S Ericson

SOC 4978V

Prof. Yanjie Bian

April 22, 2022

"I wish food shelves didn't have to exist": Culture, Compassion, and the Sociological Imagination in Two Minneapolis Food Shelves

Introduction

At first glance, a food shelf may seem like an uncomplicated space. People arrive, they receive food, and they leave. One might think that the primary challenges of operating such an organization are technical. That is, primarily concerned with acquiring food, storing it, and distributing it. But in addition to these technical aspects, food shelves are enmeshed in broader social and cultural structures and phenomena. In fact, these social and cultural factors help shape what food is available, and how much. They can also present barriers to acquiring food for people who are experiencing food insecurity.

My central thesis for this project is this: Cultural competence, including language and personal experiences, fundamentally affect food shelf staff relationships to clients. To put this another way, food shelves are social and cultural spaces as well as technical ones.

I pay special attention to the role of language proficiency and cultural competence. In my fieldwork and interviews, language skills and cultural knowledge played key roles in shaping how staff related to clients.

Recent research (Surman et al. 2021) has examined the ways in which food shelf staff and clients relate to one another, namely in terms of compassion. Their research looked at how

food shelf staff and clients related to one another through different types of compassion. However, they write that most food shelves, including the ones they studied, are "[s]taffed mainly by middle-class volunteers" (Ibid., p. 1091). As Surman et al. explain in their paper, this creates a social division between clients and staff. For my research, I was able to perform an ethnography in, and interview a staff member of, a food shelf that primarily employs people from similar class and cultural backgrounds to many clients. I also interviewed a staff member from another food shelf who used to be a client at that same food shelf. I argue that these social similarities create a fundamentally different dynamic than this previous research examined.

Another difference I observed in comparison to some previous research is the role of food shelves in broader food systems. Examples of this include McIntyre et al. (2016), Wason (2019), and parts of Surman (2021). The authors marshal various critiques. A primary one is that food shelves primarily exist to plug the gaps in an inadequate and unfair social safety net; a challenge which, many of these authors argue, food shelves are woefully unprepared to meet. In general, food shelf critics believe that food shelves are an insufficient response to rampant inequality and food insecurity that is the result of broader social systems and policy choices. I find much to agree with in these critiques. While this topic is outside the scope of this thesis, Mason (2020) is just one example of how the American welfare state is not prepared to truly address food insecurity.

Of course, it is possible to overrate the importance of these structural critiques. As Wason (2019) writes, food shelves "perform an important role in helping to meet the needs of those experiencing food poverty" (p. 81). Although this thesis mainly deals with the sociological implications of food shelf work, it is important to note that the most important role of food shelves is to provide food to people. Despite all of the valid critique of the social context that

contributes to food insecurity, food shelves still provide nutrition to people who are in desperate need of it. One of my interviewees, a former food shelf client, expressed that his primary feelings were not shame or stigma, but gratitude to have access to food and, sometimes, excitement about finding specific items he liked. He compared the experience to going to the grocery store: a utilitarian errand. And that simple reality is something that I think is important to emphasize amidst all of the social theorizing in this thesis.

I also think these critiques miss something very important. Here, I'll point to Surman et al.'s idea of "compassion 'within'" (Surman et al. (2021), p. 1092). In their observations and interviews, they noted that as food shelf volunteers worked there for a longer and longer time, they began a process of "critical self-reflection" (Ibid) about the societal context of food insecurity. What food shelf critics miss is that in addition to (most importantly) giving people food, the experience of food shelf work creates social bonds across social boundaries and facilitates the development of sociological imagination. Multiple volunteers I spoke with expressed that their food shelf experience has given them a greater understanding of the sociological context of food insecurity. Rather than reinforcing social divisions, for these volunteers, food shelves fostered empathy, understanding, and sociological imagination.

I was inspired to do this research by my previous AmeriCorps service in this food shelf location, which I call South. (AmeriCorps is an organization which, among other things, pays people to do community service.) When I originally worked there, I was struck by the degree of cultural integration that this food shelf had with the surrounding community. This extended not just to the background and knowledge of the staff, but also the physical layout of the space and the choices of which food to stock. This experience is what made me want to study whether this level of cultural integration was unique, and how it related to the previous literature on food

shelves. Indeed, I found that South differed from the other food shelf I studied, which I call North, and that North conformed more to the types of organizations studied in the pre-existing literature.

