

FOOD INSECURITY STORIES FROM COLUMBIA'S FOOD PANTRY



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FOOD INSECURITY IN THE US

- ▶ One in seven Americans gets food from local food bank/pantry (DiBlasio, 2014)
- ▶ From “hunger” to “food insecurity” (Anderson & Cook, 1999)
- ▶ Food security as a social (class) and material problem (Dougherty, 2011)



FOOD INSECURITY & SOCIAL CLASS

- ▶ Influenced by Bourdieu (1984; 1991) and how class is “shaped”
- ▶ How we talk, *the stories we tell*, marks our social class (Lareau, 2011)
- ▶ Social class represents an ongoing struggle for class (un)consciousness
 - ▶ Participants self-situated to justify their middle class status



METHODS & SITE

Participants

- ▶ 11 participants: 7 women; 4 men
- ▶ Ages 22-67
- ▶ New and experienced pantry goers
- ▶ Semi-structured interviews
- ▶ 267 pages of interview transcription
- ▶ Narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008)

Central Pantry

- ▶ Serves 11,000 people/month
- ▶ “Client Choice”
- ▶ Fresh produce, bread, canned and packaged goods
- ▶ Grow Well Seed Program

CLIENT COMMUNICATION

- ▶ Food pantry clients communicatively wiggling into a middle class position
 1. Downward Class Comparisons
 1. Straining to Stabilize Food Security
 2. Negotiating Class (Un)Consciousness through Need Comparisons

DOWNWARD CLASS COMPARISONS

- ▶ Individuals continually creating and recreating social class through language and practices

I've always been the one that thinks these things are **really more for the homeless**. Like, I have a place; I've got the majority of my normal food. I usually have food stamps and so it's normal that we don't ever go to food banks because I figure they're there for the less fortunate than I, and so I actually **feel kinda bad for going**... I think there was probably a little shyness just due to the fact that I was in a food bank and I've never been in one and, like I said, I've always thought it was for people that were less fortunate than I, **so I felt kinda bad** for being in there...

- **Lizzy, 24 years old**



DOWNWARD CLASS COMPARISONS (CONT'D)

Oh no... I hold a position where I'm in charge of other people. I mean, honestly, **I don't need the food pantry** so it's like I said, I use it as a supplement. I qualify for it... Now, people who ask me if I get the bread, I'll say yeah I stopped off at the pantry. Or the composting, I'll say yes I stopped off at the pantry and got some compost materials...And so that's the thing, since **I don't really need it**. I don't like the idea of **taking way from other people** who might need it.

- **Chris, 36 years old**



NEGOTIATING CLASS (UN)CONSCIOUSNESS

- ▶ Marked by moments of recognition of lowered class position through upward comparisons

And then sometimes, I'm just like, I see some people that go there that are **in all these brand clothes** and have these really awesome phones and all this stuff and I'm like, "How do they need all this stuff?" And then my mom's like, "Well, they spend their money on all that stuff – that's why they need the food." But food comes first in our family. So **we got kinda broken down cars**, you know. One of our vehicles you have to climb in the passenger's side to get to the driver's side, stuff like that.

- **Janice, 24 years old**

NEGOTIATING CLASS (UN)CONSCIOUSNESS (CONT'D)

Steven (53): Well, when I had a good-paying job, I was 'course, I was eating steak and potato every night and all that, but now it's more picking, "Okay, am I really hungry for this? Or do I really want this?" I have to more or less **pick out what I really, really want** instead of (pause) just picking whatever I want. Each day you gotta decide, okay do I really want that? Or can I wait 'til a couple days before I can have that...

Interviewer: How does that feel when you have to do that?

Steven: Bad, 'cause I usually am used to doing just whatever I want to, so it's like my brothers and sisters, they can do whatever they want to, so it just drives me nuts. And they say like, "Well you wanna go out to eat?" **Well, I can't really afford it!**

IMPLICATIONS

- ▶ Intersection of food and communication constructs social class positions
 - ▶ Food as a social class marker
- ▶ Downward social class comparisons
- ▶ Negotiating class consciousness through upward comparisons
- ▶ Future directions
 - ▶ Part of larger study comparing pantry clients with stereotypes of classed food habits
 - ▶ Ways for food pantries to make even temporary clients feel valuable





THANK YOU!