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The Ethical Dilemmas of Food Banking: an Analysis of the More Than Food Programme

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1. Introduction

This article makes an intervention into debates about the ethics of foodbanking, a now pervasive element in the welfare provision landscape in the UK, reflecting developments elsewhere in Europe, Canada, and the US (Ghys, 2018; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). It also connects with wider debates about the role of voluntary and community action, in particular, whether they offer something that is distinctive (from the public and private sectors) that confers them with a comparative advantage when addressing contemporary welfare issues (Billis and Glennerster, 1998). The unique focus here is on the evolving role of foodbanks and, in particular, the move to providing additional services (often referred to as 'foodbank plus') alongside the distribution of emergency food parcels. This is a hitherto little-researched topic of investigation despite its prominence in the policy discourse since the publication of the 2015 All Parliamentary Group on Hunger report 'Feeding Britain,' which provided mainstream political support for such an approach.

While the growth of foodbanks might be framed as a moral response to poverty, scholars have highlighted an ethical ambiguity at the heart of foodbanking. On the one hand, researchers have used different conceptual tools such as 'liminal spaces', 'in the meantime' and 'ethical citizenship' (Cloke *et al*, 2016, 2007; Williams *et al*, 2016) to identify the foodbank as an ethical space. While recognising that they do not represent a sustainable solution to deprivation, foodbanks have been considered a relatively benign 'sticking plaster' or 'quick-fix' solution aimed at 'patching up the holes' in the social welfare safety net (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2017; Dowler and Caraher, 2003). On the other hand, academics have drawn attention to contradictory dynamics, suggesting that foodbanks are permeated by ideological values and practices bound up with neoliberalism, austerity and the rolling back of the state that can (albeit unintentionally) do harm. Among the arguments proliferating are those claiming that the institutionalisation of foodbanks essentially depoliticise food poverty absolving governments from responsibility, legally and morally (Williams *et al*, 2016; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Critics also point to the stigma, humiliation and shame felt by foodbank users who are positioned by a wider narrative of individual failure (Cloke *et al*, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016; Horst *et al*, 2014). This has led to claims that foodbanks have no place in tackling food poverty, as well as calls for foodbanks to engage in more ethically just practices which do more to promote social justice (Lambie-Mumford, 2013, 2017; Cloke, *et al*, 2016). Such debates are more significant now than ever: foodbank usage had increased exponentially (by an estimated 81%) during the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic collapse (Power *et al*, 2020).

The food aid charity movement has not been immune to these ethical dilemmas and has looked for ways of improving the role of food aid as part of wider poverty reduction goals (Ghys, 2018). The foodbank 'plus' model which seeks to extend the range of services provided by foodbanks is indicative of this. This article adds a new and additional layer of understanding to debates about the ethics of foodbanking, through a focus on one largescale foodbank plus model the *More Than Food* programme (MTF) delivered by the Trussell Trust. Our analysis builds on an interdisciplinary body of literature concerned with the ethical foundations of foodbank practices by asking whether MTF offers a more ethical solution to food poverty. We do this through an analysis of foodbank worker's 'lay morality' understood as everyday ethical dispositions which are articulated through (but not reducible to) existing cultural resources and discourses (Sayer, 2011). In particular, we are interested in their 'poverty knowledge'; how poverty is given meaning, understood and interpreted by those working in foodbanks (Lawson and Ellwood, 2014; O'Connor, 2002).

The article begins by outlining the wider foodbank policy and practice context within which MTF emerged and introduce our case study. In section two, we provide an overview of the divergent ways in which the ethicality of foodbanking has been understood by scholars researching in the field. We also introduce some key conceptual tools which we draw on to aid our own analysis. In the third section, we analyse our empirical data through a 'poverty knowledge' lens, interrogating the lay moral narratives that underpin MTF. As a heuristic aid, we group these dynamics into 'structural' and 'individualistic' narratives. We argue that an inherent contradiction persists between foodbankers 'structural' understanding of poverty and the implicitly agential assumptions that underpin the MTF. While this does not preclude foodbanks from playing a distinctive role in tackling poverty, it is important that attention is paid to the moral judgements that underpin and shape practice (Sanghera, 2012), as well as how best foodbanks position their 'offer' relative to other welfare providers.

2. The Study

a. The emergence of foodbanks as a source of 'more than food'

Since the mid-2010s, successive UK governments and charitable funders have advocated for foodbanks to progressively extend the scope of their provision to address more than just the immediate need for food, by seeking to also address the causes of food poverty. This was encapsulated in the 2015 All Parliamentary Group on Hunger report 'Feeding Britain,' which recommended the roll-out of a co-located 'one stop shop' model of delivery, through which foodbanks may provide advice, skills and advocacy services, alongside ameliorative food aid and social support. Foodbanks were identified as uniquely placed as a 'gateway' for people who might not otherwise engage with mainstream services. For its advocates, the model provided an opportunity for food aid providers to become further embedded in the provision of welfare as spaces of care that provided support for social inclusion and to overcome challenging life situations (Briggs and Foord, 2017).

