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## **Food banks and the production of scarcity**

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Author accepted manuscript

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## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to critical discussions of austerity by examining the constructions of scarcity that underpin it. Specifically, it shows how notions of scarcity (re)emergent in a period of austerity have shaped materially insufficient and stigmatising welfare systems. We do this through the example of UK food banks. We suggest that under austerity a particular moral economy of scarcity has become embedded at the level of common-sense, including in the common-sense of many of those distributing food aid. In UK food banks this moral economy is shaped by images of the 'empty cupboard' and discourses of absolute hunger which normalise practices of (self)rationing and exacerbate food insecurity. Tracing attempts by some food bank managers and volunteers to challenge this moral economy we conclude with a critical agenda for academics and practitioners to rethink relationships between welfare, austerity, and scarcity.

## **Introduction**

Though still only rarely an explicit focus of geographical scholarship (though see Doel, 2009; Ioris, 2012; Mehta et al, 2018; Nally, 2011; Watts, 2005) the construction, political maintenance and uneven impacts of scarcity lie at the heart of both liberal and radical approaches to distributive and spatial justice (Harvey, 1973; Rawls, 1972; Soja, 2010). At its simplest 'scarcity' refers to the limited availability of finite resources. But these limits are more than a product of finitude. 'Scarcity presupposes certain social ends, and it is these that define [it] ... just as much as the lack of natural means to accomplish those ends' (Harvey, 1974: 272). Thus, recent accounts of famine (Edkins, 2000; Keen, 1994) reveal such events to

be natural, technical and humanitarian disasters to be sure, but also tools of structural violence. Representations of scarcity also shape ethical imaginations of need and care (Smith, 2001) and delineate the epistemic field through which senses of responsibility are problematized and practiced (Weizman, 2011). In an 'age of austerity' – when millions of people across the UK are suffering food insecurity - discussions of scarcity have assumed a new urgency. Whilst acknowledging recent calls to reframe questions of poverty and inequality as an issue of excess (Abbott, 2014) in this paper we therefore seek to demonstrate the continued importance of geographical analyses of scarcity to questions of social (in)justice.

Given the scale of recent cuts to public spending, and the resultant shortages in everything from affordable housing to health care that have resulted, it would clearly be possible to examine questions of scarcity across any number of arenas. We have chosen to do so through the lens of food banking for two reasons. First, because in its most straightforward sense food is vital for life. But also because, as Strong (In press) has argued, the distribution of food and of food aid in particular represents one of the clearest articulations of a 'vital politics' - a politics concerned not only with 'bodily, nutritional vitality', but vitality as an 'epistemological object and ... vehicle for conducting conducts and enacting certain arts of living' (ibid: 2) such that historically the 'distribution of food has been inseparable ... from attempts to ... guide philanthropic interventions that aim to alter and correct certain bodies and spaces ... and mark those territories and populations deemed surplus, undeserving and abject' (ibid: 4). Our analysis of UK food banking demonstrates that such attempts are by no means consigned to history. Second, because whilst shortages in housing and health care are clearly a result of austerity, UK food banks have positioned themselves as an explicit *response to – and respite*

*from* - the scarcities produced by austerity. That in many cases this response is structured around the same discourses and practices that have given rise to and helped legitimate austerity, and further perpetuate the material scarcities experienced by food bank clients, is therefore particularly disturbing and worthy of sustained analysis.

Critical scholarship around food banking has thus far explored three main themes: the extent to which food banks depoliticise problems of food poverty by drawing attention away from the need for structural reform of capitalist food production and distribution systems; the extent to which they fill the gaps left by, and thus in fact enable, the further neo-liberalisation of state welfare; and the insecurity and shame people experience as a result of their growing reliance on charitable welfare (for an overview see Riches, 2018). As foodbanks have emerged as one of the most potent symbols of 'austerity Britain' (Garthwaite, 2016) and their dramatic growth since 2010 clearly tied to welfare reform (Loopstra et al, 2018), a growing body of research has also begun to trace the relationships between austerity and food banking (Dowler, 2013; Garthwaite et al, 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2013, 2017; Power et al, 2017; Strong, 2018).

