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Discipline and Feed: Food Banks, Pastoral Power, and the Medicalisation of Poverty in the UK

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Christian Möller** 

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Abstract

Food banks across the UK are offering basic food supplies and a range of support services to people who have been affected by years of welfare cuts and the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis. Despite a growing research interest in the drivers and experiences of food bank use, their own role in constructing and managing poverty as a social problem has been neglected. Adopting a Foucauldian approach, this study critically explored how power is exercised and subjects are formed inside three UK food banks. The localised care for the poor is shown to work through a pastoral power, which requires confessions of crises and obedience to an expert regime in the diagnosis and treatment of poverty as an individual condition. By making food aid conditional on active engagement with other support agencies, volunteers negotiate and translate neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility and active citizenship. Findings are linked to a wider critique of neoliberal government, which works through therapeutic discourses and retains disciplinary and paternalistic elements in managing poverty at a distance.

Keywords

charity, food banks, governmentality, neoliberalism, pastoral power, poverty

Introduction

As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis and its economic impact, it has been reported that almost a fifth of UK homes with children have experienced hunger during lockdown (Iqbal, 2020). Food banks under the Trussell Trust (2020a) franchise recorded an increase of 81% in food bank use compared to the previous year, while the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) saw an increase in need of 177% compared to the previous year (Goodwin, 2020). Despite calls for more universal welfare provision given the inadequacies of food aid (Tarasuk and McIntyre, 2020), food charities have gained more

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visibility as ‘frontline responders’ offering a lifeline to many and have received millions of pounds in cash and food donations from UK supermarkets (Defra, 2020). The growth of food banks in the UK is not a new phenomenon (Lambie-Mumford, 2017), and commentaries in the media and recent advocacy campaigns by the Trussell Trust and IFAN (Goodwin, 2019) have attempted to scandalise the need for them in an affluent society. However, these narratives around ‘emergency responses’ imply that food banks *are* needed, in their current form and this moment in history, which places them outside of power and critique as natural, albeit shameful, reactions to a retreating welfare state. Taking a Foucauldian approach, this study sought to challenge this essentialism by exploring the active roles food banks take in problematising food poverty and administering treatments in partnership with other agencies. Analysis of the discursive practices and power dynamics inside three food banks shows how confessional encounters require ‘clients’ to perform their worthiness and constitute themselves as active subjects seeking expert treatment for their individual crisis. Drawing on pastoral power and governmentality as an analytic lens, the pastoral care by volunteers is shown to mediate dominant discourses of welfare conditionality, employability, and discipline, while binding clients to the authority of an expanding expert regime. Findings are then placed in the context of pastoral networks and often misunderstood characteristics of neoliberal government to argue that food banks take an active role in translating neoliberal discourses with subjectifying effects in the constitution of poverty as a manageable condition.

Background

The causes of rising food bank use in the UK are now well researched with a wide consensus within this literature built around a narrative of welfare retrenchment and state retreat following years of austerity policies (Caraher and Furey, 2018; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2018). Loopstra et al. (2018) specifically highlight the role of benefit sanctions as a key driver for increased food bank use in the UK to call for the introduction of standardised measurement of food insecurity in national surveys. In addition to limitations in official referral figures recorded by the Trussell Trust, Garratt (2015) points to the ‘hidden hunger’ in the UK where local food aid is either unavailable or not accessed for a variety of reasons. Indeed, Loopstra et al. (2019b) found that 20.7% of UK adults experienced food insecurity in 2016, and a major report by the Trussell Trust (Sosenko et al., 2019) found that nearly 75% of users had at least one health issue and two-thirds reported problems with the benefit system. A recent YouGov survey (Loopstra, 2020) has suggested that food insecurity in the UK has quadrupled as a result of the COVID-19 crisis with over 3 million adults going hungry during the first 3 weeks of the lockdown. The pandemic has also revealed wider inequalities in the food system, as well as between providers of food aid in the UK (Power et al., 2020).

