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DIGNITY STRATEGIES IN A NEOLIBERAL WORKFARE KITCHEN TRAINING PROGRAM

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Abstract

Welfare-to-work training (workfare) programs are designed to technically and affectively prepare marginalized people for jobs that are often routinized and dirty. They are expected to accept personal responsibility for their situation and demonstrate submission to bosses as means of “working off” their “debt” to society. Ethnographic observation at workfare training sites is limited, but has tended to emphasize the indignities that trainees suffer, with less attention to how workers maintain dignity in the face of these experiences. Using ethnographic observation and interviews in a Chicago workfare kitchen training program, we show that neoliberal kitchen training work encompasses paradoxical expectations for trainee-workers: they must demonstrate high levels of discretion and creativity required in professional kitchen work, and demonstrate submission to charismatic authority as a means of getting kitchen work done and of affective compliance with the goals of the program. Yet despite the lack of quality training and the direct efforts of chefs and others to produce indignities, trainees developed two dignity strategies that are highly dependent on the structure of kitchen work: operating in a *slipstream*, and banking confidence that allows them to *take liberties* normally allowed for chef-trainers. These findings contribute to sociological understandings of workplace dignity, a privilege that has been especially elusive for the poor under welfare-to-work programs.

Keywords: New Welfare State, Restaurants, Job Training, Dignity, Affect

Introduction

In the United States, under the New Welfare State (NWS) that began in the 1980s, but developed more forcefully after 1996, work is an obligatory repayment for the receipt of many social welfare benefits for the poor, and is often a condition of parole. Conceptualized as *workfare* (Brodkin and Larsen 2013; Krinsky 2007; Krinsky and Simonet 2017; Van Oort 2015), this system was established in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), and updated in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (1998) and the Workplace Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (2014). Workfare programs are one in a family of neoliberal policies and programs that include educational components that teach the poor to assume personal responsibility for their fate, at the same time they demonstrate deference to authority and hope for their future (Black 2009; Clinton 1996; Krinsky and Simonet 2017; Flores 2014; Miller 2018 Pintelon et al. 2013, Kaye, forthcoming; Van Oort 2015). For workfare participants, government *job training* is supposed to enable them to take advantage of the (presumed) available “opportunities” for work. Training, not racism, economic disinvestment, transportation, education, or criminal records are presumed to stand between economically marginalized people and employment (Ellis 2005; Lambert and Henley 2007). Workfare training programs are open to a wide range of citizens, but Black and Latinx people are far more likely to be long-term unemployed, formerly incarcerated, or have other barriers to employment (like educational attainment), which means that these programs are themselves racialized (Race Forward 2017).

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Yet there is little research on workfare participants' work and training experiences, and what exists has focused on jobs such as cleaner, assembly line worker, maintenance worker, and front-end fast food work (Bowie et al. 2000; Krinsky and Simonet 2017, Van Oort 2015), which are characterized by routines and repetition. And, they have tended to focus on the successful moral and social subordination of participants, rather than on their *dignity strategies*.

Food service work, including restaurant work training, is among the kinds of labor for which welfare-to-work training is available in Illinois (WOIA Works Illinois 2019; Elejalde-Ruiz 2018). Nationally, more than 12 million people are employed in the restaurant industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018a). It produced nearly \$800 billion in sales in 2017 (National Restaurant Association 2017). Black and Latinx employees made up almost 40% of the work force in food service jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018b) and are concentrated in the lowest paying and status positions (Jayaraman 2016). The workers in these positions make, on average, \$14,000 per year (DataUSA 2019). Despite the high demand for workers, low-skill kitchen work can be an inconsistent form of employment, since low-skill laborers, such as those who do food preparation, are relatively interchangeable, and scheduled according to restaurant demand (Jayaraman 2013). These low-skill positions can thus be characterized as forms of precarious labor (Kalleberg and Vallas 2017; Kalleberg 2018; Kalleberg 2013).

Yet kitchen work is a particularly complex social process that incorporates both precision and creativity. Most kitchen work requires the execution of independent and collaborative activities, submission to a chef, responsibility for one's own work, and the

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capacity to work in a fast-paced environment where workplace requirements (e.g., customer preferences and levels of supplies) may change many times during a shift. Kitchen workers are also managed by chefs, who typically rely heavily on charismatic authority to get work done (Opazo 2016). These arrangements place workers in situations where indignities can be easily produced by chefs. However, the structure of kitchen work also offers a range of possible dignity strategies that are not available to front-of-house employees such as servers (Leidner 1999; Paules 1991; Schwartz 2016) and other service industry workers who work directly with customers (Sallaz 2002). These dignity dynamics are intensified by social status of workfare trainees, whose success is in part marked by demonstrations of subjugation.

Using three months of participant observation from a Chicago kitchen workfare training program, we illuminate the multiple ways that Black and Latinx trainees are pushed to adopt subjugated affect and behavior, and their responses. In doing so, we contribute to scholarship on workplace dignity strategies under neoliberalism, and secondarily to the sociology of food work. We show that the subjugating features of workfare training were intensified by qualities of kitchen work, and that features of kitchen work allowed some trainees to demonstrate dignity through two processes. First, some operated in a *slipstream*, offering little affective response and avoiding interactions with the chefs; others banked confidence by working quickly, which allowed them to *take liberties* in the form of the privileges associated with chef trainers.