Somewhat surprisingly neither body of work has yet explored the extent to which the discourses and practices of food banks themselves also often incorporate, and help further cement, key tropes of austerity – notably, scarcity – and the effects of this on food aid recipients. Such an omission is especially surprising given the modus operandi of many UK food banks. Most obviously, though the operational procedures of food banks that are members of the Trussell Trust - the UK's largest food bank franchise, providing about two thirds of its food banks – and some of those operating independently of the Trust differ, the majority of the UK's two thousand or so food banks (Butler, 2017) operate rationing and

referral systems. Typically, to access a food bank clients must first be referred by a local 'welfare professional' (a fluid category comprising social workers, GPs, teachers, advice workers, benefits officials and church workers) who assesses their need and provides a voucher that can be exchanged for food. The number of times a person may visit the food bank and the amount of food provided on each occasion varies between organisations, but in the case of the Trussell Trust clients may only visit three times in any six month period (unless an exception is made by the manager), receiving just three days of emergency food on each occasion.

Food aid providers have explained their use of such systems in a number of ways: claiming they reflect a desire to protect volunteers from making assessments of need they may be unqualified or uncomfortable doing (Lambie-Mumford, 2017); as attempts to ensure that those referring people to food banks are doing all they can to address the underlying causes of a person's food insecurity rather than leaving them dependent on emergency relief (Garratt, 2017); and indeed that they are a necessary tool in the management of scarce resources at a time when demand threatens to outstrip supply (Iafrazi, 2018). We have assessed the first two of these claims elsewhere - suggesting these systems are better understood as a new form of 'moral outsourcing' and charting the difficulties people have negotiating them (May et al, 2019). Here we focus on the third: examining the moral economies of scarcity that underpin this rationing and its role in perpetuating rather than ameliorating the material scarcities induced by austerity.

The remainder of the paper is in five parts. In the first part we examine the conceptual relationships between scarcity and austerity and show how the Cameron government (2010-

2016) drew upon a pre-existing vocabulary of scarcity to legitimise austerity and its attack on state welfare spending and welfare recipients that helped create the crisis of food insecurity to which UK food banks have sought to respond. In the second part of the paper we examine some of the scarcities UK food banks must negotiate, but also the role of food banks themselves in the production of scarcity. In the third part we explore the material practices through which a more general sense of scarcity is constantly reaffirmed for those both giving and receiving food in UK food banks, and in the fourth part the discourses of absolute hunger and of the 'empty cupboard' that shape the practices of many food bank volunteers. Though not denying that those using food banks are often at crisis point, we suggest that these images of absolute hunger and of the 'empty cupboard' are a 'myth' (Barthes, 2009): in the sense both that for many people food banks are a key means of averting, rather than a response to, absolute hunger; and that these discourses function to simplify, and naturalise, a system of rationing less obviously based around 'need' than 'deservedness'. Thus, just as the image of an empty Exchequer naturalises spending cuts that are in fact ideologically driven and highly uneven in their effects; images of absolute hunger and of the empty cupboard naturalise a system of rationing that appears to be based upon a moral imperative to ensure a limited supply of food goes to those most in need but which in fact moves around a particular moral economy of scarcity designed to distinguish between those perceived to be deserving and undeserving. In the final part of the paper we trace attempts by some independent food banks to challenge these practices and the constructions on which they rest.

The paper draws upon research into emergency food provision in the UK during which we conducted ninety-one interviews with food bank clients, volunteers, managers and referral agents in twelve towns and cities in England and Wales; undertook discourse analysis of

campaigning and fundraising materials produced by food banks; and engaged in over eighteen months participant observation as volunteers in one Trussell Trust (TT) and one independent (Ind) food bank (FB). In presenting that material here we have chosen to draw out the experience of volunteers, managers and clients at numerous food banks across the country rather than focus on a particular project or place in an attempt to demonstrate something of the wider ubiquity of our arguments. It is also a means of ensuring anonymity for organisations and individuals who were, on occasion, critical of others' work in this field.

