September 2015

Interplay Between Agency, Perception, Structure, and Faith

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Available at: https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol5/iss1/5

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**Cover Page Footnote**
First published by Columbia College, Fall 2011 to Spring 2016.
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Introduction
For the last three months of Spring, 2015 semester, I have been volunteering at the Durham Rescue Mission (DRM) thrift store. The thrift shop earns profits that go towards the Durham Rescue Mission, a shelter that provides a faith-based Victory Program for homeless and addicted people in the Greater Triangle area to garner financial independence and learn life skills. Many of the thrift shop employees are graduates of this program. There are three such thrift stores located in Chapel Hill, Raleigh, and Durham; I conducted research at the Durham location. Volunteering has allowed for full immersion into the day-to-day activities at the thrift shop in order to take field notes that accurately represent the store’s culture. Over the last five visits, I noticed certain emerging themes. In particular, I became interested in how different factors contributed to employees’ agency. In this paper, I examine the effect religious and organizational undertones have on employee ethics and agency. Faith shapes many employees’ identities, playing a strong role in developing ethics. Yet, these Christian ethics come into tension with the Store’s capitalist ethics and the want to convey universality. Employees then exercise agency, a source of power, in negotiating ethics.

Relationship between Opposing Employee Ethics and the Impact on Agency
Daily ethics serve as the foundation for people’s social behaviors, perceptions, and reactions to oneself and to others. In Paul Brodwin’s Everyday Ethics, he characterizes ethics as, “standards of behavior concerning the close-in landscape of practice” (2013: 5). In my ethnographic research at the Durham Rescue Mission Thrift Store, I found the employees’ choices to act in particular ways depended on their ethical perspectives. I examine the roles that Durham Rescue Mission’s status as a faith-based organization and personal faith plays in employee’s everyday ethics. I argue that, similar to staff at other faith-based organizations, religion plays a strong role in shaping employee’s interactions with each other and with customers. However, conflict emerges in balancing personal and organization-based Christian ethics with the Durham Rescue Mission’s status as a “store”. Store ethics include acting to promote business and profit and recognition of the diversity of customers—Christians and non-Christians alike. Christian ethics, then, exist in tension with two ethical orientations: capitalist “store” ethics and universality. In negotiating between ethics, employees exercise agency to determine whether a situation can be resolved according to one ethic over the other; as such, personal ethics can be a way of exercising power.

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Although diverse in many respects, the thrift store employees form a common bond as Christians and express a want to abide by larger Christian values of charity and goodwill, values upon which the DRM was founded. From “a gap-toothed, middle-aged white woman” to “an African American male with a round-face and grand smile” (Field Notes, 3/22/14 & 3/27/14), the employees stem from various backgrounds, races, and genders. Despite these differences, each embodies aspects of faith and Christian values, be in rhetoric or conduct. Though I do not wish to generalize all employees as adhering strongly to religion, the majority of interactions I encountered included some reference to Christianity. For example, as explored earlier John said, “6 or 7 of us go to the same church, we’re like a big church family that comes to work here, no hostility at all” (Personal Communication, 4/3/14). Another time, he responded to a customer’s inquiry about his music taste, “I actually love Southern gospel music…it reminds me I need to follow God’s plan for my life, no matter what troubles I’m in.” His words reflect one of the two major factors involved in forming everyday faith-related ethics: that of personal and community faith. Employees often bring their outside perspectives on faith into the workplace, allowing it to influence their actions.

The employees’ faith-based ethics are also shaped by the Christian influence of the thrift store’s parent organization, The Durham Rescue Mission. Patricia Wittberg, an anthropologist researching how parent organizations shape the religiousness of member organizations, states, “faith-based parents help member organization’s staff retain and strengthen their religious identity” (Wittberg 2013: 549). Miss Fay, indicated in an interview that she underwent the Victory Program run by DRM; the site defines it as, “addiction counseling, employment training and other essential services…all classes geared toward the message of hope through Christ and His Virtues” (“Victory Program,” Durham Rescue Mission website). Not only does personal faith impact the employee’s ethics, but relationships rooted in Christian-based institutional services do too. These two factors are not mutually exclusive; they work together to impart a Christian ethical mindset onto staff.

However, the Christian ethics ingrained in employees comes into contact with the ethics of running a business. Wittberg’s article highlights how faith-based organizations often juggle “competing” (Wittberg 2013: 546) religious identities with other political or economic interests. While the thrift store incorporates religious aspects into its operations, it also desires to maintain its status as a store. John, a cashier I interviewed, relates the fine line between ethics, “Yeah, there are a lot of poor customers who shop here…once you develop a good relationship with one of them, and they start asking for discounts, you have to say, ‘Oh, I’ll give it to you this one time,’ but then you’re technically breaking the rules. It’s a fine line” (Personal Communication, 04/3/14). In order to survive as a business and continue operation, employees must seek sale optimization to increase profit, which may entail refusing to sympathize and comply with the customer’s financial troubles. Employees, then, struggle to reconcile Christian ethics that laud the “Good Samaritan” who is charitable, with business ethics that prioritize yielding funds sufficient to continue the store’s operations.

