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ENGL 1A — CT&W I

3 December 2023

Social Divisions and Group Dynamics in the Benson Memorial Center

Have you ever found yourself eating alone and extremely self-conscious because of it? While arguably overblown, this phenomenon exists in our culture (think "solo dining"). It makes sense, as eating has deep cultural roots as a social group activity. Restaurants, bars, and cafes today serve as some of the foremost social spaces in our communities, called "third places" (not one's home nor one's work). So it follows that there are complex social dynamics at play in communal eating spaces — including an aversion to eating alone — and this couldn't be more true in a college dining hall. Santa Clara University is no exception. Benson Memorial Center is a space infused with social dynamics that include, ignore, or exclude along both general group lines and social categorical lines such as class, gender, and race.

In this essay, I will examine these dynamics at play in Benson. First, I will describe and contextualize the physical space that is the dining hall. Next, I will apply Ahmed's work on strangers and Cantor's work on insiders/outsiders to Benson in a general, horizontal sense — that is, using them to examine social dynamics while ignoring identity groups. However, it will become impossible to ignore such social categories, which I will then examine. For each of the three social categories mentioned (class, gender, and race), I will give an overview of the category and what elements apply to Benson. Then, I will analyze a specific factor that affects how people within that category are positioned within Benson and how this factor may affect the experience of different individuals on a diverse campus.

Description of Space & General Observations

As the primary dining hall and home of the biggest student organizations on campus, Benson is the lively central hub of Santa Clara University. There are always students eating, working, or just passing through during normal hours. And at meal rush times, Benson is positively bustling. This essay will ignore the basement (which contains the offices of Chartered Student Organizations as well as the Cellar Market) and focus on the larger dining hall where most interpersonal dynamics take place. The dining hall is dominated by dining counters and seating arrangements and is loosely broken up into four subspaces, which I will refer to as the "Main Room," the "Cafe Area," the "Booth Room," and the "Bright Room."

The Main Room is home to the most dining stations, all of which tend towards healthier and "less-American" options: the salad bar, Simply Oasis, Global Grill, etc. This space is very open, brightly lit, and sits right alongside the major walkway through the building. As such, it is home to a diverse arrangement of individuals across categories of class, gender, race, group size, and more; I would argue that this is Benson's most "accepting" space.

Across this walkway lies the Cafe Area. This space is primarily defined by the Mission Bakery surrounded by low-rise oversized chairs and small tables, as well as a few booths lining the walls. This creates a distinctly more laid-back vibe compared to the other more meal-focused rooms and often hosts small groups. However, this vibe is occasionally disrupted by crowds at rush hour.

The Booth Room, though openly connected to the rest of the building, has a distinctly different feel than the Main Room. It contains the arguably less healthy, "more American" options: Fire Grill, The Slice, and Stacks Deli (with the sushi/poke station being the exception here). The grub of pizza and burgers combine with dimmer lighting, larger TVs, and bar- and

booth-style seating to create more of a restaurant or bar vibe. As such, this space often facilitates tighter groups of higher energy and may tend to be male-dominated.

The Bright Room is the smallest of the three spaces. It differs from the prior three in that it does not contain dining stations; its primary function is seating. The defining feature of the Bright Room is the large projector TV commonly showing sports such as football. Despite this, the room is notably different from the Booth Room in that it has large windows facing the outdoor courtyard in front of Benson and bright overhead lights. These features offset the TV and create what I would argue is more of a neutral space. Notably, the vibe can shift in the evening if the overhead lights are turned off. This space, lacking features besides its TV, is also often defined more by its inhabitants.

The spaces in Benson can be seen through the lens of their dining stations, as described above. Although students may sit anywhere regardless of what food they order, they tend to congregate in the subspace of their chosen dining station. Therefore, the presence of the stations correlates to what foods are eaten where, which in turn may correlate with where different types of people sit (discussed later), influencing the vibe of the spaces overall. Groups ordering from different stations, then, may select a space based on its vibe (e.g. smaller, higher energy groups in the Booth Room, as mentioned). Food and groups are two of the primary defining factors of Benson's subspaces.

Non-Categorical Application of Critical Theory

Sara Ahmed's work "Recognising Strangers" lays out how individuals mark others in social spaces. She clarifies that while we normally think of strangers as those we don't recognize, we do in fact "recognise somebody *as a stranger*, rather than simply failing to recognize them"

(Ahmed 21). Ahmed also describes how "recognition operates as a *visual economy*: it involves ways of *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange others…" (Ahmed 24). While I would argue that the marking of strangers is perhaps less extreme on a college campus, where everyone is at least loosely joined by the fact that they are students at the same university, it still undoubtedly occurs. In Benson, an individual encounters countless subjects and marks each of them through a visual economy.

