

THICK DESCRIPTION IN APPLIED CONTEXTS:
USING INTERPRETIVE QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS
TO INFORM QUANTITATIVE INDICATORS IN FOOD SECURITY RESEARCH

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With the drastic expansion of detention powers afforded to European member states by the 2011 Return Directive, conceptual and methodological approaches common in the United States, such as structural violence and ‘community-based research and service learning’ (CBRSL), are potentially of great significance in documenting the suffering these cuts inflict on detained asylum-seekers in the possible form of food insecurity. This article proposes a methodology capable of operating from a limited window of observation, taking as its ethnographic basis a 2009 study in a low-income US urban elementary school in which interpretative local ‘thick’ descriptions of food-insecure behaviour informed quantitative indicators. Within this framework, the scope and pattern of food insecurity among the schoolchildren were illustrated, influencing local policies to address the problem. It is hoped that this methodology will influence food-security studies of detained populations in Europe, as well as methodology within applied anthropology as a whole.

I. Introduction

Though many founders of European Union ideology intended ‘Europeanisation’ to encourage the development of a global community¹, over the past decade legislation by this supranational body has provided a major tool by which sweeping restrictions on immigration have been implemented at the national level (Block and Bonjour 2013). The Family Reunification Directive, fully implemented in 2005, substantially increased the degree to which member states may limit the immigration of families once residence has been established by a migrant relative. The debates which surrounded the Directive’s implementation at the national level reflected a major change in the discourse of ‘Europeanisation’, with a shift away from the promotion of a global community to an exclusionary ‘Fortress Europe’ ideology closely reminiscent of a

¹ See Shore 1992.

nationalist discourse (ibid.). As Bloch and Bonjour show, Europeanisation provided an ‘enabling dynamic’ through which immigration policies entailing the greatest restrictiveness allowed by the Directive were pushed through nationally, particularly in France, Germany and the Netherlands (ibid.: 213). Calls by opposition parties to prolong debate or soften restrictions were strategically denounced by governments as a hypocritical stalling device. In France, as a means of limiting debate over such increased immigration measures, one official argued: ‘One cannot ceaselessly claim harmonisation of European politics and stick to words: action is needed!’ (ibid.).

With the Return Directive passed in 2011, European policy attempting to limit immigration further intensified the draconian treatment of migrants who lacked paperwork. The 2011 Directive granted substantial leeway to national administrative immigration bureaucracies to detain third-country nationals (TCN) with no need for official charges, no appeal to legal counsel and the violation of other basic human rights (Hogganvik 2011: 97). In spite of these sweeping measures, rates of undocumented immigration have continued to grow at the astounding rate of 50-100,000 persons into the EU each year since 2000 (ibid.: 98). What therefore results from such legislation is not a marginalized but decreasingly present population, but rather an exponentially growing community within Europe that is being denied access to basic legal protections and human rights due to the undocumented status of those in this category.

This two-fold development of the continuing growth of disenfranchised immigrant populations and the use of extra-legal administrative powers to detain them is one that distinctly mirrors the effects of national policy in the United States in recent decades (Schuck 1998). In this domain, applied anthropology in the United States has developed and made use of three research paradigms directed at examining the local realities that emerge from these supralocal policies that remain surprisingly underrepresented in European anthropology: (1) structural violence, (2) food insecurity, and (3) community-based research and service learning (CBRSL). These concepts will be described further in the following section. Even less represented in the anthropological literature of either continent is research methodology that attempts to reconcile not merely the distinction between qualitative and quantitative, but also that between semiotic post-modern approaches and experimental methodologies. One aim of this article is to demonstrate a methodology that has effectively used both opposing approaches in drafting successful recommendations to local community partners.