In their studies of food bank referrals, Perry et al. (2014) found that the predominant reason for visits was some form of immediate income crisis, caused by either loss of earnings from employment, change in family circumstances, sudden homelessness, or benefit problems and sanctions. The authors highlight the positive feedback by clients praising ‘the warmth of welcome they received there, the opportunity to talk, and its

signposting to other support services' (Perry et al., 2014: 12). Haddad et al. (2017: 39) equally endorse the expansion of advice services where 'ideally, people should be seeing advisers before they go to the food bank'. Acknowledging that emergency food aid does not address underlying causes but only alleviates symptoms, Lambie-Mumford and Dowler (2014: 1420) equally praise the 'non-food related support' as perhaps the 'primary contribution charitable help offers'. To date, there has been a lack of critical engagement with so-called 'More than Food' services rolled out by the Trussell Trust in 'community hubs', including cookery and budgeting courses, 'jobs' clubs, and other skills training. With the exception of May et al.'s (2019a) analysis of the ways food banks reproduce scarcity discourses through their rationing practices, there has been a notable disregard for the power relationships and subjectifying effects of discourse in these spaces. Indeed, the frequent endorsement of food banks as welcoming spaces of care (see Cloke et al., 2017; Lambie-Mumford, 2017) tends to idealise an ethics of care while obscuring the productive features of a pastoral power in guiding the conduct of both 'clients' and volunteers.

Theoretical background

Pastoral power and governmentality

The dominant notion of welfare retrenchment driving food bank use in existing research (Lambie-Mumford, 2018) upholds a strict distinction between state power and private charities who are merely responding to new gaps left by austerity policies. Addressing exactly this false dichotomy between a retreating state and non-state actors, Lemke (2007: 45) outlines the critical potential of an analysis of neoliberal governmentality where

political changes are understood not as a decline of state sovereignty but as a promotion of forms of government that foster and enforce individual responsibility, privatized risk-management, empowerment techniques, and the play of market forces and entrepreneurial models in a variety of social domains.

The purpose of this study was to explore how governmentality as a style or art of governing populations across practices and institutions (Foucault, 2009a; Lemke, 2019) is translated, negotiated, and realised in these positive terms. For Foucault (2002b), pastoral power is above all an individualising form of power based on ancient Christian rituals through which pastors guide their local 'flock' in a combination of institutionalised religious practices, hearing confessions, and guidance towards salvation. While this form of the Christian pastorate may have largely disappeared, Foucault (2002b, 2009c) remains adamant that its function has since spread and multiplied across social institutions in the formation of the modern state where there can be no understanding of contemporary governmentality without studying the history of individualising strategies and tactics of pastoral power. Historically, pastoral power has been argued to form the background or prelude to modern governmentality and the emergence of the Western state founded on the production of inner truths through subjectification in self-examination and care for

the self where ‘the modern government inherits from the Christian pastorate these individualising dynamics of dissecting the self, servitude, and a relation to truth within the self’ (Carrette, 2013: 377).

As a technology of governing (Oksala, 2013: 328), pastoral power demands complete obedience and a continuous extraction of personal knowledge in order to normalise subjects’ conduct and guide them to well-being as salvation in this world (Foucault, 2002b) rather than the next. This presents an important paradox where pastoral power is both ‘distinct’ from political power and its institutions but also mainly concerned with ‘the worldly order of everyday conduct’ (Carrette, 2013: 381) and always accompanied by a ‘surveying gaze’ (Siisiäinen, 2015: 234) seeking perfect transparency to illuminate subjects’ inner truths and return them to the normality of the flock when necessary. Based on their research in contemporary health care settings, Waring and Martin (2018: 147) refer to these persistent disciplinary elements as ‘inspection practices’, which monitor and attempt to correct deviating subjectivities in stray sheep. An analysis sensitive to pastoral power then shifts focus from a hidden yet seemingly all-powerful discursive power of governmentality onto relational, embodied, and ‘empirically visible agency’ (Martin and Waring, 2018: 7–8) of situated actors and their involvement in the constitution of subjectivities. It emphasises the active role of subjects in translating discourses into identities and behaviour through local practices, which may at times be at odds with or work against dominant rationalities.

Avowal and subjectification

Foucault’s writings on the history of the Christian pastorate should be read in the context of his later lectures on the functions of avowal in the justice system. Avowal (Foucault, 2014: 16) here describes ‘a verbal act through which the subject affirms who he is, binds himself to this truth, places himself in a relationship of dependence with regard to another, and modifies at the same time his relationship to himself’. Foucault identifies an extended growth and ‘accelerations’ of avowals in Western Christian culture where its central ‘truth-telling function’ (Foucault, 2014: 18) ties the individual to itself and to others, thereby establishing complex power relationships with new implications for the formation of the self. For Foucault (2014: 16), an act of avowal is characterised and distinguished from a declaration or statement by voluntary self-constitution as a subject who then ‘obligates himself [*sic*] to being what he says he is’ at some personal cost or difficulty, often shame. Understanding situated confessional dynamics as productive acts of self-formation then breaks with the essentialism and empiricist profiling of food bank users in static categories of vulnerability (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017). Since ‘clients’ and volunteers do not exist prior to discourse or outside of power relations, subjectification within food bank spaces will be understood as a situated, performative, and non-linear ‘process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject’ (Butler, 1997: 2). Attributing ‘clients’ and volunteers an active role in their subjectification through their own truth-telling capacity and relational interactions with others goes beyond static subject positions as linear outcomes of deterministic discourse (Keller, 2018), contrary to many approaches in governmentality studies.