Another new element of my research is looking specifically at the Twin Cities context. Previous research has ranged from the UK as with Surman, to Turkey, as with Turkkan (2021). My research adds to this geographic variation by examining a multicultural urban environment in the Upper Midwest. My research on language and cultural competence adds new dimensions to this research. Surman, for instance, focuses on class divisions, and Turkkan looks at classed and gendered ideas of "deserving"-ness. In discussing language commonalities and differences, my research goes beyond class differences to look at how race, ethnicity, and culture affect food shelves. Also, I did not originally intend to research disability, but in the course of my interviews I was able to talk with someone who is hard of hearing and fluent in American Sign Language. In a previous job, he helped deaf individuals access food shelves, and for some of them who only knew ASL, a lack of English skills was a major barrier.

Literature Review

In contrasting my literature review with my own research, I found that different sources use different terminology. In this section, I refer to "food *banks*," which is the primary terminology used in the literature. However, in talking to my interviewees, I found that it is more typical in my area to call these organizations "food *shelves*." Food *banks*, in that context, refers to a different kind of organization, which sells food to food shelves. That is the terminology I'll be using in the rest of the paper. But specifically in this section, I will be calling food shelves food banks.

The literature on food banks in sociology and related disciplines covers many themes. Much of it describes the origin of food banks in many countries as a response to neoliberal cuts to welfare programs. Others discuss the role of food banks in providing an outlet for surplus food. Some focus on the emotional experiences of food bank volunteers and clients, such as embarrassment or compassion. A common thread among much of the literature is concern with how food banks are, aren't, or could be advancing social justice. Another core concern of the literature is the dignity (or lack thereof) of food bank clients.

One significant contribution to an overview of the food bank literature is McIntyre et al. (2016). After reviewing the previous literature on food banks, they identify some common critiques which they refer to as "seven deadly 'ins'" of inaccessibility, inadequacy, inappropriateness, indignity, inefficiency, insufficiency, and instability (p. 843). A key element of this critique is that food banks, fundamentally, are a response to an inadequate social welfare state. The argument goes that food banks emerge where government responses to poverty are inadequate (Ibid, p. 845).

This critique of food banks, or more accurately a critique of the circumstances which lead to the creation of food banks, is also present in Wason (2019). In her study of media coverage of food banks in New Zealand, the author argues that the existence of food banks is the result of a failure of social policy on the part of the government (p. 73). However, she also acknowledges that food banks nonetheless play an important role in ensuring access to food for people in need, as well as reducing food waste (p. 81).

The question of food waste is an interesting one. Anecdotally, in my experience working in food banks, clients were reluctant to accept food that was past its expiration date, even if it was still good for a period after the date. I heard from a coworker that this was because clients

had a perception that they were being given food that other people had rejected. This is a core question of dignity. Van der Horst et al. (2014) explore the flip side of dignity: shame. In their interviews and ethnography with both food bank clients and staff, the authors found that shame often accompanies the clients' experience. They find that these feelings of shame have three primary vectors: the type of food they received, their interactions with volunteers, and their general perception of their positioning in a social hierarchy (p. 1506). This shows how while food banks are intended to help people, their broader social positioning and structural aspects of the client experience can reinforce feelings of social stigma and inferiority.

In addition to general factors of food bank clients' understanding of their position in social hierarchies, this resistance to accepting expired (but still edible) goods might lie in the history of food expiration labels themselves. Milne (2012) describes how food expiration labels in the UK have changed in response to sociological conditions and institutional actors. At first, they were merely an internal tool used by grocery stores. However, after the state took a greater interest in food safety, labels became an important regulatory tool. Finally, in recent years, sustainability activists have argued for a reconsideration of labels in order to reduce food waste (p. 85). In my pre-existing, casual observations of food bank work, food labels served an additional role. Clients viewed the presence of food labeled as expired as an indicator of their inferior social status to people who are not food insecure.

In addition to shame, another emotion that can arise from food bank work is compassion. Using a unique, arts-based qualitative methodology, Surman et al. (2021) identify several different forms of compassion that working in a food bank may elicit. They do acknowledge pre-existing critiques of food banks, writing that food banks "occupy an uncomfortable position, being seen both as a manifestation of caring communities as well as an undesirable feature of

neoliberal government" (p. 1090). However, through a combination of ethnography and the participation of food bank workers and clients in expressive performance workshops, the authors focus on the nature of compassion in the food bank context (p. 1094). They separate compassion into three main types: "compassion 'for,' compassion 'with,' and compassion 'within'" (p. 1090). They find that compassion "for," in which volunteers viewed themselves as distant from clients, can lead to genuinely positive acts but can also reinforce inequality. Another type of compassion is compassion "with" clients, in which volunteers try to help out the whole person rather than merely focusing on their food insecurity, and emphasizes making personal connections with clients. This can also lead to selfless acts, but can become possessive and overwhelming for both parties (p. 1100). The final type of compassion is compassion "within." This type is less about immediate acts, and more about long-term reflection on the part of the volunteers. Compassion within encourages volunteers to think sociologically about the broader sociopolitical context of poverty and food banks (p. 1090).