Conceptual support for a wider role for foodbanks and other similar types of 'voluntary agencies' can be found in the wider academic literature where there is a suggestion that they offer something distinctive from mainstream welfare providers granting them a particular comparative advantage when financial deprivation combines with personal, social or community forms of disadvantage (Billis and Glennerster, 1998). The empirical evidence for sector-wide distinction claims, however, is contested (Miller, 2013), and described as largely "hypothetical or anecdotal" (PASC, 2008: 3) with the evidence "vast and inconclusive" (DiMaggio and Anheier, 1990: 149). In particular, the evidence that voluntary agencies focussed on poverty alleviation can do any more than support people to mitigate the consequences of poverty on a large scale, is limited (Crisp et al, 2016).

Foodbank plus projects can now be found across the UK, with foodbanks working in partnership with organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureaus to provide money advice on site and offering classes on topics such as nutrition, cooking and budgeting. Employment advisors from Jobcentre Plus have even been placed in some foodbanks to support work re-integration. In 2018, the National Lottery Community Fund launched its 'Help Through Crisis' programme which encapsulated many of these principles and supported 69 charitable partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures.

b. The More Than Food Programme

The Trussell Trust - the largest network of foodbanks in the UK consisting of more than 400 foodbanks – was one of the early adopters of foodbank plus. Trussell Trust foodbanks provide a minimum of three days' emergency food and support to people experiencing crisis and financial hardship through vouchers allocated by local service providers. However, between 2014 and 2018, they worked with their foodbank network to develop and test a range of new

services they hoped would help people to address both the causes and consequences of poverty. This became known as the 'More Than Food Programme' (MTF) and provides the case study upon which this article is based.

The goal of MTF was to build the capacity of foodbanks to develop into community hubs, providing people in need with emergency food as well as a range of different types of support from one location. It was embedded in a wider strategy by the Trussell Trust to support people and families experiencing financial crisis and longer-term financial hardship. This involved a 'four pronged' approach: meeting immediate material needs; maximising household income; optimising household expenditure; and building resilience (figure 1). The development and implementation of the MTF programme was supported by grants from charitable funders including The Big Lottery Fund, Money Saving Expert's Martin Lewis, Comic Relief, Unilever and the Innocent Foundation.

Figure 1: The Trussell Trust's strategy for supporting financial hardship
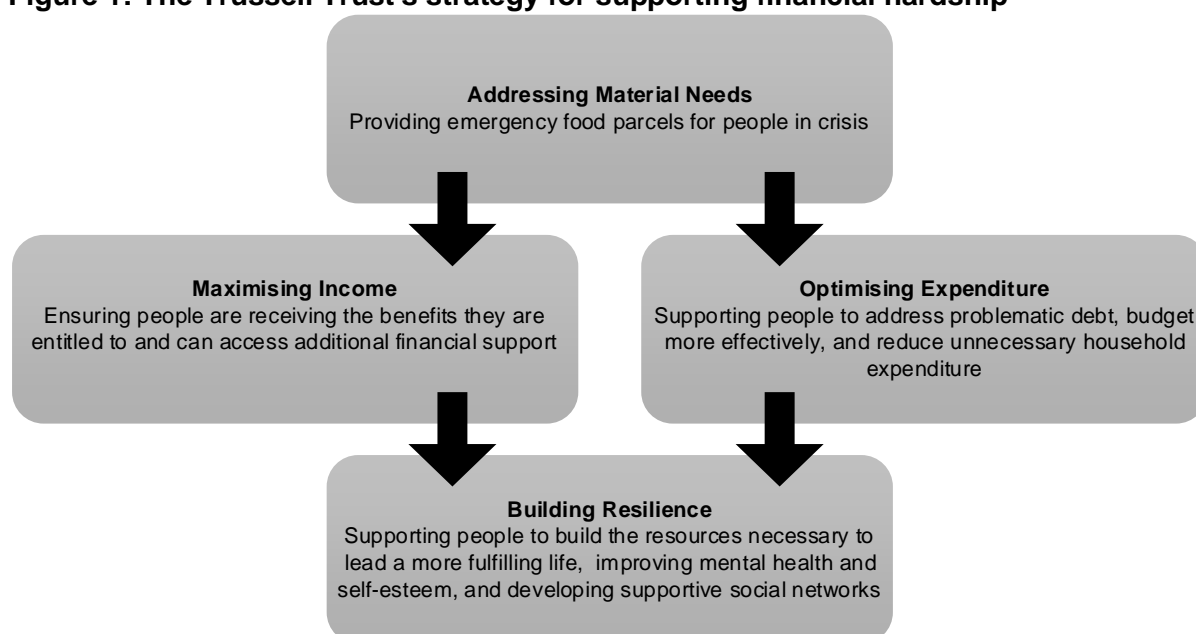
The MTF programme consisted of five 'modules': *Eat Well Spend Less* - a cookery, nutrition and budget management course that aimed to help people to eat healthily on a low budget; *Holiday Clubs* - supporting families at times when free school meals were not available by offering food and activities in a safe and convenient location; *Money Life* - linking clients with money management resources to help address debt and financial difficulties; *Energy Bank* - addressing client's energy costs and debt by identifying cost-efficient tariffs, support to switch energy provider and access to one-off grants; and *Fuel Bank* - a free top-up voucher to foodbank clients with pre-payment gas or electricity meters, helping to relieve energy debt and maintain energy use during periods of financial stress.

