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The Moral Maze of Food Bank Use

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The Moral Maze of Food Bank Use

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Abstract

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Abstract

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Introduction

The rise of the foodbank has been well chronicled in the UK and beyond (Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014, Riches, 1997 and Poppendieck, 1998). However, what has not been much discussed is the interactions between the food bank actors and their referrals. Yet this is an important step in trying to understand the role of foodbanks amongst vested interests, including the political class, foodbank providers and their donors, religious congregations, the media and citizens. This complexity can be framed in a society that arguably faces a series of economic crises since at least the 1970s (Streeck 2013). This crisis in European Capitalism is defined by a response of austerity and welfare retrenchment and revival in the vista of the deserving/undeserving poor and is most clearly associated in the public mind with unprecedented state debt, private debt and vastly increased inequality gap. As poverty is understood as the result of structural issues, channelled by decisions that are made above the control of the individual (Lister, 2004), this

article navigates through the complexity of social attitudes and confusions about foodbanks within a structure/agency debate. Within this, the authors have chosen to define the foodbank referral process as a 'moral maze' because it creates different trajectories and narratives of food poverty, the role of the state and the social responsibility on us all as citizens.

Morality is a social construction pertaining to a setting in time and place. In common discourse society has some idea about what is meant by a set of Victorian values. In the public discourse connections have been made between Victorian values and current-day values, reflecting age-old prejudices about deserving and undeserving poor. However, what exactly do we mean when we profess that actors in the foodbank context are walking through a moral maze? Moreover, what do these morals look like and in what way are the paths of the actors like a maze? A maze is a route from A to B that takes considerably longer than it should with many dead ends and frustrations along the way. We intend to demonstrate how this is the experience of actors in the foodbank context.

Theoretical Framework

Chronicling the rise of the emergency food aid system of the UK (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014), the foodbank has been key to how people struggling with financial difficulties have been able to secure access to emergency food when all other sources; including social security and family support have failed. Foodbanks are charitable organisations, typically run through religious settings that are involved with distributing free food to people in need. In the UK a national network of foodbanks is provided through the charity the Trussell Trust and occupy around two thirds of foodbanks nationwide with the remainder provided by non-affiliated independent foodbank organisations (Beck, 2019). Both the Trussell Trust and independent foodbanks are usually run by volunteers with food donated from members of the

local community and supermarkets. Bolstering the charitable foodbank, a whole industry has evolved in support, of not just food, but also through the donation of voluntary time and coordination, delivery, referral and management plus partnerships. The foodbank has grown into what could be understood to be akin to Hatcher's 'poverty industry' (2016). Framing this poverty industry, May et al (2019) have also approached the bureaucratic convergence of the foodbank and its referral system as a Kafkaesque infrastructure, interacting with Lipsky's (1980) Street-level Bureaucrats at various intersections. Yet, additional critical depth to this position finds that the role of the referral system identifies that both service users and service providers are forced to interact within a bureaucratic 'moral maze', questioning identities of deservedness. Iafrati (2018: 39) in his research has argued that foodbanks are not a "bottomless pit", whereby foodbanks themselves acknowledge that rising demand also means questioning the challenge of a potential rationing of provisions. Within this ideological approach, acceptance of social insecurity has developed from changes within the way social security has been portrayed within the media, forcing a re-imagining of the deserving and the undeserving poor (Shildrick et al, 2012: 168). Importantly, as addressed within this article, the power relationship that exists within foodbanking in the UK is argued to create powerful emotions of shame and embarrassment (Caraher, et al, 2014).

The Trussell Trust foodbanks and most independent foodbanks in the UK operate by a process of referral from frontline professional organisations, such as Social Services, General Practitioners, Health Visitors, and Citizens' Advice, who are asked to make an assessment of need before issuing a three-day foodbank voucher. Therefore, accessing a foodbank is normally not as straightforward as turning up and asking for food, a popular representation in the tabloid press (Murphy and Manning, 2014). However, recent research by the Independent Food Aid Network has found that up to 39.5% of independent foodbanks do not require referrals

(Loopstra et al, 2019). In the main however, acquiring a foodbank parcel requires interacting with poverty industry actors and demonstrating 'poverty' to gatekeepers of the service. Our own research findings presented here evidences the process of gatekeeping as a key component of the moral maze of foodbank delivery and the return of identities of a deserving and undeserving foodbank user.

