

Behind the Counter: An Ethnographic Encounter with the Capital-Dispossessed

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Abstract. In a contained environment with scarce resources, Capital in all of its forms emerges as the organizing principle imposing patterns of regularities among social agents in competition. When economic capital is stripped bare, the value of other forms of capital – cultural and social – are more readily observed. The soup kitchen is one such context where other forms of capital, their efficacy in producing results, may be better evaluated. In absence of more traditional forms of currency, these other forms of capital emerge as key predictors of resource maximization, and disparities between the ‘have’s’ and ‘have not’s’ can be discerned.

Backdrop

The day begins in leisure. I make the call, announce the caller, and greet a colleague who meets me at the back door. By the time I arrive, just before seven in the morning, two impressive pots of soup are already set to boiling on an anachronistic gas oven, the flames left burning through the day. The first twenty minutes are passed in the most benign of ways, reading the paper or listening to anecdotes of a colleague’s experience in Detroit during the race riots of the 1960’s. There’s not much to do. I might be asked to complete some little odd job but, generally, those first twenty minutes are spent in peace, minding the gate before the flood.

Seven o’clock passes and we are stirred from our loafing. The doors will be open soon and we have to be set up and ready to go. Close to fifty bowls of soup, each adorned with a bun and a spoon, are already laid out on the great counter that stretches halfway across the room, ending just where it opens up into a large sitting area. The arrangement is basically the same each time. We are four: three of us plant ourselves behind the counter, the last, affectionately called the *maître d*, assumes his position at the end of the counter; he’ll do as he always does, making small talk with the clients and delivering soup and coffee to his preferred associates. Of us behind the counter, our responsibilities are thus: one is in charge of soup, making sure there are always full bowls at hand; the other is our oracle, eye to the future, doing the preparatory work for future meals, cutting potatoes, carrots, and onions, the latter having had, so far as I’ve seen, no effect on him.

My role is essentially that of amateur barista, and toward that objective I am armed with two tall plastic containers full to the brim with hot coffee. Service at this soup kitchen follows a particular routine, tacitly observed and generally respected by those who frequent it. The door opens and clients line up at the counter. Those who want coffee receive it first, before moving down the line for their soup and bun; a veritable assembly line intended to ward against inefficiency and mitigate tension. This first line, more or less the ideal type of a ‘soup line’, stretches on for about an hour. During this time it’s not out of the ordinary to serve well

over two-hundred clients, thereby emptying two ten-gallon pots of homemade soup. New customers are readily discernible from those of longer patronage. Routine dictates that a client seeking coffee will specify in advance the number of cubes of sugar she or he wants, such that my typical “how are you doing?” is met by veterans of the line with a “I’m well, two sugars, please”, substituting two with whatever number satisfies their particular inclination. The newly initiate, fresh to the process, require a bit of prodding before they’re well and truly socialized to the system.

So passes the first hour; an hour which for me always seems to pass with haste, as my barista role keeps me on my toes. Shortly after eight the clients, many of whom had, until that time, been lounging in the sitting room – intended as a temporary refuge from the elements and an occasion for socializing – are asked to leave so that we can begin preparations for the nine o’clock line. The interceding hour is important. Tables are cleaned, floors are mopped, pots are scrubbed, coffee is made. It’s during the break between the first and second line that deliveries from local bakeries and grocery stores arrive, on which soup kitchens like ours rely, and without which could not continue. The deliveries are usually of the same order: bread and pastries unsold and otherwise off the shelves are donated to organizations like ours to be put to purpose instead of put to waste. This includes loaves of bread, baguettes, bagels, buns of a variety, croissants, and the *pièces de résistance*, assorted pastries and sweets: cinnamon buns, donuts, éclair, muffins, and scones.

The second line offers a different menu than that of the first. If any soup is leftover it is put out, but otherwise the second line is more appropriately understood as a bakery line or, better yet, the hour of ‘sweet treats’, because although there is usually plenty of bread available, there is an almost singular focus on the pastries of the day. The second line is a bit of a free-for-all compared to the first, but there still exist conventions which guide the behaviour of most patrons. There is, in theory, a limit on the number of goodies each client can take for themselves; usually one bread product (loaf, baguette, etc.) and one pastry; with few exceptions, this is a practise usually performed by the clients en masse. The next two hours are a slow roll of clients receiving baked goods on a first-come-first serve basis, the crowd gradually thinning as eleven o’clock approaches, which signals the changing of the guard, and the end of the odyssey for me, for that day.