By April 2018, 120 foodbanks were delivering at least one MTF module and more than 11,000 adults and 3,000 children had accessed enhanced support through MTF at a foodbank (table 1).

Table 1: Overview of outputs for the More Than Food Programme

MTF programme wide outputs (2016-18)	
Foodbanks that have delivered at least one MTF module	120

Foodbanks signed-up to deliver at least one MTF module	170
Adults who have received support from the MTF programme	11,493
Children who have received support from the MTF programme	3,498

Our article draws on data collected from an independent multi-method evaluation of the MTF programme carried out between 2016 and 2018 by researchers at [HEI] and funded by the Trussell Trust. The research was approved by [HEI's] ethics committee.

We report here on one subset of data comprising 57 semi-structured interviews with individuals working within individual foodbanks usually foodbank managers (n=44) or at a strategic level within the Trussell Trust - members of the senior leadership team and operational/regional managers (n=13). Research participants were recruited via the Trussell Trust, who provided information about which foodbanks were delivering or had signed up to deliver different MTF modules. Participants were asked questions that went beyond those narrowly focussed on the operation and outcomes of MTF. This generated discussion around the challenges faced by and the needs of food bank users, the underpinning logic and rationale for MTF, as well as the longer term role of food banks in tackling poverty. It is this data on which the paper draws.

Interviews were undertaken either face-to-face or over the telephone lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and were recorded and fully transcribed. Transcripts were coded in order to identify recurring themes, a process informed by prior theoretical ideas and the wider literature on foodbanks. We acknowledge that in seeking to reduce the complexity of data, coding imposes a structure and categorisation that the research participants themselves may not have intended and represents them in ways that they may not recognise. To mitigate researcher bias, transcript coding was carried out by several members of the research team, and interpretations were shared and discussed (Belotto, 2018). Despite this, we acknowledge that bias is likely to be confirmed as often as it is challenged and that the categories imposed upon the data are shaped by our positionality. As such our findings represent our interpretation rather than an excavation of absolute 'truths', but one that derives authority from its embeddedness within extant theoretical and empirical knowledge.

3. **The ethics of foodbanking**

Evaluating the ethics of foodbanking, or charitable or philanthropic giving more broadly, is inherently complicated (Cloke *et al*, 2005). What counts as 'ethical' - broadly what is 'good', how we should live and behave towards one another - is open to debate. Evaluating ethicality is equally complex and some do so with reference to core abstract principles, while others advocate an empirical approach based on a "thick understanding of social being" (Sayer, 2011). Below, we present a synopsis of the different ways in which commentators have evaluated the ethicality of foodbanks before moving onto our own conceptual framework.

Taking the prevention of suffering as a reference point, the ethics of providing food to those in need might be perceived as an uncomplicated moral 'good'; foodbanks act in the name of morality, providing a provisioning safety net when that of the state has failed or in times of emergency (such as during the covid-19 pandemic) (Power *et al*, 2020; Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Morris, 2016; Riches, 2002). While foodbanks might not claim to contribute in any substantial way to solving the problem of food insecurity, they ensure that those in food poverty are not abandoned but rather gifted food 'in the meantime', whilst longer term solutions are sought Cloke *et al* (2016). In the UK, this has predominantly been driven by religious philanthropy and framed within an ideology of 'unconditional' help (Beck and Gwilym, 2020). This moral argument in favour of foodbanks dovetails with legal arguments whereby the right

to food is considered a human right as enshrined in law (Riches and Silvasti 2014; Silvasti and Karjalainen 2014; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). Their social good has also been defended on ecological grounds as aiding the fight against food waste (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2017), and understood as playing an active role in promoting a radical form of distribution and within a gift rather than trade economy (Cloke *et al*, 2016: 710).

The ethical dimensions of foodbanks have been evaluated not only with reference to motivation or purpose, a 'narrow' concept of distributional justice (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2017), but also with regard to how foodbank provision is enacted. Empathic and non-judgemental care has been recognised as an important element of foodbank practice and conceived through a feminist ethics of care framework (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Midgley, 2016). In this sense, foodbanks have been shown to provide a more ethical counterpoint to the uncaring dynamics of neoliberal welfare institutions (Williams *et al*, 2016; Buckingham and Jolley, 2015). Cloke *et al* (2016) suggest that encounters within foodbanks can also be generative of new ethical attitudes and political transformation which can be a catalyst for food justice advocacy (Williams *et al*, 2016; Cloke *et al*, 2016). These understandings draw attention to the agency of those on the ground and the micro-level practices of foodbank volunteers who push back, resist and divert established systems and neoliberal agendas, thereby representing what May *et al* (2019) refer to as 'ethical insurgents'. Together, these analyses imply that foodbanks do *some* good or, at least, 'no harm' (Parsell and Watts, 2017).