Surman et al.'s idea of compassion "with" lines up very nicely with iconic sociologist C. Wright Mills's (2000[1959]) concept of the "sociological imagination." For Mills, the sociological imagination

> is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another— from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self— and to see the relations between the two. (p. 7)

In other words, the sociological imagination is the ability to connect your own personal experiences (and those of others) to broader social phenomena. For Mills, an "trouble" is a problem that affects a person as an individual. An "issue" is a broader phenomenon that is of concern to the whole society (Mills 2000[1959], p. 8). The sociological imagination is about seeing the connections between troubles and issues. In Surman et al.'s research, volunteering at a food bank conferred the sociological imagination upon people. One volunteer told Surman et al. that "The problem around food poverty, I think is a much bigger issue about attitudes to people who are out of work, people who are in low paid work" (Surman et al. (2021), p. 1101). This newfound sociological imagination didn't just involve internal reflection and opinions, either. One interviewee said, "Before I wouldn't speak to a homeless person, but now because I know them all by name and am aware of their problems, this makes me less judgemental [sic]" (Ibid).

This typology of compassion is one of the primary heuristics I used to evaluate my data from interviews. As I outline in my results section, I found that this typology of compassion does hold true for middle- and upper-middle-class white staff members, but isn't the case with staff and volunteers of different backgrounds and experiences.

Another aspect of food banks that plays into concerns with dignity is who gets aid when resources are limited. Turkkan (2021) researched how food bank staff in Istanbul, Turkey, sort clients into categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" (p. 464). Her paper also provides a useful expansion of the geographic and cultural scope of the literature -- most of the rest of the articles I discuss here are about wealthy Western nations. She utilized both participant observation and semi-structured interviews in her research (p. 468). She found that, in an attempt to allocate scarce resources, food bank staff seek to evaluate clients in order to determine who among them "really need help" (p. 470). However, they do not just rely on objective criteria like

income. The process of identifying "deserving" clients, Turkkan finds, also reinforces gender roles, in which mothers are prioritized and childless men deprioritized. In addition, single women are actively encouraged by the staff to get married (p. 472). So, while food banks "provide significant help to those in dire need," the process of sorting potential clients based on "deserving"-ness can reinforce social inequalities (p. 474).

Overall, the food bank literature from several different countries emphasizes that they serve a much-needed role in providing vital help to some of society's most vulnerable people. However, it could be the case that they could be obviated through better anti-poverty policy on the part of governments. Furthermore, the ways in which food bank policies are implemented has the potential to reinforce social inequalities and induce feelings of shame in clients.

Methods

As part of my research, I performed a participant ethnography working as a volunteer in one food shelf. I also interviewed six people: four in a combined group setting (with a primary focus on three of them), and two individually. I used a semi-structured interview format, shaped to fit the background and knowledge of each participant.

At first, I intended to mainly interview food shelf clients. However, a staff member told me that clients would probably not have time to sit down for an uncompensated interview. So, I pivoted to interviewing staff, including two former clients. Most interviewees staffed food shelves directly, but one interviewee is a former client who works in a different role in an organization that manages a food shelf. Staff members are spread across two different food shelves in Minneapolis. I have referred to these sites as "South" and "North," rather than the

sites' actual names, to protect subjects' privacy. I am also using pseudonyms to refer to all of my interviewees.

Everyone I interviewed signed a consent form in which they agreed to be interviewed and to have the interview recorded. I still possess these interviews as well as computer-generated transcripts of them. The consent form stated, among other things, that no one except I or my professor would hear these recordings. I have honored that promise and will continue to do so. In order to protect their privacy and confidentiality, I also use pseudonyms to refer to all of my interviewees. I also use vague alternate names (North and South) to refer to the two different food shelves where my interviewees work.

For my participant ethnography, I worked as a volunteer at the "South" food shelf. I had previously worked in this location, but all of my field notes are from my current project. Some of my knowledge of the site is shaped by my previous experience, however.

As part of my participant ethnography at South, I performed ordinary volunteer work at the food shelf. This mostly included stocking shelves and taking clients through the food distribution process, as well as some cleaning work like cleaning fridges or taking out the trash. The way the process at South works is that clients enter the food shelf and are asked some questions about basic information, such as their name and how many people are in their household. Then, they wait to be taken through the distribution process by another staff member: this was my role. I would take a cart with a cardboard box on top through the food distribution section. I would ask clients what food or other items (such as sanitary pads, diapers, and other necessities) they wanted and place them in the box.