The path

My first day at the soup kitchen passed with little drama and I was presented with a rosy picture of the setting and of the participants. There were few bumps and everything seemed to have been accomplished in an organized, benign manner. Each client seemed genuinely thankful for each item rendered, and for each employee rendering it. The first day I saw no conflict, no tension, and the overall impression made was of people helping people in mutual harmony. No more than one shift later this particular naivety took a lashing, and I was laid low by certain realities of the situation; a day I described after as a “rough day to be a volunteer, but a good day to be a researcher”. It was a hard lesson in Principles of the Soup Kitchen: good spirits and good times so long as supplies abound; that the collective enthusiasm I witnessed that first day is sustained for as long there are goodies on the counter, and no longer.

A soup kitchen is only as good as the local businesses that donate their excess products. Some days are better than others for deliveries, and on light days there may be few pastries to provide. This second day was such a day. Supplies were scarce and the only clients able to secure the few pastries we had were those who arrived at nine o'clock on the dot, or just after. Absence of sweets is translated to clients with a wooden sign, placed on the counter, that reads "no snacks", or by a shrug and an apology from the staff. Most clients receive the news neutrally, though some are not so understanding and can make a fuss. Sometimes, when occasion calls, one of the staff will journey to one of the four big fridges that line one of the walls and remove from within packages of sweets generally saved for situations like these. I had seen a staff member make one such journey before and, in the absence of more senior members, and left responsible for snack distribution, I felt audacious enough to do the same for a couple tenacious patrons inquiring after treats. By doing so I effectively maneuvered my way into a situation at the same time impolitic and foreboding. Faced with the consequences of one ill-advised action, I adapted my behaviour, only to produce consequences of a greater and more protracted order.

The sequence went something like the following. Having run out of snacks but pressed to produce more by the only two clients nearby, I obligingly, and with great sense of purpose, opened the fridge and removed two plastic containers each with two pastries inside. My intention was to give one, single pastry to each client, leaving a full container behind the counter for future patrons. When I voiced my intention to do just that, one of the clients reacted with emotion, evidently expecting to receive the full package. I tried to explain that supplies were short and that we had to preserve them for other clients who might come, but by a combination of volume and cleverness, he overrode me, claiming that he had a friend outside to whom the second pastry would go. The second guy, quick to the take, and with a half-smile, said that he too had a friend outside. I felt obliged to give him the full package, by virtue of humour alone, and each of them walked away with the maximum take.

I had lost my composure a bit with the first of the two clients and decided that nothing good could come of squabbling over portions with clients; that, if pressed, I should yield to client requests, wipe my hands of it, and carry on. As it happens, this was possibly the worst position to take, which I was about to discover. In enters old lady, who, though not an English-speaker, makes herself understood that she is here for sweets. As if in a repeat performance, I venture to the fridge to see what I can see, producing from within a package containing one large pastry. Still rattled from the previous encounter, and unwilling to initiate dialectics amidst an obvious language barrier, dropping the pretense that I should, really, divide the pastry into smaller parts, I skip the ceremony and simply give her the whole thing. She walks away happily enough, but as she does, a young man approaches asking for similar treatment, so I stick my head back in the fridge and produce a package with multiple, smaller pastries inside. At this point more clients have approached, and I know now that I need to end the cycle, that I can't possibly give a full package to each person. I explain that I'll have to split the contents and give these pastries out individually. Young man is upset. Invoking platitudes of 'equality' and 'fairness' he edifies me on the fair treatment of all clients; he says he's just seen me give a full package to that little old lady, and he can't understand why he is being short changed. Thankfully, the manager appears on the scene and delivers me from the young man's polemic; I

occupy myself with some little task, slipping away in the most dignified way allowable in such situations. The situation cleared up, the young man out the door and balance restored, the manager cheerfully explains to me the importance, not of making sure that everything is divided equally, but on being careful not to be seen when producing favors for particular clients.