### **Scarcity and Austerity**

In the midst of the 2007-8 global financial crisis, instigated by a crisis in the US sub-prime mortgage market and exacerbated by weak regulation and excessive risk in the global financial system more widely, the then Labour government provided a cash injection of £123 billion to UK banks in a bid to stop the collapse of the UK banking system and stave off (or at least ameliorate) the move into recession (NAO, 2018). Together with guarantees and indemnities, and the costs associated with moving several banks into public ownership, the total bill for this 'bail out' came to £1.152 trillion (ibid); 89% of the Treasury's then net assets (OBR, 2019), and £141 billion more than the existing 'national debt' (ONS, 2019). In his campaign speeches of 2009-10 David Cameron focused on this growing national debt as a major factor in the unfolding recession. Blaming its growth not on the banking crisis but the 'excessive' public spending of the Labour government, he declared that the 'age of irresponsibility' was over and promised that if elected he would instead oversee a new 'age of austerity' (Summer, 2009). A little over a year later his Coalition Government launched its



austerity programme; unleashing the deepest cuts to public spending in Britain since 1945 in a bid to reduce the debt and restore growth.

The affective and emotional as well as material effects of these cuts have now been well documented (for a review of work by geographers see Hall, 2018) but it is worth summarising something of their nature and scale once again. Under the auspices of austerity Coalition and Conservative governments instigated a freeze on public sector pay (affecting over 5 million people); capped, scrapped, froze or reduced the value of 45 welfare benefits; sanctioned 3.8 million welfare claimants; and reduced the Revenue Support Grant paid to local government by 77% - resulting in cuts to a range of services from education and social care, to third sector welfare organisations, libraries, street lighting and roads across hundreds of local authorities (Bounds, 2017; May et al, 2019).

Cuts have hit the poorest people and places hardest, re-enforcing classed, gendered, and racialised inequalities at a range of scales. Documenting some of their most 'vital' effects Watkins et al (2017) have estimated that between 2010 and 2014 cuts to health and social care spending alone were associated with 45,368 more than expected deaths whilst, with food prices rising seven times faster than average household incomes, by 2014 8.4 million people in the UK were experiencing food insecurity (End Hunger UK, 2018; Taylor and Loopstra, 2016). The number of food banks has also expanded dramatically, from 56 Trussell Trust food banks providing a three-day supply of food to the equivalent of 40,989 people in 2009-10, to more than 2000 Trussell Trust and independent food banks providing in excess of 1.6 million food parcels in April 2019 (Butler 2017, 2019). Notably, the single most common reason for using Trussell Trust food banks is a problem relating to benefits (Trussell Trust,

2019) and the growth of its network has closely mirrored the chronology of welfare reform (Beck, 2018).

Those concerned with the effects of austerity have focused on its victims. But it is important to recognise that others have not only continued to prosper despite but because of/from austerity. For example, having been taken into public ownership with annual losses of £3.6 billion pounds in 2009, in 2010 the Royal Bank of Scotland paid out £1.3 billion in bonuses to staff (Treanor, 2010). In parallel with austerity an aggressive programme of out-sourcing and privatisation has seen a rapid expansion of private health care - with the patient lists of private providers growing as NHS rationing has led more and more people to seek private treatment (Iacobucci 2018) – and private sector companies responsible for administering the UK's 'reformed' benefits system awarded over a billion pounds in new contracts (May et al, 2019).

Austerity is often defined simply as a budgetary policy of fiscal retrenchment by the state designed to restore growth. By contrast, Hastings et al (2017) characterise it as a form of 'regressive redistribution' (see also Taylor-Gooby, 2012). Whilst this moves us closer to an understanding of the new forms of both impoverishment but also profit under austerity, it may be most fully understood as a new 'moral economy' (Morris, 2016) moving around three key elements: finitude, futurity, and particular constructions of moral worth. In this sense, it would seem to derive its discursive power from much older, long-standing but rarely questioned constructions of *scarcity*, defined by Tellmann (2015) as a 'social device ... suffused with a moral economy of worth, closely tied to an understanding of economic futurity ... which allocates and orders where abundance applies and where restriction is called for' (2015: 32-35). For Till (2012) scarcity is thus the 'higher level condition' that drives

austerity discourses. For Tellmann (2015) the two discourses to all intents and purposes entirely overlap.

Exploring how discourses of austerity have taken hold Stanley (2014) has suggested it is important to examine how they came to chime with common-sense notions of 'living within one's means', long-standing fears of indebtedness, and widespread guilt over the 'excessive' consumption preceding the 2007-8 crisis. But it is also possible to point to a more active manipulation of discourses of scarcity by the architects of austerity designed to secure but disguise a particular moral economy. For example, pointing to issues of finitude and futurity but carefully ignoring the money that had been found to bail out the banks (monies which continue to be excluded from calculations of the national debt made by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR 2019)), its proponents seem largely to have persuaded the British electorate that the Exchequer is 'empty' (and that spending cannot resume until its coffers are full), and that future growth is dependent upon a 'tightening of belts' now - such that, even if their scale might be debated, cuts to the public purse have largely been accepted as both necessary and inevitable (Humpage, 2015).