While the process of accessing a foodbank is linear, it is also taken as a measure of last resort (Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014: 63). Other avenues typically include eating less, changing food buying habits and visiting friends and family. They also accentuate that having a strong network of friends and family is important during times of difficulty. Expending all other available strategies, the decision to visit the foodbank is a drastic step rarely taken in isolation. The visit to a voucher holder (gatekeeper) begins the understanding of the nature of the crisis and they start signposting to the most relevant agencies who can offer further help, including the foodbank. In some cases, foodbank vouchers are offered by the voucher holding organisation, even when claiming a voucher was not the intention. However, Lambie-Mumford (2013: 75-76) summarises that having a voucher referral system is the most appropriate in terms of securing sustainability for foodbanks.

Significantly, this process ensures that the food that is given out for free is given to people who '*deserve'* to receive by those experiencing the highest level of food insecurity. This identification of people in need in order to issue people with a food voucher is used by Trussell Trust and most independent foodbanks. This is done to ensure the provisions that they are supplying are given to the most in need and that the public's confidence in foodbanks is not undermined as it might be if free food was handed out to those who did not need it.

Thompson, Smith and Cummins (2019: 96) point out that potential foodbank users must 'convince' the gatekeeper referring organisations of their need so that they may receive a voucher from them. Garthwaite (2016) further identifies the voucher referral system as being inherently moralistic and judgemental and that this produces a deserving and undeserving identity. Moreover, the referral process does not sufficiently address an association with hardship that is experiential in nature, such as drug misuse as a consequence of childhood trauma (Beck, 2018). Purdam, Garratt and Esmail have commented, that there is a high social cost attached to the loss of self-esteem through the social shame and embarrassment felt through what is implied begging for food (2015: 1079). Allied to this is a level of shame attached to demonstrating hardship to someone from within their own community in order to secure food.

May (2014) has argued that the modern UK foodbank is framed within a religious dictum of providing unconstrained help. Yet, with the rise of food poverty across the UK, this once unconstrained help has introduced regulation to avoid the potentiality for overuse and exploitation and the resultant loss of public trust (Beck, 2018). As a regulated system, provided through the voucher redeeming arrangement detailed above, foodbanks have become a much bureaucratised and a highly regulated provision erring on the side of distinctive identity shaping. As May (2014) argues, religious based foodbanks have been set-up as a demonstration of active faith and recognition of the rise in localised poverty, and the desire to help their local community. However, as a congregation of volunteers with restricted resources, *provision* and *resource management* are balanced between *'supply* and *demand'*. With this, May (2014) argues that religious involvement in foodbanks is to "give without qualification" creating a contradiction between *supply* and *demand*, as giving without qualification results in demand out-stripping supply. This need to make allocation decisions doesn't sit well with religious

philanthropy, as congregations don't wish to arrive at making moral decisions over who deserves food and who doesn't. May (2014) discusses this position as a 'subcontracting of the moral difficulty' by foodbanks over to organisations skilled in making assessments. Iafrati (2017: 42) adds that this role occupied by foodbanks has become too important to remain unexamined. From our research, we add that this referral assessment is an emotional exchange between gatekeepers of the food, and those in receipt, as it requires a demonstrable appearance of '*need'*. In doing so, this *need* becomes translated to the a of self-esteem for the individual, reflective of the 'dark-side' of foodbanking (Caraher et al, 2014).

Most foodbanks now base their acceptance qualification on external partners as gatekeepers involved in decision-making and assessment. May et al (2019) frames this as a 'moral distancing', outsourcing this decision engenders voucher-holders as the start of the 'moral maze' and bureaucratisation of provisions. The voucher-holding referring organisations now must make a moral and service decision over who can access the foodbank, and, more decisively, who cannot. By registering to be a foodbank voucher-holder, front-line care organisations engage in decision-making and make a distinction between those whom they *believe* deserve help and those who do not (Beck, 2018). This highlights a manifest and intrinsic imbalance of power towards the voucher-holding organisations in their decision-making process and establishes a problematic deserving and undeserving poor narrative. However, we agree that a competent referral system is an improvement on an on-the-spot judgement of the foodbank volunteer.