This situation was nothing if not a minor event in the course of my volunteering, but it offered a hard lesson, appreciated only through experience, and opened my eyes to a whole subsystem that I had no knowledge of before. More than anything else, it initiated me to the fact that clients are absolutely vigilant when it comes to the distribution of food items, that they will, if they see something given to someone else, expect and demand the same for themselves, and the docility I had, perhaps unconsciously, ascribed to them, was pure illusion. I had occasion, later that day, to inquire about the shortage of supplies that we were presently experiencing. The colleague I spoke to said that this was typical of the time of year, that the soup kitchen is best stocked during the Christmas season, when a greater number of businesses and private persons provide donations. Still a bit sore from the travails of the day, I regretted that I had signed up to volunteer at what seemed like an inopportune time, when supplies were low and hostilities like those of that day were prone to happening. Only later did I appreciate the opportunity that this provided.

I hadn't noticed the semi-clandestine system of exchange until circumstance forced it be put on hold. Most days there are just the four of us, and we're at liberty to run things as we see fit, which implies a little bit of freewheeling. One day, a group of administrators of some kind, who I was later told were essentially the 'bosses' who 'run the place', met and occupied one of the tables for little over an hour, during snack line. The entire time that they were there, the guys were a little on edge, as if under the impression that they were being scrutinized. The behaviour of the guys immediately waxed reserved, and many habits which I had, until then, taken for granted were suspended for the duration of the visit. Notably, the habit of slipping choice goods or extra portions to select clients. I hadn't appreciated how often these favor exchanges took place until they were forced to stop, abruptly. The administrators left and it was business as usual, and this subtle system of favor dealing resumed its course – choice goodies for choice clients. A system all the more meaningful given the inevitable uproar if the unelected caught wind of an unequal distribution of supplies. To risk confrontation over such banalities, which seem to offer little reward for he who takes the risk, would seem to run directly counter to instincts of self-preservation, and yet it was a fundamental undercurrent in the kitchen day-to-day.

This particular soup kitchen is one of many in the area that services clients of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), once a "vibrant section of the city with head offices, banks, theatres, hotels, and department stores", now popularly perceived as a "dead zone within the city" (VA, 2016; Burnett, 2014, p. 157). The economy of the DTES met with decline beginning in the late 1950's: termination of key transportation services, relocation of the main library away from the DTES, and a "shift in retail businesses westward" as the city began building a new centre for Downtown Vancouver, all contributed to 10,000 fewer visitors per day to the DTES, and the "gradual marginalization of [the] community" (Newnham, 2016, p. 3; Plant, 2008, p. 4).

The Downtown Eastside had always had affordable housing relative to other parts of Vancouver, and as development in these other parts reduced the availability of low-income housing, and after the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients in the 1970's, a swell of low-income residents took root in the DTES (Newnham, 2016). The DTES had, since the 1950's, due to its proximity to the downtown core, its historical architecture, and depressed land values, been subject to strong lobbying for urban renewal, which, so far, has been met with fierce resistance from the community and bylaws to protect low-cost housing, the loss of which would effectively force residents of the DTES up and out of Vancouver (Plant, 2008; Burnett, 2013, p. 159).

Drugs and alcohol had been a reality of the DTES since its beginnings, but the situation became worse in the 1980's and 90's when more people started using crack cocaine and heroin, the money for which was often made illegitimately. Crime increased, as did "prostitution, unemployment, homelessness, and intravenous drug-related diseases such as hepatitis and HIV-AIDS" (Newnham, 2016, p. 3).

Today's DTES is riddled with the same issues of decades past: crime, poverty, mental health, addiction, homelessness and serious infection on a macabre scale. In a population of some 18,000 people, close to 5,000 are intravenous drug users (City of Vancouver, 2015; Deans et al., 2013, p. 68). Mortality rates in the DTES are significantly higher than those in the general population of Vancouver, especially among women and young people. Major causes of death are HIV infection and drug overdose, so much more so following the introduction of opioids like fentanyl. A memorial wall in the Downtown Eastside stands monument to the casualties of drug overdose in Vancouver, 600 over 2016 and 2017 alone, many from the DTES (Hennig, 2017; BC Coroners Service, 2018, p. 10).

Each of the guys who I work the morning lines with are residents of the area, recognized by and well-acquainted with many of the clients who patronize the kitchen. They've lived a sizeable part of their lives around the DTES neighborhood and are not stranger to its culture or people. Relationships fostered outside of the context of the soup kitchen seem often to find expression within it. Familiarities in the neighborhood are reaffirmed in particular staff-client interactions, and social bonds are rewarded to the extent that they can be within the limits of a specific context.