An alternative position prevails. Academic research also indicates that the moral judgements and practices associated with foodbanking are inflected with power and interests that do cause harm at both an individual and systemic level (Ghys, 2018). Researchers have therefore challenged an affirmation of foodbanking, questioning the extent to which such ostensibly benevolent, charitable and well-intentioned endeavours are a desirable and ethically just response to poverty. This is in recognition that these forms of provisioning have detrimental consequences for the pursuit of social justice and human flourishing.

While the experience may be off-set to a degree by the care provided by foodbank staff, there is a consensus that foodbank use is an experience often defined by shame, humiliation and stigmatisation (Cloke *et al*, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016; Horst *et al*, 2014). Much criticism has been directed at the conditionality that lies at the heart of the foodbank system driven, in part, by the inherent need to manage supply and demand given the systems dependence on donations. This necessarily brings with it a requirement for staff to make value judgements about users needs and 'deservedness' (May *et al*, 2019; Cloke *et al*, 2016) with Beck and Gwilym (2020) describing the referral process as a "moral maze". Even within the foodbank then, those in food poverty enjoy neither a legal or moral right to food aid but rather a lesser, conditional entitlement (Silvasti and Riches, 2014). Related to this, foodbanks are accused of reinforcing narratives of responsibilisation whereby the causes of food insecurity are laid at the door of individuals who have failed to adequately manage their finances. This is a moral sentiment closely linked to (often gendered) feelings of shame (Power and Small, 2021; Midgley, 2016; Bastian and Coveney, 2014; Sayer, 2011; Whiteford, 2010) and chimes with broader constructions of welfare recipients as 'abject' citizens (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2017; Garthwaite, 2017; Tyler, 2013).

A frequent claim is that foodbanks in the UK are being institutionalised as part of a shrinking state welfare system such that foodbanks and neoliberalism have become mutually constitutive (Williams *et al*, 2016; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Similar arguments have been made previously regarding the longer established foodbank system across Canada and the US (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). One example is the way in which foodbanks promote a positive public image for food corporations and reduce their food waste disposal costs (the same corporations that help generate food insecurity) (Beck, 2019; Cloke *et al*, 2016). Foodbanks are therefore accused of deflecting attention away from injustice in

the food system, allowing the government to shirk its responsibilities (DeVerteuill, 2015; Poppendieck, 1998).

As these arguments illustrate, a mix of ethical values are brought to bear on foodbanks, rendering academic conceptualisation complex (Close *et al*, 2016; Williams *et al*, 2016). Seemingly contradictory discourses and practices e.g. those of care and responsiblisation, can co-exist (Midgley, 2016). This ambiguity is reinforced by local cultures of charity that give rise to a diversity in foodbank practices thereby negating global claims of inherent (or absence of) social value (Williams *et al*, 2016). Thus, while some suggest that foodbanks lack moral worth and have no part to play in tackling food poverty (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2017), others have proposed ways in which foodbanking can become a more ethically just movement. Lambie-Mumford (2013) for instance suggests a role for foodbanks in campaign and advocacy work, while Cloke *et al* (2016) challenge foodbanks to adopt a more radical approach to a sharing economy. The foodbank plus approach that provides the focus for this article *may* be another example of how foodbanks can be re-oriented towards a more ethical model of intervention.

Within this debate, there have been instructive attempts to employ different ethical frameworks to help us appraise the moral integrity of welfare provisions. Parsell and Watts (2017), for instance, employ Singer's (2015) notion of 'effective altruism' to evaluate ameliorative provisioning for rough sleepers, which could equally be applied to foodbanks. Influenced by the ethical theory of consequentialism, this position states that it might be more ethical not to act, than act out of a well-intentioned but ill-conceived unenlightened altruism (D'Souza and Adams, 2014). Watts *et al* (2017) apply Ruth Grant's work on the ethics of incentives to assess a range of homelessness interventions e.g. day centres, soup kitchens and night shelters, which have clear parallels to foodbanks. They also caution against the assumption that even unconditional access to support (such as food aid) are not a priori 'good' and desirable arguing that these more care-full approaches can in fact be paternalistic or motivationally flawed, even encouraging harmful lifestyles.

Our contribution uses a conceptual framework that draws on ideas from relational poverty studies (Lawson *et al*., 2012; Lawson and Elwood, 2014; Elwood *et al*., 2017) together with Andrew Sayer's (2001) notion of 'lay morality'. Influenced by Marxism and feminism, relational poverty studies has emerged primarily in the US over the last two decades. It employs a distinct ontology whereby poverty is theorized as a product of social relations, rather than simply an economic phenomenon or the effect of socio-economic positioning. The interplay between political economic relations, and social and cultural processes are recognised as the complex, causal mechanisms that generate and sustain poverty (Ellwood *et al*, 2017). Studies that seek to understand these social relations focus analytical attention on governance within organizations and the everyday interactions that reproduce poverty, namely 'poverty encounters' (Lawson and Elwood, 2014). A central concern is the ways in which poverty is understood, framed, and acted upon - what O'Connor (2002) calls 'poverty knowledge' - together with an explicit ethical endeavour to re-politicize poverty alleviation knowledge and, in turn, practice.

