

'Thick description' in applied contexts: using interpretive qualitative observations to inform quantitative indicators in food security research

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Abstract

With the relatively recent and drastic restrictions imposed on legal access of immigrant populations to asylum throughout the European Union, conceptual and methodological approaches common in the United States such as structural violence and Community-based Research and Service-Learning (CBRSL) have a potentially great significance in documenting the suffering these restrictions inflict in the form of food insecurity. In particular, a thorough empirical analysis of conditions in European immigration detention centres since the 2011 Return Directive has been sorely lacking. A methodology capable of operating from a limited window of observation would be a useful tool in discerning the potential existence and measurement of food insecurity and other behavioural manifestations of structural violence in these centres. In 2009, I and four other undergraduate researchers under the supervision of Dr Carolyn Behrman of the University of Akron undertook a study of food security at a local inner-city elementary school. By using interpretive local 'thick' descriptions of food insecure behaviour (i.e. 'power eating') to inform quantitative indicators, we were able to detail the scope and pattern of food insecurity in children in the community from the beginning of the month to the end of the month. It is hoped this methodology will influence food security studies of detention centres in particular, immigrant groups in Europe in general, and methodology within applied anthropology as a whole.

## I. Introduction

Though many of founders of European Union ideology intended 'Europeanisation' to encourage the development of a global community, legislation by the supranational body has over the past decade provided a major tool by which sweeping restrictions on immigration have been implemented at national levels (Shore 1992; Block & Bonjour 2013). The Family Reunification Directive, fully implemented in 2005, substantially increased the degree to which member states may limit immigration of families once residence has been established by a migrant relative. The debates which surrounded the Directive's implementation at national levels reflected a major change in the discourses of 'Europeanisation' moving away from appeals for a global community to exclusionary 'Fortress Europe' ideology closely reminiscent of a nationalist discourse. As Bloch and Bonjour illustrate, Europeanisation provided an "enabling dynamic" by which immigration policies entailing the greatest restrictiveness allowed by the Directive were pushed through at national levels, particularly in France, Germany, and the Netherlands (213). Any call by opposition parties to prolong debate or soften restrictions was strategically denounced by governments as a hypocritical stalling device. In France an 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 to draconian treatment of migrants lacking 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 violation of other basic human rights (Hogganvik 2011:97). In spite of these sweeping measures, rates of undocumented immigration continue to grow at the astounding rate of 50-100,000 persons each year since 2000 (98). What therefore results from such legislation is not a marginalized but decreasingly present population, but rather an exponentially growing community within Europe denied access to basic subsistence resources and legal protections typically provided by the state due to their undocumented status.

This two fold development of a continuing growth of disenfranchised immigrant populations and extra-legal administrative powers to detain undocumented migrants 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 towards approaching 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 elaborated upon in the following section. Even less represented in the anthropological literature of either continent is research methodology that attempts to reconcile not merely the divide between qualitative and quantitative, but the divide between semiotic post-modern approaches and experimental methodologies. This paper aims towards such a methodological reconciliation.

The present paper details a proposed approach for applied anthropologists to 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 Dr Carolyn Behrman. The studied population consisted primarily of African-American children in an urban area economically and politically marginalized due to large scale de-industrialization in the 1980's and 1990's, and therefore should not be considered a prescriptive template for conducting food insecurity research among European migrant populations. However, it does provide description of an approach that successfully combined qualitative 'thick' interpretations of local narratives and quantitative experimental methodology to discern clearly evidenced behavioural patterns indicating food insecurity. This approach provides a potentially vital tool for European anthropologists to research behavioural manifestations of suffering in detained immigrant populations in particular, of which direct academic studies of living conditions in detention centres are sparse.

