

PASS THE PLATE: IDENTIFYING SHARED EXPERIENCE IN AMERICAN HUNGER

This analytical essay is the final product of a semester-long project for the English course Contemporary Rhetoric. Our assignment was to select an argumentative work and analyze it using rhetorical tools and considering its social context to gain a deeper understanding of the work's intended message and uncover latent meanings.

Introduction

“If another country was doing this to our kids, we would be at war.” This comment was made by Jeff Bridges in an interview for the documentary *A Place at the Table* (Jacobson & Silverbush). According to the film, the chronic issue that Bridges speaks of is the hunger crisis in America. *A Place at the Table* highlights how through changes in nutrition policy, Americans can improve the lives of many who face the harsh reality of hunger every day and calls on all Americans for help in bringing about this change. This documentary contains multiple layers of argument, but in the following analysis, I will examine how *A Place at the Table* persuades audiences to take action as voters and advocates against hunger in 2012 when oppositional, divisive political debates about how to solve the issue took place. As the documentary identifies, many political and social advocacy groups stated that increased funding to food assistance programs and other changes in policy would be the best strategy to fight hunger; simultaneously, many other political groups advocated for privatized food assistance through charity and were concerned that increased funding to government programs would further exacerbate America’s deep debt (Jacobson & Silverbush). To address the threat of politically motivated decreases in funding to food assistance, *A Place at the Table* persuades the audience to take action as voters and advocates by showing how hunger has an effect on all Americans. This strategy of identification shows how hunger is not someone else’s fight, but the fight of every American.

Using identification as a tool, it is clear that the appeals to value that *A Place at the Table* makes align with the values of the 2012 audience; the documentary's argument that hunger affects the economy, the military, and a diverse group of individuals shows viewers that hunger is a momentous issue for all Americans with the intention to persuade the audience to take action as voters or advocates against hunger.

The Text: *A Place at the Table*

Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush directed *A Place at the Table*, and they seek to answer the question of how hunger affects everyone in America. One of the most central terms to their argument is "food insecurity," which the US Department of Agriculture describes as a condition ranging from "reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet" to "reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake" ("Definitions"). *A Place at the Table* is clear in its demonstration that food insecurity and hunger are critical and multifaceted problems in America. The documentary is comprised of the stories of people experiencing hunger; multiple individuals are presented, each with a touching story, who all come from a wide range of economic statuses and family compositions. Through these stories as well as through commentary from various experts on the issue, *A Place at the Table* shows how current government policies provide inadequate food assistance to people in need of help. Furthermore, the documentary shows how current policies exacerbate the problem by making unhealthy food most affordable, which leads to other health issues such as diabetes and obesity. Hunger also affects children in schools; multiple teachers speak to how hunger affects students' capability to learn in the classroom, and one young student talks about how she can't focus in school because of hunger. The central focus is certainly placed on the direct effects of hunger; however, there are also other, more surprising effects discussed, including the effects of hunger on the economy

and the military. The strength of the whole nation is shown to be weakened by hunger. Through these many narratives, *A Place at the Table* calls for better funded governmental programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in order to have a positive effect on all Americans, enacted both through more strategic and increased funding as well as through better health education for the public (Jacobson & Silverbush).

The Political and Economic Context of *A Place at the Table*

The context surrounding *A Place at the Table* is complex. The issue of hunger itself, what the documentary addresses, is multifaceted; consequentially, the national discussion around the issue is also complicated. The timing of *A Place at the Table*'s release in 2012 is significant because of the unparalleled rise in hunger and also because of the political discussion about changes to food assistance programs. In her article published in 2011, Kristie Garton cites USDA research on food insecurity in the United States, writing that "in 2008, the number of Americans who were considered food insecure spiked to 17 million, the highest level recorded since the Department of Agriculture (USDA) began monitoring food security in 1995" (Garton). Jane Black also speaks to the urgency of hunger and obesity in her 2008 article; she writes, "The number of Americans on food stamps topped 31.5 million in September, a record high. Obesity, too, is at epidemic levels: In 30 states, at least 25 percent of the population is dangerously overweight" (Black). The hunger crisis had sparked unparalleled enrollment in SNAP, and as this was discussed many people pondered the possible correlation between obesity and food assistance. One possible explanation of this linkage is that "being food insecure may require households to sacrifice healthy food choices in favor of less expensive and more fattening sources of calories" (Jensen & Wilde 25). Rates of hunger, obesity, and enrollment in SNAP were all simultaneously soaring as the documentary was being released.

