

What's wrong with us?

A patchwork ethnography study of the lived experiences of the clients of a surplus food project in London.



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Introduction

There are 7 million people in the UK going hungry and 2 million tonnes of food wasted annually. As a result of this imbalance, there has been a call for surplus food projects to feed those in need utilising these resources. Whilst there is question over whether this course of action is appropriate, with suggestion that it depoliticises hunger, consequently resulting in avoidance of the issue by governments⁽¹⁾, surplus food projects are still increasingly growing in popularity. This has been attributed to such projects being viewed as an efficient community response to the challenges facing the gap between income and food costs in the UK in an increasingly challenging economic climate⁽²⁾. With the concept of nested deprivation, small pockets of deprived communities within statistically affluent areas, developing in traction⁽³⁾, there is a rise in confusion around understanding how deprivation can be defined, potentially seeking to move away from the preconception of statistically “deprived areas” in an already complicated social landscape.

Aim

The aim of this study was to deploy an evolving method of qualitative research called patchwork ethnography⁽⁴⁾ which immersed the author within the participant community to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of both the visitors to and volunteers involved in providing food surplus distribution services. Moreover, to understand the circumstances impacting why, within a geographic area of London statistically mapped as affluent by the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)⁽⁵⁾ such projects would appear to thrive as a necessity to bridge the increasing gap that many individuals and families are facing as opposed to the altruistic act of sustainability they once predominantly were.

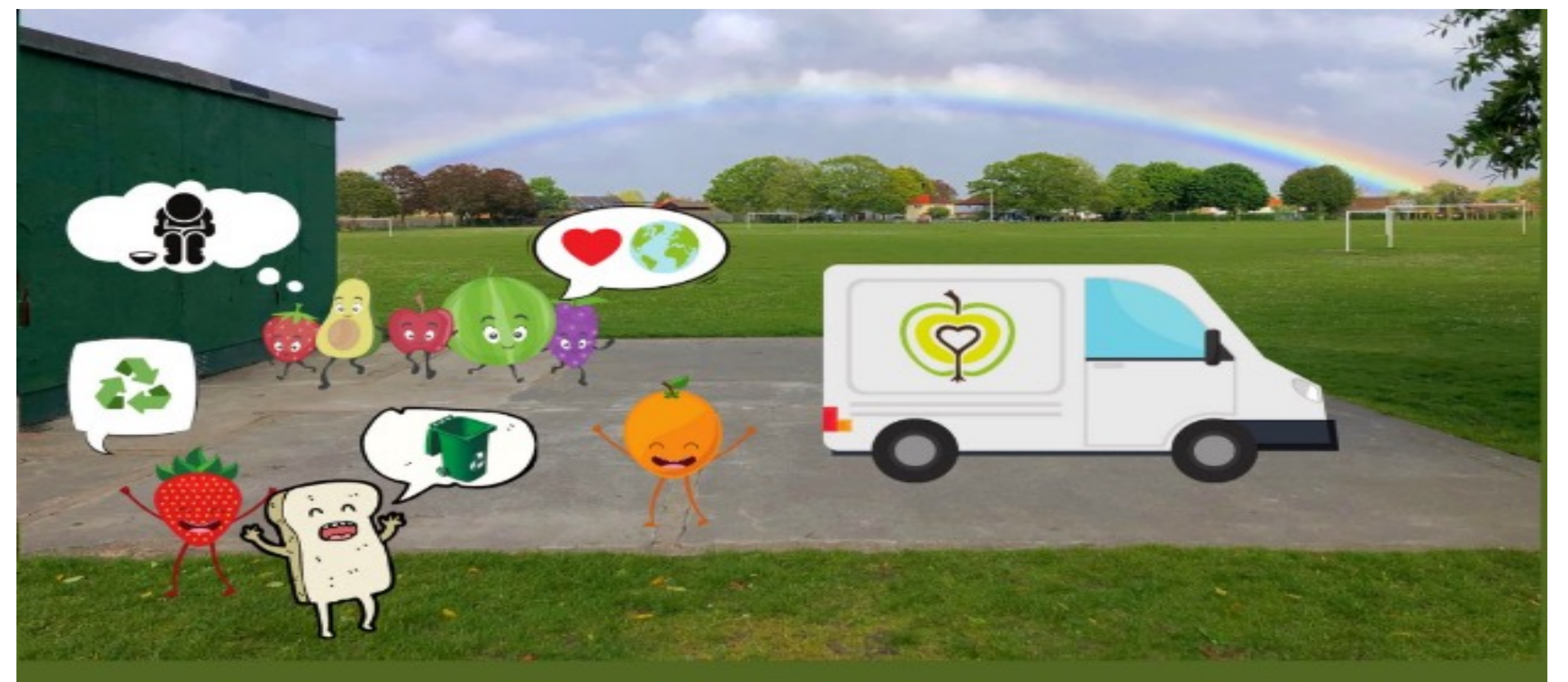


Methods

A food surplus project in South-West London was identified with the researcher training as a volunteer, getting to know the project and participants prior to data collection. During eighteen sessions, each lasting three to four hours, over a six-month period of data collection, participants were observed, through discussion, observations, and natural conversation recorded by audio, or writing on the environment, interactions and experiences of both visitors and volunteers. On average there were seventy visitors and twelve volunteers at each session. Participants visited the project from an approximate five-mile radius of the South West London location. Data gathered was analysed using a fusion of template analysis⁽⁶⁾ to provide a *priori* theming to reify the lived experience of using a surplus food project plus thematic analysis⁽⁷⁾ for further analytical depth to explore nuanced and diverse pathways to food security for families who traditionally do not fit the typical definition of socioeconomic deprivation.

Results

This study identified several categories of lived experiences of food poverty. These included experiences from queuing for food, to the collection and availability of food plus how the project impacts and interacts with social and sustainability outcomes. Moreover, a *priori* theming highlighted key elements of this project, attributed to its success, is not present in many traditional food banks. Such elements included non-compulsory referral, abundant fresh food plus community space to socialise. Additionally, there was a strong indication of a lack of empowerment or belief of visitors accessing the project, in their right, or ability to improve their circumstances. The thematic outputs suggest that interaction between end users and health agencies is instrumental in the navigation of food poverty in nested deprivations.



Conclusion

These findings highlight that the role and access to food provision services in socioeconomically deprived areas need to be dignity-centric. Moreover, it was observed that food sustainability projects managed effectively with visitor focused operational systems in place, consistently provide a wide range of food, both fresh and ambient. It was also observed that visitors create a micro-community enabling peer support and advice plus the opportunity to socialise with each other. We advocate the removal of traditional gatekeeping by referral and developing the process of projects to enable access for any person requiring support regardless of benefit, socioeconomic, or geographic status.



References

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