This research agenda resonates with the work of Ruth Lister (2013; 2004) who argues for a human rights ethical discourse within anti-poverty politics, one which brings to the fore ethical questions about how people in poverty are regarded and respected. 'Poverty knowledge' can also be understood as an example of what Sayer (2011) calls 'lay' or everyday morality concerned as it with how people living in (food) poverty should be understood and treated. Lay morality is a useful conceptual aid in thinking about the moral economy of charitable giving, including the ethicality of foodbanking (Sanghera, 2016; 2012). It incorporates the notions of moral norms, sentiments or emotions, virtues and ethical reflection, and refers to the moral dilemmas of ordinary individuals in everyday life, as opposed to the development of philosophical conceptions of the 'good life' (Sayer, 2011). Despite a common capacity for

fellow-feeling (or the ability to understand others), lay morality is understood as always culturally mediated and shaped by historical and structural conditions thereby rendering ethicality socially variable and contingent. Within this understanding, moral narratives and their frames of understanding are not considered merely representational but causal, with real material impacts on human flourishing and social suffering. In what follows, we build on the above critiques of the ethicality of foodbanks by exploring the lay morality that shapes foodbank worker's poverty knowledge.

4. More Than Food: Mapping Food Poverty Knowledge

> *"I felt that we, as a foodbank network, needed to go on a journey, and that if we really wanted to deal with hunger, the first thing we all needed to understand was that it was about more than food" (Trussell Trust team)*

The development of the MTF programme represented an intentional shift in the conceptualisation and function of foodbanks from that of a short-term emergency safety net, to organisations with a more established poverty alleviation role. In this section, we present the findings from qualitative research with foodbank and Trussell Trust staff. We do not comment on the 'effectiveness' of MTF, but rather seek to understand the ethical assumptions inherent in the 'poverty knowledge' of our respondents. What we found is a complex and contradictory moral narrative in which widespread ontological beliefs about the nature of food poverty (as something structural) were frequently undermined by an individualistic counter-narrative.

The structural narrative

In our research, participants 'poverty knowledge' was disclosed as they elaborated on the rationale behind MTF, their understanding of the needs of foodbank users and what drove their food crises. During these discussions, the majority echoed wider debates by readily pinpointing to the shortcomings of foodbanks as a sticking-plaster solution to food poverty. This often underpinned a belief that foodbanks ought to be doing more by tackling the 'root causes' of their clients' deprivation:

> *"food is only a symptom of something else that's gone wrong…prevention is always better than cure" (Foodbank manger_1)*

> *"To give a person the food and then turn them away that's not helping the problem; that's just a sticking plaster over the problem" (Foodbank 2)*

Talk about causes and the prevention of food insecurity brings with it (either explicit or implicit) assumptions about the nature of poverty itself (ontology). 'Poverty knowledge' refers to the ways in which the causes of poverty are understood; how people in poverty are defined and positioned and, the implications of this knowledge for the solutions that organisations formulate and enact (O'Conner, 2002). Within participant's narratives, food poverty was often represented as a direct consequence of structures, policies and institutions, in particular, the impact of post-2012 welfare reforms. Respondents recognised the power that social policies exerted over people and expressed views consistent with the belief that responsibility for food deprivation lies not with individuals, primarily, but with social and political structures.

This explicitly politicised understanding recognises food poverty as a phenomenon that is intrinsically connected to a web of social, economic and political relations. Reductions in social security benefits, increased welfare conditionality, precarity within the labour market, low wages and funding cuts to essential welfare services were widely acknowledged as contributing factors giving rise not just to low incomes and financial deprivation, but multi-dimensional indicators of poverty and related unmet needs such as emotional stress and mental health problems. The rollout of Universal Credit was frequently identified as a key

driver because of the delays in processing applications, the fluctuating and unstable nature of the income, and the level of sanctions that were experienced by applicants:

> *"(I)n previous years it had been benefit problems, but now we see a lot of people who are in work on low income or zero hours contract, who just manage week on week but don't have any reserves" (Foodbank_4)*

> *So if you give someone a provision for three days and they're in crisis they're not going to be out of that crisis in three days, you know, so even if in twelve days they're not going to be out of that crisis at the moment, because the benefits are taking five to six weeks (Foodbank 12)*

Integral to charitable giving is "fellow-feeling" (Sayer, 2011) and within this structural narrative, a clear compassion was expressed towards individuals who were felt to have suffered social injustice as a result of socio-economic change. The nature of poverty (human need) and, therefore, what generates suffering was defined in a way that positioned foodbank users as 'victims' of a range of structural and systemic factors out of their control. Food aid for these individuals was presented as a moral obligation driven by recognition of injustice and harm - a position largely consistent with the arguments in support of food-bank services as an essential social good and human right (Power *et al*, 2020; Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Morris, 2016; Riches, 2002). These moral sentiments were underpinned both by religious faith-based or universal values identified by one participant as 'human nature': *"I think human nature takes over to say well why and what can I do to help you?" (Foodbank_2).* In this sense, participants' poverty knowledge rendered them comparable to who Sanghera (2012) - in his research into the different ways charitable giving matters to people - calls the 'moral critics of society':