South is located in a community center in Minneapolis that also houses various other organizations and services. These include a radio station, which is run by the same parent

organization as South. The community center as a whole is administered by the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board. The building also houses a kitchen, fitness center, gym, pool, and computer lab. Occasionally, staff and volunteers from other areas, especially the radio station, will come by and help at the food shelf. Both staff and clients can eat hot meals which are served once per day, at lunchtime. These hot lunches are also open to the public, regardless of whether they get food from the food shelf. The area is decorated with various pieces of artwork. These include *papel picado*, a traditional Mexican handicraft. One of my co-staff members worked on creating a dreamcatcher. There are multiple murals, including one depicting many people's faces alongside the name of the neighborhood. There are also informational posters about historical figures and cultural traditions from various communities. These include Hmong, indigenous, and LGBT communities. Sometimes, there are potted plants available for people to take home – during my fieldwork, Jason says that he especially likes it when the plants are available.

As I mentioned above, I originally intended to only interview food shelf clients, not staff members. However, this quickly proved to not be feasible. Jason, who was a high-level staff member at South and has a degree in anthropology, informed me that an unfunded study would be difficult due to time poverty. Many clients have busy schedules and little free time, so an unpaid interview would not be helpful to them.

Ultimately, I was not able to interview any current food shelf clients. However, I was able to interview several staff members (n=6). And two of these staff members are themselves former food shelf clients. Their perspective in particular was very helpful. I performed three semi-structured interviews. One was a group interview with four participants. The other two were individual interviews. I asked many similar questions in each interview, but I also altered

the interview schedule for each instance, in order to accommodate the unique positions and experiences of each participant.

For sampling, I had two main strategies. My first one was to look up food shelves near me and email staff to see if they would be willing to participate. Five out of the six interview subjects came from just one of these food shelves, which I call North. This resulted not only from the first email I sent, but also from snowball sampling. The initial staff who I interviewed also reached out to other staff members at the same organization. Jason was the only interview subject from South. I knew him previously, as he had been one of my supervisors during my previous AmeriCorps service at South.

I chose qualitative methods primarily due to personal interest. Quantitative methods are extraordinarily valuable for social science, and often have much higher validity and reproducibility. Nonetheless, this was simply not the kind of work I was interested in doing. I do believe that qualitative methods also have a role in creating knowledge about the social world. In-depth, semi-structured interviews allowed me to solicit more open-ended thoughts from my participants than a pre-made survey would. This allows me to circumvent my own biases, to some extent, by allowing interviewees to provide unexpected answers and direct the conversation to some extent.

Interviewee descriptions

All of these names are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of interviewees.

"Jason" is a thirty-two-year-old white man. He is upper-middle-class and grew up in a rural area in Appalachia. His first language is English, and he also speaks Spanish. He works in a leadership role at the larger organization which runs South. In this role, he manages that

organization's food programs, including food shelves, agriculture, and other food-related activities.

"Todd" is a forty-eight-year-old white man. It isn't his full-time job, but he works as a community educator for the larger organization that runs North. In this role, he gives presentations on his experience with poverty, homelessness, and incarceration to different groups of people. He mostly cited professional groups, such as physical therapists or doctors. Todd told me that he has "been homeless off and on for [his] entire life," in addition to being incarcerated, in total, for half his life. Todd ascribes many of these difficulties to his struggles with drug addiction. He describes successfully overcoming his addiction as "next to impossible." Todd credits the organization that runs North, specifically their housing programs, as being critical to his recovery. Especially, he says, it was their "housing first" approach that helped him recover from his addiction and become "a productive member of society." He told me that this organization "saved [his] life," and for that reason, he was willing to do "anything" that they asked him to do. This includes being a community educator. Other things he's done with them include acting in a play based on his life. Todd speaks English, Spanish, and American Sign Language.

"Alex" is an Asian-American man who works at North. He works as a volunteer coordinator. He previously was a volunteer coordinator at a homeless shelter run by the same organization.

"Rose" is a volunteer food shelf operator at North. She is a white woman who has been volunteering at the food shelf for many years and has more recently taken on a leadership role.

"Leanne" is a black woman who is also a volunteer food shelf operator at North. Similarly to Rose, she volunteered for many years before assuming a leadership role. She is also a former client of the food shelf.

"Tiffany" is a white woman who also works as a volunteer coordinator at North. She has experienced homelessness before.

Results

There was an interesting dichotomy in my research around whether interviewees conformed to Surman et al. (2021)'s typology of compassion. I found that interviewees who conformed more with the stereotypical food shelf staff – "mainly…middle-class volunteers" (p. 1091) – did cleave to the kind of compassion typology that they set out. However, volunteers from other backgrounds were less likely to conform to this.