As important has been an ability to obscure one form of moral economy underpinning these calculations (the continued production and uneven allocation of abundance) and focus attention only and entirely on another: the 'fairest' distribution of cuts (for a discussion of 'fairness' and the 'localisation of responsibility' under austerity see Strong, 2018). Here, Tyler and Slater (2018) have traced a carefully co-ordinated 'weaponisation of stigma' by successive governments since 2010 directed against benefit recipients designed to exacerbate the shame associated with claiming welfare (and hence reduce benefit claims) and build popular support for benefit cuts. Both drawing on and further legitimating a new genre of 'poverty

porn' that has established a picture of benefit claimants as inherently workshy, untrustworthy and ultimately undeserving (Jensen 2014), the anti-welfare rhetoric of those promoting austerity has not only expanded to include groups previously spared such stigma (for example, disabled people) but presented redistributive welfare itself as both unaffordable and inherently 'unfair' (Hoggett et al, 2013).

By drawing on the vocabulary of a second genre of 'austerity chic' (Bramall 2015) popularised by celebrity chefs and lifestyle commentators in the aftermath of the 2007-8 financial crisis, this rhetoric has also been able to establish a picture of the qualities against which the 'undeserving' might be judged. Tapping into a collective (re)imagination of the hardships associated with the immediate post-war years - in which rationing, shared sacrifice and thrift enabled Britain to rebuild after the second world war - austerity chic repositioned austerity not so much as a 'virtuous necessity' than as a virtue in itself. In reality, austerity chic was less obviously a response to real impoverishment than a new marker of class distinction for economically and environmentally conscious middle-class households. But by drawing on the genres of poverty porn and austerity chic together proponents of austerity have been able to establish a picture of both the need but also the virtues of frugality and thrift, and of those who most obviously threaten these values. Thus, it is notable how frequently in current anti-welfare rhetoric the deficiencies of the undeserving are constructed in opposition to the essential qualities of the virtuous 'austerity citizen'; as workshy rather than hard working, dependent rather than self-sufficient, unskilled in the arts of household budgeting, and profligate rather than frugal. For example, in comments that would not be out of place in an episode of *Benefits Street* but which are hardly unique amongst Conservative politicians, in January 2014 the former Conservative MP Edwina Curry tweeted that she was 'very, very

troubled at the number of people ... using food banks ... [who] ... never learn to cook ... never learn to manage and the moment they've got a bit of spare cash [are] off getting another tattoo' (Alexander 2014).

Clarke and Newman (2012) have argued that the ways in which the proponents of austerity were able to 'change the shape' of the 2007-8 financial crisis (from a crisis of the US banking industry, to a global financial crisis, to a fiscal crisis of the state and of public spending in which the UK government's aggressive pursuit of austerity came to be positioned as evidence of its moral probity and good housekeeping) reveals the 'alchemy' of austerity. In fact, the real alchemy may be the way in which its proponents have been able to redraw the moral economies of scarcity. Considering the deep-rooted understandings of scarcity on which it draws, it is perhaps not surprising that under conditions of austerity constructions of finitude and fairness have become inextricably linked; with it appearing only 'right and natural' that apparently 'scarce' public resources are reserved for those most in need. More surprising is that the particular moral economy of scarcity established under austerity - in which the need for moral probity and good housekeeping has become restricted to particular subjects, and questions of need transformed into questions of deservedness – also seems to have become so firmly embedded even amongst some of the organisations that position themselves as responding to the victims of austerity and welfare reform.

### **Problems of and the production of 'scarcity'**

As the cumulative effects of austerity have pushed more and more households into poverty, UK food banks have begun to struggle to meet demand. The recent roll out of the UK

Government's flagship benefits reform (Universal Credit) has been especially damaging, with an average 52% increase in demand for emergency food supplies in areas where the programme has been introduced (Trussell Trust 2018a). Some food banks have warned that they are in danger of running out of food (Pasha-Robinson 2017) and, though the majority of UK food banks are funded through a combination of public gifts, charitable funding and corporate donations, cuts to local state funding have led to the closure of a number of the referral agencies on which food banks rely (Trussell Trust 2015) and to the closure of some food banks themselves (Henderson 2017).