Methods

This study was conducted between 2016 and 2019 with the overall aim to critically explore the discourses and power relationships at work in British food banks. In contrast to realist ontologies which may focus on hidden realities of poverty, a critical discursive approach ‘dismisses the empiricist myth of an easy separation between research object and knowledge production’ (Beetz and Schwab, 2018: 347). An added sensitivity for pastoral power allowed studying ‘how discourses translate into subjectivity, action and material consequence’ (Martin and Waring, 2018: 8) in local contexts. Although the original study used a multi-modal approach to analyse a corpus of documents, visual data, and interviews, this article reports only on interviews conducted in three UK food banks. After in-depth interviews with two volunteers and the manager at Southern Food Bank¹ (SFB), expert interviews were conducted with three senior project managers at Eastern Food Bank (EFB) and Western Food Bank (WFB) who were much better placed than volunteers to offer insight into policies and procedures across their centres. Whereas SFB is an independent food bank located in a rural area, EFB and WFB are Trussell Trust food banks based in large towns with more than a dozen distribution centres and considerable warehouse capacity. Semi-structured interviews lasted around 90 minutes each and were guided by open questions about daily routines and interactions with clients as well as partnerships with local agencies. In addition, I kept a reflective diary of observations of interactions and spatial arrangements inside the food banks.

The study received ethical permission from the Human and Health Sciences School Research Ethics Panel (SREP) at the University of Huddersfield, and informed consent was obtained from all participants who were fully briefed about the exploratory nature of the study. With a broad interest in food bank operations and local partnerships, I used open questions and some managers later thanked me for giving them a space to pause and reflect on their practices. I only adopted a more critical but non-normative (Hansen, 2014) perspective during the analysis where it would have been unethical to leave out data which may show a ‘darker’ side of food banks (Van Der Horst et al., 2014). To address this and ensure transparency and integrity, all reporting is grounded in the participants’ accounts and aims to show that individual perspectives and experiences are always shaped by larger discourses and historical constructions of poverty. Ongoing ethical concerns with the complex power dynamics, awareness of my own privileged position as an outsider, and personal experiences in the food bank meant that I decided not to interview ‘clients’ but to problematise these confessional encounters and promises of empowerment.

All interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and imported into MAXQDA software (v.12) for a discourse analysis guided by the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) and situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2017). SKAD (Keller, 2018) provides a flexible research programme based on a pragmatist reading of Foucault, which focuses on local practices, socially regulated forms of acting, and how specific ways of speaking are legitimised in institutional settings. The initial coding identified dominant problematisations of food poverty, along with intervention strategies, subject positions of clients, and self-positioning by the managers and volunteers. Problematisations were a central concern throughout Foucault’s work and can be understood as ways of

framing a social problem in need for intervention, and hence rendering it governable (Triantafyllou, 2012). In a subsequent round of inductive coding, different food bank practices were coded to allow easy retrieval for more in-depth discursive analysis through memos, coding queries, and situational maps for comparisons between sites.

Findings

Pastoral care and the persistence of discipline

At all three food banks, volunteers performed their pastoral care for the poor through packing and distributing food parcels and having personal conversations about the reasons for their visit. Located in a rural area, the independent food bank also delivered food to clients' homes with the help of local agencies and volunteers occasionally helped with personal errands. Contents of food parcels varied considerably depending on the availability of donations, and supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables were often held back for families with children as the embodiment of the 'worthy poor' who needed to be cared for first. In the event of shortages or special dietary requirements, volunteers would go out and buy suitable items, rather than give out money:

Like some people say oh why don't you give people money because you know you're having to manage all this food [. . .] umm but then of course you have the problems of giving people money, you know will they spend it on the right thing is that the fear. (Manager, SFB)