<u>Jason: Conformity to Surman et al.'s framework</u>

Take Jason, for example. He is a 32-year-old white man from an upper-middle-class background. In his job, he oversees two food shelves as well as various other food programs for a nonprofit organization in Minneapolis. He told me that at the beginning of his work for that organization, he had a "white savior complex." This is similar to Surman's idea of compassion "for": staff having a compassionate, but hierarchical view of their relationship to clients. Comparing his initial attitude to the Peace Corps, Jason said he initially thought he was at South "to save people."

Nowadays, Jason told me, he has developed personal relationships with clients and other people in community around the "South" food shelf, which is predominantly Latino and Native American. He talked about knowing some people for ten years at this point. This is similar to Surman's compassion "with," in which staff develop more holistic, personal relationships with clients. Indeed, Jason described his current work as "community supporting community." It also resonates with a quote that Surman et al. place in the "compassion 'within'" category. One volunteer in their study said that, "Before [volunteering] I wouldn't speak to a homeless person, but now because I know them all by name and am aware of their problems, this makes me less judgemental [sic]" (Surman et al. (2021), p. 1101). Jason did not express that he had been judgmental of people living in poverty before he worked at a food shelf, but his description of forming long-lasting bonds with people in the community is similar to this volunteer's account of knowing many houseless people "by name" and being "aware of their problems."

However, Jason also described this deeper community engagement as emotionally draining. This is especially relevant when it comes to other services he performs that aren't directly food-related. During the warmer months, an encampment of unhoused people often reside in the land across the street from South, and many residents struggle with opioid addiction. Jason told me that his positive feelings about his work "ebb and flow," especially when it comes to administering naloxone, a drug that can stop opioid overdoses. Jason told me he has administered naloxone twelve times in the last two years. Addiction was also a concern during my ethnography. One day, as I was taking out the trash, I compressed the trash down in the can so as to make it easier to tie the bag shut. However, a coworker warned me that I shouldn't be doing that, as we didn't know what was in there and there could be needles. This

shows that the crisis of addiction in surrounding communities affects the operations of the food shelf in multiple ways.

Another challenging element of this more complete community membership is de-escalating potentially violent situations. While Jason finds this to be a distressing and demoralizing part of his work, Jason also expressed empathy for the people involved and the broader social context. He described his de-escalation work as "talk[ing] people out of some of the worst moments of their life." The few people who are potentially violent, Jason said, "aren't mad at [staff]. They aren't mad at me. They're just mad at the situation within the world," for instance, because they cannot provide food for their families.

Surman et al. also discuss how attachment to specific clients can sometimes become possessive or overwhelming for staff. And while Jason did not express a sense of possessiveness around specific clients, his occasionally difficult experiences working in the broader community highlights that this deeper engagement can be challenging as well as rewarding.

Jason also exhibits what Surman et al. call compassion "within": long-term personal reflection on the structural and social contexts of food insecurity and food shelves. One of Surman's interviewees said, "we should really be working to put ourselves out of existence" (p. 1101). Jason expressed a similar sentiment to me: "I would love to work ourselves out of a job. I wish food shelves didn't have to exist." Surman et al. write that volunteers questioned their own "values and attitudes" as part of this form of compassion (Ibid). Similarly, Jason told me that he has "unlearned" a lot of his own preconceptions and ideas during his work. He specifically cited that he is often "the one white guy at the table." I also saw evidence of this in his discussion of de-escalation (see above), in his conception that people are not mad at him, but mad at the world. In this way, exposure to people of other backgrounds can encourage both self-reflection and

sociological imagination on the part of food shelf staff who come from more privileged backgrounds.

Emotions and Other Models of Staff-Client Relationships

However, not all of my interviewees talked about these deep, holistic staff-client relationships. Todd, a white man who is a former food shelf client, told me that he did not develop these kinds of relationships with staff. He said the process was "in and out" and that he "didn't really have an opportunity to develop any type of relationships with [staff]." When I asked two volunteers from "North" whether they formed long-term relationships with people in the community, they said no. Alex, a paid staff member at North, said that interactions with clients are "usually very brief" due to the long lines.

Todd also told me that while he understood how other people might feel ashamed or embarrassed about using food assistance, by the time he became a food shelf client, "that feeling of shame or embarrassment was long gone." Because of all of the "horrific, traumatic circumstances in [his] life," his primary emotion was being grateful to have access to food, and excitement about finding particular foods that he enjoyed. Todd also described how the experience of using food shelves gave him empathy for others who might find themselves in a similar situation. He told me that he understands his own level of competence and intelligence. To him, this means that because he found himself experiencing food insecurity, "it can happen to anybody" and there's no need to feel shame about it. In addition, Todd said that it felt like a typical errand to him. "How does anybody else feel when they have to go to the grocery store?"