For some food banks, and certainly their clients, the problems of 'scarcity' are therefore very real. In line with Ioris' (2012) non-essentialist reading, this scarcity takes the form of multiple, interlocking fields; with rising demand and cuts to funding at the same time as difficulties in sourcing, collecting and distributing enough food because of a shortage of volunteers (Interview Ind FB Manager, Midlands). This scarcity is also both temporally, and geographically, uneven. Most obviously, food banks must try and manage fluctuating supplies; facing problems in storing donations at some times of the year (for example, Christmas) and struggling to source enough food at other times. Replicating a problem common to many voluntary welfare organisations (Mohan 2011), whilst some food banks have an apparent abundance of volunteers and donors, others – notably those in poorer communities – often struggle to secure the food they need to meet demand:

*Food banks in more affluent areas ... have that abundance ... We don't have that. So, we do run very close to the "we've just got beans, pasta and cereal left." We're never gonna have an abundance ... because there isn't an abundance around here. (Manager, TT FB 1, South Wales Valleys)*

UK food banks are less reliant on corporate food redistribution programmes than their North American counterparts. None-the-less, a number of independent food banks purchase food through *FareShare*; a national charity that redistributes corporate food waste/surplus to a variety of local state and third sector agencies. Inevitable variation in the food available for redistribution, but also a pricing policy that charges customers by the volume rather than type of food provided can also lead to shortages of basic food stuffs:

*We find as well that food is running very low, because ... [though] you are guaranteed a certain amount ... you could end up with ... Bottled water, which ... is considered part of the weight that you're buying. (Manager, Ind FB 1, Midlands)*

To deal with these kinds of problems, both Trussell Trust and independent food banks have begun to adopt a variety of strategies to better manage the supply and (re)distribution of food, including working directly with wholesalers, sharing donations with other food banks, and establishing their own redistribution networks. For example, reflecting a long-standing tradition of social solidarity and mutualism in what remains a tight-knit working class community, the same food bank which reported struggling to secure enough food in the exert above also described how they worked with other food banks in the area to ensure that whatever food is available is shared as equitably as possible between different projects:

*There's an independent [food bank in \*\*\*\* and] ... we had a long discussion between us and Asda about ... spreading the food within the valley ... and we all divided the food between us ... it's one of the things that we ... believe quite fundamentally ... we don't have an abundance of resources so we have to divide equally what we have. (Manager, TT FB 1, South Wales Valleys)*

Building on this kind of informal arrangement, the Trussell Trust has developed its own redistribution network in which food banks with a surplus of food can redistribute that surplus to other food banks in the network who are struggling. A volunteer at a Trussell Trust food bank in London we spoke with, for example, recalled how when they collect from 'Waitrose

*... we'll get enough food to fill this room, the whole floor, stacked up in boxes about halfway up to the ceiling'. On one such occasion they therefore responded to a call on the network from a food bank that was short of stock and 'vans turn[ed] up from Newcastle' to take away the 'surplus'.*

For Tarasuk and Eakin (2005) problems of scarcity are endemic to food banking systems that are reliant on volunteer labour, public donations, and corporate food redistribution schemes. But it is also important to recognise the role that food banks themselves play in the production of these scarcities. Not least, and in contrast to many North American food banks (Fisher, 2017), the food distributed by food banks in the UK is often designed to provide a 'balanced diet'; including complex carbohydrates, protein (meat or fish) and (tinned) fruit. Indeed, the Trussell Trust highlights the input of nutritionists in designing their food parcels (Trussell Trust 2018b). Yet whilst the Trust, and other food banks, tend to campaign around an attempt to tackle 'hunger', the simultaneous concern with (mal)nutrition produces a paradox in which even when faced with hungry clients food banks may withhold the 'wrong kind of food' (on the replacement of concerns with 'hunger' by 'malnutrition' see Vernon 2007'; for a discussion of food banks returning supermarket donations to exchange them for prescribed items see Garthwaite, 2016):

*... we've got quite limited capacity to deal with [surplus food donations] because we do have to be really prescriptive about the non-perishable food that we give out. We've also got a list of very specific items we don't give out. Because it's all geared up to provide people with three balanced meals over three days. (Assistant Manager, TT FB, City in South West England)*

It is also clear that the Trussell Trust's redistribution network (open only to members of the Trust) does not always work smoothly. Partly this is because it is mostly regionally based. In the case of wealthier regions, where food banks across the area may be relatively 'resource



rich', projects can find themselves struggling not with a shortage but a surplus of food, and difficulties in finding projects to which they might offer it, as this assistant manager explained: *'If we've got more food we'll offer it to other food banks in the region ... But often they've got as much food as us, so it all gets a bit difficult then'*.

