

The Detrimental Effects of the Fining Industry Environment on Worker Psychology

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Detrimental Psychological Effects of the Fine Dining Industry Environment

Introduction

You are sitting in a dimmed room, impeccable service all around and your food has just arrived. You take the first bite and you cannot believe how good the food is. All of these qualities help encapsulate your experience in a fine-dining restaurant. You are enjoying everything around you, unaware of the truth happening behind the scenes. You do not see the amount of perfectionist pressure that is placed on the restaurant staff. While not all restaurants are like this, many fine-dining restaurants have a darker side to them. These conditions in the work environment can lead to many problems for their mental health.

Chef David Chang recently released a memoir, *Eat a Peach*, which talks about his experience and upbringing in the food industry. He talks about the verbal and physical abuse which worsened his mental illness and his passion for cooking (Chang). This can commonly lead to substance abuse as a form of coping as seen in *The Boiling Point*, where the head chef disappears to his office to snort cocaine and drink alcohol when everything went wrong (Barantini). By shedding light on this uncharted situation, a discussion can begin about a potential change in the industry which begs the question: How do the fine dining industry's infrastructure and environment psychologically affect the workers? Through the Actor-Network Theory, this question can be broken down to understand how the toxicity became to be and if it is beneficial to keep the industry's standards.

Methodology

When establishing all the actors, network analysis is used on documentary sources and literature reviews to help build a connection between the actors and how they relate to the main network of the restaurant environment. The actors described in this paper are mentorship,

restaurant culture, history of haute cuisine, culinary school, the consumer, and Michelin rating. Through each actor, emphasis is placed on any factors that can lead to stress or any negative mental consequences it causes for a worker. The following analysis begins with contextualizing restaurant culture, then transitions to restaurant expectations and consequences of unmet expectations, and concludes with a final discussion about a potential solution to remedy the unrealistic pressures of the industry.

Fine Dining Origins

When customers go to a fine dining restaurant, they are expecting more than high-quality food. Good service, elegant food presentation, and a sophisticated ambiance, are all factors that contribute to what a patron would expect (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010). This expectation can be traced back to the creation of fine dining, or Haute cooking, which was cooking for royalty in the 1800s (Larson). The idea was to differentiate the dining experience for the upper class with higher-quality ingredients and meticulous attention to detail (A History of French Cuisine, n.d.). This foundation of Haute cooking is seen in fine dining restaurants today.

Many cooks who enter this industry are required to go to culinary school as well as internships, stages, to build experience before starting in the kitchen. The student are graded harshly on their cooking abilities, like pristine knife skills and plating. These chefs are trained to have a level of perfection in school and whatever restaurant they work in. Long workdays contribute to the restaurant's goal of having notoriety as well as serving the consumers good food. However, these working conditions are physically taxing, sometimes working 16-20 hours every day. (Jake Talks Food, 2021). While these work conditions may seem not as detrimental to a regular person, the combination of these 'labor requirements', as well as the need to be perfect

builds a mental strain on a person. This problem is prevalent in this industry, which many patrons are not generally aware of.

Many restaurants enforce these habits to try to achieve an end goal of Michelin stars, which many associate to be fine dining. These stars are extremely prestigious, where the restaurant is rated by: (1) quality of products, (2) mastery of flavor and cooking techniques, (3) the personality of the chef represented in the dining experience, (4) value for money, and (5) consistency between inspectors (Larson). While service is not explicitly rated, its perceived to be part of the dining experience. The restaurants is picked and then critiqued anonymously by many inspectors to see if the restaurant is deemed stars. This means the restaurant staff must always be perfect at all times if their goal are Michelin stars. Restaraunts who receive just only one star gain prestige and exposure for their restaurant. The more stars the restaurants receive, three being the max, the more renound they are seen.

Applications of Actor-Network Theory

Regarding this question, there are many different factors that can contribute to this environment. With the framework of actor-network theory (ANT), these factors can be translated into “actors” which can be used to relate the influence of said actors in the network. (Greenhalgh & Stones, 2010). ANT was created by Bruno Latour, alongside Michel Callon and John Law to describe how all the complex relationships are related and constantly. Everything can be seen as either an actor or a network; where an actor is described as things human and non-human like a object or idea that’s interacts inside the network. This framework views these human and non-human actors as equal, which is ideal for this discussion (Cressman, 2009).