No time else, within this specific context – the soup kitchen – does the value of sociability become so clear as when deliveries wane and stores are low. When supplies abound, there is little tension, as each individual can make away with basically whatever and however much they're inclined to take. This is not the case when hard times come and supplies are scarce. We were experiencing those times and it allowed me to appreciate that under the veneer of charity there was a complex system of competition between staff and clients, where both sides employed various strategies to accomplish the particular objectives of each. And it can be reduced quite simply. The staff, for their (our) part, feel an obligation to preserve the little supplies that we have, so that late-comers might at least get some morsel to bring home. There's also the fact that we are not the only set of hands to work that day; another group of people will arrive later to relieve us and take upon themselves the responsibility of food

distribution. To use up all of the stores during our shift alone would be to put the later staff into a position of having, truly, nothing to give out.

Our instinct to preserve therefore runs headlong into the instinct of the client, which is to maximize the amount – and quality – of goodies they can grab that day, and there's some diversity in the methods used to achieve that goal. There's the blitz approach, where a client is limited in what she or he takes only by the time it takes for a staff member to rebuke she or he for taking more than her or his due, at which point the client's typical response is plead ignorance and scam. There's those who exchange their labour, like the old woman who comes in each day and busies herself with sweeping the floor – a herculean task – or the committed individuals who routinely help bring in boxes of bread deliveries from the street.

But here something should be made very clear: assuming that one can arrive on time – within the first forty-five minutes of the morning soup line or twenty minutes of the nine o'clock snack line – one will always get, regardless of who you are, the minimum offering – coffee and soup in the morning; a snack and bread product later on – ostensibly understood to be the standard for all. However, if one has the audacity to pursue it, *there is always the opportunity to walk away with more than the minimum*. And the single most important factor predicting a client's ability to walk away with a better quality and higher quantity of goods is the *social capital* she or he is able to mobilize.

Bourdieu and Capital

In his 1986 treatise on the Forms of Capital, Pierre Bourdieu offers us a world; a world of “perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one, every soldier has a marshal's baton in his knapsack, and every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). A portrait of an alien world – the sole function to better lay bare the peculiarities of ours, the real world; a world of embedded social hierarchies, class divisions, and inequalities of opportunity. In a contained environment with scarce resources, Capital in all its forms emerges as the organizing principle of social life which allows for patterns of regularities between social agents in competition, giving method to madness, imposing structure on chaos, replacing chance with inheritance.

For Bourdieu, the structure and functioning of the social world, and its durability, cannot be explained without reference to the forms of capital, which impose a semblance of order on what would otherwise be chaos or pure chance. In our society, particularly our capitalist society, ‘success’ at the ‘games of society’ is dependent on the individual's ability to accumulate capital in all or some of its forms. The forms of capital are three; economic, cultural, and social. The most obvious type of capital is economic, “immediately and directly convertible into money”, which might be readily used to procure goods, resources, and services, and confers on its owner certain status (p. 244). Our society is ordered, first and foremost, by economic capital, and to the extent that one possesses economic capital one secures for her or himself a position of privilege in the social order, and in fact, other forms of capital – cultural and social – are, at

their root, 'disguised' forms of economic capital, in that the effect of each is linked often with economic success.

Nonetheless, it was important to Bourdieu to emphasize that 'capital' could not be entirely reduced to its economic component, and that other forces were at work in reproducing existing stratifications of society; that privilege and position could not be sustained simply by laws protecting inheritance and property rights, as such laws, when recognized for their capacity to reproduce existing inequalities, would be most liable to censor and control (p. 248). There were other avenues toward success, other forms of capital, more unseen and perhaps more insidious, that stacked the odds in favor of the propertied, even when they could no longer openly buy their way into positions of power. To this effect Bourdieu emphasized the roles of cultural and social capital which, in the context of a stratified society, operated in the shadows but were little less important in predicting which groups maintain status.