As UK food banking has grown competition has also emerged between different providers. For example, several independent food banks reported difficulties in securing donations because of the tie-in developed by the much larger Trussell Trust network with *Tesco* and *Asda* to host only its collection boxes (for contrasting discussions of these tie-ins see IFAN, 2018; Lambie-Mumford, 2017):

*Most supermarkets I don't get in the front door because they want to go through ... Trussell Trust. So [that's a problem] ... because ... I don't want to be in the situation that I have been in - that I've got nothing in my cupboard.* (Manager, Ind FB 4, Midlands)

Voluntary welfare systems commonly tend towards unevenness in both the supply and quality of provision (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003). This unevenness is also evident in the UK food banking system, with the reliance on volunteers, public donations and corporate food redistribution schemes - but also spatially delimited redistribution networks and the monopolistic practices of some food banks - producing an uneven geography of 'scarcity' for food banks and their clients at local and regional scales. In the next section we explore some of the ways in which scarcity is 'written into' the material practices and spaces of individual food banks.

### **Scarcity as material practice**

Mason et al (2018) have traced the material practices that constantly re-enforce a sense of stigma amongst those claiming benefits; from the abuse (and sometimes projectiles) hurled

by passers-by when queuing to access a Job Centre, to the security guards and grilles that confront people when they enter the building. Others have explored the 'felt stigma' (Scambler 2004) reported by those using food banks (Purdam et al, 2015). Here we trace the production and reproduction of 'felt scarcity'.

A combination of fluctuating donations and a reliance on surplus food and/or the monopolistic practices of other providers mean that many food banks sometimes experience shortages of food. In fact, however much food they have, most UK food banks seem to operate according to the horizons of what Doel calls 'miserly thinking'; a system of thought in which one is 'fated to allocate scarce resources, obligated to utilize deficient means, and duty bound to minimise waste ... condemned forever to spin around in [a] vortex of calculation' (2009: 1056). For example, many volunteers appear to take pride in their ability to manage uneven, and sometimes scarce, donations and indeed a certain pleasure in the 'vortex of calculations' such management systems demand:

*We had a glut of pasta at one point so you give people a little bit more. But then you get low again. So you've got to be careful ... you have a list of all the goods that go out ... Then you have to weigh it, weigh what's going out as opposed to what's coming in when it's weighed in before ... some of the things that we're given are ... out of date ... So they go in a bag, separate. They have to be weighed out because they've been weighed in. (Volunteer 1, TT FB 1, London)*

As miserly thought suffuses the material practices of food banks, these practices constantly reaffirm a sense of scarcity amongst both those distributing and collecting food - whether the constant checking and weighing of stock; the boxes of ingredients sorted and ready to make up a food parcel, the contents of which follow a prescribed checklist with only limited choice between canned or packet soup, this tin of meat, or that one; or the long queues people sometimes have to negotiate before they can collect a parcel.

This sense of scarcity is most obviously reproduced in the various referral and rationing systems many UK food banks use. Such systems are indeed widely understood by food bank managers and volunteers in relation to two of the three elements of scarcity - finitude and futurity; that is, as essential to the management of scarce resources in a context where demand constantly threatens to overwhelm supply. As this assistant manager from a Trussell Trust food bank in a city in the South West of England told us, for example:

*We tell people that we really shouldn't give food without a valid voucher because it is going to open up the flood gates to ... a level of need that we wouldn't be able to cope with. Realistically, we need to have some way of managing the huge amount of need in order to be able to do anything effectively.*