Todd's experience diverges significantly from the client experiences reported by Van der Horst et al. (2014). Based on interviews with food shelf clients, observations, and interactions

with volunteers (all in the Netherlands), these researchers concluded that shame was the "most prominent" emotion expressed by clients in relation to their food shelf experiences (p. 1506). These researchers said that clients mainly expressed shame about the types of food they received, the nature of their interactions with volunteers, and their general ideas about where they were located in a social hierarchy (Ibid). This is not to say that Todd's feelings are invalid: his experience is his own. But the interviewees in this other study felt differently about their own experiences. Of course, that study did have a higher sample size than I did (n=17), and they interviewed more current clients. In the future, larger-scale quantitative research may be able to assess food shelf clients' emotional responses in a more generalizable way.

There were some notable differences between the two food shelves involved in my study. I have more information on the physical space at South, because I actually worked there. North had a fire before I started my research, so I was not able to do fieldwork there. South is part of a broader community center. There are many posters on the walls, talking about different cultures and historical figures, usually from marginalized communities such as Native Americans, Hmong, Latinos, or the LGBT community. In addition to the demographics of the staff (mainly Latino and Native American), these cultural decorations communicated to me that food shelf staff were making an attempt to relate to the neighboring communities.

Language and culture

This gets into cultural competence. Cultural difference was very important at both South and North. Jason told me that "most of [his] day" at work is in Spanish. This matched up with my experience during fieldwork, as I used my limited Spanish skills frequently with clients, and I had multiple coworkers who were native Spanish speakers. And Todd, who is hard of hearing,

discussed his experience working as a peer support specialist for deaf and hard of hearing people who were in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. As part of this job, he would help people at food shelves. Some, he said, knew how to write in English and so they could communicate with staff that way. But others never learned English, and only knew American Sign Language. These examples show that language proficiency is extremely important in enabling people to access food assistance.

Food stocking

Another area that cultural difference impacts food shelves is choices in food stocking. People from both food shelves, especially North, emphasized to me that they don't always have autonomy in what food they stock. Nonetheless, they do have choices. North expressed that they wish they had more fresh produce, and it seemed like South was better able to stock fresh produce, but still prioritized it. This is because food shelves, through donations and food banks, get lots of canned food. This is advantageous because it's cheap and lasts for a long time. However, canned foods, Jason told me, often contain a lot of sodium. And staff from both food shelves said that clients often request fresh produce and are frustrated by the predominance of canned food. This has a cultural component as well: Jason told me that he knows someone who, when they first migrated to the United States, was given mostly canned foods, but they had never seen a can before and didn't know what to do with it.

While multiple interview subjects told me that clients most value the provision of fresh produce, there are also other models of what types of food to prioritize. Jason told me about a previous staff member who prioritized purchasing Popsicles and other sweets. This was because she understood that when families have to go without something, sweets are often the first to go.

This focus on sweets, Jason said, "ma[d]e it a really wonderful experience for [small children] to come to the food shelf." Ultimately, however, sweets ended up taking up too much of the budget, and they re-oriented to the most-requested items, such as produce, milk, eggs, and meat. This shows that food stocking decisions are not only scientific or technical ones. They also involve questions about what staff and clients value and prioritize.

A particular example of the impact of cultural difference and cultural competence on stocking choices came in an interaction between two long-time volunteers at North. Rose, who is white, said of her fellow volunteer Leanne, who is black: "Leanne does seem to know what people would like or want much more than I do." They told me that their clientele is primarily black. Leanne, being familiar with African-American culinary traditions, was able to anticipate client requests if they corresponded with these traditions. For instance, the volunteers discussed that Leanne anticipated that clients might want black-eyed peas around New Year's, which is a tradition in both the American South and in African-American communities around the country.

Another way that social difference impacts food shelves is policies around volunteers who are also clients at the food shelf. Jason was very passionate about volunteers being allowed to receive food, because many of them start off as clients and are themselves food insecure. However, a food bank that South was buying their food from at the time said this was a violation of their policies, because they wanted to avoid volunteers picking and choosing the most desirable items for themselves. Even with this rationale, Jason argued, "you're creating that hierarchy of the haves are here to serve the have-nots, rather than the have-nots banding together…and feeding one another." Jason told me that the staff of South actually managed to get this policy changed. Now, volunteers are allowed to also be clients. Rose said to me that the food bank in question does "have very strict rules" about volunteers taking home food at the end of

their shift. However, she said, “I can’t say that what you’re describing never happens.” This indicates that even in food shelves that nominally follow the policy, volunteers sometimes take food home anyway.