At the same time, budget cuts to food assistance programs were discussed politically. A 2012 editorial in the *Charleston Gazette* states that “the problem [of hunger] has been getting worse since the start of the Great Recession, yet Congress is talking about cutting funds for food assistance” (“Editorial”). These budget cuts would threaten the food security of millions as the country gets back on its feet after the 2008 recession. The recession itself seems to have affected hunger; Garton writes that “when the recession took hold in 2008, the number of Americans who were considered food insecure spiked to 17 million” (Garton). Clearly, there was a disconnect between the government policy makers who dictated food assistance funding and the troubled economy that caused hunger and food insecurity to soar.

Part of the disconnect may be attributed to the fact that hunger in America manifests differently than one might assume. Co-directors Lori Silverbush and Kristi Jacobson believe that “the problem of hunger is very much invisible in this country and, in fact, hidden in the bodies of those who are obese,” (Gonyea). John Anderson also identifies this idea of an invisible problem; he writes that *A Place at the Table* “speaks to the once unspeakable -- that America cannot feed itself” (Anderson 25). The directors (and Anderson) observe that because the conditions of hunger in America aren’t always congruent with the usual connotations of hunger, people may not be fully aware or willing to talk about the issue (Osenlund). These ideas of invisibility show that there is some discussion about a lack of awareness of hunger in America.

From the context above, the emerging exigence that *A Place at the Table* addresses is that public awareness of the complexity of the hunger issue was needed to inform citizens how they should act to call on the government to amend its food assistance and nutrition policies.

Identifying Identification

To spread public awareness, *A Place at the Table* appeals to the common values its message shares with the values of the 2012 audience. Kenneth Burke's concept of identification can help readers to understand how the connections are made. Identification is a way of achieving persuasion through finding overlaps in identity. Dennis Day explains that Burke's theory of identification is an approach to "achieving" persuasion (270-1). Day relays Burke's idea of "consubstantiality," the alignment which takes place when two "substances" overlap in their "properties," and explains that "properties" are the elements like "sensation, concept, image, idea, or attitude" that make up "substances" (271). When two individuals share in "substance," they achieve "identification" (Day 272). This basic schematic is held as true by multiple other scholars, who also expound on the practical function of identification; for example, Debora Antunes points out identification's ability to "overcome division at the same time [it] that perpetuates it," because the need for commonalities presupposes that there are differences (Antunes). At the same time, Krista Ratcliffe and John Seiter have a more cautious observation of identification that argues too much agreement and focus on shared traits can cause the value of differences to be lost (Ratcliffe 53, Seiter 43-4). On one hand, this place of agreement can encourage positive interaction and communication, but at the same time, it can also cause people to diminish a value of differences.

Analysis

A Place at the Table pointedly identifies the issue of hunger with all Americans (even those who may have not felt hunger's immediate effects) by showing how hunger affects economy and the military. The documentary also shows how hunger can be present in many often surprising communities through the presentation of the modern face of hunger, which

shows how families and individuals of all different make-ups and economic statuses experience food insecurity. Through the lens of Burke's identification, a deeper understanding of the documentary's occasionally puzzling appeals to value may be achieved.

Identification through the Economy and Security/Military

In an appeal to the value of a healthy economy, *A Place at the Table* speaks to anxieties over the recent recession by showing how hunger itself both is caused by a weak economy as well as burdens it. Late in the documentary, text appears on the screen that reads "the cost of hunger and food insecurity to the U.S. economy is \$167 billion per year" (Jacobson & Silverbush). This statement is preceded by scenes of people in the hospital suffering from illnesses caused by poor diet, but these words are highlighted because they appear on a plain black screen. Clearly, this sum of money is large and is a serious element to consider, but the statement's alignment with the values of the audience in 2012 is especially heightened when considering the harsh recession that occurred just a few years earlier in 2008. The recession directly affected many Americans and affected the hunger crisis as well; to return to Garton's article, she stated that the recession in 2008 correlated with a very sharp rise in food insecurity (Garton). Because monetary difficulties increased, struggles with hunger increased for many individuals as well, which in turn created a large sum of money that needed to be paid. Returning to Day's explanation of Burke, readers can see that "consubstantiality," or the alignment of two "substances," is achieved in this documentary by identifying a common "substance" of value between audience and documentary: the affected economy (Day 271). The economy is something that affects all Americans, and hunger further weakens it in its troubled post-recession state. The weakened economy also causes more individuals to be personally affected by hunger. In this way, both groups find a common ground in the value of a healthy economy.