Yet most UK food banks continue to ration the amount of food they offer, and the number of times people can receive it, irrespective of whether the food bank is currently short of food or operating with a (sometimes significant) surplus. Another volunteer at the food bank in London which sometimes redistributed its 'surplus' to food banks in Newcastle told us, for example, that at other times there is such a 'swathe of stuff' that they 'basically have to take it to the tip'. Even so, they continued to ration, suggesting that such rationing may have less to do with questions of finitude and futurity than the third element fundamental to understandings of scarcity: a moral economy of worth moving around, at first sight at least, assessments of need. As a third volunteer at the same food bank explained:

*I think it's good to have a system so that there's some sort of filter of who's coming in. Because we couldn't cope with loads of people coming in off the streets all the time ...*

*Interviewer: Because you'd run out of food?*

*(Pause) Well - partly that, and partly - we don't know whether they really need it or not ... So I think it's really good ... that the people who are coming in have been vetted in some way.*

## The 'myth' of the empty cupboard ... and constructions of need

The most obvious way in which the need for both food banks, and their clients' need for food, can be demonstrated is through a demonstration of 'real hunger'. As Henderson (2004) has shown, food banks will often seek to engender support from potential donors by focusing their fund raising and campaigning materials on the most extreme images of food insecurity – on people who may not have eaten for days, and those with literally nothing in their cupboards. This iconography of absolute hunger and of the empty cupboard is evident in the images and client stories used on the Trussell Trust website, the content of which is shared between franchises to promote a unified ethos and 'brand'. Between 2013 and 2015, for example, and accompanied by Figure 1, the Trust appealed for donations by drawing visitors' attention to:

*A primary school boy from Gloucester [who] stopped attending school ... because he could not face the embarrassment of having no money for lunch. On visiting his home to deliver a foodbank parcel, the school's liaison officer discovered there was no food, except a little oats and milk. (Web Archive, 2018a)*



(Figure 1: Empty cupboards)

Visitors could also click through to more *Real Stories*, choosing between a range of links variously entitled: *I hadn't eaten for days to feed my children*; *The food bank saved our lives*;

and *Couple forced to borrow soup to feed 18-month-old daughter* (Web Archive, 2018b; for a discussion of the ways in which this focus on individualised experiences of extreme hunger depoliticise discussions of famine see Campbell, 2011; for an attempt to subvert these textual and visual tropes in the context of UK food insecurity see End Hunger UK, 2018).

Indeed, the empty cupboard is a staple trope of numerous reports and blogs on food banking too (see, for example, Chapman 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2019) and is sometimes re-worked to draw attention to the threat of food banks themselves running out of food (Barker 2017). It is also used by food bank volunteers in their own campaigning work, as this volunteer recalls:

*Something that I do with children is I have pictures [of my larder, and I say] 'I have no food.' And it's not full-full but ... there's a couple of boxes of cereal, and bits and pieces or whatever. I say 'This is not no food. This is nothing in my cupboard that my children will eat.' Then you have an open cupboard with nothing, maybe with salt or something in the corner - I say, 'This is no food.'* (Manager, TT FB 1, South Wales Valleys)

The iconography of the empty cupboard and absolute hunger also shapes the practices of referral agents and food bank managers. For example, agencies working with the Trussell Trust are instructed to ask potential clients whether they have any food, or the financial means to buy food, before a referral can be made and in a Trussell Trust media training workshop attended by one of the authors food bank managers were warned to avoid using images of people which might undermine a picture of need – including images of noticeably ‘overweight’ people.

One obvious danger of such iconography is that it can easily lead to stigma and exclusion and be reworked by those seeking to question the extent of food insecurity. In a particularly crass intervention in debates around the growth of food banks in 2015, for example, a Conservative Health Minister pointed to the apparent ‘paradox’ of rising levels of both food insecurity and

obesity in the UK (Hope, 2015). Providing a more personal example of the consequences this conflation of food insecurity with 'absolute hunger' and body size, this respondent recounted her own reluctance to visit a food bank in London:

*[My cousin] said to me – 'You're having so much difficulty, you can't afford the food, why don't you ask for food?' I said, 'I don't think I have the right to ask' ... Because I'm a big woman ... I feel I don't deserve it because everybody is saying 'You're too big to have this. You're too big'.* (Client 1, Ind FB food 2, London)

The 'myth' of absolute hunger and of the empty cupboard shapes encounters between food bank volunteers and clients too. Most obviously, for many food bank volunteers any attempts by clients to exercise a choice of what food they might receive - whether because they do not like, cannot eat, or simply do not need particular items - is often read as evidence that they cannot be in 'real need':