Faced with the 'fear' of clients making the wrong choices, volunteers defended their pastoral position of authority, deciding over entitlements and making these choices on behalf of their clients. In addition to the powerful Christian ethos of feeding the hungry, giving out money would separate pastors from their 'flock', diminish their authority, and expose clients to the temptation of making bad choices. The material design and spatial divisions inside the food bank enabled many of these paternalistic practices and placed limits on what clients could say with a strict division between receiving clients as welcomed guests and giving volunteers residing over parcel composition. While clients were seated and questioned by a volunteer, another would go and put their parcel together in a discursive environment where visible expressions of gratitude are expected (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003) and worthiness must constantly be performed. Any 'fussiness' over types, quality, and quantity of food would draw a suspicious pastoral gaze evaluating their genuine need:

You would get volunteers that are like well oh they can't be that in need if they're being fussy about what brand of whatever they're given and stuff. (Manager, WFB)

All Trussell Trust food banks employ a referral system in addition to a parcel limit designed to guard against dependency 'where it's three vouchers in a six-month period because we are here for a crisis only, not to be reliant on and depended upon', as one manager explained. Although the '3-in-6 rule' may have been originally introduced to provide short-term emergency food provision that would not undermine and potentially replace welfare benefits, another manager admitted that more long-term crises were

‘increasingly common’ so that three parcels were ‘no longer sufficient’. At her discretion, additional parcels were given ‘on the rare occasion’ but always required having an ‘informed decision’ with the referral agencies. Despite not being bound by the same Trussell policies, volunteers at the independent food bank insisted on the same limit of three parcels ‘because the point is to make them independent of us, not dependent on us’. These dominant concerns with dependency and wrong choices were closely linked to problematisations of ‘chaotic’ lives where clients were said to lack the necessary skills, motivation, and attitude to overcome poverty, and thus required moral guidance through the food bank. Sometimes visiting clients in their homes to deliver food parcels, the manager at SFB diagnosed a culture of poverty and lack of discipline in clients said to be ‘leading very chaotic lives’ in ‘very dirty houses’. A major problem for the manager at WFB, too, was how to ‘deal’ with problematic clients, who, despite best intentions and attempts by the food bank, were still ‘constantly in and out of services’. These people remained unable to escape food poverty ‘because their lives are chaotic’ where any intervention by the food bank was short-lived due to a lack of personal resilience and ‘the slightest little thing happens’ to throw them back into a state of crisis. Such targeting of psychological deficits in wrong attitudes or decision making is characteristic of a wider neoliberal turn to behavioural factors (Gill and Orgad, 2018), which problematises clients’ subjectivities as root causes of poverty in a lack of cognitive capacity for processing information to build necessary resilience and cope with crises.

We’re really keen to support people out of their situation, not ingrain them into it and so having a referral system like we do is a bit of a carrot and a stick in some ways in that we absolutely will help you if you’re in need but it has to go hand-in-hand with you getting support from somewhere, does that make sense? So there has to be somebody who’s looking into the bigger picture [. . .] and foodbank is a part of that support package. (Manager, WFB)

Through disciplinary intervention, support in the form of food provision remained conditional and had to go ‘hand-in-hand’ with a willingness by clients to change and constitute themselves as active welfare subjects. The pastoral care of feeding the poor is accompanied by a disciplinary gaze in a ‘carrot and a stick’ approach to then condition clients into demonstrating responsible conduct. The food bank becomes ‘part of that support package’ in a wider pastoral network where it specialises on immediate short-term relief but leaves any long-term intervention to other experts concerned with the ‘bigger picture’ of personal recovery. Failure to adhere to the pastoral regime brings with it an increasingly suspicious pastoral gaze after the third food parcel, at which point managers would then ‘have a conversation’ as continued support becomes conditional on taking up advice and becoming an active, self-reforming subject. What is noteworthy, and characteristic of pastoral power (McCuaig et al., 2013) here, is that rather than abandoning problematic clients, any deviancy elicits even more intense care and surveillance because stray ‘sheep’ must not be abandoned but returned to the ‘flock’ to ensure the salvation of each and all.

Some exceptions were made to the parcel limit at the discretion of the manager who would even decide over entitlements herself if clients came straight to the food bank without a voucher from a referral agency:

If people come straight here I, I'll often give them a food parcel if I think they're kind of come across as being genuine I'll give them a food parcel or even if I'm a bit worried I'll give them a very small food parcel [chuckles] give them some emergency sort of food and then I'll ask that they get in touch with one of the other agencies really because I think if people are in need they need more help than just the food bank can provide. (Manager, SFB)

