

# Community Education and Foodbanks: A Recipe for Dignity?

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## Introduction

Dignity is a concept that many of us will have had little reason to contemplate. We go about our daily lives taking for granted that we deserve respect whilst showing it to others throughout all our interactions; it is a notion likely unquestioned by most of us, or thought too deeply about. When considering those experiencing food poverty, however, and for those delivering food parcels through foodbanks, it is a difficult notion to uphold. As I will come to argue, a different approach is needed if a lasting impact is to be made; one that can truly value and uphold dignity, a concept that should stand front and centre for community workers developing approaches towards addressing food poverty. Indeed, with the UK experiencing a ‘ballooning of foodbanks’ (O’Hara, 2015, p23) combined with the widespread anxieties connected to the current COVID-19 pandemic, there has perhaps never been a more crucial moment in which to examine their place in society.

## Foodbanks in the UK

To begin, I introduce those ‘at the forefront of the rise of food aid’ (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p207), the Trussell Trust. A charity and NGO, the Trussell Trust aims ‘to end hunger and poverty in the UK’ (Trussell Trust, 2019a, p4). This vision stands alongside a ‘mission’ of ‘providing compassionate, practical help with dignity whilst challenging injustice’ (Ibid). Encompassing the largest network of foodbanks in the UK - over 450 of them operating through 1200 centres (Ibid, p6) - the Trussell Trust is prevalent throughout almost all the literature concerning foodbanks in the UK, such is its centrality in this area.

Perhaps more fascinating than the size of their network is its vast and relatively quick growth; ‘in 2009, the charity ran twenty-eight foodbanks. By 2014 the number had

climbed to over four hundred' (Lansley & Mack, 2015, p207). In their most recent report, the Trussell Trust state that foodbank use in their network has increased by 73% in the last five years alone (2013/14-2018/19), with 1.6 million three-day emergency food parcels being distributed in 2018/19 (Trussell Trust, 2019a, p6). As Garthwaite notes, 'Britain is experiencing a foodbank explosion' (2016a, p2). Four years later, it appears this explosion may still not have reached its apotheosis.

This ongoing surge has not gone unnoticed by the general population: 'pick up a newspaper, watch a news bulletin (national or local), listen to the radio or just pop into your local supermarket. Chances are, you'll see or hear mention of foodbanks somewhere along the way' (Garthwaite, 2016a, pp2-3). Thus, foodbanks have become a commonplace feature of contemporary Britain. However, this does not necessarily mean that the population understand them, as Garthwaite warns, 'I found a substantial lack of awareness about how foodbanks work and what it is they actually do' (2016a, p35). In response, she outlines the five stages of a Trussell Trust foodbank:

First, food is donated; second, food is sorted and stored; third, people are assessed by frontline professionals; fourth, vouchers are taken to a foodbank to be redeemed for three days' emergency food; and finally, people are signposted to further support through the More Than Food programme (Garthwaite, 2016a, p37)

Foodbanks can be understood to be responding to redistributive (or economic injustice) whereby individuals are denied the economic ability to adequately feed themselves and/or their family. Identified by Fraser's (1998) framework of justice alongside claims for recognition, which I will address shortly, redistributive injustices require 'a more just distribution of resources and goods' (Fraser, 1998, p1) – in this case, food. Why then are people struggling for this most basic need?

### **Foodbanks in the UK: Why the Rise?**

The short answer is financial hardship. O'Hara talks of the 'shocking practice of parents increasingly sacrificing their own nutritional needs in order to feed their children as money became tighter' (2015, p22); Dowler et al declare that 'families who

live for any length of time on low incomes, whether from wages or benefits, face severe problems getting enough food to meet their health and social needs' (2001, p102); and Lansley and Mack proclaim that 'more and more families in Britain are unable to afford some of the most basic of needs' (2015, p41). How then, has this increase come about?

As O'Hara notes, there is a 'formidable body of evidence' proving that food poverty has 'been made markedly worse by austerity and its fallout' (2015, p22). Since 2010, austerity 'has been the UK government's dominant fiscal policy' most prominent 'in the form of deep spending cuts with comparatively small increases in tax' (Garthwaite, 2016a, p7). As Lansley and Mack declare, 'the government's policies – on austerity, benefits and sanctions – came to be blamed for the surging demand for help' (2015, p209), causing ministers to 'publicly clash with foodaid charities' and become 'increasingly defensive about the impact of their own policies' (Ibid). Such policies, like the Welfare Reform Act (UK Government, 2012) included 'caps on levels of entitlement' as well as 'longer waiting periods between becoming unemployed and benefit eligibility' (Garthwaite, 2016a, p3). Consequently, 'almost half the reasons people cite for using foodbanks can be attributed to austerity-led welfare reform' (Ibid, p8). Writing of the Trussell Trust in 2015, Lansley and Mack stated that 'fifty-five percent of referrals for food help have been due to problems with benefits and sanctions' (2015, p210). As the latest figures reveal, not much has changed, with low income (36.05%), benefit delays (17.92%) and benefit changes (16.24%) the three main reasons cited for foodbank referral (Trussell Trust, 2019b). Thus, the notion that 'it is the poorest who have been hit the most by the government's austerity and welfare strategy' (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p133) gains credence.