Cultural capital, in its 'embodied state', is the accumulated cultural knowledge brought to the market by the individual – his manners, demeanor, and behavior; *habitus* – in whom it appears as 'legitimate competence' and justifies his claim to the best positions. Notwithstanding the fact that such an embodied state is a process which begins early in life within the familial realm and requires time to cultivate; time which can be purchased more freely by families of means, where economic necessity does not demand the child work sooner, in contexts requiring less refinement (p. 248-249). In its 'objectified state' cultural competence expresses itself through the material possessions of the possessor; authority and legitimacy translated through clothing, jewelry, hygiene, and especially through 'institutionalized' objectified cultural capital: academic qualifications and degrees which confer on their possessor the right to the most coveted positions (249-251). Cultural capital begets cultural capital, and the families most rich in culture, with the economic security to allow for a prolonged education of their young, will be able to transmit, over a longer period of time than that available to families of leaner means, the cultural symbols and objects to their children who, now fluent in the dominant 'language' of society, are well equipped to take for themselves the choice positions in the economic order, granted to them on account of their perceived merit or 'natural aptitude' (p. 244). Class reproduction disguised as meritocracy.

Social capital is an expectation of resources tied to one's belonging to a group or network, or alliance with an individual (p. 252). The 'volume' of an individual's social capital is directly proportional to the "size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize" and on the "volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (p. 252). Social capital does not come for free, and it does not come easily; it must be cultivated tirelessly through material and/or symbolic exchanges with the subjects of one's attention, through which one hopes to "produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships" that can be usable in the "short or long term" to secure *material or symbolic profits* (p. 253). Through careful cultivation, the individual hopes to transform contingent relations – those of the neighborhood, the workplace; cordial but detached – into relationships both *necessary* and *elective* (chosen) that imply *durable obligations subjectively felt*, (i.e., expressed through feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship) (p. 253). The maintenance of social relationships is dependent on continuous exchange, which "transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition", which must be affirmed and reaffirmed ad infinitum if the

relationship is to persist (p. 252). Thus, social capital requires not only an “unceasing effort of sociability” combined with the time and energy to commit to it, but also a *capacity* for sociability and the specific *competence* for making the most of social connections (p. 253).

For Bourdieu, the dominant classes will necessarily have to alter their strategy if the existing social order is to remain. The transmission of power and privilege through economic capital alone can no longer suffice since such blatant unfairness and arbitrariness is easily spotted and attacked by oppositional forces. If existing power dynamics are to be reproduced, transmission needs to occur with greater subtlety, through channels less obvious in their inequities.

And what is a soup kitchen if not the perfect sandbox for an evaluation of these more-subtle forms of capital, their efficacy in producing results? An isolated context where, with little exception, economic capital is stripped bare and the floor is levelled for those involved. A context where traditional currency is significant in its absence, where other currencies take its place, their value that much more obvious because of the very absence of material forms of exchange.

Capital in the kitchen

The morning soup line is more standardized than the nine o’clock snack line. More so than later on, clients all pretty much receive the same thing and same quantity of thing – one bowl of soup, one bun, and as much coffee as one can stomach. The morning soup line is rich in form and drab in content. The wheels come off a little during the nine o’clock snack line, the success of which – measured by the volume and quality of goodies – is directly proportional to the number and size of deliveries received that day. There is little form, evolving content, and the possibility for great mercantilism – this is when the action happens.

There’s a tendency among staff to, upon delivery, sort through the mess of goods and quarantine the more-choice items in the backroom, away from the buffet spread of the apparently less reputable items on the counter. There’s also a quantitative change between the morning soup line and the nine o’clock snack line in that coffee, which was free in the morning, now costs \$0.50. Favor giving in the snack line context can thus be expressed through a variety of mediums, from the provision of cakes and sweets from the fridges, to the distribution of choice items from the backroom, or articulated by the expression “buy so-and-so a coffee”, which is nothing but a coded instruction to give the subject of esteem a free coffee.

There’s elements of cultural capital predictive of resource maximization in the soup kitchen context, both in its embodied and objectified states. Short of any readily obvious pre-existing relationship, staff will reward clients that they are well-disposed to simply on the basis of ‘manners’ – that set of behaviors inculcated in child by parent or guardian during the first years of life. Simple politeness and please-and-thank-yous are often rewarded with permission to take more items or inquire after sought-after items. The opposite is true when the same yearning for goods is accompanied by a negative faculty for politeness, in which instance staff can react somewhat mercilessly and the chances of the client achieving more than he is due is zero.

