

Nicole Filipowicz

Dr. Harris and Dr. Newman

BHP 150

8 March 2023

Defining the Server Subculture Through Capital and Social Status

Servers are notorious for having a high turnover rate, and as a member of the industry, I can tell you why. It's because you have to be a very special person to make it as one. The unspoken requirements of being a server are having extraordinary patience, being able to quickly brush off insults or complaints instead of taking them personally, having the social skills to make even the most disagreeable customers like you, and being physically able to move fast, or otherwise proficient at delegating tasks to others. These harsh standards weed out the feeble, the petulant, and the indolent. The group that remains is a special amalgamation of either optimistic or strong-willed individuals who make up a distinct subculture of our society, classified by their shared characteristics and experiences. The servers that encompass the entirety of the wait staff in America's eateries differ in nuances despite being unified through their occupation, principally due to the various types of establishments in which they can find themselves employed. As a member of the order that works at casual dine-in chain restaurants, these restaurant archetypes are the only ones to which I can speak. As such, this analysis will evaluate the server subculture through this particular lens. When such a lens is applied to Pierre Bourdieu's "Forms of Capital", this subcategory of workers can be defined in part by their social class, which, by observation, encompasses the working and lower middle classes. In his work, Bourdieu illustrates the idea that members of a social class share material and cultural capital because the scope of these properties is what keeps them locked into their social rank. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich,

through her immersion into the world of servers as research for her expository piece “Nickled and Dimed”, uncovers a supplementary attribute that can be utilized to connect the members of the server subculture; the depersonalization they are subjected to within their work. It is through the emergence of traits such as these that Bourdieu and Ehrenreich facilitate a better understanding of the often overlooked subculture of servers in our society.

The server subculture has been recognized as being predominantly working class, with a lower middle class minority that still maintains a presence. Throughout his work, Bourdieu defines the general working class in terms of the physical and intangible assets they have available to them, what he touts as “forms of capital”. One such form Bourdieu describes is economic, defined by the material goods that a person owns. By this definition, the working class is clearly earmarked from other social strata through what can be observed as their comparable lack of material goods, or lack of those of high worth. This lack of physical resources can often stand in the way of these individuals moving onto better jobs and positions of higher esteem in society, as certain resources are often needed to facilitate such a change. For example, it would be difficult to secure a more professional job if one did not have access to a business casual wardrobe.

The less direct forms of capital include cultural, which can be defined as the set of skills and knowledge that an individual has developed, and that are likely to increase their perceived value in society. Bourdieu acknowledges that, like material capital, working class individuals are often locked into their social position because of their underdevelopment of cultural capital. He goes on to cite several factors that fuel this depletion. Bourdieu first states that “the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family” (244). Here Bourdieu acknowledges that, even if children of different socioeconomic

backgrounds are provided with the same quality of education, children from less privileged families will still get less out of it. This trend can be attributed mainly to the attitudes towards education perpetuated in low income households – principally that education is a superfluous pursuit, considering the comparatively more important task of making money to support the family, and additionally that learning is often a difficult endeavor that produces little reward. These attitudes towards education cause working class children to invest less time and effort into their studies, resulting in the discrepancy between the cultural capital that these children extract from their schooling compared to middle or upper class children. Bourdieu also maintains that children from low-income families, such as those whose parents are servers, lack more robust development of cultural capital because their parents themselves lack it. He states that the “socially most determinant educational investment [is] the domestic transmission of cultural capital” (244). By this, Bourdieu implies that an important source of the cultural capital children develop is their family. However, connecting this with Bourdieu’s previous idea that working class individuals are diminished in their cultural capital, this means that working class children have less capital transmitted to them by their family, thus perpetuating a generational cycle of diminished cultural capital that equates to diminished economic capital in our society.