Workfare, Kitchens, and The Management of Affect

Responsibilization and Workfare

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Responsibilization is the umbrella concept that refers to the process by which individual people are taught to see themselves as the solution to problems of poverty, unemployment, drug use, crime, and other social ills (Birk 2018; Miller 2018; Miller and Rose 2008; Peeters 2017, van Oort 2015). Studies of job training for the poor show that the goal of being “job ready” demands that acknowledging personal responsibility and demonstrating submission to authority (Hackworth 2012; Purser and Hannigan 2017, 2018; van Oort 2015). Such qualities are aimed, in theory, to prepare trainees to fit into low-wage jobs with plenty of routine and physical demands, including jobs such as factory work, cleaners, nurse’s aides, cashier positions, and drivers (Bowie et al. 2000, Van Oort 2015). These goals are consistent with the creation of what Michel Foucault called the *docile subject* (Foucault 1977) who internalizes responsibility for their own life, including their work life (Sandoff and Widell 2009).

Job training for low-income and low-education citizens does not anticipate the possibility of jobs with autonomy, decision-making power, creativity, or emotional expression (Ellis 2005; Krinsky and Simonet 2017). Workfare trainees do not have full employee rights or benefits, even though they are subject to as much, or more, scrutiny than employees. Nor do they have the same legal recourse if they are injured at the training program (Gilbert 1998; Krinsky and Simonet 2017). These vulnerabilities limit collective organizing, a practice that is further limited by the temporary nature of workfare jobs and training systems, leaving them with fewer ways to insist on their dignity, as is the case with many other contingent workers today. Yet these legal arrangements and program goals are not lived out in the same way by all

trainees, nor by post-training workers, and are shaped by local conditions and types of work that people do.

Paradoxes of Kitchen Work

Ethnographic studies of restaurant kitchens demonstrate that food preparation requires a careful balancing of kitchen equipment, food, and social relationships that are only partially routinized; improvisation is often needed. These studies also demonstrate that it is expressive work because the very quality of the work—the need for coordination, routine and quick-thinking, often under time pressure—intensifies feelings (Cherry, DeSoucey, and Ellis 2011; Fine 1996; Gatta 2014; Whyte 1948). Kitchens, however, are also governed in strictly hierarchical fashion. *The Professional Chef (TPC)* (Culinary Institute of America 2011) is the key text for professional kitchen training, and it is mandatory at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), the major site for most high-end kitchen training in the US. This private institution is known for its strict dress code, stringent attendance policies, and for graduating some of the most well-respected chefs of the day. The text and the training reinforce a kitchen structure based on military hierarchy and precision that was first established as a standard by Auguste Escoffier in France in the 19th century. Drawing on his military background, Escoffier conceptualized the kitchen as a series of “stations” staffed in an expressly hierarchical fashion, with those doing cooking right before the food is delivered to customers given higher status, and those preparing the food to be cooked much lower status. As Harris and Giuffre show, this highly masculinized space demands military-like precision (Harris and Giuffre 2015). Each “soldier” is to carry out the chef’s orders for that (battle) station. *TPC* makes clear, moreover, that material things (tools

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and the food itself), spatial arrangements (workers at stations) and literary forms (recipes) limit the autonomy of those working in kitchens.

Yet the kitchen should not be confused with a factory, as William Foot Whyte's classic analysis (1948) demonstrated, because restaurant work involves customers. Whyte contended that the immediacy with which food is created and consumed changes the nature of this workplace. Rather than factory goods like brake pads or nails—or even manufactured food products like packaged cookies or candies—when food is being made to order and for immediate consumption, exigencies of supply, timing, and customer preference are built into daily work (Whyte 1948). Kitchen workers, thus, must necessarily be given some autonomy to complete tasks. This is particularly true during meal service, where most of those doing the cooking and preparing have indirect access to the consumer through tickets sent to them (often with some degree of menu modification) and through communications from wait staff. Kitchen work involves a complex interplay of space and time, shaped by the cultures of specific places (Demetry 2013). Although the Head Chef has ultimate control over what is sent to customers, they cannot inspect every aspect of the meal; there must be trust that the person working the grill station, for example, has cooked the steak correctly. These processes are happening at a rapid pace and require constant adaptation from the workers. Even prep work—which takes up more time than the cooking itself—requires both autonomy and creativity.

Unlike in many other low-wage jobs, the professional kitchen is run by a chef who, as Opazo (2016) writes in her book on renowned Chef Ferran Adria, relies on charismatic authority (Weber 2015) to get work done. Chefs often establish and rule over a “boy's club” where brash

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attitudes, flippant behavior, and ill-temperedness are acceptable—within limits set by the Head Chef (Harris and Giuffre 2015; Bourdain 2000; Johnston and Baumann 2010). The use of vulgar language, the overt sexism toward women, and the hyper-masculinity mirrors that which can be found in other hyper-masculine places, like a football locker-room (Harris and Giuffre 2015). Pushing the limits is part and parcel of kitchen life, but complaining to or fighting back against the head chef is rarely—if ever— acceptable: the response is always “Yes, Chef.” Workers are also confronted with long hours, harsh working conditions, and are rarely given the status of the chef that appears in popular culture and to which many aspire (Hendley 2017).