Again, being given a food parcel is conditional on clients presenting themselves as 'genuine' in the examination of their personal crisis, while the initial feeding forms only the first step in a treatment protocol. Even the slightest doubt might then result in 'worry' and incur a penalty of only getting a smaller 'emergency' parcel subject to seeking 'more help' from affiliated partner agencies. Another volunteer explained that she would only give out additional parcels to clients while closely monitoring their progress in ongoing efforts to avoid dependency. To perform her pastoral duties, she reported keeping in touch with them via text messages to develop a better knowledge of their health needs and other 'issues' which are then evaluated before permission is sought from the partner agency to give out additional parcels. In addition to providing individualised care and guidance, pastors here perform a double role (Waring and Latif, 2017: 4) as both 'a "relay" of surveillance and discipline' but also as promoters of 'self-reflexive and self-governing subjects' who get to define normative expectations for appropriate conduct and enforce these in their everyday practice.

Confessional spaces and subjectification in food banks

After being welcomed and having their vouchers checked by staff, who then continue to pack their food parcel, volunteers with specific 'signposting' roles invite clients to sit down in a separate area. Small desks for individual conversations are set up in this café-style area where the client sits across from a volunteer. Clients are then offered a hot drink, biscuits, and sometimes even a hot meal, and asked to explain their personal situation. Based on these conversations, clients are signposted to partner agencies for 'further support'.

Then our signposters will sit down with them and have a conversation, a cup of tea with them and a biscuit and talk to them and find out if they're getting the help that they need umm if they're not getting the help that they need then we'd signpost them to an agency that can help them.

Pastoral power here works through signposting in confessional rituals where volunteers take up a listening and diagnostic role of authority. As clients are waiting for their food parcel to be packed, they are expected to verbalise their genuine need once more as volunteers cast their pastoral gaze upon them to confirm they are receiving appropriate care beyond material food aid. The confessional space offers a welcoming atmosphere in a friendly encounter without any overt exercise of power in contrast to institutions like the job centre. Signposting sessions were said to have therapeutic effects on clients, since having expert advisors from different organisations present allowed more effective treatment of the 'underlying' problem.

Umm the majority of people will go away much more uplifted than when they came in a lot of the time because we found that people would come in with really complex issues and we were just referring them back out to Citizens Advice all the time.

Signposting sessions call upon clients to avow to their crisis within a specific scene of address (Butler, 2005) as they are asked to sit down and asked to give an account of themselves in a situation, which creates complex power dynamics between listening givers and obedient receivers. Confessions are attributed a liberating effect (Foucault, 1978: 62) here and remain inherently individualising but also relational, since pastors must extract inner truths from their ‘sheep’ to know them in their individuality, thereby further ‘binding the individual to the spiritual director’ (Borg, 2015: 10) of the volunteer through subordination to their authority and moral–spiritual leadership. Guided by a desire to speak with clients directly, one manager referred to her Christian faith and the importance of building ‘personal relationships’:

I come more from the Christian background, I’m just wanting to help my neighbour making sure that people have food and what I have also discovered though through the years is that it’s really the person, the personal relationships you build or the connections that you make that can help people. (Manager, SFB)

As a practising Catholic, her personal encounter in the client’s home allowed the manager to diagnose the client’s needs and refer her to CAP (Christians Against Poverty) for debt management and financial advice, thereby acting as intermediary between problematic client as stray sheep and financially prudent communities. This diagnostic function relies on the professional expertise of other agents where the food bank’s function is to identify needs and establish trust through personal encounters and food provision before guiding clients onto other agencies. Through these translation practices (Waring and Martin, 2018), situated pastors translate discourses of financial literacy, personal responsibility, and active citizenship into practice. By recording and disseminating these confessions as ‘real stories’ across Trussell Trust websites and reports (Trussell Trust, 2020b), clients’ identities are further tied to their individual condition and aims for recovery in narratives of salvation as normative guidance for other food bank clients. Often documenting the effects of some unexpected life event, these stories normalise expectations of gratitude and moral indebtedness, while silencing any negative affect such as resentment or anger along with any desire for social change or resistance outside the communal care and normalisation of economic conduct overseen by the pastorate.

Just as Foucault’s (2014) confessional subject must avow to *being* made in order to be cured, ‘clients’ must embrace a new understanding of self to overcome poverty within the offered terms of the diagnosis where signposting forms a crucial moment of subjectification. At the same time, speaking the truth and confessing one’s problems, or that which is ‘most difficult to tell’ (Foucault, 1978: 59), promises understanding and recognition by others in a safe space. Confessions are then always produced relationally – that is, through power itself – where ‘we are compelled and internalize the compulsion, to search out and bring into light of day the truth of our selves, but in the process we create these truths, and create selves as products of power’ (Taylor, 2009: 78). It is through

these confessional rituals that clients are produced as subjects of charity and expected to bind, and therefore limit themselves to a new understanding of self as requiring treatment for an underlying condition located within the self which requires expert diagnosis and medical intervention.

