Keeping Connected:
An Ethnography of the Staff at Linda’s Café

I. Preface

I grew up in Corcoran, Minnesota—a rural town where everyone seemed to know each other. In my world, it was completely normal to refer to the neighbors as members of my family. I was raised to value hard work, honesty, kindness, and family. Over the years, these qualities have continued to be a dominant part of my life and helped to lay the foundation for my participation in National Honor Society, Student Council, and Yearbook.

For my ethnography, I wanted to observe a group that I felt comfortable with and demonstrated some of the qualities I valued. My grandparents had introduced me to Linda’s Café a few years ago. The small-town feel and strong customer relationships established within the café appealed to me, and I realized it was easy to take the teamwork among the staff, and the services provided by the café, for granted.

Acting as my own broker, I returned to the café to ask the head waitress, Daisy, if it would be possible to observe the staff for a few days. She approved, and I was ready to begin my investigation into the success behind the restaurant and its staff.

In order to capture the true personality of the group, I am hoping to blend in so well that the staff ignores me. This shouldn’t be a problem during busy times, but I am anticipating higher levels of interaction as the business day comes to an end.
Even though waitresses are commonly portrayed in movies as having labor-intensive careers with long shifts and odd hours, everyone at Linda’s seems to genuinely enjoy their job. They are always smiling, suggesting that they have taken their career and turned it into a hobby.

Staff and customer interactions are key to the operation of the subculture. I am assume that customers are more than a source of income; they are a part of the Linda’s Café family.

I am predicting that the staff will get along most of the time, but also expect occasional conflicts to arise within the group. They will probably try to hide this behavior from the customers and settle disagreements in timely, professional manner.

The ethnography will provide an opportunity to learn how the café keeps their regular customers coming back, as well as some of the complications that arise while working with a close group. The social aspects of the job and a passion for the community must be the motivation behind the staff.

II. Background

Rogers, Minnesota is a city that has recently flourished. According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of the city was only 3,588 in the year 2000 (“Profile”). Today, Rogers has grown to bustling area. The Hassan Area Historical Society says it is only 45 miles outside of the Twin Cities, and as if 2013, the population had grown to 11,983 (“History”).

Linda’s Café is located just off of Highway 101 in Rogers. According the café’s staff, their mission is to provide good food and good service to keep their loyal and regular customers coming back (Frigaard, Linda).

The café was started by Linda Grady and Linda Frigaard, who had been best friends since the third grade. Grady was looking to start a business and asked Frigaard for help. Together, they started the process of opening a restaurant (Frigaard, Linda).
Places were available for rent on the East and West sides of Highway 101, so Grady and her daughters counted cars on each side to see which area had more traffic. When Grady found out the West side was near one of the busiest Super Americas in Minnesota, she knew the West side was the right location for her café (Toering).

Previously, the building had been a completely gutted-out video store. Frigaard and Grady had to put in the walls and kitchen to get the café to the single room restaurant it is today (Toering). The cabin design and décor of the café was inspired by Frigaard’s love for fishing (Frigaard, Linda).

Linda’s Café has been family owned and operated since the day it opened in August of 2006. It is a small business with only eight to twelve staff members working at a time. Frigaard’s daughter, Mariah, started as a dishwasher in middle school, and worked her way up to her position today as a waitress (Frigaard, Mariah).

Looking back, the café is pleased with their location choice. “We’re just glad we went with this side because on the other side, there’s a lot of businesses that went out of business,” Mariah said.

III. Observations

First Observation: 21 February 2015, 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
Second Observation: 22 February 2015 7:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.

I woke up extra early on the days of my observations to ensure that I would arrive on time. I wanted to make a good first impression. After all, the café was doing me a huge favor by allowing me to come in for a few days. As I began my drive, it became clear that I was more than a little nervous. I had driven to Rogers probably a hundred times before, but on the day of my observation, I managed to miss one of my turns and had to take an alternative route. Luckily, I still managed to make it on time.
The parking lot was shared by a stretch of buildings resembling a strip mall. Every business looked identical with a brick-faced wall and a green canopy-like overhang. The café didn’t need flashing signs to flag down customers or draw attention. Instead of relying on spontaneous business, it relied on loyal customers for a steady source of income.