Katz (2013: x) argues that the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor has been an identity that has shifted with time and context. However, the enduring categorisation still creates a divergence in societal treatment, as the undeserving poor are considered to have

brought this situation upon themselves (Katz, 2013: x). This bifurcation of poverty identities, described by Lister (2004: 102) as a negative system is associated with the process of stigmatisation and how society sees 'the poor', and thus how society treats 'the poor' - either as deserving of support or not.

Poppendieck indicates that a certain level of assessment is required as providing free food – no questions asked – raises the question "will people who could afford to purchase food show up at a pantry for a food box…?" (1998: 236). Food pantries in the US usually require some form of assessment before they handout food, justifying that if the food pantry option is made too appealing on the basis of it being free food – no questions asked, then they could be inundated with people not necessarily experiencing a crisis (1998: 237). Additionally, this will also create a negative effect on those who donate to foodbanks risking their donating behaviour, as food on a constant supply to anyone could not be maintained indefinitely.

However, the referral system approach to foodbank use is predicated on the fact that it aims to help the service user by ensuring that the referring organisation is providing all the help that is at their disposal. This also ensures that foodbanks are not becoming exhausted through continual and non-essential use. This paper highlights that referring organisations could be negating their ability to help people, or perhaps saving on the costs associated with helping people, by simply providing them with a foodbank voucher to access free food. Williams et al (2016: 2296) draw attention to this arguing that several foodbanks take deliberate steps to not operate a voucher system, preferring instead to maintain dignity and unconditionality. However, Lambie-Mumford (2013: 75-76) summarises the voucher referral system is the most appropriate in terms of securing sustainability for foodbanks providers, prioritising their use as

a crisis intervention. Therefore, foodbanks offer food support whilst the service user is placed on a waiting list for support from statutory authorities (Lambie-Mumford, 2013).

Methods

For our research, qualitative interviews with foodbank users, providers and referring organisations were conducted between June 2014 and June 2015 across Wales. The research questions aimed to examine the rising use of foodbanks and interrogating the place of structure and agency as causes that may shape 'deserving/undeserving' identities.

In total, fifty-three qualitative interviews and three focus-groups (nineteen participants per focus- group) N=56 were conducted to generate a complete picture of the moral maze of foodbank referral decisions. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews with foodbank coordinators and their referring organisations were held alongside focus-groups (nineteen foodbank volunteers). Finally, twenty-seven semi-structured biographical interviews with people using the foodbank service were also conducted. This was done to ensure validity of results through triangulation and confirmation. The recruitment and sampling of service providers followed a purposive sampling approach whereby all known referral organisations were approached and entered into the study accordingly. Convenience sampling was considered the most appropriate means towards attaining a suitable sample size within the community of foodbank service users. Recruitment of both service users and providers was drawn from both the Trussell Trust and independent Welsh Foodbanks (and their associated voucher-holding organisations).

Figure 1 here

All interview and focus-group transcripts were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory three-stage coding process. Starting with line-by-line coding, transcripts were 'fractured' creating initial codes (Charmaz 2014: 341) and opening the data to descriptive interpretation (Holton, 2007: 275). Identifying early concepts and drawing similar codes together, coding stage-two created conceptual themes between each transcript as themes emerge within and across the data through analytical abstraction (Charmaz, 2003: 67). These more prominent codes allow for the development of analytical ideas to form into conceptual categories as the line-by-line codes become subsumed into more focused codes (Charmaz, 2008: 189).

The final stage of coding brings together focused codes to create an analytical space for the development of theoretical ideas about the interview data (Charmaz, 2014: 150). As coded transcripts allow us to theorise on what is being argued through the data, this research will present an emergence of the theoretical position about the referral process of foodbanks being a moral maze.

Ethics

Understanding the necessity of ethical consideration within a qualitative study of people's lives is essential in the social sciences. Before empirical research for this study began, ethical approval from Bangor University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Board was granted. It was important to ensure that both foodbank service users and service delivery participants were not harmed from participating in this research, for each group needed to be protected and given anonymity. All participants were under no obligation to participate, and those who did contribute have been provided with a pseudonym.

Findings

Measuring the levels of poverty across Wales, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation have found that there are approximately 710,000 people or nearly a quarter of the population who live in poverty (JRF, 2018: 2). What's more, in the years of austerity 2010 to date, poverty has been strongly associated with food insecurity, namely people's inability to be able to secure an adequate, amount of food. The findings in this paper reflect the level of acceptance of social insecurity and the ascendancy of neoliberalism, retrenchment and individual responsibility. Interview quotations below reflect discussions with service providers identifying decision making within the moral maze of foodbank use. Significantly, decisions for referral tended to concur across the sample. When positioned with interview data with service users, similar arguments over deservingness were also identified.