This evidence is at odds with a discourse said to be 'accompanying the rise of foodbanks in the UK' (Garthwaite, 2016b, p278) - a 'discourse where myths, moral judgements and misconceptions exist, fuelled by Conservative government rhetoric' (Ibid):

A frequent theme of these newspaper articles is that the poor are undeserving – they are unable to manage their personal finances, they are freeloaders abusing the service the foodbank offers or they are opportunistically taking advantage of the burgeoning network of foodbanks offering free food (Wells and Caraher, 2014, p1436)

Here, recognitional injustice moves into the foreground as the poor are subsequently ‘maligned or disparaged in stereotypical public cultural representations and/or in everyday life situations’ (Power, 2012, p475); they are misrecognised. The discourse discussed above illustrates how the media can work in tandem with government policy, using ‘language and arguments apparently designed to fuel public antagonism to the poor, thus justifying the government’s argument for more punitive welfare policies’ (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p140). Such misrepresentations are also highlighted in Garthwaite’s more recent ethnographic research (see Garthwaite, 2016a; 2016b), in which she notes that, stigma, shame, humiliation, and embarrassment were commonly felt by those using the foodbank service. A sense of dignity commonly seemed a distant prospect.

### **Dignity**

Dignity is a term present throughout Trussell Trust literature as they promote their mission ‘to end hunger and poverty in the UK by providing compassionate, practical help with dignity whilst challenging injustice’ (2019a, p4); ‘the food banks in our network need to provide the best possible emergency food to people experiencing hunger with dignity and compassion’ (Ibid, p6). One of those foodbanks, East Lothian Foodbank, aims to ‘treat all clients without judgement and with respect and dignity’; ‘we believe in...upholding the dignity of everyone who needs our help’; ‘we aim to offer choice and dignity’(2019, p3). Evidently, dignity is a term of importance to those providing emergency food aid.

Indeed, dignity stands at the centre of one report ‘designed to support community food providers, including those providing emergency food aid, to consider the practical ways their projects can promote the dignity of those experiencing food insecurity’ (Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018, p1). By their findings,

dignity appears to encompass notions of feeling valued, included, capable and trusted – redolent of justice as recognition, seeking a ‘difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect’ (Fraser, 1998, p1). Dignity is commonly described in this positive manner; seen as ‘central to modern human rights discourse’ (Rosen, 2012, p1); ‘dignity’s fundamental principle: ensure to all, directly and indirectly, the rights of dignity – liberty, well-being and respect’ (Herrman, 2019, pp105-6).

Nevertheless, dignity has seemingly avoided an altogether clear definition (Ibid, p107). For this article however, a definition, in some form, is helpful going forward. From here on, as drawn from the literature in this section, I suggest that to genuinely respect one’s dignity, is to authentically ensure respect, agency, well-being and inclusion (RAWBI) to that person.

Such notions are contrary to those mentioned earlier of stigma, shame, humiliation and embarrassment (Garthwaite, 2016a, p135); ‘even though foodbanks have become so ingrained in daily life in Britain, for the people using them, stigma and shame are all part of walking through the church doors, red voucher in hand’ (Ibid, p148). Indeed, how can one feel valued and capable when experiencing stigma and shame? How can one be dignified if they are misrecognised as a scrounger? As argued in Dignity in Practice however, ‘the community food sector is well placed to respond to current crises and promote and restore dignity’ (Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2016, p1) – and this community food sector contains more than just foodbanks.

### **Community Education**

The phrase ‘community food providers’ is included within Dignity in Practice as ‘a broad term for community and voluntary organisations providing a response to food insecurity, from provision of emergency food aid to supporting people to grow and enjoy fresh food’ (Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2016, piv). It is not just redistributive foodbanks that fall under the community food provider banner. Today, ‘many different forms of emergency food provision have become so

much more prevalent' (Garthwaite, 2016a, p3) with 'the charitable sector now playing a much more direct role in poverty relief' (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p221). This is evident through projects like breakfast clubs and pay-as-you-can cafés, mentioned by Garthwaite (2016a, p3). Community educators, albeit not on a grand scale, are part of those community food providers.