The clients of the soup kitchen are diverse: there are homeless, there are individuals on disability or welfare, and many simply of low means; but there are also those with obvious employment, such as the construction workers who come in each day around ten and are more often than not awarded a full cake or pie from the fridge to enjoy on their break. There's subtle evidence of a premium placed on honest and able work, and respect toward those who perform it; expressed in one staff member's assertion that he "works for his food", and in another's insistence that he's not afraid to work ("unlike some of these other guys"). It's really unsurprising then that the plumage of honest work – in this case construction gear; vests and hardhats – translates certain cultural statements of legitimacy and candidacy for hospitable treatment, especially when compared to the lack of such objectified cultural capital among the great majority of other clients.

The single greatest predictor of resource maximization in the soup kitchen context is the volume of social capital possessed by an individual. At minimum, and in absence of a pre-existing relationship with staff, clients must have a *capacity* for sociability and the skill and competence to navigate social situations. This means that the client possesses a certain amount of affability, charisma, or tact – a capacity for friendliness – such that she or he can exploit a short-term relationship for immediate benefits. These are the sporadic or occasional clients, whose visit to the kitchen is brief, who have little if any relationship with the staff, but whose social competence nonetheless rewards them with little more than the standard fare.

Then there are the regulars, clients who come every day and are recognized on sight by the staff. Their relationship to the staff is less so about friendship than 'endearment through persistent contact'. They hang out for longer periods of time than other clients, they make conversation with the staff, and this prolonged contact and capacity for affability has created the sort of 'durable obligation subjectively felt' to supply for them a good deal more than the daily minimum. These individuals are particularly immune to rebuke from breaking the one-per-customer convention, and they make the most of their license.

But it is genuine friendship that seems to guarantee the greatest access to the best and most items. These are the individuals who are obviously well acquainted with the staff on the outside, and whose intimacy entitles them to consistent favors of high quality. These are the relationships that have obviously taken time to cultivate, were chosen by the parties involved, and having fostered between both feelings of respect and comradery have created an obligation on the staff member's part to provide for their friend.

I was fascinated by the system of exchange and by the individuals who, by virtue of sociability, were able to make the most of their time in our midst. For a long time, my preoccupation was for those who did receive bonus supplies, and when I was confident that I had identified the element to their success – the social capital they were able to mobilize – my attention shifted toward those who were not so successful; and the pattern was stable.

With little variability, it is the recognizably mentally ill or addicted who are among the *least likely* to receive better quality or higher quantity of goods – despite the fact that they might be the population in most need of greater resources. This is not to say that the mentally ill do not, on occasion, walk away with more than the minimum, but they are, on average, the least likely to do so. And this is precisely due to the absence of the type of social competence

which, for those who have it, multiplies their chance of greater gains. It must be made very clear that this is not a slight on the staff who, on many occasions, make a blatant and directed effort to provide more for those with these disabilities, but the fact is that it *requires exactly these directed efforts*; the clients themselves very rarely make, or are able to make, the effort themselves.

There are those who despite, or perhaps because of, their mental health issues, are such regulars to the kitchen that they qualify for the same 'endearment through persistent contact' obligations on the part of the staff, and they will be well-provided for. But this assumes recognition on the part of the staff, and there is simply too much traffic in one day for limited staff to make the exertions to provide for each of these clients. These exertions are, however, absolutely necessary if the mentally ill are to be properly provided for. It must be expressed unequivocally that in many cases the mentally ill will not seek out services or resources for themselves, *effort must be made to bring it to them*.

Social capital and mental health

The connection between social capital and mental health has been made, often with reference to the meaningful impact social capital at the community level can have on greater collective levels of mental well-being (McKenzie & Harpham, 2006; De Silva et al., 2005). In their comprehensive analysis of the subject, McKenzie & Harpham (2006) lean on studies from as far back as Durkheim's 1897 treatise on suicide in order to advance their thesis that not only has social capital been shown to be highly associated with mental health, but that absence of sufficient social capital may even be causally related to higher levels of mental illness. And, significantly, the opposite may be true: that higher levels of social capital might imply lower risk of suicide, lower "all-cause mortality", and longer life expectancy (p. 12).