In conversation with Helen, a foodbank coordinator, causes of rising foodbank use were clear;

> "*Its definitely austerity led. You know. Wage levels, zero-hour-contracts and all those things that make people think; 'I'm less stable, and less secure'".*
>
> (Siobhan, Referring-Agency, N.W. Wales).

Our findings show that foodbank voucher-holding organisations view divisions within society as having encouraged an alternative form of community solidarity. This is represented throughout many conversations regarding 'experience' of foodbank use with referral organisations, who inevitably make a decision about sending someone to a foodbank or not. The idea of emerging deserving/undeserving identities of those who use foodbanks became apparent from conversations with food aid organisations. This sentiment was expressed through conversations with both voucher-holders and some foodbank staff themselves, as they raise concerns over potential abuse of foodbank resources by those considered 'less-deserving'. However, what was clear was the need to support people, deserving or otherwise, as some

referring agents didn't explicitly see their role as gatekeeper. For Chris, very little 'deservingness' assessment was applied to her interaction with people, as she was happy to provide any help at her disposal;

> *"And I think, for me, I think that, we are here to support, I struggle anyway with my background around means testing, because it is so demeaning, and shameful. I think we are here to explore with that person their options, to signpost them, if they want to be signposted, to signpost assertively, if that would help, if that's what the person wants. CAB training you see, it is about offering options, and being non-judgemental* [...] *But then we can't quantify our evidence that if we just have a feeling that someone is trying to screw you over, you just can't say; 'I think you are trying to screw me over, sod off I am not giving you a voucher'! We don't work that way, it is not right...Because we are not skilled in assessment. And assessment can sometimes border on interrogation and we are not here to do that".*
>
> (Chris, Referring-Agency, N.E. Wales).

This was not typical for all referral organisations in this research, as most did see themselves as being the decision makers, yet without wanting to decide between the deserving/undeserving;

> *"If we just issued the foodbank voucher to anyone who walked through the door who said they needed one, we'd hammer the organisations and it would be an ongoing cycle. You need to address the problem […] we could exhaust them! We could stretch their resources beyond what they can cope. And it doesn't help the client either. What's the point of them having to come here? And even in a genuine case, if they keep coming in, they have to go through the indignity of it. […] We call it emergency use only. […] That is when we issue these [vouchers]".*
>
> (Siobhan – Referring-Agency, N.W. Wales).

Siobhan works for a welfare rights charity and makes regular referrals to both her local Trussell Trust and independent foodbanks. She also explained that most of her referrals are associated with changes, delays or reductions in social security payments. Having to make referral decisions moves the discussion towards understanding how the referral system invokes feelings of shame and embarrassment for the foodbank user; as they are asked to demonstrate why they need to use the service. Sentiments of shame and embarrassment were observable in discussions with people in the foodbank;

> "*I'm ashamed coming in here! I think that other people are a lot worse off than me. I shouldn't really be coming here. But on the other hand, I'm hungry. You know, there are people with children; elderly people; I do feel embarrassed and ashamed."*
>
> (Nia, foodbank user, N.W. Wales).

> *"I have never been in this situation before in my life. Not where I've been so desperate where I have had to come begging for food"*
>
> (Duncan, foodbank user, Mid-Wales).

> *"It's the embarrassment of coming here and taking the food from someone else, when usually, you'd struggle and survive* [...] *Well I went with a few neighbours, I felt a bit easier going in with someone else, rather than on my own. I think if I, come the first time, I don't think I would have done it. I would have preferred not to. But the encouragement of my neighbours who needed it themselves, we all come together, we all went home together"*
>
> (Teresa, foodbank user, S.E. Wales).