The remaining paper will be divided into four subsequent sections: (Section II) clarification of definitions, particularly structural violence, food insecurity, and Community-based Research and Service Learning methods; (Section III) the potential for quantitative and experimental methods to be incorporated into interpretivist research methods, and vice versa; (Section IV) detailing of the proposed approach in the context of the aforementioned study conducted in the United States; and (Section V) illustration of 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 Sen warns in her forward to *Pathologies of Power* (Farmer 2005:xiv). In keeping with this ethos, I maintain for the purposes of this paper 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 representational conceptual system wherein suffering serves as its *content* and socio-political/socio-economic structures serve as its *form*. The notions of content and form will be further elaborated in the subsequent 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 by 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 prominence of food insecurity among resettled and detained migrants in Europe, this could very well be due to a lack of research rather than non-existence of the phenomenon. In the United States, where such studies are common, even immigrant populations which enjoy full legal status consistently illustrate statistically significant indications of food insecurity (Hadley et al. 2014). While such negative outcomes may be buffered in the European context by comparatively generous public assistance programs, the increasing exclusion of immigrant access to such resources due to undocumented status may very well entail marked food insecurity in such populations. It is hoped the study described in the paper, though relating specifically to non-immigrant minority populations in extreme poverty, will serve as a useful future guide for significantly underrepresented food insecurity studies on immigrant populations in Europe, particularly those confined to detention centres.

The particular method of research within which this study was conducted was the Community Based Research and Service-Learning approach. CBRSL entails both Community-based participatory research which emphasizes a “collaborative approach” between researchers and the community studied with direct engagement of undergraduate and graduate students under the supervision of a principle investigator as part of an academic curriculum (Horowitz et al. 2009:2644; Hardwick 2013:349). While somewhat more prominent in European social science literature, this and analogous approaches are still rather underrepresented and appear to have not yet been incorporated into any food security study on the continent (Bodorkos and Pataki 2009). While the emphasis of this paper 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 past 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 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 of themselves. However, this unavoidable partiality, entailing 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 entails not 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 1986:7).

Though both authors have to a tremendous extent re-established the central importance of literary and rhetorical theory in ethnographic method and representation, it 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 (Clifford 1986:26, emphasis mine). Likewise, Geertz places tremendous emphasis not only on documenting qualitative experience, but its interpretation as well which he considers a "sorting out of structures of signification" via his methodological approach of 'thick description' (Geertz 1993:8). Here was opened a door that regrettably few anthropologists have attempted to traverse. While we must refrain from making the wholesale claims to authority common in early positivist approaches, nevertheless 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 the lack of regard for the fact that all bodies of knowledge are subject to the "contingencies of language, rhetoric, power, and history" (Clifford: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 into a much broader context, acknowledging the social researcher's inseparable influence in the representation of socio-cultural phenomena (Geertz: 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 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 recognizing 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 first 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, and as Susanne Langer outlines in her introductory text to symbolic logic, content denotes the “substance” which comprises individual nodes within a symbolic construct, 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” (31). Langer makes frequent use of the example of musical scales, where individual sounds produced are the content and the regular intervals of difference in tonal frequency are the forms of such constructs (27).

The existence of both content and form play central roles in Geertz’s conception of thick description, who 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:6). The content of the wink takes on a nearly infinite multivocality. This multivocality 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 by the union of content within a structural form that encompasses it that thick description is able to arise.

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 illustrated in his classic *Principles of Mathematics*, the entire corpus of mathematical operations are 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 1903:6-9). 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 undue violence to ethnographic specificity, mathematics provide an ideal approach by which to communicate 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 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 possible is of little use to research of 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 food insecurity research

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 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 school

The city of Akron, Ohio suffered among the greatest losses in employment in the region known as the 'Rust Belt', an area located in the northeast United States heavily affected by the collapse of the country's auto industry in the 1970's and 1980's. According to comparative census data on Summit County, within which Akron is located, well over half of the manufacturing jobs that existed in 1954 have been lost as of 2002 (Frank 1961:40; Economic Census 2002). The economic devastation of large scale losses in manufacturing employment was further exacerbated by sweeping reductions in government assistance in the mid-1990's, such as a five year cap on family financial assistance programs (Poppo & Leighinger 2011:126). The Milton Park neighbourhood, whose elementary school served as the site of our study, has fared among the worst within the city. The neighbourhood suffers from the lowest income and employment levels and the highest rates of violent crime and prostitution (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 the 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: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 school children 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 attempt to discern the significance of any variance 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 increased 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 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, patterns observed by our team as well in preliminary participant observation. Second, lunchtime consumption of food universally consisted of standardized free lunches provided by the school, which consisted of identical food types and weights within each lunch period. Moreover, the potential confounding variable of differing preferences for food provided across either time point was adjusted for by choosing lunches of comparable reported preference (Behrman: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, wherein food consumed is according to percentage of total lunch eaten as weighted in grams. While the original report presented at the 2010 Society for Applied Anthropology did not entail significance testing, I have undertaken such analysis in this paper, with the local narrative of greater ‘power eating’ indicators at the end of the month as the alternate hypothesis. The table following the graph illustrates a two-tailed significance (i.e. ‘p value’) of 0.04, well 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 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: 88-91).