While there has not been any specific research regarding ANT and this topic, many scholars have used this framework to frame their own studies which can be adapted. Karan

Chawla used this framework to analyze how the Knight Captical Group LLC market making firm collapsed. Chawla effectively laid out the relationship between the actors by discovering a “power imbalance of the relationships between the actors” (2020). Fiona Teevan-Kamhawi’s ANT analysis focuses on case studies about the low-income communities are affected by water crises, speficially in Flint, Michigan and Newark, New Jersey. Teevan-Kamhawi was effective in her aim to discuss potential solutions by looking at how each actor interacts inside each case study. While there was no immediate solution, Teevan-Kamhawi was able to list all human and non-human elements that led and was affected by this problem (2020). Katelyn Salotto’s approach to ANT was to bring awareness to food additives looking at monosodium glutamate, high-fructose corn syrup and brown rice syrup (2020). Through her research, she was able to define the actors that contributed to the stigma and challenge it.

While these topics are vastly different, these scholars were able to successfully build a discussion by using ANT to explain all the relationships inside the given networks. By having a combination different human and non-human actors, it explains which actors start the toxicity in the fine dining industry, how each actor contributes to it, bring awareness to the problem, and potentially propose a solution.

Results & Discussion

The extremely stressful ecosystem of fine dining restaurants is largely due to the historical traditions and culture of fine dining. The infrastructure is unsustainable and deteriorates the chef’s passion for food overall. While not all fine dining restaurants have this level of problem, by encouraging victims to speak up about their experiences, the institutions that breed these toxic workplaces would eventually be shut down. When looking at Figure 1, the actors of the haute cuisine history, accolades, and culinary school are the least susceptible to

change. The biggest way to change is to change the actor mentorship. These head chefs greatly influence the culture of the restaurant as well has the power to influence the consumer. Understanding how these mentors affect this network shows the impact it has to provide a healthier ecosystem.

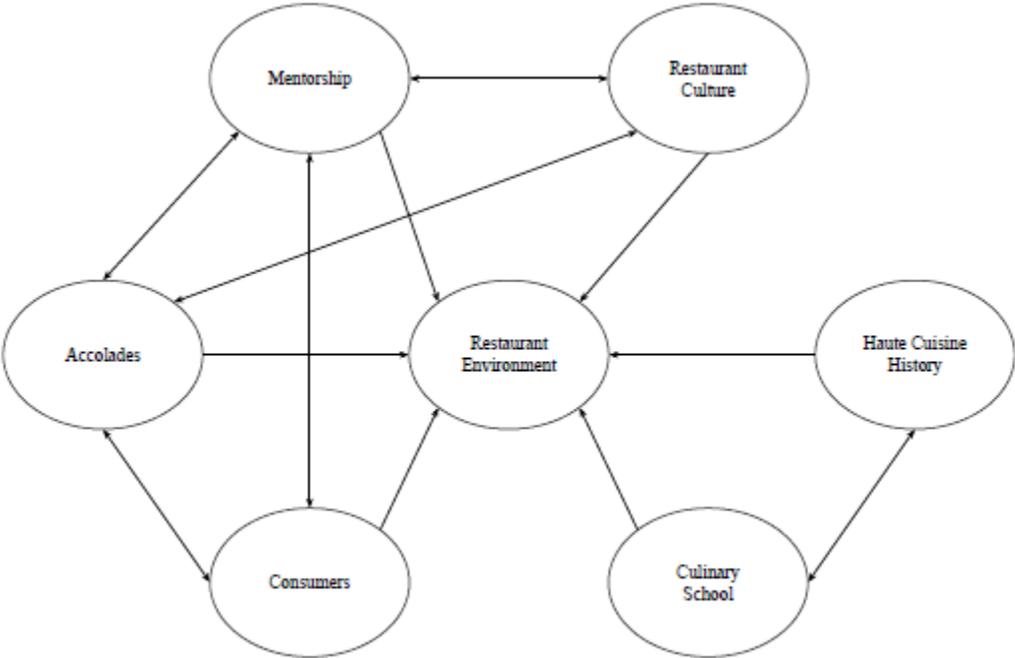


Figure 1. Actor Network Theory Map for the Fine Dining Environment
(Nguyen, 2023)