The ambiguity, according to the authors, has been with regard to whether social capital should be considered a property of groups or of individuals, conceptualized respectfully as 'ecological' or 'individual' social capital (p. 13). In its ecological conception social capital is not peculiar to the individual, but to the community, group, or particular area as a whole, embodied in relationships between individuals and between groups, and evaluated, in part, by the extensiveness and connectedness of social networks.

Social capital at the individual level finds its expression precisely in the formulation by Bourdieu, which is what made it an effective foil for understanding the mechanisms in the soup kitchen context where disparities in capital are readily observable between single persons. There's been hesitancy to adopt an individual definition of social capital because for some it seems to account for little more than what has already been addressed by the existing and "well-researched concepts of social support and social networks" – concepts incorporated in collective level social capital (p. 13). Social capital at the individual level has typically, and not inappropriately, been understood as a measure of an individual's *access* to the substance of these higher concepts. If social capital at the individual level is understood narrowly as the extent to which one can access social support/networks, then, it is argued, individual social capital is little more than a proxy variable for "access to the active ingredient" – social support and social networks – and there may be little utility in substituting a new concept for "the more

accurate descriptions of the factors under observation – accessed social support or social networks” (p. 13).

Essentially, it comes down to whether or not ‘access’, as a process, is distinct and important enough in its own right to justify considering it separately of what is being accessed. Here individual level social capital à la Bourdieu does not get its fair due, and there’s no reason why an understanding of social capital at both the ecological and individual level cannot coexist. What was particularly useful in the Bourdieuan sense of social capital was that it acknowledged not only the importance of relationships and one’s social network but also the *individual capacity* for sociability and the *competency* to exploit social connections. Access to social support or social networks was, for Bourdieu, more than a simple ‘do or do not have it’. Access – in terms of developing and maintaining social connections – was a process that took time, energy, and the *skill and knowledge* to make it work. The capacity and competence to foster social relationships is nothing if not a form of capital peculiar to, and variable between, individuals. The two levels of social capital are not then incompatible: while social capital in the ecological sense is the extensiveness and strength of connectedness of social relationships in a collective network, individual social capital is the *differential ability* of individuals to breach and find a place within that broader network, which then secures for them the benefits of the whole.

Absence of a clear delineation between individual and collective, micro and macro, social capital is in part why social capital itself is such a slippery concept to grasp. Social capital is frequently thought of as an “umbrella term” incorporating, but not synonymous with, many “features in the social structure” such as “social cohesion, social support, social integration and/or participation”, and social networks (Lin, 1999, p. 471). Social capital can be manifested by the density of community and personal networks; the degree of civic “engagement, participation, and use of civic networks”; strength of civic identities and feelings of belonging, solidarity and equality; the presence of norms of reciprocity and cooperation; and trust in the community and one’s neighbors, colleagues, or representatives (McKenzie & Harpham, 2006, p. 14; Putnam, 1993). Social capital can be ‘bridging’ – links forged between different groups – or ‘bonding’ – ties among members of a single group –, ‘horizontal’ – ties among people of the same strata of society – and ‘vertical’ – integration of people of different strata of society (McKenzie & Harpham, 2006, p. 15-16).

Despite its apparent similarity to the concepts – social support, social networks – that embody it, social capital is distinguished precisely by its emphasis on *capital*, the “stocks” individuals are able to “build up” through “social interactions and community participation”, which entitles them to resources accessed through the concomitant networks (Biddle, 2012, p. 298; Lin, 1999). The social groups and networks themselves provide quality of benefits proportional to the quality of the network, and the extent of one’s social capital is related to the strength of the network to which one belongs. Of the many “returns” from social capital include its ability to mitigate against isolation and alienation and the consequent health impacts (Biddle, 2012, p. 298; McKenzie & Harpham, 2006).

The quality of social networks and the extent of civic participation are obviously important *ecological* aspects of social capital, but so too are the *individual* faculties that

presuppose membership in social networks and participation in civil society. The collective benefits of social networks – the resources accessed through membership to a group – are foreign to the individual who, either because of distrust or limited capacity for sociability, is unwilling or unable to negotiate her or his place in the fabric of the community. If society is to take upon itself the responsibility for providing for the wretched among us, then there needs to be a way to draw the capital-dispossessed into the broader community network, where they might access the same resources available to others. Precisely what is needed is the sort of bridging or vertical social capital that might sweep the down-and-out members of our society into a shared network of mutual support and respect.