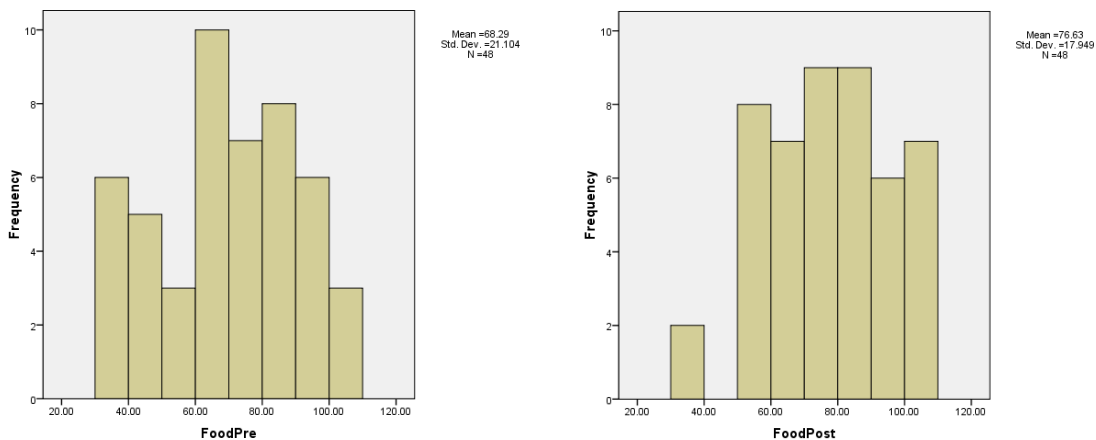


Figure 1

Independent Samples Test										
		Levine Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
									Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Food	Assumed	1.331	.251	-2.084	94	.040	-8.33555	3.99889	-1.62754E1	-.39567
	Not assumed			-2.084	9.164E1	.040	-8.33555	3.99889	-1.62781E1	-.39300

Figure 2

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 of these quantified representations of behavioural patterns for statistical significance, the local narrative serving as the alternate hypothesis. This is particularly useful for contexts wherein thorough documentation of caloric 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, and can potentially be applied to any manner of structural violence which entails clear behavioural manifestations.

The Jesuit Refugee Service conducted a sweeping analysis and critique of detainment centre conditions prior to 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 expired” (Jesuit Refugee Service 2010:76). Quantitatively, strong indication is further provided by reports of weight loss up to eight kilograms, well over 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the weight of a healthy male of average height according to body mass index scales (JRS:76). Moreover, both physical and mental health as a whole showed marked decrease as a result of detainment among previously healthy individuals (JRS:62-70). Given the clear cursory indications of food insecurity in the report, the implementation of the Return Directive the year following its publication, and the continued



exponential increase of undocumented asylum seekers in spite of this Directive, food insecurity poses a grave potential human rights crisis as detention populations increase far beyond the abilities of member states to process them through detainment facilities (Hogganvik:97)

The method I propose would potentially be 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, etcetera). Though the setting of research is very different, the remarkably similar methodological obstacle of limited access to the research population exists for the study of both detained migrants as with our team's study of children at Milton Elementary. As the JRS 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 marked in the outright refusal of access in the United Kingdom (JRS: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 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 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.

## Notes

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The names of the neighbourhood and school have been altered per the community partner's wishes.

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