The social organization of the kitchen then, is both hierarchical and requires teamwork, and is organized by formal rules, spatial systems, and cultural codes. While most head chefs who command control are white, most of the cooks, prep cooks, and dishwashers are people of color (Jayaraman 2016; Jayaraman 2013) who must comply with their supervisors’ demands (Johnston, Rodney, and Chong 2014). Kitchen workers must be flexible with respect to the duration of a shift, be capable of handling being “slammed” by an onslaught of customers and demanding diners, and to improvise when there are problems with food and staffing (Fine 1990). Cooking and preparing food require a wide range of skills, and the capacity to combine them. Terms such as finely chopped, roughly chopped, marinated, garnished, thinly sliced, pounded, and whipped require knowledge of how a recipe is supposed to look, as well as how it is supposed to taste. Cooking also requires a wide range of motor skills, like using knives and mandolines, as well as the ability to carve a chicken, or properly tie knots so that bags of spices don’t accidentally leak into a simmering pot of soup. Finally, styling food is complex, and

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without first-hand knowledge of how food should look, it is nearly impossible to produce work that looks appetizing and “right” to those more familiar with the food. A recipe is thus the most basic of instructions, akin to sewing patterns or images of finished clothing. But neither recipes nor patterns are substitutes for the kinds of tacit and embodied knowledge that cooking requires. Learning some of these social and technical skills under the charismatic-rational control of the Head Chef, while complying with demands for personal responsibility and subordination, places workfare workers in emotionally precarious positions, but also offers specific kinds of dignity resources.

Between Resistance and Compliance: Expressing Human Dignity

Analysts of dignity at work have tended to focus on the structural conditions that produce indignity, and treat overt “resistance,” collective or individualized, as a major strategy for handling it (Rogers 2000; Hodson 2001; Schwartz 2016; Crowley 2014). Drawing from Marx’s theory of alienation (Marx 2009), in which he argued that workers suffered because of their inability to control relations of production, much of this scholarship has shown that forms of control (technical or direct, for example) and general forms of work (industrial, clerical) are major sources of indignity. The kind of direct control that operates in a kitchen, Crowley (2014) and Hodson (2001) show, is a major source of humiliation and indignity at work. Work speed is also a critical source of indignity, not only on the assembly line, but in complex service jobs where interactions between people, material things, workspaces and machines make fast delivery almost impossible (Van Oort 2018). In an era when many jobs are also precarious (Kalleberg 2013; Vallas and Kalleberg 2018), the politics of disregard are heightened.

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Most scholarship on avoiding indignities also draws from Marxist traditions, focusing on “resistance,” a broad category that can include anything from union organizing to making barely noticeable changes to one’s uniform. In a recent review of this scholarship, Mumby et al. (2017) make the case for treating overt resistance as only one dignity strategy at work, a position also embraced by Sandoff and Widell (2009). Drawing on James C. Scott (1990) they argue for the need to understand dignity strategies in terms of *individual infrapolitics* and *insubordination*. In doing so, they underscore Scott’s (1990) emphasis on the idea that acquiring dignity need not be coupled with explicit choices, but rather, may be in-the-moment acts. This factor is especially important in job training, where longer-term strategies for “resistance” may not be fully fleshed out. More broadly, Burawoy’s (1979) study of how capitalists gain compliance on the shop floor offers a helpful way of considering dignity strategies between compliance and overt resistance that dovetails with Scott’s (1990) emphasis on less explicit forms of resistance, and on Mumby et al.’s (2017) framework. His analysis of “making out” and “playing all the angles” makes clear that some workers, particularly those with workplace status of some kind, can find ways around alienation through creative and often playful means. We extend this line of work by demonstrating how workers in a neoliberal kitchen training program experienced indignities, produced by the interactions between chef-trainers and trainee-workers, and how they managed to find dignity within them without overt resistance.

Ethnography at a Chicago Kitchen Training Program

Author 1 is a white female¹, and former professional chef, who carried out 50 hours of fieldwork at “Training Kitchen” (TK),² which trains formerly incarcerated, homeless, and long-term unemployed people for jobs in the food industry. Funds for the program come from PWORA funds delivered through the state, and from other non-profit and public funds that are managed by the kitchen. It is located in a poor, predominately black neighborhood on Chicago’s West side.

Author 1 gained access to this site in 2016 via administrative staff who worked at the parent organization³. Author 1’s roles were as a participant, and sometimes an observer. Author 1’s background provided a critical baseline from which the expectations and activities of non-workfare kitchen work could be compared. Thus, the extent to which trainees expressed affects and behaviors that were similar to those seen in a professional kitchen were the major foci of the study. The majority of the observations took place during kitchen training, and others during classroom training. As an observer, Author 1 was permitted to come and go at will throughout the week.⁴ Generally, observations were done during morning and afternoon several days per week. All participants were told of Author 1’s status as a researcher and were

¹ This fact was never explicitly brought up during conversations. However, because all of the trainees were people of color, but two of the four chef-trainers were white and all administrative staff were white, this gave author 1 a distinct social advantage. Although author 1’s status as a researcher was known, attempts to build comradery as an in-group member (a fellow cook) were made.

² The name of the program has been changed.

³ A letter of consent was submitted to the proper IRB. Confidentiality procedures for training participants and staff were detailed there.

⁴ Notes were rarely taken on site because of the nature of author 1’s participation. Every evening after returning home, fieldnotes were written on a password protected computer.

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given the option of participating in a study of the experiences of program participants in workfare programs⁵. As a participant, Author 1 often helped clean and put away dishes, cut fruits and vegetables, or monitored items on the stove or in the oven on an *ad hoc* basis.