Signs of resistance

Repeatedly pointing out fractures and contingencies in the histories of confessional practices, Foucault points out the political dimensions of refusal and reinvention by becoming other than what we are, rather than binding ourselves to offered identities by confessing what we are (Taylor, 2009). The constant need for verbalisation of referral reasons as inner truths and avowing to these ‘underlying reasons’ was indeed shown to be part of a larger expert culture that exercises power while silencing alternative solutions beyond food charity. Yet, the manager at SFB reported that some clients resisted her attempts at building a personal relationship by rushing the exchange of the food parcel and not allowing her into their home, thereby successfully evading her pastoral gaze. This indicates some capacity for resistance among the flock (Martin and Waring, 2018) with pastors relying on the recognition of their legitimacy and willingness by subjects offering to speak of their problems and constitute themselves as obedient subjects of charity.

Whereas SFB and EFB had embraced further expansion and building closer links with businesses and local authorities, the manager at WFB reflected much more critically on their further institutionalisation and had refused to accept referrals by the local job centre. She was equally critical of the local council who had underspent hardship funds 1 year and instead sent over 600 families to the food bank, thereby breaking their ‘statutory duty of care’. As a ‘subject of doubt’ (Clarke et al., 2007: 141), she is capable of reflecting on – and then rejecting the governmental transfer of further responsibility. While the food bank managers in this study frequently pointed to structural drivers of food bank use in benefit cuts and delays, not all were comfortable with this advocacy role and one manager refused to answer any questions related to government policy because she was ‘not supposed to be political’. In contrast, the manager at the independent food bank reported having regular political discussions and disagreements with her volunteers and despite not attributing blame, she argued, ‘the government can do more’. This shows how managers can themselves be placed in a restrictive subject position through institutional discourses and constructions of charity as unpolitical. There has been a considerable shift in the public relations strategy by the Trussell Trust from proudly aiming to build a food bank in every town at the height of their expansion (Lambie-Mumford, 2013) to today’s declared mission as ‘anti-poverty’ charity doing considerable media and advocacy work to scandalise the extent and drivers of food bank use in the UK. However, it is also through these policy critiques and published usage figures that food banks position themselves as emergency responders, merely reacting to existing needs and filling gaps in provision, seemingly outside of political power and opposed to a retreating welfare state. A governmentality perspective challenges this easy distinction and instead ‘focuses on technologies that are materialized and stabilized in institutional settings’ (Lemke, 2007: 50), including charities.

To analyse the government of poverty as a social problem then means to analyse the wider ‘discursive field within which these problems, sites and forms of visibility are delineated and accorded significance’ (Rose and Miller, 2010: 275), which cannot exclude food banks themselves. While they may not be mere ‘dupes of neoliberal governmentality’ (Williams et al., 2014: 2807) given how they retain a degree of institutional agency with considerable variability and competing problematisations between sites, they become centres of calculation and action (Rose, 2006), providing crucial material infrastructures with access and new opportunities to monitor risks and regulate the well-being of the ‘flock’ (McCuaig et al., 2013). As seen in the examples above, this does not render resistance impossible and pastoral power as analytic lens affords a more active role in negotiating available discourses and translating them into situated practices. It is here that errors in translation (Rose and Miller, 2010) frequently occur and opportunities for subversion may open up. Rather than idealising resistance across any such ‘interstitial spaces of resistance’ (Williams et al., 2014: 2810) as distinctly ‘other’ spaces of care, we should pay close attention to how they may also minimise resistance by coordinating better alignment with discourses of employability, productivity, and discipline.

Discussion

Shepherding a hungry flock

Across the three food banks in this study, pastoral practices constantly balanced discipline and subjectification ‘which together categorise, inscribe, normalise and monitor desirable subjectivities’ (Waring and Latif, 2017: 15) in a pastoral network of organisations whose expertise and authority have remained largely uncontested. The pastoral labour by volunteers in communal spaces was accompanied by disciplinary normalisation of clients’ financial and moral conduct, driven by discourses of welfare conditionality, material dependency, and individual crises requiring expert intervention and skills training. Ethnographic studies have raised other concerns over a ‘dark side’ of food banking pointing to the stigmatising effects of food aid and experiences of shame (Garthwaite, 2016; Van Der Horst et al., 2014). May et al. (2019b) further point to how the bureaucratic system, located mainly in the voucher system, together with constructions of scarcity by the Trussell Trust, reinforces divisions between ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ recipients. Yet, despite identifying some overlaps between food bank practices and neoliberal discourses, Cloke et al. (2017) emphasise their transformative potential as ‘caring places’ in normative terms without recognising the power inherent to this pastoral care.