Bourdieu recognizes that the accumulation of capital is more nuanced than simply the sources of capital you are exposed to. He goes on to explain another key determinant in the amount of social capital the working class exhibits, stating that “the length of time for which a given individual can prolong his acquisition process depends on the length of time for which his family can provide him with free time, i.e., time free from economic necessity” (246). Bourdieu recognizes the fact that the time of many low income people is monopolized towards earning enough money to support their basic needs. The little free time that these individuals do have is

utilized to tend to other necessary tasks, such as laundry, taking care of children, and sleeping. The miniscule fraction of time left available to these individuals is used to recover from the draining hustle of almost constantly working; a brief moment of rest before the necessity to work kicks back in. With this kind of schedule, there is no time to dedicate to developing any new skills to enhance one's cultural capital, once again entrapping working class individuals in a cyclical pattern because they have no opportunity for improvement.

While Bourdieu describes the physical assets and skill sets that working class individuals such as servers possess, Ehrenreich groups servers together based on how they are treated in the workplace, and the effects that can have on them. Specifically, Ehrenreich looks at the dehumanization that servers are subjected to. The most clear example of this comes from the feelings Ehrenreich describes while she tries to work back to back jobs, practically a full day of labor: "I am not tired at all, I assure myself, though it may be that there is simply no more 'I' left to do the tiredness monitoring" (51). The depersonalization expressed by Ehrenreich here is stirred by two related factors. First, by the disregard of one's own needs in order to meet the demands of both a serving job and constantly working. Serving jobs by definition encompass catering to the needs of others, but this in itself would not necessitate servers to neglect their own needs in order to do their jobs. What does cause this is the absurd rate at which servers are given tasks to complete. Often when they have multiple tables, servers are asked to get drinks for one table, take the order of another, and split the bill five ways for another all right away, since no customer wants to be left waiting. Between all of this rushing around to complete tasks in an impossibly small amount of time, servers barely have room to catch their breath, let alone tend to their own basic needs such as pausing for a quick bite to eat or running to the bathroom. Now, servers are often not this busy for the entire duration of their shift, but even when they have no

tables, management ensures that they still know no down time. As Ehrenreich described in her exposition, if a manager catches you in an idle moment, they will come up with some form of work to occupy you (42). Not to mention the auxiliary side-work that servers are responsible for, it ends up being difficult to steal a moment to yourself during a shift. This truth creates a dangerous cycle when you factor in the work schedules of many individuals who work these kinds of jobs. With such low hourly pay, many servers are forced to work a majority of their waking hours, leaving them hardly any time outside of work to care for their physical needs either. The fact that this system perpetuates the continual neglect of servers' own needs means that this industry fails to value them fully as people, instead depersonalizing them and reducing them only to the labor they are able to produce.

The second factor that elicits a depersonalization of servers is also a product of their limited available free time. People often define themselves by what they do, but when they spend all of their time tending to the desires of others, they lose touch with their individuality and passions that make up the essence of who they are. Leading a life void of all that an individual considers important or is passionate about creates a shell of a person, whose ultimate purpose is not to dream, love, and cause change in the world, but instead efficiently carry out their assigned tasks like a cog in the machine of the service industry. This is the epitome of dehumanization, and a form of such that servers are all too familiar with.

Society often becomes infatuated with the glamorous lives of the wealthy and powerful, throwing to the wayside any regard for the factors that influence the lives and struggles of low-wage individuals. These individuals are often underrepresented in our society, and disregarded as if their human experience and perspective is of no anthropological importance. The works of both Pierre Bourdieu and Barbara Ehrenreich help shed analytical light on this

group that is the power behind an important leisure activity within our society, and recognizes the struggles these individuals ensure at the expense of providing such leisure to their patrons. Through acknowledging the harsh circumstances and limitations that this group is subjected to, Bourdieu and Ehrenreich return some of the humanization to these individuals that is so unequivocally stripped from them through the nature of their profession, providing them with one of the most important gifts of all: acknowledgement of their hardships.