In addition, open-ended interviews supplemented observations,⁶ including five with current and former participants in the program, one with a chef-trainer, and one with an administrative staff member. The interviews with then-current and former trainee-workers were conducted at the Harold Washington Library⁷ in Chicago; interviews with staff took place on site. These interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. People were asked to talk about their past experiences, including: their childhoods, their former and current living situations, if and when they became interested in cooking, and what brought them to TK. Based on those initial responses, interviewees were then asked to discuss their experiences with the program, including how they felt about the training they were receiving, what their interactions with others in the program was like (including people in authority), and what they thought their prospects were for future employment. All interviewees were given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

Author 2's role was to co-frame arguments and analyze evidence in light of them.

⁵ We recognize that because this process may have been done at the training center, participants may have felt less free to say no to the study.

⁶ Author 1 conducted the interviews. All interviewees were given a consent form that outlined anonymity and confidentiality. They were asked to read and sign the form. They were recorded and transcribed, then Authors 1 and 2 coded for consistent phrases and patterns. Interview audio and transcriptions are kept on a password-protected computer.

⁷ This was done in order to mitigate risk for participants. Transportation was provided and interviewees were paid a small stipend.

The Spatial and Social Organization of the Training Kitchen and Training School

Physical Layout

TK has a state-of-the-art training facility and also operates as a functioning restaurant. The modern brick building is nestled under an elevated train stop, in a rundown, former industrial area that is 96 percent black, and 42 percent below the national poverty line (Chicago Census Data 2012). TK stands in stark contrast to the dilapidated buildings and brown fields around it. The restaurant offers moderately priced “high-end soul food,” in a dining room with high ceilings, an open layout, and comfortable seating for 50.

The kitchen where training and meal service takes place is large, clean, airy and spacious, and in better repair than many professional kitchens. It is divided by a partial wall into the visible “front line⁸” and the hidden training kitchen. The training kitchen area has long prep tables, several ovens, and is well-stocked with kitchenware. The front line, where food is cooked to order for patrons, is exposed to the dining room by a large window, making the two or three cooks visible to diners. This area is where the trainee-workers and chef-trainers prepare the necessary foods for the restaurant’s needs. The dishwashing station is set apart from the kitchen; those who work in the “dishwasher pit” do not have regular contact with the other workers unless the chefs bring dirty cookware to be cleaned. The kitchen, therefore, is a site of visual surveillance by the diners, as well as being a site overseen by the chefs. The only places that offer some respite from surveillance are the dry-goods storage room and walk-in coolers.

⁸ The front line is visible to customers. This station with stove tops, prepped items, and stacked with plates for service is where food for the restaurant is made.

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The Program

The 13-week training program provides formal classroom and hands on training, for 40 hours each week. Cohorts ranged from between 1 to 10 trainee-workers, and they are admitted on a rolling basis. Those who qualified for the training had to have proved that they were formerly incarcerated, homeless, or were long-term unemployed (an ambiguous term). Several of the trainee-workers had been referred by a case worker or parole officer. Before they were accepted into the program, applicants were vetted, socially, psychologically, and emotionally by intake specialists (who are not trained in mental or behavioral health), who assessed whether applicants were mentally and physically able to do the work, and willing to do it, and they certified that applicants stated that they wanted to make a “serious transition” in their life that would involve work in the food industry. Once a cohort was created, trainees did a “test run” in the kitchen, in which they were placed in the kitchen in front of the chef and handed a recipe that they were asked to complete. If their temperament and personality were agreeable to the chef-trainer, and their ability to move around the kitchen seemed adequate, they would then be admitted to the program.

The first weeks were spent in “Employment Preparation Training” (EPT), where trainees refreshed basic math and English skills, and learned employment-specific skills, including resume building, interviewing, and appropriate behavior and conduct. The next 9 weeks were spent in the classroom (about 8 hours per week), and then in kitchen training (about 32 hours a week), using a culinary curriculum that was pieced together in a collaborative effort between interns and the chef-trainers. In the final four weeks of the program, trainee-workers were put

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on a rotation of meal-service shifts, where they were slowly integrated into the restaurant operation. This bureaucratically counted as “work experience,” even though they were given no compensation for this work, and were only allowed three absences or late arrivals for the 520 hours that they were in the program. The elision between trainee and worker meant that they were encouraged to view future paid work in much the same way as they had experienced the training; chef-trainers had no incentive to shift their department toward trainee-workers in this transition.

The Social Characteristics of the Trainees

Throughout the observation period three cohorts passed through the program. Of the 30 participants (10 from each cohort) who started (after the completion of the 4-week EPT training), five trainee-workers completed the entire program and received a graduation certificate. Of those who graduated, two were women, three were men, and all were Black. Because this was an unpaid training program, several trainees were required to maintain jobs outside of TK because they had young children to care for. This often resulted in 16 (or greater) hour work days. Although all trainee-workers faced adversity in order to complete the training, trainee-workers who had been formerly incarcerated seemed to have the greatest challenges to overcome. Some lived in halfway houses and had curfews to keep to, some had court dates that they had to work around and for which they were penalized by TK for attending, and all had pressure from parole boards to keep regular attendance, show sufficient improvement, and demonstrate that they were actively searching for employment.