Restaurant Culture Retention

To initially understand how the workers’ mental health is affected, one looks at what makes a worker stay at a restaurant and through a questionnaire of each staff member, the results show employees are more comfortable when they are incorporated within the restaurant culture as well as if restaurants take into consideration of the “subordinates’ outside needs” (DiPietro et al., 2019). In fine dining restaurants, the culture is heavily gained through family meal, where a chef cooks for everyone in the restaurant prior to service time. These activities build bonds

between all the employees where they can enjoy each other's company. Creating opportunities to bond between staff outside of work would additionally allow them to be integrated into the culture. While keeping employees involved in the culture is generally successful, the problem lies with ensuring the workers' outside life. The long work hours typically make it hard for these workers to have a life outside the restaurant. When Jacob Potashnick, a chef who has interned at many Michelin restaurants, interned in Japan, he observed the other cooks were forced to work gruesome hours 6 A.M. to 2:30 AM every day, some for 13 years. Due to the competitiveness of sushi restaurants, many head sushi chefs must wake up at 5 A.M. and arrive at the fish market to ensure they are serving the best quality. Before the head chef woke up, two cooks were required to water the cement every day to ensure the driveway was clean and if they failed to wake up, everyone was docked a twelfth of their salary. To avoid it, the chefs would stay awake and continue to work for 36-hour shifts. (Jake Talks Food, 2021). The time commitment makes it difficult for an outside life from the restaurant. If a chef wanted to start a family, his or her time would be occupied solely for their career. This is seen at the highest level of restaurants, specifically, Noma regarded as the best restaurant for years. After being at the top for so long, they decided to close in 2024 due to "consistently high work under grueling conditions" and an "unsustainable workplace with an environment of hostility and poorly compensated but painstaking work" (Crispin, 2023). The constant level of work deteriorates one's passion to work in the kitchen, building on continuous stress, and eventually leaving the industry as a whole. Additionally, the amount of work and compensation for working in the kitchen do not align. The average Michelin line cook salary can range from \$57,000 to around \$80,000 only in New York, where there are currently only 73 Michelin-rated restaurants (Michelin-Star Chef Salaries, n.d.; NYC's Michelin-Starred Restaurants for 2022, Mapped - Eater NY, n.d.) These

wages make living difficult and require a taxing amount of time and energy every day. This commitment in the kitchen is driven by wanting to work and learn with the best chefs in the world who achieve the highest accolades in the culinary world, whether it be Michelin stars or James Beard awards, another highly prized title given to chefs around the world. Given the limited number of spots in the industry, it becomes cutthroat and seen as a privilege to learn under these renowned chefs.

Expectations in the Kitchen

As mentioned previously, haute cuisine was a way to differentiate food for the higher class, especially in France and to work in any fine dining restaurant one must be qualified through intense training. In the past, the French upper class would use the idea of haute cuisine to show their wealth at their feasts, where Marie-Antoine Carême had the largest influence on the level of expertise and precision. Eventually, Georges Auguste Escoffier brought this cuisine to modern cuisine. Though modernized, his influence as the “King of Chefs” shaped the way food is taught in culinary school, transforming haute cuisine into French cooking. He has been accredited as the reason many culinary schools are largely influenced by this form of cooking. In the culinary curriculum, the students are required to understand and must be able to replicate French cuts and French mother sauces: julienne, batonnet, brunoise, chiffonade, and espagnole, hollandaise, tomate, velouté, respectively. These students are graded on their proficiency so when they enter a kitchen, it becomes second nature for them. While culinary school is not required to enter a fine dining establishment, having a background in culinary school ensures one is trained with the skills as well as the knowledge in the field. However, if the student was unable to demonstrate a mastery of the skills, there could be major consequences for them.