There must first exist community-collective level social capital: dense networks of reciprocally supportive social relationships, civic institutions and active participation in them, and a collective spirit of solidarity, identity, and trust. In short, the caliber of community the membership to which insulates the member from social exclusion and all of its consequent health issues.

Toward this objective the city of Vancouver has already demonstrated, through its 2015 Plan for the Downtown Eastside, its resolve (City of Vancouver, 2015). The plan recognizes that while the DTES is a neighborhood facing formidable social problems, it's also one with a profound sense of community and history that radiates from its diverse districts. It outlines the steps that will be taken to improve quality of life including, but not limited to: providing access to affordable housing for low-income residents and the homeless and improving conditions in existing low-income housing; meeting basic health and social support needs; and promoting a healthy neighborhood through a "sense of community belonging, inclusion, dignity and safety" (p. 14).

Social capital in its ecological sense finds its expression in the health and well-being component of the DTES plan. There's an obvious emphasis on promoting inclusion and a "strong sense of safety and belonging" for residents in and among the different districts of the DTES and supporting existing neighborhood and resident groups which encourage the active participation of residents in the community.

There is recognition of the fact that existing social and health services are inadequate to handle the scale of health problems in the community at present, with research indicating that "at least two-thirds of the homeless and half of the SRO [single room occupancy] tenant population live with mental health issues and more importantly approximately *two-thirds of these individuals either receive no or inadequate treatment*" (p. 95). A finding which, despite the magnitude of its implications, strikes one as unsurprising when one considers the conclusions of *this* study, to the extent that the soup kitchen can be considered a microcosm of society at large. In the soup kitchen context it was the mentally ill, with demonstrably the least capacity for sociability, who were the least likely to muster the social capital predictive of greater access to food supplies. Should we be surprised that features of this telescoped context replicate themselves in the larger community? That a large percentage of the mentally ill, with great need of health and social services, seem unable to access them?

Many mental health services occupy fixed locations, immobile, relying on receiving clients rather than seeking to engage them, with the unhappy consequence that in many cases

“people of no fixed abode have effectively been excluded from mental health provision” (Jones & Scannell, 1997). Communities can take the first step to mitigate against this problem by providing accommodation (housing) for the homeless, where health services can be installed and delivered on site. But fixed location service provision does little to help those who are “unable to navigate the avenues to care”, those individuals lacking the social competencies to acquire the social capital and access to networks that provide these resources (Jones & Scannell, 1997, p. 1242).

If the mentally ill homeless cannot, by virtue of social isolation, access social and health services, then services must be brought to them – if they are unable, on their own initiative, to access networks of social support, then a directed effort must be made to bring them into the fold. What is needed is an *assertive mental health outreach approach* where “case managers, clinicians, and others leave their offices to make contact and provide a wide range of services to people who are homeless with behavioral health disorders” (Rowe et al., 2016, p. 56). Outreach efforts are intended precisely to address the “gap in service utilization for at-risk populations”, meeting the client where *they* are, establishing a relationship of trust and support, and providing referrals to “psychological, medical, and social resources”, based on the recognition that health and social services cannot provide needed care or support if the individual does not know of, or cannot access, their services (Carmona et al., 2017, p. 62).

Still, outreach efforts are effective only insofar as the services and resources subject to referral are available and accessible. The initial challenge overcome – connecting with traditionally hard to reach individuals and having received their consent to receive services – the services themselves need to be readily available and navigable, in the sense of being unobstructed by bureaucracy or by a lack of coordination between the relevant parties (Rowe et al., 2016, p. 60-61).

Vancouver’s stated commitment to invest more into health and social services in the DTES – to the extent that platitudes are put to practice – is certainly a noble and worthwhile endeavor. For those who can access them these services are a necessary prerequisite for an improved quality of life. It is, however, not only necessary that the city be absolutely vigilant about providing these services, but that it also compliments them with effective outreach efforts to connect these services to those with whom social isolation precludes their awareness of these services. And that is where I see the utility of organizations like the soup kitchen, which apart from providing simple nourishment, offer an opportunity for information sharing and a setting for basic conversation, therapeutic in its own right. More needs to be done for those unable to provide effectively for themselves; can we do it?

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