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Full-time staff managed the organization. There were case workers on staff, although they were always overworked and understaffed. There were four salaried chefs who taught in the kitchen and the classroom, including a Head Chef, two chef-trainers, and a chef who primarily did food preparation and organized catering events. All of the paid employees previously held positions in professional kitchens, and many saw their work as a kind of public service. The two highest positions in the kitchen were held by white men; in the next level down, the prep chef was an older Black man; the other chef-trainer was a young Black woman who was receiving formal culinary training at a local university.

Handling Indignity without Resistance: Life in the Slipstream

Fort trainees, classroom training was a far cry from how trainee-workers in a professional kitchen program would learn. At KT, they were given verbal instructions for a variety of kitchen tasks: recognizing foods, measuring, learning cuts and shapes for vegetables, sauce making, soup making, and cuts of meat and preparation techniques. They also completed a food safety course. Yet trainees were never given the opportunity to *prepare* different kinds of sauces, use different dices for vegetables or cut meat, nor use the different forms of hot preparation (roasting, braising, sautéing), nor to practice basic measurement. Although trainees listened, observed, and were given written quizzes on this knowledge, when they moved from the classroom to the kitchen, they did not have the practical skills they needed. As Willie said, “It’s not hands on teaching. It’s just like they’re not teaching nothing, it’s like go do this and then you gotta do it...they don’t help. Like my first time doing a couple things I didn’t need no help, but like a couple of the trainee-workers, they be needing help...and they [the instructors]

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don't talk to people a certain way. They be kinda rude...And it's gonna discourage them [trainee-workers]" (Interview, 8.4.16).

Once trainees began working in the kitchen, they were expected to begin food prep work to create food that would be sold in the kitchen. This is in contrast to professional training programs, where "practice foods" are thrown away. Thus, at KT, what trainee-workers learn that an important outcome is *labor*, not skill. They were also given explicit personal behavioral rules that might be given to children, including that they were not to drink the lemonade, have their phones out, or to take too long a break. They were taught to wear the proper uniform, and to keep it and their own clothes clean, even though some were homeless and did not have access to laundering services. The kitchen was often a tense place, and the trainees often seemed frazzled and disenchanting with the program. Yet these circumstances of infantilization, a lack of hands-on training, and the communication of the importance of their labor-as-profit-making rarely produced overt resistance or overt compliance.

As we show below, in instances in which chefs were dehumanizing to trainee-workers, some trainee workers operated in a slipstream, "moving with the flow" of the program as if in a current, or slipstream in which they made as little a ripple as possible to reach the end of the program. These trainees did not challenge authority, and ended interactions with the chefs as quickly as possible. They sought to avoid further interactions by changing their outward actions to connote compliance, such as putting their heads down after the chef had reprimanded them. Only when they were out of view of the chef might they show signs of frustration, such as shaking their heads or make remarks that asserted their personal dignity. Trainees thus did

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tasks and obeyed rules in a way that minimized any kind of friction. It was not an easy task however: trainee-workers needed to follow what the chef said at any given moment, whether consistent with their training or not. For most trainees, trying to operate in the slipstream was undertaken to simply succeed in the program without being noticed by the charismatic chef. Importantly, it was also coupled by statements to Author 1 asserting their dignity and value.

Dealing With a Failure to Train

One day, while making a recipe for waffles, Caroline noticed there was not enough buttermilk to follow the recipe (8.19.16). Chef Paul told her that buttermilk could be made from whole milk and vinegar. He told her the ratios and time needed to make it quickly, but she was unable to remember them. He said it again, without stopping or looking up. Instead his voice became louder. Caroline went to gather the vinegar and milk and a measuring cup. She stood, unsure of what to do. She said to Author 1, "I don't want to be the one responsible for messing this up" (8.6.16). She timidly added the ingredients, working slowly. She indicated that she had never done this before and did not know what buttermilk was supposed to look like. Chef Paul paid no more attention. Caroline set the time Chef Paul had told her, to calculate exactly how many minutes it should be before the milk had properly coagulated. She stared at it. Chef Paul then demanded that she return to her recipe, which required her to "not overmix the batter, lumps are ok." Caroline said to Author 1, "I don't know what that means. I'm not going to be the one messing things up." She wavered back-and-forth, continuing to mix, and not sure what "some lumps are ok" meant, but neither engaging fully, nor leaving her station. It was not until Author 1 stepped in and said that what she was doing was probably ok, that Caroline felt some

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reassurance to stop mixing. This was not an isolated incident—Caroline was seemingly always under the watchful eye of chefs, particularly Chef Felicia, the trainee-chef. She unnecessarily criticized or humiliated Caroline, such as calling her out for taking quiche from the walk-in for lunch (a task which had been previously approved by Chef Jason) or forcing Caroline to painstakingly pick out pieces of onion from a bowl, only to eventually tell her to begin the recipe over (interview 8.4.16). These constant corrections made Caroline wary of doing anything except to avoid direct engagements with the chefs. Because Caroline did not know how to engage with contradictory demands, nor was she trained effectively, she moved in a slipstream, seeking to avoid rebuke and often complying with rules as best she could, and by acquiring the assistance of someone unlikely to be criticized—the white researcher who was a former professional chef.