The inside of the restaurant reflected the simplicity of the outside well. Its cabin feel was accented with an antique cash register and candy machines, an indication of their old-fashioned values. The toy bins along the wall welcomed families yet provided a necessary distraction for kids waiting to be seated during the busiest times.

Upon my arrival, Mariah, a mom and waitress in her mid-twenties with medium-length dyed, red, curly hair, approached me. “Just one?” she asked me. I tried to explain that I had talked to Daisy a week earlier about doing observations for a paper. Mariah’s face became puzzled and she went to check with the rest of the staff.

The group awkwardly gathered in a huddle and stared at me. Clearly, everyone’s opinion was valued and taken into consideration when making decisions. Finally, Stephanie, a married waitress and natural-born leader, came over to clarify the purpose of my visit.

Stephanie was Linda Grady’s daughter, and was currently only working part-time at the café. She was going back to college to become a psychiatrist. She wanted to help others and said, “There are some messed-up people in this world I could fix, including myself.” She was abnormally tall for a woman and had the perfect tan that every teenage girl longs for. Her gentle smile comforted me and calmed me down. She asked me if the staff was being graded on their performance. I assured her that I wasn’t grading them; instead, I was being graded on the quality of my observations. Their hesitation proved that they valued their reputation and did not want to participate in any activity that put it on the line.
To my relief, after exchanging a few jokes, the staff relaxed and carried on as normal. Their initial nerves from my presence were a sign that they valued their customers and prided themselves on their service. They wanted to be prepared and show their best work to keep diners happy. “You just want people to come back,” Mariah said. “We highly base our café on a lot of regular customers who come in daily or every weekend. It’s really important that we make that connection with our customers, so that they will come back, and we have those repeat customers.”

Mariah was a bold and straight-forward waitress. She took her job seriously. Serving her customers was her mission, and she didn’t seem to have time for anything else. As it turned out, she only appeared to have a tough exterior. In reality, she was a kind and bubbly person. Her giggle lit up the room, keeping the atmosphere fun and light.

Customers were the first priority at the restaurant. Each one was seen as a unique individual and was welcomed into the Linda’s Café family with open arms. It was a ritual for the staff to greet repeat customers by their first name and memorize their orders, an indication of their insider status.

One of the regulars, Barry, came in and sat next to me. He was a stereotypical cute old man. He had been coming to the café since it first opened. The staff members were extremely excited to see him. He sat in a specific spot at the high counter, next to the kitchen, so that he could give the cooks a hard time. Without even taking his order one of the staff members pulled out Barry’s special coffee mug and filled it for him. There was no other mug in the restaurant like it. He was at his second home. “It’s kind of like watching our family grow up,” Barry said. “We even worry about them at times,” he joked. “We sort of adopted them, or they adopted us. I
don’t know what it is, but when you walk through the door and they call you by name and you get the chance to visit and talk, it’s just the little things.”

The café helped Barry connect with younger generations, kept him on his toes, and made him feel young. Getting out of the house to visit with the staff was a highlight of his day.

Before the staff was able to connect with customers, they had to learn to communicate and connect with each other to be a successful team. The family was well-coordinated when they first opened Linda’s, but with a high counter, beverage station, eight booths, and nine tables, the single-room café was cramped and required strong communication skills. They used both verbal and body language to avoid crashes. A gentle “behind you” or a light touch of the back was used as a warning of each other’s presence. Tables were given numbers because simply pointing to a general area of the room was not allowed. They needed to be specific and precise to ensure staff members were on the same page, enabling them to effectively and efficiently communicate while serving diners.

In contrast to my predictions, the staff got along impeccably well. Joking around was considered acceptable behavior. They placed friendly bets on who had forgotten to put their name on their order forms the most times throughout the day, claiming that their dignity as a waitress was on the line. The fun employees had while working was contagious. They radiated positivity, creating a more enjoyable experience for their coworkers and customers.

Admittedly the staff has some conflicts, but they solved them quickly and set their differences aside. “We are family-owned, so there are a lot of conflicts,” Mariah explained. “A lot of us go home and sleep in the same house as well. There is conflict, but we try to leave it at work. We usually just do a lot of direct confrontation. We just talk amongst each other and try to
get it resolved before we leave.” For Mariah, this was especially important because she often relied on her mom, Linda Frigaard, to babysit her daughter when she had a busy evening.