> *"Poverty is the thing I'm fighting…if you narrowly define it [foodbanking] as about making sure people have a meal, the social policy aspect of it doesn't need to change. I suppose the quote that comes back to me - is it Desmond Tutu said - when you start fishing people out of the river after a while shouldn't you go upstream and figure out who's throwing them in the river" (Foodbank 6)*

Within this context, foodbank managers described feeling that it was insufficient to *only* offer an emergency food parcel if people's food deprivation needs were going to be prevented in the longer term. This meant foodbanks (charities) taking responsibility for meeting a wider range of foodbank user's welfare needs, amounting to an ambition to tackle 'poverty' *per se* (not just short-term food crises) through foodbanks having a greater presence and role within welfare support systems. With a recognition of food poverty as a manifestation of systemic or structural problems, the assumption of many was that foodbanks should not seek to reduce their role over time, but rather expand into wider service provision that had traditionally been the preserve of statutory or more established third sector providers. The 'success' that foodbanks have had in meeting their original remit, provided evidence to our respondents that they were ideally placed to reposition themselves as a crucial part of a new mixed-economy of local welfare provision, plugging gaps in local systems and infrastructure and enabling access to essential services no longer provided by the state or state-funded organisations. This led some to champion a model whereby foodbanks would evolve into a "community hub" or "one-stop shop" bringing together a range of essential welfare services under one roof:

> *"We jokingly call it NATO cos it's like a community of organisations coming together to solve a bigger problem" (Trussel Trust)*

Others, while concurring on the greater role for foodbanks, resisted this model, suggesting that foodbanks offered a 'safer' space for their clients beyond the (more punitive) state and one imbued with greater respect, care and compassion for those in poverty. Here, foodbanks were framed as morally superior and more effective (than the state) in meeting need:

> *"We also were adamant that we were never going to invite anyone from the DWP or the council to come and sit in because we really feel strongly that the foodbank is a safe space for our clients and we don't want outsiders" (Foodbank 9)*

As the perceived role of the foodbank shifts from one defined by the provision of emergency food towards anti-poverty strategies, some suggested that the moniker 'foodbank' would soon become obsolete. Within this narrative account, food became the lens through which other issues were conceptualised and the vehicle used for engaging people in order to address a wider set of (underpinning) problems such as social isolation, skills deficits, mental health problems, employment and issues related to housing. Although some expressed discomfort about the prospect of foodbanks stepping into the gap left by statutory agencies offering a disclaimer that they were not *"empire building"*, the majority felt that it was appropriate for foodbanks to fill this void; they were seen as well-placed and even best-placed to do so. So while many participants attested to a belief that in an ideal world foodbanks should not exist, they felt that in the prevailing circumstances, it was morally right for foodbanks to expand their services. Deciding where best to devote resource and energy in the short term however was acknowledged as a complex ethical question with no easy answers:

> *"I suppose the more we perceive the client to have an unmet need, the more likely we are to bend over backwards…I'm having to make a judgement call on which of these is the least worst, or the best problem to tackle now. If you've got an ethical decision making framework that you think might help me make that decision I'm happy to look at it" (Trussel Trust team)*

The individualistic narrative

The narrative clarity about the nature of food poverty and the characteristics of those who face it became more opaque during discussions of the MTF interventions offered by foodbanks as part of a wider anti-poverty strategy. Whilst acknowledging that many of the drivers of food poverty are structural, among many of the *same* research participants, a different, conflicting narrative emerged. Speaking to a moral behaviouralism, this effectively worked to depoliticise food poverty by characterising those who experience it as deficient and lacking (in motivation, rationality and capability).

Our data demonstrated that despite the way most respondents understood food poverty and their clients' circumstances - their moral values or sentiments - in structural terms, this was not reflected in their practice response in the guise of MTF. Instead, their actual engagement with people - their values in practice - was rationalised by an alternative poverty knowledge which placed responsibility for poverty at the door of those experiencing it; an essentially private trouble:

> *"the first thing is that you provide immediate food because someone needs food, but if you want to move to a position where foodbanks are not needed any more then we have to be saying how are you going to get out of the situation you're in?" (Foodbank_3)*

Participant's endorsement of specific MTF interventions was underpinned by a logic which foresees a route out of poverty through re-education and equipping people with the right 'tools' so they can help themselves; so they can be more 'resilient' and better able to 'manage' their circumstances. This sentiment is demonstrated in the quote below:

> *"…you can keep giving people food but if you're not giving them the tools to help them get out of poverty then it's just the revolving door and they just come back again. It's looking at how you can equip people to manage their money, look at getting new skills, helping them find work, signpost them to education programmes" (Foodbank _7)*

In contrast to the perceived short-comings of the provision of food parcels (the sticking plaster argument) MTF was understood as a more sustainable response aimed at addressing inherent deficiencies in people's capabilities and attitudes, sometimes understood as cultural and multi-generational in nature (Welshman, 2008; Lister, 2004):

> *"I don't think food poverty is going to go away any time soon and I think catching the youngsters at school and getting them right at the beginning is so important because that can change a complete lifestyle and if you can engender kids to be more physically fit and able and wanting to do things then they have other interests they won't be so keen to just sit on their haunches and expect everything to be given" (Foodbank_4)*