However, Caroline did not accept that she was personally responsible for her situation, telling Author 1 that Chef Felicia had a “power problem” (interview, 8.4.16), and said that it was nice to have someone else (Author 1) to work with her. And, she underscored her human worth by saying that she was good at following fixed and explicit rules and working hard: “I’m good at following rules. Even from when I worked, started my first job at 17 and stayed there 20 years, at a dry cleaner. Oh, he was a very hard boss...But I can take it” (interview, 8.6.16). Caroline thus preserved her dignity backstage, using the presence of an outsider, and a white one, at that, to assert that she was a hard worker, and that the trainer, not her, was partially responsible for her experiences.

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Chris, a program graduate, was hired to wash dishes. He began to realize that the job was assigned to him because he was slow in the kitchen, but he sought to distance his true self from his job, much as Caroline did: “[it is] the lowest of the low positions...even though I am washing dishes that is not all that I am or all that I want to obtain” (7.24.16). And like Caroline, Chris often tried to stay out of the view of the chefs. He did blame the trainers for his position in the kitchen but asserted that the chef-trainers did not know how to assist him in his learning, and as a result, in his own words, he was “separated from the class” (interview, 9.4.16). He had dreams of going back to school and desperately needed the job to help save enough money to do so (7.24.16). When Author 1 asked a chef about Chris’ prospects, the chef laughed, and pointed to Chris’ eccentric personality and slowness in movements (interview, 8.19.16). Like Caroline, Chris was frequently chastised by a single chef, in this case, Chef Paul. Chris attempted to get by without being noticed, and often made physical gestures to signal frustration. Despite the fact that these signs of frustration were done as private acts, Chris’s perceived job ineffectiveness warranted constant surveillance by the chefs.

Dignity and Dampened Expectations

Another experience for some trainee-workers was dampened expectations for their future, often couched in kitchen banter. At the initial screening, applicants were asked if they wanted to make a significant life change. Many expressed interest in work that would be well remunerated and would give them some autonomy. Cecile wanted to have the satisfaction of people eating her food, Caroline wanted to be a caterer, Barry wanted to be a Head Chef someday, and Willie, Josiah, Frederick, and Thomas aspired to owning their own businesses.

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The idea of being in charge—being one’s own boss—obviously held significant appeal for these people. And indeed, such aspirations are a key component of workfare training and neoliberal ideology in general: to want better your own life and improve opportunities.

Although trainee-workers desired to reach these goals and believed the program could help them meet these goals, chefs and administration dampened expectations, often in ways that seemed designed to humiliate. At the outset of the program, Caroline was asked what type of position she would most like. She said that she would like to work as a line cook for the Marriott Downtown (7.19.16). Caroline said this several times throughout the program. However, as the weeks went by, Caroline began to think differently. Rather than aspiring to be a line cook, she thought that catering would better suit her—shorter hours, less standing, and not as hot or as fast-paced (interview 8.4.16). This came about in part because she realized at her age how hard it was for her to stand for 8 to 12 hours a day, sometimes without breaks. But she was also encouraged to aim low, through the chefs’ attitudes and action. When she was having difficulty following a recipe, for example, Chef Paul became frustrated and told her that she would never be able to keep up in a kitchen (7.26.16).

Caroline reported to Author 1 that this message was fed to her constantly. Chef Paul rebuked her on many occasions, not only when she was making buttermilk, but when she was attempting to make waffle batter and tomato jam. Eventually Caroline was offered a position as a prep cook at the training facility. While she did not want to take it, Caroline begrudgingly

accepted, after repeatedly hearing that she could not attain the position that she desired. Given her precarious living situation,⁹ she sunk into the routines of getting by without being noticed.¹⁰

Avoiding confrontation and making efforts to comply with rules does not produce the richest forms of human dignity. But neither Chris nor Caroline, subject to a number of efforts to humiliate them, accepted the moral terms of the training, and made use of the structure of kitchen work to assert their dignity. They made use of the researcher to assert their value, away from the eyes and ears of the chefs, a situation made possible by the layout of the kitchen. This is, at a minimal level, a means by which the neoliberal affects that workfare trainees are supposed to adopt do not fully take hold.

Banking Confidence and Taking Liberties

Not all trainees operated as if in a slipstream, following along but also preserving some space for backstage dignity assertions that did not involve direct conflict with chefs, but which refused complete subjugation. Some trainee-workers had learned to *bank confidence* in order to *take liberties*. *Banking confidence* means that the trainee found ways to do tasks well enough—much like Burawoy’s analysis of how workers “made out” on the shop floor—so that they could take liberties in other ways (Burawoy 1979). Thus, when a chef was not watching, some trainee-workers ignored rules. Drinks were taken illegally, breaks went over, earrings were worn though strictly forbidden, and phones were ever present when a chef was not around.

⁹ She lived in a long-term women’s shelter.

¹⁰ This is speculation is based on conversations. Gerald was also offered a position, and was not given the proper help with finding an outside job. He complained that they never held up their end of the bargain, a common complaint that may be related to the understaffing of case worker positions.

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For some in the program, *banking confidence* came through cooking abilities learned elsewhere. Confidence in tasks and speedy completion were also means of making a chef satisfied. A few of the worker-trainees learned that speed in particular would keep them from getting in trouble, and they tended to perform tasks quickly, throwing perfection or even decent quality, to the wind. When a new round of trainee-workers came in early August, it was easy to see who would be favored: the three trainee-workers who began to work quickly.

