Ad feedback

*Book Review*

**Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries**

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***Feeding the other: Whiteness, privilege, and neoliberal stigma in food pantries* (2019)Rebecca de Souza**

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**312pp**

*Feeding the other:**Whiteness, privilege, and neoliberal stigma in food pantries* by Rebecca de Souza examines in detail a case study of a food pantry in Duluth, Minnesota. The book examines how individuals (volunteers, administrators, and clients/guests) and organizations participate in structural patterns of injustice within the food system. *Feeding the Other* is a fierce critique of the neoliberal values that underpin food access and distribution. de Souza examines ‘stigmatizing narratives’ about people experiencing food insecurity and the role of these narratives in legitimizing and perpetuating unjust systems. She argues that discourses of white privilege and neo-liberalism produce narratives and frameworks that idealize individualism, hard work, and personal responsibility while perpetuating negative stereotypes of people who are seen to be not living up to ideals related to wealth accumulation. These narratives create and/or increase the social distance between the ‘givers’ and ‘receivers’ and are stigmatizing in that those experiencing food insecurity are framed as the problem to be fixed. From a micro perspective, the ‘givers’ in food pantries are the volunteers who are typically older white women and the ‘receivers’ are individuals more diverse in backgrounds who come to collect food from the food pantries. de Souza also shows how similar dynamics play out at an organizational level where the ‘givers’ are corporations and the ‘receivers’ are the non-profit agencies. Policies and procedures, such as poverty governance procedures, are put in place to reinforce the social distance between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Food is political and is a marker of citizenship, de Souza asserts. The same claim can be made for education.

Describing the volunteers as ‘good white women,’ de Souza presents a radical critique of charity as the way to fix problems in society. Charity, she argues, ‘results in outpourings of gratitude on the part of givers, but never quite moves in the direction of food justice’ (de Souza, 2019, p. 120). The volunteers who participated in the study were motivated by a desire to do good in the world. These motivations protect white privilege by not allowing for space to interrogate and problematize whiteness. A key finding of the study is that the stigmatizing narratives ignore the complex and nuanced nature of the lives of food pantry clients. Because of the social distance between the givers and receivers, the receivers have little room to question the giver or the gift. These same narratives are reflected in the messaging on public-facing communication collateral for fund-raising and other public relations purposes.

Community-based adult literacy programs depend on volunteers to serve as tutors. It is estimated that volunteers make up over 43% of the adult education workforce serving in state-sponsored adult education programs (Belzer, 2006). Taking into consideration the many volunteer tutors in non-state sponsored, typically volunteer-led programs, 43% would be a conservative estimate (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). Especially in urban areas of the United States, volunteer tutors, like the food pantry volunteers, are often white, retired women. The learners, on the other hand, are often people of color, younger, and more diverse in cultural backgrounds. Not surprisingly, the dynamics embedded in the relationship between volunteers and clients in the food pantries would apply to the context of volunteers and learners in the context of adult basic education. While the core premise and argument of the book will not be new to anyone familiar with critical perspectives in adult education, de Souza’s analysis offers a nuanced perspective that I found refreshing. The ideas presented in the book can serve as a platform for interrogating the politics of charity in the adult education space.

I was intrigued by the title of this book because of the words ‘whiteness privilege and neoliberal stigma’ and was curious to see if and how these concepts from a food access context would apply to the context of adult basic education. While not often discussed, the dynamics of race and class are at play in adult basic education programs. Reading the book, I wondered about the stigmatizing narratives embedded in the many systems that adult learners encounter in and beyond the ABE/ESOL classroom and how that influences their experience of learning. I appreciated the author’s critique of charity as a concept that legitimizes and perpetuates unequal power relationships in any context. How do we change things? de Souza offers practical suggestions for shifting narratives. I recommend this book to adult educators who are interested in interrogating and transforming the dynamics between tutors and learners in the context of adult basic education. With its focus on volunteers, the book could potentially inform volunteer tutor training programs so the volunteers are better prepared to bridge social distances with learners.

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