When a chef opens a restaurant, they generally have two goals: to serve good food and to gain accolades as mentioned before. To gain these, the chef must continue to innovate and impress the customer for their restaurants to get their name out. Sheng-Hsiung Tsaur aimed to find what makes a memorable dining experience (MDE) for a customer. The largest factors for the customers were: excellent service behavior, exquisite and delicious cuisine, amazing physical environment and unique atmosphere, and high perceived value (2020). From the chef's perspective, the main factor they can control would be the cuisine they give out to the customer. The chef must ensure anything he or she innovates must be how they originally envisioned the dish. Meaning if one of the cooks messes up, the vision the chef had for a dish could drastically differ, reflecting poorly on the chef. Creating a consistency of near perfection is what the head chef dreams to produce. Once a chef becomes distinguished in the world, more customers are likely to return. After a comparative review between casual dining versus fine dining, when patrons expect a more hedonic experience, "foods that excite, that are fun and are enjoyable" (Hwang & Ok, 2013). This example can be seen through three Michelin star Alinea's iconic table dessert, depicted in Figure 2. Chef Grant Achatz distinguished himself with this dish and many food enthusiasts became interested in what he would innovate next.



Figure 2. Alinea's *Painting*

(Goldberg, 2011)

Kitchen Consequences

While each restaurant varies, the consequences can range from a simple reprimand, threatening to be fired, or even verbal and physical abuse. Since many aspiring cooks worked hard through culinary school, they want to try to keep their position in the restaurant. To ensure the employees are working up to their standard, the head chef can verbally manipulate the worker to “shape” them leading to a toxic relationship. The initial interaction typically starts like a caring mentorship; however, it quickly becomes grim which creates a false hope for any new chef. This relationship can be depicted in the second episode of the television series *The Bear*, which is based on a true story. The scene follows the main character, Carmy, and a flashback where his boss immediately fires someone for overheating a sauce and then walks towards Carmy and berates him with insults while he cooks. While the sauce being broken was not Carmy's fault, his boss blames him and starts targeting Carmy's personality and then continues to say, “Why are you so slow”, “You are talentless” and “You deserve to die” (Storer, 2022).

These insults were ingrained inside Carmy, resulting in a large disconnect between him and his new chefs from his perfectionist upbringing.

The physical abuse from the head chef is just as bad. In 2021, allegations surfaced where multiple chefs who were mentored under Tom Kitchin spoke out about being physically abused. The chefs stated they were slammed against the wall by the neck, not given food and water, and not given any medical treatment (Bennett, 2023). While inexcusable, Kitchin's drive to gain a Michelin star was the reason for his level of perfection, a goal for many aspiring chefs.

Another incident surfaced in 2021 with James Beard winning chef Blaine Wetzel and his restaurant Willows Inn. After an investigation, over 100 former employees spoke out of verbal and sexual harassment, long work hours, sexual assault, and coercion of young female employees to drink alcohol and do illegal drugs (Moskin, 2021) which led to his restaurant permanently shutting down. Many of these victims are unable to speak out about their opinion because Wetzel's credibility is likely to outweigh the victims. Many of these victims try to endure this abuse for the sole reason to gain experience to help them progress in the culinary hierarchy. In an anonymous interview, Robin Burrow describes the narrative of the life of a young aspiring haute cuisine chef and his experience throughout his experience of becoming a chef. Under one of the restaurants, the chef exclaimed how he would be abused similarly above, and it was all because he wanted to advance in the kitchen. For over two and a half years of working there, the breaking point was when the head chef threw a large cling film at his chest and he started to have trouble breathing and eventually started to cry. The mentality he was told was "shut up and take it, let him think he's right, even if he's not" (Burrow et al., 2015). This cycle of keeping quiet and doing what you are told is due to other chefs experiencing this treatment as well, which is extremely apparent when looking at celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. Many people

view him as a hot-headed chef who gets angry at all the chefs who work under him; however, it was due to the teaching of one of his mentors, Marco Pierre White. White was the first British chef to gain three Michelin stars and become the role model of some to achieve the Michelin goal. His methods of teaching were similar as stated before, where he would constantly yell at the other chefs, sometimes to the breaking point. Gordon became a product of his teaching which eventually partially became his method of teaching his students, as that was what White did for success, which emphasizes the amount of influence a mentor has in the kitchen.