Another surprising identification that the documentary makes with the audience is its appeal to the value of security shown through hunger's effect on the military. In the documentary, hungry children are presented as needing the security of a school lunch because it is a consistent and reliable meal; as such, *A Place at the Table* argues that better funding for free school lunches is crucial to provide healthier meals to more children (Jacobson & Silverbush). In the documentary, the secretary of the USDA Tom Vilsack says, "Only 25% of youngsters in America today ages 19 to 24 are fit for military service, and one of the principle reasons for that is that too many of our youngsters are overweight"; the documentary explains that part of the reason for this is because school lunches are unhealthy (Jacobson & Silverbush). Vilsack's statement functions to persuade the audience that more adequately nutritious school lunches are needed because it effects the military, which is a symbol of American security and safety. To add to this issue, a 2012 editorial in the *Charleston Gazette* reminds readers that the recession has caused a drastic increase in hunger. The author writes that "Congress is talking about cutting funds for food assistance... such a reduction would throw about 3 million people off SNAP and mean 280,000 children would no longer qualify for free meals at school" ("Editorial"). Clearly many people, adults and children alike, would be directly affected by reduced food assistance funding; this could mean for a broader audience in 2012 that a large body of people will not qualify for military service based on their physical health. This site of hunger's effect on the military provides grounds for a common "substance" of value between the documentary and a broad 2012 audience: both groups desire safety and security (Day 271). Children need the security of a school lunch that is healthy for them, and America may desire security through the assurance of a military. *A Place at the Table* appeals to the basic, emotional desire for security and comfort through this metaphorical use of the military as providing security. In Day's article,

he explains that the demonstration of aligned “substances” is achieved through the classical “strategies” of rhetoric, such as “logical, ethical, and pathetic proof” (Day 272). In *A Place at the Table*, this appeal to the feeling of safety and security is certainly an emotional appeal for all audiences; the alternative is hunger and insecurity, and that is devastating. Through this strategy of speaking to the shared value of security through the effect of hunger on the military, identification is reached.

By demonstrating how hunger affects the economy and national security, *A Place at the Table* finds common value between both groups of “experiencing hunger” and “not experiencing hunger” and effectively shows that hunger isn’t an issue for one group, but both. The high cost of hunger affects the economy that encompasses all Americans, and hunger’s health effects weaken the military and the security of all Americans. Both of these appeals transform hunger from a crisis belonging to a specific group into a crisis affecting all Americans through the identification of commonly held values of a healthy economy and security. These appeals demonstrate that even when an individual is not personally hungry, they indirectly experience other ramifications of the hunger crisis. In this way, the documentary asks the audience to advocate for improved government policies and take action against hunger not only in the interest of others, but also in the interest of oneself. The issue becomes important for *all* citizens, which provides internal motivation to end hunger.

It Can Be Anyone; Identification through Varied Individuals

A Place at the Table has multiple strategies for identifying with its audience; one of these strategies is to shatter what the directors Jacobson and Silverbush say is the “invisible” quality of the hunger in America (Gonyea). According to the directors, hunger is “hidden in the bodies of those who are obese,” but it is also shown in the documentary that people of all different walks

of life, family constructions, and economic statuses can experience hunger (Gonyea, Jacobson & Silverbush). Examples of families and individuals presented include a family of three generations, a single mother with two kids, and a sheriff with a wife and children. Some receive SNAP benefits, some visit food banks, and some receive food donations from their neighbors (Jacobson & Silverbush). Through the countless individual testimonies given throughout the documentary, a very diverse face of hunger is presented to the audience. This reflects the reality of hunger in America, where more people than ever before are experiencing hunger in 2012. Garton quotes a USDA representative, who says that there “is a record number of Americans who are voluntarily seeking emergency food assistance... Not since the Great Depression has this kind of assistance been as urgently needed as now” (Garton). As the public discusses how increasing numbers of people are encountering hunger, it becomes apparent that hunger may not be very far away from one’s own experience or from one’s friends or family. In this way, *A Place at the Table* works to combat a lack of awareness and the perception of hunger to show how it is a reality for many individuals who may not align with an audience’s original expectations.