Other stocking decisions affect people of any culture. For instance, on one day of my fieldwork, South had potted plants near the entrance available for people to take home if they wanted. That day, Jason said that he appreciated when those plants were available. South also frequently stocks cat and dog food. At one point, a client asked if he could take home an empty bag, of the type used to hold large amounts of vegetables. He motioned and stated that it was to use as a loofah in the shower. I forget whether he said this in English or Spanish. This moment was the collision of a lot of things that I am seeking to elucidate: language differences, food shelves serving a variety of different needs, and the necessity of accommodating stocking decisions to the desires and cultures of clients.

These examples show that cultural difference and cultural competence mediate food shelf staff’s relationships with clients, as well as the policies and methods they adapt.

Locus of other social services

Food shelves are often part of broader organizations that provide a wide variety of services. North is part of a local nonprofit organization with multiple locations that provides other services primarily aimed at unhoused people, including hot meals, chemical and mental health treatment, and housing. South is both part of a broader nonprofit organization that operates a variety of programs, and is physically situated in a community center that houses a radio station run by the same parent organization as well as facilities run by other groups.

During my fieldwork at South, I noticed that scattered around the facility were containers distributing fliers for many other social services in various languages. They also ran a youth education group out of the same building, trying to help young people acquire the skills they need for employment. This program is where Jason initially worked when he was hired by the organization. There were also informational posters, such as one advising people about what to do if they were affected by the public charge rule, a former policy which placed additional restrictions on immigrants who used public assistance programs. Another flier advised people on how to apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. There was also a hot lunch program on some of the days I did my ethnography. Members of the public could come in and get a free prepared hot meal once per day. All of these are examples of other, non-food shelf assistance programs that the food shelf serves as a locus for.

While there was no encampment while I did my fieldwork, during the warmer months, there is often an encampment of houseless people across the street from South. As discussed above, food shelf staff often do things to assist this population as well as their regular clientele. Jason, for instance, is trained on how to administer naloxone and does so regularly. This is another example of different social services, beyond just food, that food shelves provide. I think this contributes to Surman et al.'s idea of compassion with: if there's more than just food, but also other community services, it might make it more likely for staff to develop long-term relationships with clients and feel like they are part of the community.

Compassion "with" and the sociological imagination

Famed sociologist C. Wright Mills created the concept of the "sociological imagination." As I explained above, for Mills, the sociological imagination is the ability to connect someone's

private “troubles” to public “issues.” With the sociological imagination, we can see how the events and circumstances of our lives and the lives of others are connected to broader social phenomena. I also discussed above how this concept connects to Surman et al.’s idea of “compassion within,” in which food bank volunteers developed a better understanding of the sociological context of food insecurity over time.

Both compassion within and the sociological imagination were present in my interviews. In particular, both Jason (staff member at South) and Rose (volunteer at North) expressed experiences and ideas in line with these concepts. Jason told me that “in an ideal world, everyone is just participating and has full control over what food that they bring into their families.” In addition, he said that food deserts are not “a naturally occurring phenomenon,” but the product of policies and choices by powerful institutions that underinvest in certain areas of the city.

Similarly, Rose, a volunteer at North, explained how her volunteer experience has expanded her view of the sociological context of food insecurity. “It really has come home to me very clearly,” she said, “that we have enough food in this country for everyone.” When describing the image of a long line of people outside a food shelf, she asked, rhetorically, “Why are these people food insecure?” She continued that this question “does get at some very, very, very basic questions about, what kind of a society do we want to be?” She also said that her experience had taught her the problem is less about the amount of food we have, but about how it's distributed, such as elderly people who can’t drive and are unable to go to the food shelf to pick it up. This is as clear an example of the sociological imagination as I can think of, and it’s the result of food shelf work. I think these volunteers’ experiences show that structural critiques of food shelves miss that they have an important impact in fostering the sociological imagination among volunteers.

Conclusion

I found in my ethnography and interviews that culture and individual background deeply influence the relationships and forms of compassion between staff and clients at food shelves. Contrasting a food shelf with a predominantly English-speaking clientele with another food shelf that had a predominantly Spanish-speaking clientele elucidated the importance of language. My research is immensely indebted to Surman et al.'s (2021) framework of three types of compassion. I found that food shelf staff who had middle-class and/or white backgrounds were much more likely to conform to this framework. By contrast, staff who came from similar backgrounds to their clients, especially if they had previously been clients themselves, were less likely to conform to this framework.

This has important implications both for social scientific research on food shelves, and for the practical operation of food shelves. While my research raises interesting questions, my conclusions are limited by my small sample size (n=6 for interviews, and brief fieldwork at only one site). Future research could refine my methods and expand them, with lengthier fieldwork at more sites, and a greater number of interviews. In addition, future research could use funding as a means to compensate client interviewees for their time. This has the potential to both increase the sample of interviewees, get more direct perspectives from clients, and also be more ethical. The ethical question arises because food shelf clients are by definition struggling economically. Paying interviewees would provide fair compensation to these people for their time.