Since many of these victims are abused and overworked to their breaking point, the food industry resulted in a major addiction problem, either from drugs or alcohol. The Substance Abuse and Mental Services Administration found 11.8% of food services workers reported binge drinking, 19.1% of workers reported using illicit drugs and 17% of workers were diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder (Kaliszewski, 2022). These high assumptions are attributed to how the work hours and how they are treated in the restaurant. When the younger chefs watch their seniors rely on these substances, they become trapped in this cycle as well.

Finding a way to break the cycle, both from the treatment of the mentors and the substance abuse, would improve the restaurant culture itself. When these victims can speak freely about their complaints without worrying about any repercussions, they begin to build trust within the restaurant helping the overall culture.

Solution

When conducting this research, it is important to iterate that not all fine dining restaurants breed this level of toxicity. While the level of toxicity varies from each restaurant, this paper generalizes talks about the extremities in the industry. As mentioned earlier about the victims not speaking up, there is a high likelihood other restaurants are still treating their employees harshly

without it being known. To shed more light on this problem, the first step would be to encourage other victims to speak out about their experiences.

Looking at Figure 1, one of the easiest solutions would be to help change how mentorship is presented in these restaurants. Given how mentorship affects the restaurant culture and the staff, by transitioning to an open form of development. In an interview with 21 Michelin stars-winning chef, Alain Ducasse prides himself in his ability to grow his staff. He says the three main goals he tries to engrain in his restaurants would be the development his chefs' skills, compensation, and harmony among the team (Editors, 2014). This translation would directly affect the restaurant culture, creating a healthier environment. Onne Janssen and Nico W. Van Yperen found the best way to improve the relationship between the employees and boss was through their method of performance orientation, or how an employee feels successful at the job. (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004). By building the connection to show their leader cares about their members, the member would likely perform to a higher standard and becomes a healthier work environment for all parties. When the leader sets a good example, the employees are driven to work harder.

When using ANT, changing the mentor actor in would result in the translation of the network, shifting the relationships between each actors whichs causes a chain reaction. Firstly, changing how the mentors teach others in the kitchen environment could immediately change the culture inside the restaurant. These mentors become more approachable and which breeds a sense of family in the restaurant. When problems arise, the mentees can communicate their situation without fear of possible backlash, giving respect to both parties. When the mentor are changing the environment, it has an indirect affect with the culinary school. Since culinary school is a gateway to fine dining restaurants, there could be a change on how culinary school

curriculums change. While the basic kitchen, like knife skills and heat control, are required, the grading response would change. Instead of the intense and harsh responses, the instructors could give supportive feedback and criticism, shaping the new chefs on what their experience would be like in the real kitchen. In regards to the connection of the mentor with the consumer, changing the perception of the mentor from the public would create publicity for their restaurant. If the head chef is openly making on change on how he/she is treating their staff and the work environment is healthy, many consumers are likely to be attracted to visit the restaurant. While the translation of the mentor actor would affect all the surrounding actors, the network will still be stable.

Limitations

This paper originally aimed to interview someone who worked inside Michelin level restaurants, however, due to unresponsiveness, it was omitted. However, if this research were to be re-conducted, the addition of the anecdotal experience of a chef would strongly support the answer to this research question. Additionally, this research focused on the chef or the back of the house, however, a restaurant also consists of hostesses and servers or the front of the house. By looking at the restaurant holistically, the customer experience can drastically change, changing the restaurant environment even further.

Conclusion

In this paper, I used Actor-Network Theory to understand how the environment of fine dining industry came to be and to understand how it affects its workers. By understanding how each actor, mentorship, restaurant culture, haute cuisine history, culinary school, consumers, and accolades interact with each other in the restaurant environment network, the actor most susceptible to change would be the mentorship. This change would potentially create a chain

reaction changing the relationships in this network and hosting a much healthier workplace. By slowly implementing ways these mentors teach their chefs, we could shift away from the toxicity inside the kitchen.

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