Community educators are said to support social change and social justice, developing activities that 'enhance quality of life and sphere of influence' (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2018, p4). Such approaches can offer the opportunity for service users to come 'to new awareness of self...a new sense of dignity...stirred by a new hope' (Shaull, 1970, p33). This sense of new hope and refreshed dignity is perhaps precisely what is needed regarding food poverty, and indeed, poverty itself.

Foodbanks alone, in their present form, cannot offer this. While they address the immediate needs of redistribution, providing a 'lifeline to those using them' (Garthwaite, 2016a, p14), they also contribute to the creation of misrecognition, and subsequently, stigma and shame. Such outcomes stand contrary to the concept of dignity and its common attributes highlighted earlier (RAWBI). Furthermore, they stand contrary to community education, a practice that is to be 'anti-discriminatory and equalities-focused' (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2018, p4).

Like the benefits system, foodbanks are redistributive, and like benefit recipients, users of foodbanks are often stigmatized. Here, inequality and poverty is misrecognised as 'the product of their own behaviour or some other lacking in the way that they organise their personal or family lives' (Mooney, 2010, p9), thus, 'poverty and inequality come to be seen not as a product of state failure, of an inadequate welfare state nor of 'unfairness' or injustice, but as a consequence of a 'lacking' or of 'negative', 'dysfunctional' and 'backward' attitudes' (Ibid, p10).

Subsequently, poverty is seen as an individual's private trouble rather than as a public issue, the reversal of which requires 'real community empowerment' (Emejulu and Shaw, 2010, p7). As Fraser argues, this type of 'misrecognition' causes one to 'be

denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem' (1998, p3). If the rights of dignity are 'liberty, well-being and respect' (Herrman, 2019, pp105-6), then this misrecognition is unquestionably undignified.

Such injustices are said to 'require a politics of recognition' that can 'involve strategies of affirmation whereby misrecognised groups attempt to invert their low status and affirm the value of their previously 'despised' identity' (Power, 2012, p475). Thus, a focus beyond the sphere of distribution, one that also encompasses a recognitional approach is essential to cultivate dignity, for this cannot be successfully upheld if those using food aid services are perceived as freeloaders or 'getting something for nothing'. Therefore, a key point I draw from Fraser is that attempts to address food poverty should embrace recognition alongside redistribution: 'no distribution without recognition' (Fraser, 1998, p9).

That is not to say that foodbanks should miraculously transform, for they 'provide a lifeline to those using them' (Garthwaite, 2016a, p14); redistribution approaches can serve the immediate needs of poverty. What it is to say though, is that they cannot become the 'new normal' (Ibid). There needs to exist an alternative yet equally prominent approach to addressing food poverty, one that can work collaboratively with foodbanks, one that 'unites redistribution and recognition' bringing us closer to 'justice for all' (Fraser, 1998, p10). As I now argue, community education is almost perfectly placed to lead such a refreshed approach to addressing the issue of food poverty – an approach that addresses both maldistribution and misrecognition, centred on the notion of dignity – and importantly, is educational.

### **Community Education: Redistribution & Recognition**

Education is the factor that places community education practices so uniquely when it comes to addressing food poverty. As I now explain, that is because, if recognition needs to effectively be incorporated into practices addressing food poverty alongside redistribution, then education is key – as is the type of education pursued. 'Banking'

education where ‘students patiently receive, memorise, and repeat’ (Freire, 1970, p72) knowledge is not commonly favoured by community education. Practitioners should work with people; educational and development opportunities should be created in dialogue with individuals and communities (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2018, p9) that ‘enhance quality of life and sphere of influence’ (Ibid, p4).

The enhancing of this ‘sphere of influence’ is crucial when ‘the poor have – all too often – come to rely on church, charities and pressure groups to make their case’ (Lansley and Mack, 2016, p222) due to a lack of influence and an increasing stigmatization ‘by the media and political forces alike’ (Ibid). Despite this being nothing new, it is as prevalent, and relevant, as ever. With such a lack of influence, how can we ever achieve recognition and true cultural change? How can people challenge their misrecognition, as freeloaders, for example, and re-label poverty as a public issue if they are stigmatized for seeking aid? This stigmatization negatively impacts dignity, and despite the noble actions of organisations supporting those in need abiding by the concept’s most basic attributes such as ‘respect for one another’ (Herrman, 2019, p122), they also display an undermining of others, such as individual autonomy (Rosens, 2012, pp4-5). Thus, if recognition is to truly be achieved in a dignified way, then one must develop this ‘sphere of influence’.