Foodbank's charitable acts were evidently well-meaning described by one participant as wanting *"to be loving and generous"*. MTF might be seen as more care-full in the sense that it embraces a more 'holistic' conception of the person, supporting the 'intellectual' or 'spiritual' as well as the physical self (Power and Small, 2021). Yet, the food poverty knowledge that underpinned MTF disclosed moral sentiments and judgements informed by wider cultural discourses which seemed less concerned with challenging social injustice (Beck and Gwilym, 2020). Participant's drew on normative tropes with an associated tendency to 'other' those in need, a process recognised as generative of feelings of shame and the loss of self-worth (Cloke *et al*, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016; Horst *et al*, 2014; Riches, 2011). In this narrative, rather than being understood as victims of a punitive state, foodbank users were attributed a greater degree of power and agency (and failure to utilise them) to initiate change and overcome the challenges of their situations:

> *"These are longer term, educational initiatives, how they actually educate people in terms of how to manage their money, not to over-extend themselves or how to make sure they're employable" (Trussel Trust leadership)*

> *"We run [eat well spend less] really to combat some of the causes of people getting into crises, if people can manage their money better, shop better and cook better then there's a better chance that they'll be more resilient when hard times come along" (Foodbank_1)*

This food poverty narrative can be seen to reinforce responsibilising narratives, echoing other's critiques (Midgley, 2016; Bastian and Coveney, 2014; Whiteford, 2010). While there may be nothing inherently wrong with a notion of responsibility, injustice arises when people are held responsible for circumstances outwith their control (Sayer, 2017). Arguably, the severity and complexity of the problems faced by foodbank users are largely generated by and within the remit of the state, even those 'ordinary people' who have 'fallen on hard times' (Beck and Gwilym, 2020). Yet foodbank managers claimed that engagement with these poverty management strategies ought to enable people to avoid crisis and repeatedly return to foodbanks. This brought with it a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, a conditionality that meant those who do not take adequate responsibility to better manage their circumstances, especially after targeted help through MTF, may be prohibited from further assistance. One foodbank manager stated explicitly that people who were judged to be using the foodbank 'inappropriately' (e.g., to fund substance dependency) would be placed on a *"do not issue list"* and turned away:

> *"we do not expect to see them again, we keep them on a list, we call it a do not issue list, it's not a banned list, it's a list that says we've engaged with this person in a very full way, we've had a plan of action with them through the partnership and we do not expect them to come back[…]all you're doing is taking our food to supplement your living…so we're not actually helping them by continuing to feed them" (Foodbank_8)*

As independent services, foodbanks are able to define their own scale of conditionality. As such, while foodbank managers positioned their organisations as a safety net - there to meet

human need when no one else would - they retained a right to withhold services from clients who they judged were not engaging adequately or who were using the foodbank as a longer-term support mechanism. This led to a range of ad-hoc measures of discretion in which foodbank users were positioned as somewhat feckless or in the words of one: *"taking the mick"*. Reflecting wider narratives about foodbank users that circulate within popular discourse (Beck and Gwilym, 2020; Price et al, 2020), there was a clear sense that foodbank managers felt they could identify the deserving (those with moral worth) and the less deserving - those who use foodbanks as a lifestyle choice. This betrayed a lay morality in which those who were judged to be responsible for their own poverty did not have the (same) 'right' to receive food aid (as 'victims' of structural injustice):

> *"we're not going to leave anyone to go without, we just want to make sure they aren't depending on us" (Foodbank_6)*

> *"we keep telling clients, you know this isn't a right, or an entitlement, its specifically there for people who are really, really struggling. So since we've done that, we've had a much quieter year so far." (Foodbank_2)*

This echoes the work of Beck and Gwilys (2020) who argue that the structural causes of poverty become hidden within the 'moral maze' that characterises the decision-making process in the foodbanking system. Power and Small (2021) similarly found a requirement for service users to explain and justify why their need for (a) food (parcel). Previous research has evidenced how even those clients considered 'deserving' of foodbank support experience moral sentiments of shame, humiliation and stigmatisation when using foodbanks (Power and Small, 2021; Cloke *et al*, 2016; Garthwaite, 2016; Horst *et al*, 2014). We must therefore ask ourselves what emotions people experience when they find that they are unable to meet the conditions of the foodbank.

Adding another layer of complexity to understanding the moral judgments made within foodbanks, our findings also indicated that the philanthropic structures underpinning foodbanks leave them open to some of the established critiques about the power dynamics that are enacted within charitable models of social support; where the donors' needs retain more control over decision making than the recipients (Ostrander 2007). In the quote below, one foodbank manager candidly gives voice to the way in which the needs of the donor override Christian moral norms and values to justify foodbank conditionality:

> *"Obviously we're a Christian charity and we're operating within the church environment, and sometimes people will challenge that and say things like if Jesus came along and someone needed something he just gave him it, and I say yeah but I'm not Jesus, and also Jesus was giving his stuff and I'm not giving my stuff away, I'm giving stuff away that donors have given us…and donors often write and speak to me and say 'how do we know this is getting to people that really deserve it (Foodbank_8)*