In contrast, Waring and Martin’s (2018: 138) extended conception of pastoral networks has shown these to be ‘crucial nodes in neoliberalism who translate prevailing mentalities or discourses into specific life worlds’ while also ‘deflecting resistance and maximising alignment between neoliberal discourse and the values and self-identity of the community’, especially in times of crisis. This could be seen in the ways managers and volunteers sought to reintegrate food bank clients into the community, while promoting dominant norms of personal responsibility and economic independence. Whereas Foucault (2009b: 143) described a history of the Christian pastorate where ‘there are

never several shepherds for a flock; there is only one' who issues lifelong and consistent guidance, Waring and Latif (2017: 12) have convincingly demonstrated how modern regimes of governmentality work through networks of multiple pastors and pastorates potentially in competition with one another. With possibly conflicting interests and operating in different social spaces, these pastors are capable of developing different relationships with subjects and complement another's expertise, as seen with the growing networks between food banks and advice agencies. These partnerships then present a possible fragmentation of surveillance where no single actor or institution seeks to hold complete knowledge of their clients but operates only within the frame of their own expertise and local reach. After all, 'such preeminent power of sight belongs to God alone' (Siisiäinen, 2015: 241) and no human pastor can 'ever achieve an all-seeing surveillance and knowledge' of their flock. There is clearly a dilemma here for the food bank which does not have the necessary resources nor expertise to offer exclusive care for long-term needs and must instead refer clients to other expert services, at least temporarily entrusting their 'flock' to another shepherd.

Another relevant element to pastoral power is 'sacrificial reversal' (Foucault, 2009c: 170) through which pastors must be willing to make physical and spiritual sacrifices in service of their flock. Here it must be noted that volunteers are themselves guided and subjectified by dominant discourses which impose limits on their capacity to act and think outside the boundaries of neoliberal government. This paradoxical position raises the question of the costs to volunteers who sacrifice themselves for their flock of clients by investing considerable time and their unpaid labour while risking their health to maintain food charities during the COVID-19 crisis (Power et al., 2020). Although the impact of social distancing measures and closure of churches on interactions and power dynamics in food bank spaces is not known at this point, some independent food banks like SFB have long maintained their pastoral networks through delivery schemes and partnerships with other agencies.

The medicalisation of poverty

Much of the existing literature on food poverty in Western countries recognises how austerity policies have transferred responsibilities from state welfare onto charitable food providers, absolving governments from political responsibility and even de-politicising poverty itself (Caraher and Furey, 2018; Riches, 2018). However, contrary to dominant understandings of food charities merely responding to state retreat and filling gaps in provision (see Lambie-Mumford, 2018), governmentality scholars have long insisted that neoliberalisation as a social process does not mean less government but government at a distance (Rose, 2001b). Historically, neoliberal strategies for managing poverty have been guided by discourses of empowerment and self-help (Cruikshank, 1999), risk assessment (Dean, 2010), and instilling responsibility by targeting skills deficits using community both as a site and technology of government (Rose, 2001a). A common dilemma here is the reluctance to act through direct coercion, as neoliberal governmentality seeks to minimise direct intervention (Binkley, 2018) in favour of more distanced manipulations and constructions of market environments built upon the principle of not governing too much. Analysis of signposting practices has indeed shown how the pastoral desire to know clients and guide their moral conduct was accompanied by careful and subtle nudging, at

least until the parcel limit had first been reached. Rather than coercing clients through overt exercise of power, such paternalistic libertarianism (Jones et al., 2011) retains disciplinary mechanisms but prefers to act upon people's capacity to exercise through their own freedom in the pursuit of better economic outcomes.