Helen volunteers as a coordinator for her local independent foodbank. She describes her acquiescence to a deserving and an undeserving identity for the people using the service she

coordinates, describing them here as 'ordinary people'. This hint at 'ordinary people', becomes value-laden, as the opposite to ordinary people would be those who are unordinary and living chaotic disorganised lifestyles;

> *"I'm aware that we serve a good proportion of people with addictions. Now, I came into it thinking it would be your ordinary people who were hitting crisis for some reason. Sudden redundancy, sudden illness, sudden bereavement, divorce, relationship breakdown whatever. Sudden loss of benefits, or the gap between hitting crisis and claiming benefit, and finding themselves literally with no money for a short period of time. But what we actually see is a lot of people who have far more chaotic lifestyles, and whatever money they have coming in, food isn't their first priority".*
>
> (Helen – Foodbank Coordinator, N.W. Wales)

Helen's account highlights that within the foodbank system there are clear *deserving/undeserving* identities. Probing this line of inquiry further she also has a clear idea that those who visit her foodbank could be hampered by bureaucratic structural barriers;

> *"Because we recognise that all the deserving people using foodbanks, for want of a better term, their circumstances weren't going to be sorted in the space of three food vouchers. We abandoned that idea because it takes longer than that for people to get on their feet, you know. And now with sanctions, we are hearing that peoples' money is being stopped for up to 3 months. So, three food parcels are nine days. What do you do for the rest of the three months?"*
>
> (Helen, Foodbank Coordinator, N.W. Wales)

She also demonstrates that the foodbank system holds a normative assumption that people suffering with chaotic lifestyles, such as addiction have their deservedness brought into question before issuing a voucher. Yet, deserving or undeserving, foodbank referral

organisations were undivided in agreement that, if a person needs help, it will be provided. Contributing to the complexity of a moral maze, some volunteers also reflected on their own assumptions of what the identity of poverty should look like;

> *"The other situation is; people come in for food, sometimes, and then we serve them the food because they have got a voucher, so they have cleared the [referral organisation]. And then when you follow them out the door they get in a car! Now you don't know whether they have borrowed the car, or whether they are actually driving around in a car. They can afford to drive a car, but they come to the foodbank to get food.*
>
> (Thomas, Foodbank volunteer, S.E. Wales).

In discussing foodbank use with people experiencing food poverty our research also highlights how the structural causes of poverty become hidden within this moral maze.

> *"I think, I must have had ADHD, but in them days it wasn't recognised […]. I can remember it because a bird came down the chimney, and it frightened me to death, I was screaming man, I thought I was going to die, you know. And they [parents] come up and they laughed, and they said it is only a bird […]. But I didn't think it was funny because I had been tied to my cot with my mam's stockings"*
>
> (Iain – Foodbank User. N.E. Wales).

Probing Iain's story further, it became clear that as a child he was removed from his parents care by social services. He was then placed in a string of care homes where he was then sexually abused by staff and public officials associated with his local authority care system. The institutional failings of the local authority care system and social services were seen by Iain as contributing to his current position. As an adult, mental health issues ensued and Iain battled

with post-traumatic stress disorder, prescription drug abuse and suicide attempts as he tried to control his situation;

> *"But it was because I was hiding this secret for thirty-five years. And my head has just burnt out […]. I have been on the Valium for years, and my head is just burnt out […] I took them to try and forget, because I have nightmares".*
>
> (Iain – Foodbank User. N.E. Wales).

For Iain, this prescription drug abuse evolved into illegal drug use and he found himself in and out of prison. On this occasion, Iain's referral to the foodbank was due to insufficient income; following his Work Capability Assessment he was found fit for work. Due to poor mental health, he found it hard to make the appointment and ultimately his social security payment was sanctioned.

Most foodbanks are organised around allowing three visits per user over a given period. Introduced as a method of maintaining credibility with the referring organisation, this 'rule of three' as one foodbank volunteer member explains is, however, a flexible one. It highlights the moral decisions that providing food aid can bring, especially so given the complex changing social welfare landscape and heightened levels of poverty. If a service user approaches the foodbank without having a voucher (if they have used their entitlement for this period) the volunteers can issue further food at their discretion. This 'discretion' postulates a certain level of conditionality attached to foodbank use and raises questions over the capability for all volunteers to be able to make moral judgements. But, how are these morals constructed and invoked in this situation? Our research has found that this *flexibility* and discretion allows the volunteer to be able to decide between those whom they would like to offer further help to and those whom they may deem 'undeserving'. Crucially, this addresses how, even within the

religious setting of a foodbank, there could exist resentment towards the undeserving poor, taken here by foodbank volunteer Evan to be the addict;

> *"Oh, on the amount of vouchers. It helps us in a way that we are only supposed to give out three vouchers so all the people that we know are on the borderline, or drug addicts, or alcoholics, we can say; 'Sorry, you have had your three vouchers'.*
>
> *On the other hand we have got the flexibility, if we see a family with three kids and we know that they are starving, we can still give food. So it still gives us a little flexibility".*
>
> (Evan - Foodbank Coordinator. N.W. Wales)

Evan addresses how they can make 'street-level' decisions over someone's 'deservedness' for food. He also reports how a decision can be made if the person who is asking for help appears to be 'deserving'. On the face, these decisions are made to dispel fears of dependency and abuse of foodbank supplies. However, these judgements see people going without food. Deserving or not.