It's important to note that foodbanks are diverse and not *all* foodbank managers who took part in our research embraced this narrative. What we present here is a salient theme, but we acknowledge that there were participants whose poverty knowledge resisted this individualised understanding with its associated moral sentiments. One had decided against engaging with MTF for that very reason:

> *"…we're a political lot and the underlying assumption that poor people don't know how to cook is a little bit insulting[…]In our experience it is benefits…there isn't enough of it to manage" (Foodbank manager_11)*

> *"…we just give [food parcels]…I understand they say they don't want people to depend on them, but…with the way the benefits are at the moment, well we just don't turn people away full stop (Foodbank _10)*

5. Conclusion

In this final section, we return to our original question of whether MTF offers a more socially just, ethical solution to food poverty. Having identified the predominance of both a 'structural' and 'individualist' narrative within the talk of foodbank professionals, we suggest that their poverty knowledge lacks coherence and is instead defined by a mishmash of moral assumptions, values and judgements. We also suggest that participants' 'structural' food poverty knowledge was fundamentally inconsistent with the programme design and operational practices within MTF, which are defined primarily by individualistic assumptions that blame those in poverty for their suffering and assign them agency to improve their situation through engagement with the different elements of programme. The idea that the effects of poverty can be 'fixed' via a linear pathway (figure 1) in which individuals are supported to address material needs and sort out their finances as a foundation for becoming resilient is inconsistent with the structural narrative put forward by many participants. Furthermore, whilst there is some evidence to suggest that 'voluntary agencies' such as foodbanks may have a comparative advantage over the state when financial disadvantage combines with other forms of disadvantage (Billis and Glennerster, 1998), this is largely limited to the consequences of poverty rather than their structural determinants (Crisp et al, 2016), and our findings do not offer anything contrary to that evidence.

These findings support the claims of others that the foodbank is a morally ambiguous space (Williams *et al*, 2016; Midgley, 2016). This moral ambiguity and ethical inconsistency is a clear example of the way in which moral beliefs and "values in practice" diverge; lay morality is messy and always flawed (Sayer, 2011). Sanghera's (2016) research on charitable giving supports this by revealing how lay ethical practices are often confusing and contradictory, partly, he suggests, because: *"ordinary individuals think and act in piecemeal fashion, so that their actions tend to be inconsistent with their beliefs and values"* (ibid: 309). Part of the explanation for the ethical complexity we have identified lies in the necessarily contingent nature of lay morality and the mixed sentiments that drive action. We see this played out at the local level where religious values, the power of donors, and cultural and political discourses all play a role in people's poverty knowledge. For charities such as the Trussell Trust another important element in this mix are the social-economic relations which limit the extent to which they are able to put moral values into practice. Their reliance on donations and funding is a major influencing factor. Our research indicated that MTF was shaped not only by compassion and moral values but organisational self-interest. The direction of travel for the MTF was strategically aligned with available funding opportunities and therefore had instrumental value for the Trussell Trust itself:

> *"The funding dictates what you can and can't do"* (Trussell Trust team)

> *"…you get a really good project like the foodbank and it works really well…and the big funders won't support it cos they're not interested in supporting something that's working, they want to support the next new project, so for us, we find it easier to get funding for More Than Food when we really didn't know what More Than Food was going to be"* (Trussel Trust team)

This leaves open the question of how foodbank interventions targeting the symptoms of poverty might 'solve' their clients' structurally driven needs and the extent to which this amounts to something distinctive or more effective when compared with mainstream welfare provision (Billis and Glennerster, 1998; Miller, 2013). We found limited evidence of 'ethical insurgency' or the transformative political potential of foodbanking (May *et al*, 2019; Williams *et al*, 2016; Cloke *et al*, 2016). Despite recognising the structural drivers of acute food poverty, such as reduced and highly conditional welfare provision, underfunded health services and low-paid precarious work, there was no evidence of foodbanks seeking to work against these structural conditions (Ghys, 2018). Further, whilst there is evidence of micro-resistance in the interpretation of conditionality and examples of more politically progressive foodbank

practices, the position that foodbanks occupy as an informal and ad-hoc provider of food charity means that there are no clear and consistent moral values, sentiments or ethos driving practice or the distribution of goods and services. This leaves conditionality to be calibrated at a local level in response to a range of individual value judgements of deservedness or pressure from donor organisations (May *et al*, 2019; Cloke *et al*, 2016). This is a precarious ethical position on which to base practice.

Yet this does not preclude foodbanks from playing a distinctive role in tackling poverty. If they are to become more established service providers in the field of poverty alleviation however, then their programmes (values in practice) should be informed and motivated by a deeper engagement with moral concerns about the structural drivers of poverty. This might mean developing a clearer organisational ethos around the poverty knowledge that underpins their practice. Foodbanks also need to consider how best they can position their 'offer' relative to other welfare providers. Whilst we recognise that organisations like the Trussell Trust are not responsible for and cannot directly change the economic structures that lead to poverty, they are now substantial contributors to the wider conversation about the drivers and responses to poverty. As such, they have the power to shape poverty knowledge whilst continuing their important work alleviating the symptoms of structural poverty.

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