Another work, "Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the 21st Century Academy" by Nancy Cantor, is relevant here. This essay describes social dynamics as a system of "insiders" and "outsiders." The category an individual falls into is determined by their "matrix of opportunities and constraints" and the social groups they identify with (Cantor 67). Thus, these divisions usually correlate with social categories such as class, gender, and race. Cantor goes on to describe how insiders experience "cognitive egocentrism," where they center themselves and ignore the subjugation of others, while outsiders experience the "epistemic privilege" of knowing how they're treated differently (subordinated) because of their identity.

These systems can be useful in explaining the social dynamics in Benson. The insider versus outsider dynamic can be applied to those eating in groups versus those eating alone, respectively. Similarly, per Ahmed, solo eaters may be marked as "strange," or at least distinct from those in groups. This may at first seem like a weak distinction to apply such frameworks to. However, I'd like to suggest that there exists a natural human tendency to eat with others socially. This is both by nature and nurture: communal eating has roots in biology (the evolution of our species and our cultures) and development (family meals, school lunchtimes, etc.). It is true that some individuals may not have had such an upbringing, or they skew introverted. Nonetheless, there exists a general social/normative pressure to eat in groups due to most people

holding that tendency. In other words, eating in groups is a desirable configuration, while eating alone is generally less desirable. Thus, group eaters become insiders and solo eaters are marked as outsiders.

The rest of Cantor's framework applies well here. When eating alone, people may sometimes feel self-conscious, or at least attuned to the judgment of others. (I'm generalizing experiences here, but the point still stands for many people). This is epistemic privilege manifesting: the solo eater experiences a gentler version of what Cantor describes as "a perpetual state of guardedness and uncertainty, examining the social landscape, always prepared for some group-based challenge" (Cantor 69). They may also be marked in the visual economy as "alone" or even "strange." Meanwhile, those eating in groups — the insiders — experience cognitive egocentrism in that they don't really concern themselves with solo eaters. For these reasons, many solo eaters simply choose to take their food to go so as not to position themselves as an outsider in Benson, while intentional groups tend to congregate at Benson rather than elsewhere.

While this application of Cantor's and Ahmed's work to the solo/group axis in Benson is an interesting and valid perspective, it has some flaws. One issue is that some individuals may fall completely outside the framework in that they truly do not care about eating in a large group and are genuinely happy eating alone. Perhaps they even dread eating in a large group. I do not believe this is a majority mindset, so the application still stands, but not as universally.

Another point to note is that the cognitive egocentrism of the insider, in this context, is not dangerous. In society, cognitive egocentrism causes "a critical impediment to interpersonal trust" (Cantor 68). However, in Benson, there are no external oppressive factors or institutions. In fact, the group eater ignoring the solo eater may be advantageous if neither party is interested in making a social connection. The negative connotations of epistemic privilege manifest in only

the solo eater's head and heart; I would argue real harm is rarely inflicted. Additionally, insider/outsider status in this case is more fluid than in society; an individual may be a solo eater "outsider" one night and a large group "insider" the next. Therefore, the implications of impeding trust or multiculturalism are not as significant in Benson.

Finally, actual social categories (class, gender, race, etc.) are purposefully ignored by this application, yet they are an element of Cantor's framework. Not only that, but social categories are relevant to the formation of eating groups as well as the harm an individual may experience in the Benson space. Thus, while group eating / solo eating may exist as one insider-outsider axis, the axes of class, gender, and race are just as — if not more — important to a subject's social positioning within Benson.

Social Axes of Division & Various Factors

Class

I'd like to start my analysis of social axes of division with economic class, not because it is somehow less important, but because it is different. Class is the most "real," or "least constructed," axis compared to gender and race. This means its factors and effects are more straightforward and less dependent on social norms. Additionally, the influencing factor that I will discuss does not yield much further social analysis. However, class is still relevant.

In Benson, as is the case in society at large, those of lower economic class will experience more barriers. This is largely due to the cost of food. While there does exist a range of prices, those of lower class not only have to apply more conscious thought to how much they're spending, but may have to avoid certain pricier items as well. The former point alone makes the dining experience worse for these individuals, but the latter point may extend to affect

the individual's social experience. For example, buying a smaller or cheaper meal may raise questions from others. Those of lower economic class experience a mild “outsider” status in Benson due to high food prices.

Gender.

Next, there is the category of gender. Gender definition contains some complexities; considering the scope of this analysis and the demographic in question, I will analyze the categories of man, woman (the cisgender binary), and non-conforming as a general category (encompassing genderqueer, transgender, etc.). Like class, the societal gender insider-outsider dynamic extends into Benson: cisgender men enjoy “insider” status while cisgender women and any non-conforming folks generally end up as “outsiders” (with non-comforming people being outsiders to the greatest degree). While I do believe that a good deal of mixed-gender groups and interactions take place in Benson, there are certainly instances of male-dominated spaces or gender-exclusive groups. At the very least, gender is a factor in Ahmed’s “visual economy.” We subconsciously mark or attempt to mark each individual’s gender; this may influence our behavior towards them and allow for the application of societal insider/outsider status.