The wish to dispel dependency fears within the foodbank comes from the management of the supply and demand issue highlighted above. As foodbanks depend upon food that is donated by the public and supermarkets, voucher holding organisations (and foodbanks in some cases) find themselves involved in navigating a moral maze over deservedness and public acceptability of whom the donated food is given to. As Siobhan makes clear this becomes a fine tightrope to walk for both foodbanks and voucher holders;

> *"You do have in your mind this deserving/undeserving poor thing. It is very difficult not to. […] Also expressed has been a concern that donors knew some of the people going to the foodbank, that donor fatigue would kick in. Because people would say; 'well that's not who we want our food to go to!' […] But it is a constant battle of head*

and heart. […] Yeah, certainly people feel very much that they want the food to go to the deserving poor. Whoever they are! And there is a risk that people will stop giving".

(Siobhan – Referring-Agency, N.W. Wales)

It is clear with the argument presented by Siobhan that the worry over who deserves, and who does not deserve to use a foodbank not only lies with those responsible for making the decision, but that there is almost a fear that they need to keep this in line with what the public expects;

"And you know people, if you get the smart phone, you have got the smart phone for another two years, you have got a contract, what can you do? It is going to be there even if your benefits stop and you've got no money. The same as my phone will be there if everything went wrong in my life.

(Sarah, Referral-Agent, Mid-Wales)

The power of a media driven influence was a point raised by other voucher holding referral organisations, as they expect to do battle with public perceptions about people in food poverty and what happens in reality. Arguing that the recent portrayal of some individuals living within the benefits system had been a point of public/media manipulation, the issue of the Channel 4 T.V. programme 'Benefits Street' was a watershed moment in the public perception of people in poverty;

Owen "*What worries me is people's attitudes to foodbanks. We are being manipulated by the media. If you are lucky enough to have a job, be healthy, have an income and things like that. We are being drip-fed, that people on benefits, people that need the food vouchers are just scroungers and propping up their budget".*

Gabe "*It's the media mentality isn't it, things like Benefit-Street".*

Mikes *"Oh, Benefit-Street has done so much damage".*

Sam *"But people believe it. They really do".*

(Referring-Agency Focus-group – N.E. Wales)

Yet deserving or undeserving, foodbanks and their voucher-holding organisations were undivided in their agreement that if a person needs help it will be provided. As foodbank manager Michael explains, the role of the foodbank seems to have become politicised given the retrenchment of a stable social security welfare safety-net;

> *"increasingly, it just feels like the government is making policies that we are having to pick-up the fallout from. They* [foodbank users] *can't get money, so we literally are having to feed the people who would have been picked up by the system before [...] it shouldn't be our responsibility to meet the needs of the poverty of this country when it is created by poor government policies, the greed of the wealthy few, all of those things. But it shouldn't be charities responsibility to plug the gaps [...] It is ridiculous that bunches of well-meaning volunteers, propping up as I say, putting the sticky plaster on this massive wound. It is terrible that it is becoming expected"*
>
> (Michael, Foodbank Manager, S. Wales)

One area of contention was the difficulties of deciding if the assistance is needed because it is helping the family, or if in doing so, was this enabling expenditure on other things. As the discussions with various voucher holders moved towards a deeper understanding of referral reasons and *their* decision-making process, and how this needed to fit in line with public perceptions. The issue of drugs and alcohol drew much attention as being one such area where the voucher holders usually expressed a sense of consternation;

> *"I think, most people who come to us aren't thinking, 'great free food'. They are thinking - 'this is awful, I have even got to go and get my food from a foodbank'.- There are possibly some[…] people with addictions, you know chaotic lifestyles, who, perhaps not quite as blatantly as that, say to themselves, - 'I can spend it all on something else,*

and then go to the [foodbank] for free food'. - But that does end up happening. I mean, it's terrible, it's difficult, isn't it? Because you don't know about everybody who walks through the door".

