessness, such as addressing the structural inequalities that create and sustain poverty. In fact, social services are particularly antithetical to social

change because they present the *illusion* of a solution. Social services allow people to feel that something is being done about the problem of homelessness, and the lives of homeless people are sustained because social services provide basic necessities, which further arrests demand for social change.

The primary goal of the Grace Café is to provide meals to homeless guests in a dignified and respectful environment. While most research on the homeless is focused on the individual problems and pathologies of “the homeless,” other researchers have drawn attention to the personal needs of homeless people. Some researchers have found that dignity, defined as a sense of self-worth, is one of these needs. According to these researchers, the experience of losing one’s home and living on the streets presents a formidable challenge to personal dignity (Buckner, et al., 1993; Seltser and Miller, 1993; Snow and Anderson, 1993). Miller and Keys (2001), in their analysis of interviews with homeless people at the Inspiration Café, identified service factors that either facilitated or undermined a homeless person’s sense of dignity. Further, the authors found that a sense of dignity can dramatically affect the outcomes of an individual’s homeless experience: “An important implication of these findings is that one way homeless people get the hope and motivation to begin to reconstruct their lives is by being treated with dignity” (349). Snow and Anderson (1993) attest that a sense of self-worth is as important for homeless people as the fulfillment of survival needs. Therefore, the dignity provided by organizations such as the Grace Café, the Inspiration Café, and Loaves and Fishes (Allahyari, 2000) is as significant as the food they serve.

The dignity message at the Grace Café is not executed as flawlessly as it is presented. Further, from a structural perspective, the Grace Café operates as a distraction

from the real problems creating homelessness. Although the Grace Café can be criticized on many fronts, it provides an invaluable service to real people with unwavering regularity. By providing dignity and respect instead of blame and punishment, organizers and volunteers endeavor to create an oasis for homeless people, or in the words of Travis, “an island of hope in a sea of misery.”

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