Working with family presented a few challenges for the group. Some head butting was to be expected, but they were always there for each other. Family ties, like these, kept Linda Lohn-Swanson coming to Linda’s Café. She was a chipper and social older woman who couldn’t speak highly enough of the restaurant. All the staff members knew who she was. She was a celebrity to them. “The reason that we like it the best is because it is small, and it’s family-oriented and it’s family-owned,” She shared. “Do families always get along together? No, but I tell you if there’s anything, they back them 100%. If there’s anything going on, your family members are there working with you.”

Linda had eaten at the restaurant often enough that everyone knew her routine order, and when she changed it, even the cooks commented on how out of the ordinary it was. She valued the staff’s support for each other. It reminded her of what a family should be.

Waitresses had specific tables assigned to them, and even though it wasn’t a rule, they were expected to cover for each other when business picked up. The lack of written rules were a result of the staff growing up together and sharing common values. It portrayed the laid-back environment of the café while capturing the dedicated and sincere approach taken by the staff. If anything ever spilled or dropped everyone would acknowledge it saying, “Fumble.” Then, whoever was available to help would rush over to clean it up, demonstrating their unity as a staff. Their jobs meant more to them than the money they made. Fulfilling the minimal job requirements was not acceptable. They strove to be the best they could be, and went above and beyond to help each other.
The team player attitude extended beyond the café and out to the community. The entryway displayed small handmade items like soap, potholders, candles, and birdhouses for sale. Trophies and pictures from several of the Rogers High School sports teams indicated their connections with the community and willingness to help the small businesses around them. They understood the struggle of competing with the surrounding franchises and corporate chains and they promoted taking the risk to start a small business. “We try to help out the small people in the area including the Rogers High School just to try to keep Rogers connected with our café because this is our only location,” Mariah explained.

When it came down to it, the staff members were proud of the work they put in. They celebrated at the end of the day by each putting in one final order for lunch and gathered at the high counter, taking moment to relax and bond with each other. This tradition kept them close as a staff. Being family and friends strengthened their relationships as coworkers. Without these bonds, they wouldn’t have been able to create the fun and welcoming atmosphere present within the café. Irreplaceable moments like these set the Linda’s staff apart and motivated them to come to work every day with good attitudes and smiles on their faces. It wasn’t a job to them; it was a hobby.

IV. Conclusion

Walking into my observations, I was nervous and shy. I learned that when meeting new people I am not always willing to take the first step and introduce myself, but if approached by someone else, I will slowly begin to open up and break out of my shell. Linda’s Café taught me that I need to step back and take the time to appreciate the simple things in life. I am easily swooped up into a whirlwind of activity and lose focus on what is really important. Making time
for my family and friends is necessary. They are the truest and most valuable relationships I will have in my life, and they can’t be recreated.

Most of my assumptions about the group proved to be correct. Their jobs are much more complex than what they seemed to be on the surface. For this small-town café it is about providing good service and creating strong bonds with the customers. While there are conflicts among the staff, they manage to work them out quickly. They welcome everyone who walks through their doors, and want to be a positive influence on the community surrounding them.

As long as the café continues to have regular customers, it will have a steady source of income. The business may not grow, but it will live on. The atmosphere will probably remain the same. I do not foresee the restaurant trying to keep up with the newest styles. They want their customers to have an escape from the craziness of the outside world and relax. Linda Frigaard and Linda Grady will likely remain active members of the staff until the day they are ready to retire. The staff will always be together no matter what happens.

The café provided refreshingly simple values in a world that is often consumed by social media. They encouraged looking for the positives in life instead of always picking at the negatives. The staff realized that every day they have the opportunity to affect someone’s life, and they get to choose what kind of an influence they want to be. When it came down to it, the dominant value of the group was treating their customers and the community as they wanted to be treated. They stripped away the all the complex ideas of running a business and boiled it down to one simple idea: respect and value customers, so they will come back. “I think our customers come back because, obviously, the food and because of us,” Grady’s outspoken daughter Stephanie said. “If the staff sucked or if our service sucked, they wouldn’t come back. I wouldn’t.”
Works Cited


Frigaard, Mariah. Personal Interview. 21 Feb. 2015.


Toering, Stephanie. Personal Interview. 21 Feb. 2015.