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Another store ethic that establishes tension with Christian ethics is the desire to appeal to a diverse customer basis. If an employee lets his Christian values, conduct, or rhetoric overpower his actions, he risks imposing a feeling of alienation or estrangement on customers who are not Christian (or religious at all), potentially resulting in loss of customers. The growing religious diversity in America coupled with rise in secularism, agnostics, and atheism (Harris 2011: 1) pushes businesses to secularize, in order to attract the most customers. Susan Chambré’s article on the meaning of “faith” in faith-based organizations reports that organizations honored religious roots, but the meaning of faith secularized, likely due to “synthesizing elements from mainstream religion, including a belief in God, and secular culture” (Chambré 2001: 454). Thus, religion is not absent at the Thrift Store, but employees try to limit its ostensible presence in order to discourage religious imposition on or alienation of the customer population.

Encounters at the field site reflected this attempt to display universality while maintaining Christian influence. In an interview between the assistant floor manager, Miss Fay, and my classmates, she told us, “We play Christian music sometimes, but we try to be secular, you know, we won’t play overly religious gospel music” (Personal Communication, 03/29/14). The employees describe a Christian universality, focusing on Christian virtues, rather than a specific sect of Christianity. For example, signs hung up in the store showcased virtues, rather than specific tenets of Christianity. One explained that volunteering was an “expression of faith and love”, another proclaimed, “When I am weak, then I am strong” with a person kneeling in the background (Field Notes, 3/27/14 & 4/3/14).

Staff at another faith-based organization, Mercy House’s Franciscan nuns, define faith more narrowly in China Scherz’s “Let us make God our banker.” To the nuns, faith involves strong belief in “the workings of divine providence” (Scherz 2013: 625) to accomplish goals, leading to difficulties such as limited agency and inability to plan long-term. Opposing this, the Thrift Store staff’s choice to relate its faith in universal terms, concurrent with Chambré’s findings, enables its employee’s flexibility in conveying a Christian moral ethic without feeling it hinders a customer’s freedom to express him or herself.

Despite employee’s cognizance and acceptance of the diversity of shoppers, at times their supposed universalistic faith did not prevent certain customers from experiencing an overwhelming Christian presence. I had a casual interview with an Indian woman, who experienced this sentiment while browsing for a dress, “They [the employees] always seem to put church dresses on the racks, there’s never anything Indian, only for Christians who go to church” (Personal Communication, 3/22/14). Examples like this, albeit rare, speak to the disparity between how employees perceive their religious ethics as compared to perceptions of non-Christian customers. Their disquiet suggests an ineffective communication and reconciliation of secular and Christian ethics.

While some scholars, such as Patricia Wittberg, have witnessed ethical quandaries I show that they assert themselves as agents choosing to abide by Christian moral ethics or business ethics. Wittberg
portends in her article, “competing identities [of religion, politics, and economics] can result in paralysis and instability [of an organization]” (2013: 546). I challenge her claim that paralysis and instability inevitably result from competing ethics, finding Thrift Store staff exercised agency in responding to the tension between different ethics. In one interaction they may choose act like a shopkeeper, in another, a charitable Christian. For example, when a pregnant woman, toddler by her side, could not pay for items because she forgot coupons, she begs mercy of the cashier, who accepts her pleads (Field Notes, 2/28/14). The cashier faced a decision and chose, for a multiplicity of reasons, to abide by his Christian ethics. Had the situation been different, perhaps if the woman was not pregnant or did not have a child nearby or was of the opposite gender, the cashier might have chosen instead to follow store ethics.

Employees, then, exert agency over their ethics in deciding how to act, enabling them a source of power. Didier Fassin’s “Humanitarian Reason” reflects this kind of power, writing, “A critique of compassion is necessary because it presupposes a relation of inequality” (Fassin 2011: 3). Employees choosing to act as Christians suppose an equal employee-customer relationship, but inequality arises in that it is this choice determining the fate of customers. Thus, equality does not necessarily translate into the most ethical decision; it depends on which ethic the employee believes is more relevant and appropriate under given circumstances. One can now observe that Brodwin’s everyday ethics concept is not merely a set of guidelines employees follow, rather encompasses complex, even opposing, ethics over which employees wield power.

Conclusions

This study observed the Durham Rescue Mission to explore the intersection of agency with perception, structure, and faith. I observed employees’ Christian ethics come into conflict with capitalist and universalistic ethics. Mediating between these ethics enable the employee’s agency because they must decide which ethic is most appropriate in a situation. I believe the implications of these relationships are relevant across the world when applied to other faith-based and structured organizations within a similar local context.

Although this study did illuminate interesting trends, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of it. For instance, I was only able to formally interview two employees, so their personal views greatly impacted our view of the Durham Rescue Mission. Similarly, I never was able to get in contact with a donor, volunteer, or the DRM at large, so my views may have been heavily skewed based on the thrift shop. Due to time constraints, I was only able to visit DRM thrift shop five times over the course of three months for approximately twenty hours, so I recognize that I may not have gotten the full picture of how the thrift shop operates.

These limitations are not stated as a means of expunging the study’s conclusions. Overall, this
study adds to the current understanding of agency, perception, structure, and faith. Not only can it be used to understand the complex web of interactions that influence identity at DRM, but it can also be generalized to understand the interplay between agency, perception, structure, and faith in the larger world.

Works Cited