One interesting factor that interacts with gender is food type. As briefly discussed earlier, Benson’s subspaces are largely defined by the food served. The Main Room mostly serves healthier and more “global” options and the Cafe Area serves drinks and small portions. This contrasts with the Booth Room’s heavier, more American cuisine. I would like to claim that this loosely correlates (perhaps mildly, but nonetheless) with gender due to a complex set of social and gender norms. Thus, subspaces are gendered: The Booth Room may tend to be more masculine while the Main Room and Cafe Area tend feminine.

This correlation may be overstated. I have no data to support the claim and recognize that my own eating habits are a counterexample. I have also failed to perform a thorough non-binary gender analysis, as stated above. However, I can at least conclude that gender dynamics do play a role in Benson — whether that's through groups, comfort in different subspaces, or simply societal insider/outsider status.

Race & Ethnicity.

Finally, race and ethnicity are both important axes. To clarify, these are different but intertwined concepts. Ethnicity is about specific cultural and geographical heritage. Race is a bit more complicated; for these purposes it is socially constructed categories upheld by meaningless physical markers but may also be informed by an individual's self-identification in regards to culture, ancestry, experience, etc. Often, these two concepts are correlated or conflated.

I will begin with ethnicity. There exists a wide variety of food, food practices, and relationships with food across different ethnicities. As a general trend, I'd say Benson best represents white American cultural food norms and falls short to varying degrees on other cultures. As discussed earlier, Benson contains stations dedicated to burgers, pizza, pasta, and salad. Stations serving Mexican-, Japanese-, and Indian-themed dishes are usually Americanized, simplified, or limited. While there's nothing wrong with enjoying and providing American dishes (especially in America), individuals of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds should be served just as well. Because they aren't, these individuals may feel unsatisfied, less comfortable, or less welcome in Benson. Additionally, if individuals tend even slightly towards the foods of their culture, then the subspaces of Benson may correlate with ethnicity as they do with gender.

Race enters this dynamic in a few ways. Firstly, an individual may racially identify in a way that correlates with their ethnicity, which would enforce the experience described above. However, consider a subject whose race and ethnicity do not align in an easily identifiable way. In this case, others may use visual markers to falsely assume the subject's relationship with food. This would once again create social difficulties or assign an outsider status to the subject. Race also functions as an axis independently to ethnicity. Similar to gender, race is a factor in the general "visual economy" of Benson. All the various realities of interpersonal racial stereotyping or discrimination present in society are at play in Benson as well.

Additionally, race is a factor when it comes to group formation. It is not uncommon for social groups to fall along racial or ethnic lines. This appears acceptable: homogeneous groups may be more comfortable or allow for bonding over shared experiences. However, remembering that groups function as insiders in Benson, racially themed or homogeneous groups would then further racialize insider/outsider status (by reducing the ease of individuals of different races obtaining "insider" status). And on a larger scale, as Cantor reminds us, multiculturalism is important (especially in the academy) because it leads insiders to acknowledge outsider struggles and "the potential for collaboration and community grows. This is when multicultural education is at its best… turning the tables of epistemic privilege" (Cantor 70).

Clearly, social categories such as class, gender, and race are all relevant factors in how an individual experiences Benson. As in the real world, these identities may intersect for certain individuals, creating distinct experiences. These axes also intersect with the insider/outsider dynamic of eating in groups versus alone. While present day dynamics are of concern, it should also be noted that Santa Clara University has had historically exclusive relationships with class,

gender, and race. That history cannot be ignored as it translates into Benson in more nuanced forms today.

Conclusion

In practice, these divisions and dynamics are very subtle in Benson. Ultimately, Benson is a lively, social, and diverse place. This analysis simply dives into various possible factors at play when it comes to the different experiences that a diverse student body has in such an active place such as Benson. The analysis may also shed light on potential general solutions. Namely, the physical layout of a social place is nearly always highly influential to its social dynamics. And for Benson specifically, the presence of food undoubtedly complicates things: food is intrinsically tied to human social nature and group formation, as well as social categories such as class, gender, and race. Thus, the type of food and where it's served influences the overall experience along these axes as well as the gendering and racialization of subspaces. These factors must be considered in the move towards a more equal and multicultural space.

Clearly, much of an individual's experience in Benson relates to society or the world in general. Recognizing and analyzing these complex experiences of being welcome or unwelcome, strange or familiar, or an insider or an outsider is essential to addressing them not just at Santa Clara, but in the world at large.

Works Cited

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