The varied stories presented in the documentary offer many opportunities for shared familial and economic experiences and values with much of the audience, thus providing multiple avenues for identification. To use Day’s explanation, the common “substance” between the documentary and the audience is those possible familial and economic experiences (Day 271). To further this understanding of common substance, Ratcliffe explains in her book *Rhetorical Listening* Burke’s thoughts about different kinds of substances and how they are connected: “For Burke, first-nature substance (the material body and its natural environment in which we live) is inextricably intertwined with second-nature substance (rhetorically constructed

discursive and cultural categories, both extrinsic and embodied, within which we think and feel)” (56-7). The ground-level connection the documentary makes between the audience and the varied faces of hunger is “first-nature,” which it accomplishes by showing a diverse group of individuals experiencing hunger with different economic, physical, and familial make-ups. At the same time, the documentary works to challenge the “intertwined” “second-nature,” “discursive” ideas surrounding those who are hungry (that they are lazy, that they look malnourished, that they don’t hold jobs) again by showing the varied faces of hunger. The documentary highlights how those who experience hunger are hardworking, responsible, “average” individuals and thusly on multiple levels are no different from the audience. Viewers can identify both with empirical facts such as job position, family makeup, and economic status, while also discovering the shared values of family and work ethic despite any constructed negative assumptions they might have held about those who experience hunger. In this way, *A Place at the Table* informs the audience that there are multiple levels of identification.

By showing the varied faces of hunger, the documentary most directly calls for sympathy for individuals who experience hunger, but it also appeals to an anxiety over an audience’s uncertain future in order to call the audience to action. At the end of the documentary, single mother Barbie Izquierdo shares her painful experience of not being able to provide adequate food for her children and says, “Take time and learn a little from each of us, because you never know where tomorrow can take you” (Jacobson & Silverbush). Izquierdo’s words are a direct statement to the reality that hunger could be in an audience member’s future. The documentary’s demonstration of varied individuals who experience hunger does create an anxiety about the possibility of hunger striking the audience next; because the audience can closely identify with hungry individuals, the “threat” of hunger in their own life becomes more real. Furthermore,

because the documentary clearly shows how individuals experiencing hunger are hardworking and deeply caring people, the idea that hunger only effects the lazy or some group of “others” is shattered and shows that hunger is something uncontrollable in the current climate. As mentioned above, even a hard-working man who puts his life on the line for his community as a sheriff requires some food assistance (Jacobson & Silverbush). Within the political and economic climate of 2012, hunger affects surprising individuals who are not unlike the audience, whether similarities are found in values or in economic positions. This creates a subtle appeal to anxiety about the uncertain future of one’s own hunger. To again return to Day’s explanation of identification, this appeal is an example of a strategy based on pathos that speaks to an audience’s fears (Day 272). The motivation of fearing hunger on one’s own horizon is effective because no longer is hunger another person’s fight, but it becomes very personally one’s own responsibility. This appeal to anxiety motivates the audience to vote and advocate for changes in food policy for others who experience hunger as well as for their own benefit.

Conclusion

Using the lens of Burke’s identification, it is clear that the appeals to value that *A Place at the Table* makes align with the 2012 audience’s values; to persuade the audience to take action against the hunger crisis, the documentary demonstrates how hunger affects the economy, the military, and a diverse group of individuals to show viewers that it is an issue affecting all Americans. What stands out as particularly important from this analysis is the fact that many points of identification can be found between the message of ending hunger and the specific values of the 2012 audience. Despite the polarized political debates about funding for food assistance programs that swirled in the background of the 2012 audience’s minds, there were still many places where divided groups could find agreement, even if the agreement was over

material things such as the economy. These sites of common ground that appear despite the divisive conversation surrounding them provide a hopeful outlook for not only the argument on how to end hunger but for divisive arguments in general. While identification of common ground may not be a perfect tool for discourse, it at least provides a place for some positive communication. In this analysis, however, one of the most important things identification shows viewers is that hunger isn't a far away, unfelt concept, but is something experienced by others who share in common experiences and values. Viewers of the documentary, people experiencing hunger, and advocates for policy changes alike can find common ground as they share their experiences and they "pass the plate" and communicate. *A Place at the Table* invites compassion, discussion, and action to end hunger, and through the identification of places for communication the film provides a hopeful outlook for the future.

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