For McFalls and Pandolfi (2014: 173), neoliberalism is further characterised by 'a therapeutic mode of government, one that legitimates its authority with claims of benevolence, of expertise, and even of empowerment of those whose conduct it guides'. Therapeutic discourses of crisis, prevention, early intervention, and recovery were evident across food bank practices where they medicalise poverty as an individual condition amenable to diagnosis and expert intervention. Medicalisation is here understood as a social and historical process (Clarke et al., 2003; Conrad, 2007), which extends medical jurisdiction, technologies, institutional reach, and expert knowledge into new areas of social life, thereby transforming social problems into treatable conditions at the level of subjectivity. Here, a pastor takes up a key role in translating medical intervention, as 'essentially a doctor who has to take responsibility for each soul and for the sickness of each soul' (Foucault, 2009c: 174) tasked with diagnosing faults and deviant subjectivities. Pastoral power is so persistent because it combines disciplinary intervention with the promise of salvation through benevolent care. The signposting of food bank clients to welfare advice services can undoubtedly have very positive effects in maximising benefit entitlements and could even be seen as a way of resisting a punitive welfare regime. However, such support still relies on the unquestionable expertise and authority of pastors (Waring and Latif, 2017) who not only monitor and discipline but also 'nurture self-governing subjectivities' so people can equip themselves with the skills and knowledge necessary to conform to the market and survive the shocks of austerity yet to come. Becoming an active consumer of advice services, financial literacy, and cooking courses in our fully therapeutic present (McFalls and Pandolfi, 2014) may offer some immediate relief but always comes at a cost as it reduces political questions to the technical management of a life in constant crisis.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the lack of critical engagement with power relationships inside food banks and challenge essentialist concerns with cause and effect, which reduce them to necessary, but shameful, responses to a retreating state as natural expression of community. In welcoming spaces of care and support, the provision of food parcels and other support were shown as forms of pastoral labour (Butler, 2019) accompanied also by disciplinary acts of monitoring clients' conduct, limiting their entitlements, and making them conditional in a wider pastoral network, which medicalises social problems (Conrad, 2007) and denies any agency in intervening in them. Far from either condemning or idealising the sacrificial labour inside food banks, the purpose of this article was to make visible these 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 2002b) and to cultivate reflexive doubt among volunteers and the public so that thinking outside the normality of food charity becomes possible. This raises new questions and ethical issues for critical sociologists, including the extent to which we may be critical of charity and volunteer work. The non-normative critique (Hansen, 2014) I am advocating is not directed at volunteers

or charities but at the discourses and unquestioned truths, which guide their conduct. Opening such a space for critique requires 'analysing and reflecting upon limits' (Foucault, 2000: 315) imposed on our reality and deciding what ways of acting, thinking, and feeling about poverty should no longer be acceptable so we can re-politicise and de-essentialise charitable solutions. Read as an 'essay in refusal' and 'an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is' (Foucault, 2002a: 236), this article contributes to a critical ontology of ourselves as ongoing political work capable of resisting simple solutions claiming to be outside of power and critique, in favour of historically sensitive and empirically grounded analyses of what is at stake in becoming neoliberal subjects. Such critical ethos does not stop with saying that food banks should not exist but resists causal reductionism by continuing to ask how they have come to exist in their current form, and what their own discursive practices and rituals mean for the constitution of subjects of charity.

Despite offering new insights into these neglected power dynamics and discursive dynamics at three UK food banks, there are clear limitations to the study and throughout I have emphasised the importance of local knowledges and ways that discourses are translated into situated practices. Given the focus on institutional discourses and local power effects, the findings do not reflect the diverse values, perspectives, and political attitudes of those volunteering at food banks (Williams et al., 2016). Especially among independent food banks, there is considerable variability in operating procedures and 40% of independent food banks in England (Loopstra et al., 2019a) do not employ a referral system and may offer more long-term provision. However, despite varying degrees of autonomy, all the 1200 food bank centres operating under the Trussell Trust are bound by the referral system and parcel limits where exceptions remain discretionary and conditional on the uptake of other support as a tool for behavioural activation. Coinciding with record needs and the integration of food charities into the COVID-19 response by the UK government, food banks have already widely reported food shortages and declining donations. Given these pressures arising from sustained economic and deep structural crises in capitalism, it seems likely that debates over deservingness are set to continue, but food banks are themselves deeply ingrained in these politics of knowledge production. Decisions over entitlements to a food voucher are routinely outsourced to partner agencies as a form of moral distancing and rationing (Beck and Gwilym, 2020; May et al., 2019b), but within these pastoral networks, responsibility becomes further fragmented and 'genuine' poverty must constantly be performed. The expansion and institutionalisation of food charity then cannot be understood without critical analysis of the discursive reproduction of poverty in medical terms and the (self-) examination of inner truths to which people bind themselves in times of crisis. This recognition not only opens new possibilities for resisting medicalisation but also calls for more critical reflexivity in poverty research, including its own power effects and role in an expanding therapeutic regime.

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Note

1. Pseudonyms.

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