Ritualistic Meal Consumption and the Temporal Reduction of Divisions Due to Economic Disparity

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Can a simple consumption activity challenge normative systems of inequality? Using a qualitative approach, this paper illustrates how the act of sharing a meal in a religious setting can ostensibly reduce deeply entrenched notions of difference due to economic disparity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In this paper, we illuminate how a social consumption practice in an ephemeral religious organization subverts systems of social inequality that otherwise prevail in and structure society. Specifically, drawing on a rich ethnographic study in Pakistan, we show how sharing food in the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ)—a religious organization originating in South Asia that is practiced intermittently by its followers—represents temporal spaces of egalitarianism. Within these temporal spaces, entrenched social hierarchies that are salient in organizing Pakistani society are deconstructed. We found that although the fundamental principles of the Tablighi Jamaat advocate for transgression from the social hierarchies which propagate myriad inequalities by demarcating local Muslims into spheres of different social and economic classes, it is in the practice of food consumption when challenges to these hierarchies become the most conspicuous.

With burgeoning social inequalities—which are now consecrated by growing income and wealth disparities—we respond to recent calls from scholars in the field to identify trajectories by which to disrupt systems that create, maintain, and reify stratification between individuals in a society (Fotaki and Prasad 2015). We demonstrate how a seemingly inconsequential social practice—in this case, meal sharing (Belk 2010)—can function as a powerful mechanism by which to destabilize entrenched social hierarchies that have historically structured the society in which the consumption practice occurs. Notwithstanding this point, we do not intend to romanticize our argument. Indeed, we appreciate the fact that the temporal nature of the TJ and the ingrained nature of the cultural codification of social hierarchies in Pakistan should not be negated. We equally acknowledge that these realities of Pakistani society raise the question concerning the extent to which an apparently innocuous phenomenon such as food consumption transforms how individuals relate to one another following the religious experience in spaces not governed by the TJ. While these remain fair points, we contend that, at the very minimum, egalitarian food consumption practices in the TJ symbolically reveal alternative tenets by which to organize individuals in society—principles based more on equality than on inequality. The present study extends prior literature by highlighting how social inequality can be challenged through a consumption practice in a less-industrialized country context.

Methodology
This study uses multi-sited ethnography and in-depth interviews to understand how a consumption practice can collapse social boundaries that maintain systems of inequality. Specifically, we analyze food consumption by participants of the orthodox Islamic religious group Tablighi Jamaat (TJ).

Research Site
We use the context of TJ to illustrate the phenomenon of food consumption as a normalizing social force. TJ forms a traditional reformist approach to Islam that developed in late colonial India. The movement follows an approach accessible to the common Muslim, focusing on making participants lay preachers with periodic commitments that involve staying away from their residences, families, and workplaces. According to one estimate, TJ today has 80 million followers (Taylor 2009) in more than 200 countries.

Data Collection
The data for this study was collected from 2012-2016. As part of a more formal ethnography, the first author then undertook a 40-day sojourn with 10 other TJ participants. After the sojourn, purposeful sampling was used to choose an additional 13 informants to interview to achieve better triangulation (Ritchie et al. 2013).

Findings
From the data, we found that food consumption in TJ sojourns subverts the everyday social and economic hierarchies present in Pakistani life. Our analysis yields two thematic explanations behind this temporary collapse in social boundaries: changing causes (religious cause versus the everyday routine of earning to sustain and consume); and bringing everyone to the same consumption lifestyle. While these themes are exposed during TJ activities, they are temporal in their effect to linger on post-TJ and differ by the socioeconomic profiles of the participants and their connection with the movement.

Discussion
From the results of this study, we can derive some contributory notes for existing literature. First, food consumption can be a social bridging activity. It has been previously established that where you eat, how you eat, and with whom you eat signifies social power or lack of it (Bourdieu 1984). Organizations in Pakistan like government institutes, corporations, and schools (where teacher and student separation is evident) use differing meal consumption practices (place, style, and group) to signal their social superiority. TJ participation challenges the strongly embedded social stratification prevalent in Pakistani society. Food consumption appears to be an exemplar of this practice.

Second, changing ideological causes can help lessen social divides. The foundation stone for driving the motivation of TJ travelers is their belief for success in a Hereafter which is accomplished through sacrificing and working for a higher spiritual cause in this world. We learn that a cause that is promoted to be larger than the everyday routines of working to earn, providing and caring for the family, and consuming to live can be a means to displace the social understandings that govern world citizens. In this regard, an egalitarian-motivated social cause, can aid in reducing barriers due to economic divides.

Third, while the concept of sharing has already been noted to be a means of bringing people closer (Belk 2010), this study illuminates that sharing can be a means of solving a cardinal social problem.

We additionally note that this study is limited in its focus to address economic disparity, while not considering other forms of inequality (religious, gender, etc.).

REFERENCES