The present article will also propose an approach whereby applied anthropologists can discern, document and analyse patterns of structural violence within the particular manifestation of food insecurity. This approach is based on a mixed-methods CBRSL study conducted in a low-income marginalized neighbourhood in Akron, Ohio, in the United States by myself and five other students under the leadership of Dr Carolyn Behrman (Behrman et. al. 2014). The studied population consisted primarily of African-American children in an urban area that had become economically and politically marginalized due to large scale de-industrialization in the 1980s and 1990s. Given the marked difference in populations between a disadvantaged school in the US and detained immigrants in Europe, the potentially very different dynamics of food insecurity among the latter should be kept in mind. However, the case study does provide a description of a widely applicable approach that successfully combines qualitative ‘thick’ interpretations of local narratives with quantitative experimental methodology in order to discern and present behavioural patterns indicating food insecurity. Such an approach provides a potentially vital tool for European social researchers to study behavioural manifestations of suffering in detained immigrant populations, of which no major post-Return Directive study has yet been conducted.

The rest of this article will be divided into four sections. Section II will clarify definitions of such central concepts as structural violence, food insecurity and community-based research and service learning methods. Section III will assess the potential for quantitative and experimental methods to be incorporated into interpretivist research methods, and vice versa. Section IV will describe the proposed approach in the context of the aforementioned study conducted in the United States. Finally, Section V will illustrate the approach’s potential usefulness in the context of studying food insecurity in European immigration detention centres.

II. Clarification of Concepts

Much like numerous other anthropological terms used to characterize cross-cultural phenomena (e.g. ritual, myth, shamanism, etc.), the conceptual usefulness and applicability of structural violence depends on a suitably broad but delimited definition. To attempt too narrow a definition runs the risk of being ‘precise but precisely inaccurate’, as Amartya Sen warns in his forward to Paul Farmer’s *Pathologies of power* (Sen 2005: xiv). In keeping with this ethos, for the purposes of this paper I maintain a definition that emphasizes the *qualitative experience of suffering*, which lends itself to empathic understanding in participant observation, combined with the

typically *supralocal structural machinations* of regional, state and international bodies that engender this suffering. We can therefore think of structural violence as a system in which qualitative suffering serves as the *content*, and socio-political and socio-economic structures serve as the *form* of the concept. The larger scale structure of political and economic networks engenders the suffering experienced at the local level. The notions of content and form will receive further elaboration in the next section.

One of the most common results of structural violence is the qualitative state of hunger, a manner of suffering which lends itself to formal representation in empirical research through the concept of food insecurity. While there is a wide diversity of modes of measuring food insecurity, the concept itself admits of a relatively standard definition offered by the American Society for Nutritional Sciences as a phenomenon occurring ‘whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain’ (Hamelin et al. 2002: 119). While few works exist on the predominance of food insecurity among resettled and detained migrants in Europe, this could very well be due to a lack of research rather than the non-existence of the phenomenon. In the United States, where such studies are common, even immigrant populations that enjoy full legal status consistently show statistically significant indications of food insecurity (Hadley et al. 2010). While such negative outcomes may be buffered in the European context by comparatively generous public assistance programs, the increasing exclusion of immigrants’ access to such resources due to their undocumented status as described in the introduction may very well entail marked food insecurity in such populations. It is hoped that the study described in this article, though relating specifically to non-immigrant minority populations in extreme poverty, will provide a useful tool in conducting significantly underrepresented studies of food insecurity in immigrant populations in Europe in the future, particularly those confined to detention centres.

The particular method of research with which the aforementioned study was conducted was what has become known as the ‘community-based research and service learning’ approach. CBRSLS entails both community-based participatory research, which emphasizes a ‘collaborative approach’ between researchers and the community being studied, and the direct engagement of undergraduate and graduate students under the supervision of a principal investigator as part of an academic curriculum (Horowitz et al. 2009: 2644; Hardwick 2013: 349). While somewhat more prominent in the European social-science literature, this and analogous approaches are still

rather under-represented and appear not to have been incorporated into any food security study in the region as yet (Bodorkos and Pataki 2009). While the emphasis of this article is on combining interpretivist and experimental methodologies in deriving food insecurity indicators rather than CBRSL, an extensive description of the community–university partnership process involved in the study has been provided in a previous publication (Behrman 2011).