Cecile, Frederick, and Josiah were assigned to various tasks, and despite being given no direction about where their necessary materials were or exactly how to prepare the food, they conveyed a sense of being confident and fast (9.2.16). They moved around the kitchen with ease and completed tasks with little instruction from the chefs, even though what they produced was often not what they were supposed to make. Frederick and Cecile carried themselves with a kind of arrogance, by joking and talking lightly with each other, and attempting to correct other trainee-workers' cooking mishaps. They quickly adopted the demeanor of a chef and someone who was not a neoliberal trainee-worker, such as a time when they stood over the waffle maker, sharing jokes and flirting. While they did receive a reprimand, it was insignificant (9.9.16).¹¹ In addition to her position at TK, Cecile worked an early morning shift in the kitchen of a recovery house. She never let any sort of conflict or uncertainty show to the chef. When she needed direction, she boldly asked. When others needed help, she was the first to step in. She became a 'mother' figure, acting, in part, as the instructors should have.

¹¹ Author 1 was actually given a stern warning after this incident, instead of the two trainee-workers.

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As the example of Frederick and Cecile shows, banking confidence was related to the adoption of the authority and affects of the chef. Thus, rather than being overtly rule-bound, as much of the classroom training had told them to be, in the face of a lack of assistance, these faster and more confident workers were able to use kitchen culture to assert their dignity. They became more relaxed away from the eyes of the chef, completing tasks at their leisure and in their own way, and mimicked the chefs who ‘talked shit’ about everyone else. In doing so, they also relied on backstage behavior, just as those who got by in the slipstream did.

For example, on one Sunday, they were working and observing Sunday brunch production. Willie was huddled in the corner, resting his arms on the low-boy table top, looking at his phone. Cecile came up to the line to melt butter for cookies. She stayed to talk. She walked over to the same corner where Willie was, and she, Willie, Barry, and Leonard began to talk and laugh. Cecile and Leonard flirted. Barry mimicked and made fun of Caroline, who was in the prep area, much as other chefs did. Leonard and Barry continued to work, and Willie observed but paid no particular attention to what was being done. A plate went into the window to be taken out to service, and they all shared a joke about just how ridiculous the new French Toast, created by Chef Paul, was—so many ingredients. Then the conversation switched to Chris, the dishwasher. They knew that he had been interviewed for the study and asked me how the interview with the “crazy guy” went. They all laughed, and Leonard chimed in, “Man he was weird and made me turn off my phone” because “he thinks the waves are gonna mess him up” (8.4.16). They were able to use the brash and often harsh language of kitchen culture to assert their value as persons. Although Chef Felicia came over to tell them they needed to

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get back to work, the words held little meaning to them, since she did not demand that they complete their tasks. They remained where they were. Although Willie and Cecile, not too long ago, were compassionate towards their fellow trainee-workers, what made them stand out was that they had the ability to cook quickly, and just passably, and took advantage of that to bank confidence.

Barry, for example, who was sure of himself, found the program to be “a breeze.” He was responsible for training some of the new trainee-workers (interview, 8.23.16). Juan was one of his first trainees¹² (7.24.16). Juan stuck out from the others who worked “the line” of the restaurant because of his small stature, strong Puerto Rican accent, and his awkwardness and lack of confidence. He was new to cooking and it showed. He often panicked: pancakes were ruined because he could not flip them, and orders were often mixed up with wrong ingredients in each dish. Rather than correct the mistakes or offer help, Barry, who often worked alongside Juan, often let Juan panic and mess up. Barry had learned this attitude through previous experience in kitchen work, including by observing chefs at his other job. Of the difference between his work at TK and his other job, Barry said, “This, this is easy here. At my other job it’s hard. It is 50 times harder. We had an average of 400 customers come through there between a 5-hour shift. So, it was constant move, constant cooking... I did not know it was this hard [cooking] until I got the second job” (interview, 8.23.16). Barry’s experience with fast-paced kitchen work—not training from TK—allowed him to quickly move through services, and to take liberties as he saw fit.

¹² This is a former trainee-worker who was now a paid cook for the restaurant.

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Juan soon learned from his mentor that this was the way to succeed. He adopted these same practices and mannerisms, acting the part even when it was clear to Author 1 that he did not know what he was doing. But he was fast and appeared to be cooking effectively. In just a few weeks there was a shift in Juan's attitude and actions. When macaroni and cheese for a child came up on a ticket, Juan and Barry realized that there was only some that was frozen solid. They turned to quick and sloppy techniques just to get it onto the plate (8.21.16). They haphazardly put the container in the microwave and chipped away at it. They did not properly take the temperature, but just threw cheese on top and melted it, again using a microwave. As he was working, Juan said to me, "As soon as I realized that everything did not have to be so neat, then I was able to move faster instead of worrying" (8.21.16). He used his newfound sense of knowledge and attitude that comes along with it in order to bank confidence and begin taking liberties. In his case, this meant that he would pre-cook meat before meal service, heat things in the microwave instead of on the stove, and neglect to properly plate dishes if he was short on time. In no case did a chef reprimand him. These acts may not be considered overt forms of resistance, but they speak to ways that specific types of workfare labor can produce indignities, and offer means of addressing them.