Furthermore, the biggest weakness of my results is their generalizability. Expanding the qualitative sample size might help with this, but ultimately, to be truly generalizable there needs to be quantitative research. Future research could use my interview questions, and my

interviewees' answers, to formulative a quantitative survey and potentially reach a much larger sample size. This would also allow researchers to compare different parts of the country, or between staff of different backgrounds on a larger scale.

In addition, I think this research has practical implications for the operation of food shelves and food banks. The consistent theme across South and North of clients wanting more fresh produce highlights the urgent need for these types of foods to be distributed to food shelves. Furthermore, my ethnography and my interviewees' statements demonstrate that food shelves need to attract and retain staff from a variety of backgrounds in order to properly serve their communities. At South, language skills allow staff to serve Latin American immigrant communities more effectively. And at North, familiarity with African-American culinary traditions helps staff facilitate clients' desire to observe those traditions. These data points, if confirmed by studies with greater generalizability, demonstrate the necessity of cultural competence in food shelf staffing. Food shelves should seek to attract volunteers and paid staff who are representative of the communities they serve, as well as ensuring that minority populations (such as deaf and hard of hearing people) are represented as well.

In addition, my interviews revealed an impact of food shelves that many structural critiques miss. These critics are correct to point out the inadequacy of social safety nets and broader structural problems with our food system. But as my interviewees show, food shelf work has tremendous potential to bridge social divides and foster the sociological imagination. Rather than solely being subordinate to a flawed food system, food shelf work gives people a hands-on education in the broader social context of why some people go hungry. In many ways, people like Leanne and Rose who do frontline food shelf work are much better and more complete practitioners of sociology than any of us in the academy can claim to be.

Works Cited

González-Torre, Pilar L., and Jorge Coque. 2016. “How Is a Food Bank Managed? Different Profiles in Spain.” *Agriculture and Human Values* 33(1):89–100. doi: 10.1007/s10460-015-9595-x.

van der Horst, Hilje, Stefano Pascucci, and Wilma Bol. 2014. “The ‘Dark Side’ of Food Banks? Exploring Emotional Responses of Food Bank Receivers in the Netherlands” edited by P. Martin Caraher and Dr Alessio Cavicchi. *British Food Journal* 116(9):1506–20. doi: 10.1108/BFJ-02-2014-0081.

Mason, Diana J. 2020. “Food Insecurity and a Threatened Safety Net.” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 323(5):406. doi: 10.1001/jama.2019.22150.

McIntyre, Lynn, Danielle Tougas, Krista Rondeau, and Catherine L. Mah. 2016. “‘In’-Sights about Food Banks from a Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the Academic Literature.” *Agriculture and Human Values* 33(4):843–59. doi: 10.1007/s10460-015-9674-z.

Mills, C. Wright. [1959] 2000. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford [England] New York: Oxford University Press.

Milne, Richard. 2012. “Arbiters of Waste: Date Labels, the Consumer and Knowing Good, Safe Food.” *The Sociological Review* 60(2_suppl):84–101. doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.12039.

Mukoya, Mercy N., Fiona H. McKay, and Matthew Dunn. 2017. “Can Giving Clients a Choice in Food Selection Help to Meet Their Nutritional Needs?: Investigating a Novel

Food Bank Approach for Asylum Seekers." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 18(4):981–91. doi: 10.1007/s12134-017-0515-3.

Surman, Emma, Mihaela Kelemen, and Nick Rumens. 2021. "Ways to Care: Forms and Possibilities of Compassion within UK Food Banks." *The Sociological Review* 69(5):1090–1106. doi: 10.1177/0038026121991330.

Tarasuk, Valerie, and Joan M. Eakin. 2005. "Food Assistance through 'Surplus' Food: Insights from an Ethnographic Study of Food Bank Work." *Agriculture and Human Values* 22(2):177–86. doi: 10.1007/s10460-004-8277-x.

Tarasuk, Valerie, Andrée-Anne Fafard St-Germain, and Rachel Loopstra. 2020. "The Relationship Between Food Banks and Food Insecurity: Insights from Canada." *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 31(5):841–52. doi: 10.1007/s11266-019-00092-w.

Turkkan, Candan. 2021. "Who Is 'Deserving' of Aid? Subject-Formation in Istanbul's Food Banks." *Food, Culture & Society* 24(3):464–80. doi: 10.1080/15528014.2021.1884419.

Wason, Susan. 2019. "Food Banks and Food Rescue Organisations: Damned If They Do; Damned If They Don't." *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* 31(4):71–83. doi: 10.11157/anzswj-vol31iss4id671.