III. Qualitative-quantitative distinction as a content-form spectrum

i. On the compatibility of post-modern interpretivism and reflexivity with quantitative and experimental methodologies

The importance of the interpretivism of Clifford Geertz and the reflexivity of James Clifford cannot be overstated in the ability of contemporary anthropologists to recognize that ultimately ethnography produces representations, and that the observations and interpretations therein are to be taken as subjective understandings of the anthropologist rather than facts in and of themselves. However, this unavoidable partiality, which entails the inherent influence of the author’s own political agency, as well as his or her place in a socio-historical context, is by no means to be taken as counsel of despair. Acknowledgment of this inherent subjectivity does not entail blanket deconstruction characteristic of the French semiotic school exemplified by Jacques Derrida. Rather, such recognition simply allows for ‘representational tact’ in the construction of new systems of knowledge, as is characteristic of the American semiotic school (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 7).

Though Clifford and Marcus have to a tremendous extent re-established the central importance of literary and rhetorical theory in ethnographic method and representation, this is by no means to be confused with categorical rejection of scientific and quantitative approaches in the discipline. Far from being isolated, ‘ethnography is hybrid textual activity: *it traverses genres and disciplines*’ and can incorporate ‘objective’ and precise methodologies, ‘not “just” literary and rhetorical approaches (ibid.: 26, emphasis mine). Likewise, Geertz places tremendous emphasis not only on documenting qualitative experience, but on its interpretation as well, which he considers a ‘sorting out of structures of signification’ through his methodological approach of ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973: 8). Here was opened a door that regrettably few anthropologists have attempted to traverse. While we must refrain from making the wholesale claims to authority that were common in early positivist approaches, there is no need to confine ourselves to literary

and rhetorical theory alone. What is problematic about the positivist approach is not so much the quantitative and experimental methods of representation it incorporates, but rather its lack of regard for the fact that all bodies of knowledge are subject to the ‘contingencies of language, rhetoric, power, and history’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 25). Instead of wholesale rejection of the concerns for scientific discourse of Durkheim, Weber, Freud and Malinowski, it is advisable that we as ethnographers seek only to ‘move beyond them’ by placing them in a much broader context and acknowledging the social researcher’s inseparable influence over the representation of socio-cultural phenomena (Geertz 1973: 88).

Likewise, any introduction of quantitative and experimental methodology into ethnography should not seek to abandon the concerns for literary and rhetorical method that Geertz, Clifford and other authors of the early post-modern generations necessarily made central to the ethnographic project. Doing so would be to attempt to ‘move beyond them’ without carrying forward the lessons of our most recent predecessors, and to return to the same mistakes of the modernist period of reductionism and the over-application of experimental scientific method. The approaches of previous generations of researchers are not to be discarded, but rather must be seen with a constructively critical eye that recognizes the inherent partiality and representational nature of any empirical description, while still attempting an empirical and rigorous science of the social.

ii. *Qualitative as representation of content, quantitative as representation of form*

Before entering into a discussion of the respective strengths and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative representation, as well as their respective places in the study of structural violence, it will first be necessary to make explicit what is meant by content and form and the reason for their analogous relation to literary and mathematical methods. The distinction between content and form arises from the academic study of logic. As Susanne Langer outlines in her introductory text to symbolic logic, content denotes the ‘substance’ which comprises individual nodes within a symbolic construct, while form governs how the constituent elements of content are organized into a whole (Langer 1967: 25, 51). These individual nodes of content, which arise in human cognition, ‘are not mere fleeting images without definite relations to each other’, she writes; ‘[they] exhibit sequence, arrangement, connection, and a definite pattern’ (ibid.: 31). Langer makes frequent use of the example of musical scales, where the individual sounds

produced are the content and the regular intervals of difference in tonal frequency are the forms of such constructs (ibid.: 27).