Dignity, Workfare and the Kitchen

One of the critical logics of workfare is to deem people worthy of assistance only by being willing to work, and to perform a role as an individualized docile and compliant worker. This idea of individualization is not new; analysts including Harvey (2007) and Wacquant (2009) suggest that the fate of capitalism, especially manifested in the urban context, is

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individualization. Rooted in the concept of alienation, it lauds personal victories and punishes personal failures. While training programs such as TK cannot count as “precarious” quasi-permanent work, what it does have in common with the kind of precarious work life that Kalleberg and others examine is that it attempts to teach people that they should not expect security and dignity as a matter of course, nor are their futures important to employers (Kalleberg 2013). The efforts at TK to produce a compliant worker—while contradictorily suggesting that the training is a “catalyst for self-reliance¹³”—thus seeks to make participants “job-ready” in a particular way: prepared to blame themselves for their failures, and to expect little support or encouragement.

As the evidence from TK shows, managers and intake processes regularly made efforts to produce indignities. The face-to-face disciplining that some workers experienced is a social form that is deeply instantiated in professional kitchen work itself, and those who were never taught the necessary skills, nor knew how to work quickly and confidently, experienced this quite often. Through constant monitoring and rebuke, trainee-workers were taught to follow the rules and directions of the chef—while contradictorily requiring no assistance from the chefs. They were taught, moreover, that they would never be able to do more than the most basic of food service labor, despite the high hopes that many had had about getting jobs with decent pay and autonomy. Trainee-workers were reminded to aim low. While this is not the only workfare job in which this kind of subjugation and discouragement can be seen (e.g., Krinsky and Simonet 2017; Van Oort 2015) the kitchen makes this sort of face-to-face

¹³ This is a motto often used in Training Kitchen materials.

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humiliation more naturalized, given the hostile culture of kitchen life to which the professional chefs were accustomed.

Yet participants were not, as top-down studies of workfare and some ethnographies have suggested, fully subjugated. Rather, they used dignity strategies that took advantage of the kitchen structure itself. Some tried to move in a *slipstream*, emotionally or physically removing themselves from the gaze of the chef, looking away, or repeatedly directly following orders. While deflection (Schwartz 2016) and refusal were other options in theory, there was little evidence that trainees used them. Critically, trainees also asserted, out of ear-shot from the chefs, that they were persons worthy of dignity. To be sure, being in the slipstream is not an ideal means of producing dignity as characterized by Hodson (2000) and others, but it is a means to avoid conflict that produces humiliation, protecting at least some of their social worth from being submerged under the neoliberal demands of self-responsibility and insecurity.

Others, more confident in the setting and with food service experience, learned some of the tacit rules that operate in professional kitchens, including the importance of speed. By banking confidence—handling high pressure situations with confidence and speed, and producing food that was at least visually passable in the views of the chefs—they were able to carve out identity spaces in which they took the liberties normally given just to supervisors, or to those high up in the hierarchy in a professional kitchen. These liberties included the solidarity-building act of making fun of supervisors and peers, and visibly not working. Their jocular, too, is a means of pushing back against the insistence that being poor and in need of assistance to morally and economically “re-enter” society must be emotionally understood as a

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punishment. In using humor, they echoed some of the same methods that people in state-mandated drug-rehabilitation programs used to retain their dignity while being hyper-monitored and regularly humiliated (Kaye, forthcoming). They also reinforce foundational scholarship in the sociology of work that showed how making work fun serves as a way to address its socially numbing affects (Burawoy 1979). Options for collective bargaining were unavailable to worker-trainees. While Burawoy (1979) argued that management would bend just slightly to give workers the illusion of participation and choice in order to limit collective bargaining, here, the short-term character of the program, its efforts to individuate and subordinate, and the use of charisma as a major form of authority likely limit the possibility of collective action. All of these dignity strategies sociologically valuable to attend to, for they offer a corrective to studies that find or assume that responsabilization projects are actually successful.

For many of these trainee-workers, life in the food industry will likely be a continuation of work that is precarious and offer little in the way of autonomy or creativity, such as work on ready-to-eat food assembly lines and in fast-food service. The exciting kitchen jobs popularized in the mass media (Johnston and Baumann 2010) have been largely off limits to these workers, in part through the use of secondary labor markets (Krinsky and Simonet 2017), but also because of the history of racialized work in Chicago.

Yet there is reason to think that workfare training programs may take new forms. There are new efforts to expand our understanding of how racially and socially subordinated laborers are being treated (Jayaraman 2013; Krinsky 2007). Restaurant Opportunities Center,

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for example, has developed a system to better the working conditions of “immigrants and other workers of color” (Brady 2014). The organization brings together varied workers in the restaurant sector in different cities across the country. They have utilized grassroots campaigns and close partnerships with community members and low-wage workers to develop strategies for best-practices. This holistic and broad approach aims to address concerns of business, environment, and workers (Brady 2014), and enables a wider range of people to see and understand how trainees are treated not only as learners of technical skills, but as people.

We would do well to learn from organizations like this that recognize how welfare-to-work programs fail to address the underlying issues within poor communities and communities of color. Workfare training programs, with justice-focused visions and execution, might be able to operate in ways that do not aim to humiliate and discourage workers. However, private-public partnerships in particular need to be carefully considered. This type of collaboration incentivizes market-based rationales which, as was seen at Training Kitchen, turns out under-prepared workers with little economic, emotional, and community support. Understanding how job training programs function as a carrier for the neoliberal mindset, future work on re-entry programs might do well to focus on transforming the system to community-based collaborations, which address the lives of trainees holistically, rather than ignoring them in favor of training workers for menial labor.

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