(Riley – Referral-Agency – S. Wales)

Riley argues that there is a high cost to free food, and that this is at the loss of dignity borne out through using a foodbank. It seems that the voucher holding organisations must walk a fine line within their decision-making process, as it ultimately asks for a distinction to be made over the deserving and undeserving user.

Discussion

The representation of foodbanks in society reflects a sharp rise in social insecurity and food poverty. The financial crisis of 2008 led to austerity measures and reductions in welfare spending (Shreek, 2013). Consistent with Ronson and Caraher (2016), the argument holds that neoliberalism and social security are, in fact incompatible, and this encourages the demonization of those in receipt of social security. Within a neoliberal mindset, being on low-income draws attention to how social security is spent. What could be seen as the 'mismanagement' of income, by those in better circumstances, therefore, draws a distinction between what people on low-income are 'able' to spend their money on and what others consider it 'should' spend on. As eloquently argued by Tirado (2014), people on low-incomes are in no position to 'choose' what their income is spent on, and, in most cases, spending money in ways that may seem improvident is normally done as a means of 'getting-by'.

However, Lister (2004: 126) argues that the experience of poverty is not always the fault of the individual agent but is at times driven by structural changes impacting on people's abilities to

manage. There has been much theorising about the social causes of the precariat from the Minority Poor Law Report (1909) which blamed economic forces for unemployment, to the current critique of in-work insecurity and low-income as an adjustment in capitalism to boost wealth and production. The context of the sudden rise in foodbanks can also be theorised as an astonishing response to the 2008 crisis and subsequent austerity measures.

Welfare retrenchment was blamed on the poor, as it was deemed that their use of services was a problematic drain on society. Retrenchment of welfare was coupled with the politicization of voluntary engagement in the new and overly optimistic Tory policy of the 'Big Society', encouraging community driven voluntary support and a stepping-back of government involvement. Here acknowledge Wolfgang Seibel's (1989) Shunting Yard Theory, whereby Governments, in order to save reduce spending in certain areas, in the hope that the community will pick up the pieces. In effect shunting this responsibility over to the volunteering sector that is already over-stretched. Politically, this works to show the concerned electorate that the issue of food poverty is being dealt with, and that current policies have enabled this to happen. In this respect foodbanks are a 'systematic addition to public welfare' (Ghys, 2018: 183). In agreement with Ronson and Caraher (2016), what is really happening is a political handwashing of the issue, shunting the work of tackling food poverty over to the voluntary sector, and thus creating further issues of resentment within the public eye. Using this service now, shows that people are depending upon the charitable good will of volunteers, and not, as the public wishes, that people should stand on their own two feet.

The foodbank system has become a theatre where many of the social normative values and moral judgements are played out. The actors involved in referrals must make a moral decision about who deserves to be referred to the foodbank and who does not; accepting a role within

this moral maze. They must also consider this decision within reference to the fact that over 90% of donated food comes from the public (Trussell Trust, 2020). Being a decision-maker exemplifies May's (2014) 'subcontracting of the moral difficulty' out to frontline organisations. This process has been described by Lipsky (1980) as the Street Level Bureaucrat, whereby governmental (or in this case foodbank) decisions become bureaucratised and normative rules adopted, which in turn are enacted and followed by a third party. The foodbank user, however, has to tread through this moral maze likewise, as they demonstrate their 'weakness' and thus potential shame for being in need. Decision making within the foodbank system becomes a moral maze of interactions, which confer a sense of philanthropic superiority for the provider against reduced agency for the receiver. For the public, interaction within this moral maze of philanthropic decision making has been driven by the intrusion of politically charged media, unrepresentative of the true identities of the poor. Notwithstanding the involvement of the Government who have decided to disavow themselves of responsibility, as they perform like the distant relative who visits from time to time, reprimanding people who use foodbanks; simultaneously demonstrating a political point-scoring 'concern' in the run-up to Christmas (Cosslett, 2018).

As someone using the foodbank, Iain's story is poised to contest the structure and agency debate which runs through an argument over individualism, that poverty is caused by the individual, as the circumstances behind his longer-term poverty were disclosed as being not of his making, or of his individual 'life choices'. Individualism conveys the idea that we are all free agents and that we can exercise free-will over our individual life choices. However, Iain can defend his position as someone experiencing poverty and reoccurring foodbank use not through any fault of his own, but because of institutional failings by statutory services

expediting incidents out of his control. As a victim, Iain's drug use was a direct result of institutional failures of the care-system that was meant to look after him as a child.