The existence of both content and form play central roles in Geertz's conception of thick description. Geertz himself cites Langer in his description of *grandes idées*. In the classic 'winking' example Geertz adopted from the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle, in which the instinctiveness of blinking is differentiated from the intentionality of winking, the qualitative meaning of the content of a boy winking takes on substantially different elements depending on the socio-cultural form within which it comprises a part (Geertz 1973: 6). The content of the wink takes on a nearly infinite multivocality, which can only be delimited by its placement in a *relational context*, that is, the socio-cultural form in which it is found. Far from being antithetical to Geertz's method, it is only through the embedding of content within a structural form that encompasses it that thick description is able to emerge.

Given the central role of deductive principles in an understanding of thick description (though not, as Geertz is quick to point out, to the extent of the absence of induction), it would therefore be an arbitrary and counterproductive barrier to refrain from incorporating mathematical methods into interpretivist methodology. As Bertrand Russell showed in his classic *Principles of mathematics*, the entire corpus of mathematical operations is predicated upon notions present in Aristotelian logic. Once the elasticity and non-categorical properties of mathematical variables are accounted for – that is, their meaning is understood as entirely based in *context* and not universal meaning – any given variable is subject to logical constants within the parameters of its usage. All such parameters are therefore predicated upon principles of categorization and operation in classic logic (Russell 1932: 6-9). Though it is important to recognize that Aristotelian principles of logic may not be present even in analogous form in certain local contexts, nevertheless fascinating work has emerged from the ontological movement indicating that conceptual systems that at first seem incomprehensible are in fact at least capable of being represented through Aristotelian principles of non-contradiction once the ontological unit is understood, as illustrated by Martin Holbraad's work on the ache powder of Cuban Ifa diviner cults (Holbraad 2007). Therefore, at least in contexts admitting of translation into Aristotelian principles of categorization without doing undue violence to ethnographic specificity, mathematics provides an ideal approach by which to communicate the structural parameters of meaning, just as more literary approaches provide an ideal means of

communicating the empathic reality and content of this meaning. These respective styles of representation should not be considered as in opposition, or even as entirely distinct categories, but rather as poles on a continuum between content and form as a means of communication. Only in the case of ‘pure mathematics’ is the possibility of structure without content approached, and any communication of content without structure, if even possible, is of little use to research into socio-cultural phenomena, which is so dependent on ‘thick’ representation entailing both.

In combining the empathic content communicated by qualitative literary methods with the emphasis on structure found in quantitative methods, the research into food insecurity demonstrated in the following section can be understood as an attempt at holistic ‘thick’ socio-cultural representation incorporating both qualitative and quantitative modes. Taking into account both the structural and qualitative concerns that are central to approaching an understanding of structural violence and its manifestations, it incorporates and evaluates the applicability of an explanatory structural framework wherein food insecurity increases at the end of the month as compared to the beginning of the month as a means of contextualizing and framing the empathic experience of food-insecure behaviours as reported in local narratives and observed in participant observation.

IV. Combining qualitative-interpretivist and quantitative-experimental methods in studying food insecurity in a low-income urban US school²

The city of Akron, Ohio, suffered one of the greatest losses in employment in the region known as the ‘Rust Belt’, an area located in the northeast United States that was heavily affected by the collapse of the country’s auto industry in the 1970s and 1980s. According to comparative census data on Summit County, within which Akron is located, well over half of the manufacturing jobs that existed in 1954³ had been lost as of 2002.⁴ The economic devastation of large-scale losses in manufacturing employment was further exacerbated by sweeping reductions in government assistance in the mid-1990s, such as a five-year cap on family financial assistance programs (Poppo and Leighinger 2011: 126). The Milton Park neighbourhood, whose elementary school served as the site of our study, has fared among the worst in the city. The neighbourhood suffers

² The names of the neighbourhood and school have been changed in accordance with the community partner’s wishes.

³ Frank 1961: 40.

⁴ US Economic Bureau 2005.