Since community education is already concerned with the development of these areas, I propose it is best equipped to lead a refreshed approach to addressing food poverty. Education considering ‘really useful knowledge’ (Johnson, 1988, pp21-22) or ‘conscientization’ that is said to hold ‘the power to transform reality’ (Taylor, 1993, p52) can help develop individuals’ influence. By working with people in poverty and supporting them, rather than being content with a reliance on charity, then there is potential to uphold elements of dignity such as autonomy (Rosens, 2012, pp4-5) that would not have been possible otherwise. When ‘respect for the autonomy and dignity of every person is an ethical imperative and not a favour that we may or may not concede to each other’ (Freire, 1998, p59), then this is imperative.

It is important to emphasize that this focus on autonomy is not a plugging of individualism, where people are encouraged to develop resilience in the face of severe hardship. It is instead one of collectivism which emphasises ‘cooperation, sharing, and prevalence of...group goals’ (Arpaci, et al, 2018, p89). That is because ‘people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack the power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people’ (Mullender, et al, 2013, p49). It is exactly this type of empowerment that community education and its forms of education hold the potential to achieve. For example, recognising the ‘symbiosis of knowledge and power’ (McKeown, et al, 2018, p156), conscientization’s mutual and dialogic learning process ‘potentiates the identification and resistance to sources of oppression’ (Ibid, p157). Working with people, mutual learning, ‘is at the heart’ (Ibid, p156) of the process: ‘to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation’ (Freire, 1970, p75). Thus, such an approach can be empowering and emancipatory (McKeown, et al, 2018, p156), the former of which is needed to ‘transform private troubles back into public issues’ (Emejulu and Shaw, 2010, p7), thus aiding dignity. Ultimately, for recognition to truly be incorporated into approaches addressing food poverty, then a mutual learning approach is essential if dignity is to be upheld. The very nature of foodbank users’ position alongside the stigma that comes with it reduces their ‘sphere of influence’ and their ability to alone create ‘cultural change’ (Fraser, 1998, p9). Despite this, we cannot solely rely on charities and so on to ‘make their case’ for them (Lansley and Mack, 2016, p222), as this, to a degree, promotes indignity; for ‘it is hard to think of dignity without some idea of freedom, without some idea of choice and agency’ (Ignatieff, 2001, p165). Indeed, if one considers Ignatieff’s conception of dignity as agency, its ‘most plural’ definition (Ibid), then such an approach is most definitely undignified. Akin to the effects Fraser describes of political exclusion, people are at danger of simply becoming ‘objects of charity or benevolence...they become non-persons with respect to justice’ (2008, p20). Therefore, redolent of Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, these struggles for change ‘must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity [emphasis in original]’ (Freire, 1970, p48).

Certainly, I believe the fight against food poverty is just that – a struggle to regain humanity; a struggle to regain dignity. And in this struggle, community education holds the potential to incorporate recognition alongside redistribution.

Even so, this may not be enough for a crusade aiming to ‘end hunger and poverty in the UK’ (Trussell Trust, 2019a, p4); for ‘an adequate theory of justice for our time must be three dimensional; encompassing not only redistribution and recognition, but also representation’ (Fraser, 2008, p21). In this, Fraser’s updated model, she states that there is ‘no redistribution or recognition without representation’ (Ibid). This third dimension of justice, representation, is concerned with political injustices ‘whereby political decision rules wrongly deny some the right to participate in decision-making...where some members and groups are deemed outside the legitimate political community’ (Power, 2012, p475). Those who lack such participation subsequently lack a voice in many decisions affecting them, once again undermining dignity as agency - causing the poor to rely on others to ‘make their case’ (Lansley and Mack, 2016, p222). When ‘maldistribution and misrecognition will inevitably limit people’s capacity to engage in all kinds of civic and political activity’ (Power, 2012, p475), then those in poverty become both silenced and limited in their abilities to challenge and change the real causes of their situation; dignity is lost. Community education, though, can help develop that voice and capacity. Community education can help reclaim that dignity.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at attempts to address food poverty, and indeed poverty itself, through the lens of dignity can reveal how dignified an approach might be. Consideration of the three dimensions of justice (Fraser, 2008), can help to further break down this analysis; for dignity is essentially a matter of social justice. And with community education’s ability to develop individuals’ ‘sphere of influence’, supporting social change and social justice (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2018, p9), then it is perfectly placed to develop a dignified, three-dimensional approach to addressing food poverty.

As Freire once said, ‘human existence is, in fact, a radical and profound tension between good and evil, between dignity and indignity, between decency and

indecenty' (1998, p53). Community education holds the potential to work with people, to help stabilize these tensions. Perhaps having that potential is, in fact, a duty – as I reiterate 'respect for the autonomy and dignity of every person is an ethical imperative and not a favour that we may or may not concede to each other' (Ibid, p59).

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