As part of a moral maze, Iain's use of the foodbank could be linked to welfare reform. It can also be argued that his position had been exacerbated further due to spending money on his addiction to drugs. Here, as the evidence above has shown, judgments made by the referring organisations begin to walk a fine line between maintaining the public image of the foodbank as a space for support, whilst not becoming a self-defeating act supporting addiction. As Helen, Evan and Siobhan made clear, they described a system that acknowledges not wishing to help the undeserving poor, because it may reduce donations, and donations keep the foodbank going.

Iain's foodbank use would, quite rightly, be understood by those external to foodbanking (the public, the media), but also by some involved within the foodbank moral maze (decision makers such as referral organisations and volunteers) to have been attributed to his heroin abuse. As this spending is superfluous to need, therefore, potentially Iain's foodbank use becomes viewed as disassociated with any structural causes. Conversely, understanding the trajectory of which life had taken for Iain, it was clear that there was a direct association between child sexual abuse, and Iain's decline into heroin abuse and foodbank use.

Drawing on May's (2014) theory of 'subcontracting of the moral difficulty', this paper furthers this argument, namely that the outsourcing of moral difficulties that occurs within the moral maze of foodbank usage is beset with identities of deserving and undeserving poor, and that they permeate through the actors involved with delivering and receiving this service. This is exemplified by participants within our research as they describe how social security has

become devalued as less of a 'right' and more a source of shame and stigma. Having to provide a reason for being in receipt of social security was associated with having to justify their reason for using the foodbank. Justifying *their need* was used as a mechanism for defending *their use* of the foodbank, as they simultaneously engaged and reflected on their feelings of embarrassment of claiming food assistance. In justifying *their need*, the participants also engaged in creating a social hierarchy of perceived need amongst fellow foodbank users (Nia). It is this process of othering and the forming of hierarchical internal identities - a theoretical framework of conditionality that helps explain the moral maze.

Expounding on the sociological imagination and research findings, we theorise how food poverty and insecurity could be addressed differently. We are not arguing that the foodbank is necessarily a model full of morality, after all, there might be a welcome justification for citizen involvement in a voluntary system of mutual aid. However, the foodbank model is problematized because it is politicised. Rather, we argue that the antithetical position to foodbanks is the universal provision of food security through adequate social security as a human right and that social security payments should meet a minimum income threshold. More recently, there have been calls for a UK Ministry of Food Poverty (Parliament.UK, 2019) that, in an apparent concession, the Government will now allow the collection of data on the amount of people experiencing food poverty (Butler, 2019). This change in policy will see a national index of food insecurity incorporated into the UK-wide Family Resources annual survey; counting the numbers of low-income families who go hungry due to a lack of affordable food. Evidentially, this concession allows authoritative evidence on the causes of food poverty, acknowledging the extent to which food poverty levels are intrinsically linked to personal problems and structural drivers - such as welfare reform and social inequality.

Conclusion

Our research identifies concerns about the sustainability of the foodbank model in a complex moral structure of support. Key to sustainability is the supply and demand model and public trust in foodbanks. The public are the main donors to the foodbank - in the eye of the donating public, those ***deserving*** of help are typically who they think of when placing tins in collection-baskets in supermarkets; namely, those who have fallen on hard-times due to no fault of their own and of a **structural** nature. Perhaps they are not thinking that this tin will go to help an addict who has spent all their benefit money on heroin and therefore, has no money left to buy food for themselves and their dependents. This would be representative of an **agency** driven reason and draws on a discourse of foodbank conditionality. This is a risky image for the foodbank since it could lead to unsustainability as donors stop donating. Therefore, the referral organisations need to maintain their bureaucratic approach over whom they decide to refer or not; constructing a chain of moral decisions that we have described as a moral maze.

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Table

Figure 1

Participant	User group	Number of interviews
Semi structured interviews	Food bank Coordinator n=7 Referral Organisation n=19	N=26
Focus groups	Food bank volunteer focus group members n=19	n=3
Semi structured biographical interviews	Food bank user n=27	n=27
		Total interviews and focus groups N=56