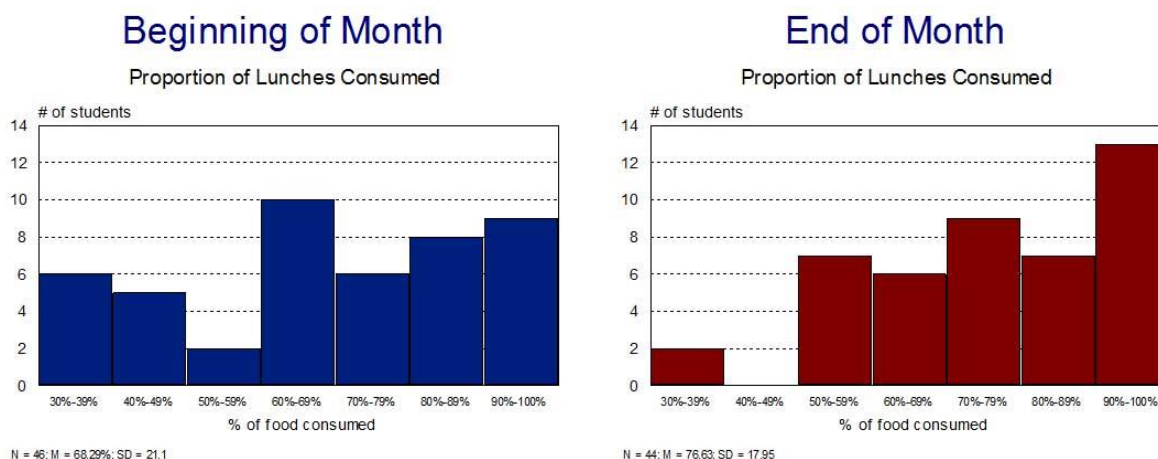
from the lowest income and employment levels and the highest rates of violent crime and prostitution in the city (Behrman 2011: 81).

A central aspect of Paul Farmer's approach is the necessity of understanding local suffering (content) as an aspect of supralocal structures and machinations as placed in broader contexts of international politico-economic frameworks (form). This is pronounced in his analysis of the AIDS epidemic in the local Haitian context of Do Kay village, which he argues is impossible to understand except in the broader formal context of international development schemes (Farmer 2006: 20). Our project took a very similar approach, listening to local narratives of suffering observed in children as provided by school staff, and attempting to connect these narratives to larger scale supralocal power networks. In our engagement with the community, a well-defined narrative was provided by the cafeteria lunch lady, who expressed a concern that students were 'power eating' at the end of the month (Behrman 2011: 83). This behaviour was defined by the lunch lady as 'eating more, eating more intently, and pocketing food,' which she causatively linked to 'reduced food resources at home toward the end of monthly public assistance cycles' (ibid.). Such behaviour falls well within standard United States Department of Agriculture definitions of food insecurity indicators, particularly 'coping behaviours to augment food supply' (Bickel et. al 2000: 25). Our project was therefore centrally one of thick description, understanding the qualitative 'wink' of consumption behaviours interpreted as food-insecure in the schoolchildren as a consequence of the supralocal structures of national and state public assistance policies.

Given this overarching aim, the task governing our research design was to empirically document this reported pattern within a quantitative framework and to attempt to discern the significance of any variation in consumption behaviours between beginning and end of month time points. As the field of our observations was restricted to the elementary school, an initial methodology entailed the use of 24-hour dietary recalls of students performed at either time point that indicated a general trend towards decreased food consumption at home at the end of the month. However, the combination of a small sample size and the large standard deviation this entailed made the results questionable. As a practical solution to a practical logistical problem, the primary experimental design was adapted to emphasize 'power eating' behavioural patterns in the lunchroom itself. The behavioural pattern of 'power eating' was related to its direct quantifiable manifestation in the amount of food eaten at lunch time. Measuring this amount

served as a valid unit for two reasons. First, the site of such behavioural patterns as reported by the lunch lady's narrative was the lunchroom itself and patterns observed by our team, as well as in preliminary participant observation. Second, lunchtime consumption of food universally consisted of standardized free lunches provided by the school, with identical food types and weights within each lunch period. Moreover, the potentially confounding variable of differing preferences for food provided across either time point was adjusted for by choosing lunches of comparable reported preferences (Behrman 2011: 85).

