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Power Relations in the Culinary Arena

"Power. . . is at the base of all forms of inequality."[1]
—Max Weber (1864 - 1920)

Various inequalities are created and sustained within the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, especially regarding inmate job assignments. All kitchen workers exhibit an equal status display uniform "mess hall whites," however this particular shared social identity has no bearing on the power relations in the kitchen, which are influenced by the differentiation and stratification created by occupational status.

The stratification within this total institution's culinary arena is topped by what Max Weber described as legal-rational authority. This civilian-led bureaucracy is devised of Correction Officers, the Food Service Administrator (FSA), the Head Cook and his subordinates, in which, they all have power — backed by the threat of sanctions — to order inmates to fulfill requests, even those outside of their job description. Beneath this oligarchy of sorts, lies Weber's notion of 'class' through

[1] Marger, Martin. Social Inequality: Patterns and processes, 4th ed. McGraw Hill, New York, 2008. p. 41.

the occupational order of inmates' job assignments: Institutional Cooks (Covens and diets), Recycling, and Beverage, which makes up a status community excluding the low-ranking Clean-Up-Crew. An institutional cook is an achieved status through training and certification that is attributed with social prestige and power. However, the clean-up-crew is an odious entry level position open to part-time GED students and graduates.

Erik Olin Wright's concept of "contradictory class locations" exemplifies the clean-up-crews' exclusion from and exploitation by the status community. This cohort, especially the cooks, are privileged with access to spices, fresh produce, eggs, poultry, meat, etc., to prepare their own meals, including baked goods — not to mention the possible availability of a microwave, blender, and coffee machine. However, the clean-up-crews ability to eat while at work is subject to the mercy of the status community and their surplus of food, which is usually distributed unequally, or the seldom 'quick-chill' scraps of mess hall food left by the civilian cooks. An additional determining factor of who may be fed is one's social status outside of work, which may include their religion, gang affiliation, or sexual orientation. This inequality of condition occasionally leads to informal grievances about cleaning pans soiled with non-quick-chill residue being outside of their assigned duties, if and when they're not fed. Since the status community

feeds them randomly, their desire for a good meal is weaponized against them, in which, this social force always results in the pans being washed. This social interaction often times results in mobility aspirations. However, the status community does have some say in who may fill any potential vacancies, which certainly contributes to the legitimation of these power relations.

The social norms of the power relations that exist in the kitchen also extend to the housing units. Many inmates who do not work in the kitchen want access to its resources. Thus, a kitchen workers social location enables them to engage in a form of culinary capitalism, especially when the solicited consumer is a prisoner with 'bling' that enhances his status display, which may consist of jewelry, expensive clothing and footwear that exceed the allowable limit, excessive property, big bags of commissary food, no eating in the mess hall, and over-eating personal food. Rather than have his social credibility come into question, he must save face and engage in the business at hand. This impression management becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, which additionally legitimates the insidious power relations and the social roles of the kitchen's status community.

There is a supplemental inmate status cohort on the fringes of the culinary arena who have power over the diet cooks — the kosher fed Jewish population. This

social identity is vicariously empowered through the status display of their Rabbi. His achieved master-status enables him to stroll through the prison, the visiting room, and to pop-up in the kitchen unannounced to inspect how Kosher meals are cooked and respected. Any grievances from Jewish inmates concerning their meals are remedied expeditiously and the job of the cook that's responsible for the problem may be in jeopardy. The civilian cooks will even supply them with additional meals to prevent any complaints that the Rabbi may wage on them. Thus, the diet cooks are socialized into handling Kosher meals with more attention and care than regular inmate diets, which legitimates this power dynamic.

According to Michel Foucault (1926-1984), "Power is not simply wielded by one level of society over another, but is present in every level of society."[2] His words certainly ring true, even inside of D.O.C.C.S. culinary arena.

[2] Lusian, Christy and Margaret Parrish. The Sociology Book: big ideas simply explained, DK, New York, 2019, p. 53.