Analysis illustrates a statistically significant increase in lunch-time food consumption from the beginning of the month to the end of the month, indicating increased prevalence of 'power eating' behaviour. The respective distributions for the beginning and end of month time points are illustrated below in Figure 1, in which food consumed is listed according to the percentage of total lunch eaten as weighed in grams. While the original report presented at the 2010 Society for Applied Anthropology conference did not entail significance testing, I have undertaken such an analysis for both this article and a recent publication by our group, with the local narrative of greater 'power eating' indicators at the end of the month as the alternate hypothesis (Behrman et. al. 2014). The table following the graph illustrates a two-tailed significance (i.e. 'p value') of 0.04, lying within the conventional range of significance wherein $p < 0.05$. Moreover, there was no significant alteration in this demonstrated pattern of indicative food insecurity behaviours when the samples were separated by gender. This significant increase in average lunchtime consumption was presented to school officials and a local community food distribution organization ('food bank'), both informing future distribution strategies and influencing the creation of new food distribution initiatives (Behrman 2011: 88-91).



V. A proposed approach for food insecurity studies in European immigration detention centres

From this study, a potentially useful and widely applicable four-step approach for combined methods research on food insecurity emerges: (1) identification of local narratives of behaviours indicating food insecurity and their observable patterns; (2) development of a research model which in some manner quantifies these behaviour types into additive units; (3) empirical documentation across a suitable period of time of such quantifiable behaviour types and their observed patterns; and (4) testing these quantified representations of behavioural patterns for statistical significance, the local narrative serving as the alternate hypothesis. This is particularly useful for contexts in which thorough documentation of calorific intake throughout the day is difficult or impossible, as when access to a research population is limited. Moreover, this method need not be restricted to food insecurity alone, but can potentially be applied to any manner of structural violence which entails clear and quantifiable behavioural manifestations.

Returning now to Europe, in 2010 the Jesuit Refugee Service conducted a sweeping analysis and critique of detainment centre conditions prior to the passage of the Return Directive. In interviews, significant indicators of food insecurity were qualitatively expressed, particularly the common testimony that ‘food is often undercooked, or simply inedible’ and is moreover ‘almost always [date-]expired’ (Jesuit Refugee Service 2010: 76). Quantitatively, strong indication is further provided by reports of weight loss of up to eight kilograms, well over a tenth of the weight of a healthy adult male of average height according to body mass index scales (ibid.). Moreover, both physical and mental health as a whole showed marked decreases as a result of detention among previously healthy individuals (ibid.: 62-70). Given the clear cursory

indications of food insecurity in the report, the implementation of the Return Directive in the year following its publication and the continued exponential increase of undocumented asylum-seekers in spite of this Directive, food insecurity presents us with a potentially grave human rights crisis, as detention populations increase far beyond the abilities of member states to process them through detention facilities (Hogganvik 2011: 97).

The method I propose is potentially a very useful preliminary approach for exploring food insecurity and other potential manifestations of structural violence in detention centres (such as psychological stress, behavioural reactions to physical and emotional abuse, etc.). Though the setting of the research is very different, the remarkably similar methodological obstacle of limited access to the research population exists for both detained migrants in the EU and children at Milton Elementary. As the Jesuit Refugee Service report states, the ‘sheer size’ of a representative sample requires methods that are time- and resource-efficient, especially given the limited access directly imposed by state governments, most markedly in the outright refusal of access in the United Kingdom (Jesuit Refugee Service 2010: 22, 23). Certainly the obstacle of limited access is significantly more pronounced in the case of detention centres, but as a practical solution to a practical logistical problem, a method of identifying local explanations and descriptions of food-insecure behaviour and quantitatively documenting behavioural patterns which either do or do not correspond to these narratives is an approach that provides for the efficiency of time and resources required. It is hoped that the methodology provided in this paper will serve future reports on the potential structural violence inflicted upon migrant populations as a result of the Return Directive.

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