*People used to set up in reception ... and go through the bag and maybe leave some of the bits. I could never understand why - if people were in so much need - they could ... leave it ... [and then] we get people saying: 'Oh, I don't want pasta, I don't want rice. Can I have another meat item?'* (Manager, Ind FB 2, Midlands)

To be absolutely clear, we are not arguing that the client stories food banks circulate are not true, or that many of the people using UK food banks are not in crisis. Rather, we want only to suggest that there are very real dangers in representing food poverty through an iconography of absolute hunger. Most obviously, images of empty cupboards run the risk of drowning out a more nuanced understanding of food insecurity in which people turn to food banks both when in absolute crisis, but also when attempting to stave off that crisis by adding to the limited supplies they may already have – *'just keeping the cupboards stocked up'*, because *'it's so hard living on benefits'* as one client told us - and providing people caught in the stranglehold of austerity with a small but vital breathing space, as this Trustee of a food bank in London explained:

*They couldn't survive off the food that we give them for an entire month. But ... they get about £30 worth of food [every two weeks] maybe a bit more ... that might give some people ... just ... that little bit of slack ... a little bit of breathing space.* (Trustee, Ind FB 2, London)

***... and of the undeserving poor***

The 'myth' of the empty cupboard and of absolute hunger leaves no space for this more complex picture of food insecurity. It also carries the risk that anyone seeking to receive more than the bare minimum – visiting more than one food bank in an attempt to secure more than three days of supplies, for example, returning to a food bank more often than is allowed because they need food on more than only three occasions or because they are indeed trying to stave off a crisis by topping up their cupboards – become cast as undeserving. Indeed it is notable how many UK food bank managers and volunteers seem to have internalised the constructions of welfare subjects - as workshy and profligate, for example – and the fears of 'welfare dependency' that dominate current political rhetoric:

*I've got a feeling that some people are not cut out for work today ... They're used to lying in bed and then going and getting money ... A lot of people, I do notice, smoke ... and it costs you six pound a packet. I don't approve of that when they're coming here.* (Volunteer 1, Ind FB 2, London)

*We work to a system people can have three food hampers in a year ... [We're not here] ... to encourage them to use their money elsewhere ... Some of the other food banks continually say that they've not got enough food, but they ... give food out to people that ... can go as often as they like. To me that's just creating dependence* (Manager, Ind FB 2, Midlands)

In their account of food banking in North America, Tarasuk and Eakin suggest that 'the frequency with which clients [can] receive assistance, and the level of assistance they receive on any one occasion [is] driven not by their need for food so much as by the food bank's policies and practices designed to maintain operations in the face of a limited, highly volatile,

and largely uncontrollable supply of food donations' (2003: 1511). Though many UK food banks must also manage limited and volatile supplies and justify the use of rationing systems as a way of managing these problems of finitude and futurity, these systems are enforced even when there is no such scarcity; even indeed, as we have shown, when 'surplus' food is being sent to land-fill. Rather than relating to constructions of finitude or futurity, or even to a moral economy constructed around need, such systems may therefore be more accurately understood through the particular moral economy of scarcity established under austerity – one within which 'scarce' rations are reserved for those deemed not only as being in 'genuine need' but also 'deserving' of them:

*\*\*\*\* has what she calls her miscreant file, and once a month she looks up on the database anybody who has had more than three vouchers and then once a month I phone those agencies to enquire why ... And it's really helped us to be quite clear in making sure that people genuinely need the vouchers and they genuinely need the food when they come to us. We don't get many people that slip through the net, who are abusing it. (Manager, TT Food Bank, City in South West England)*

There is even evidence of volunteers seeking to restrict people's access not only to their own food bank but to food banks across the network in attempts to frustrate the efforts of those who would seek to 'take advantage' of or 'cheat' the system:

*A lady came in last week ... And I had to ... say, 'What's happening with this voucher? ... You're not eligible' ... She said, 'Can you just let us ... this once ... we promise we'll never come back again'. And I said, 'I'm afraid that's not how it works'. 'Oh in that case, can we have the voucher back and we'll go to another food bank?' I said 'No, the food bank system, it counts as everything. You can't just go to \*\*\*\* or wherever and use the same voucher. That's not how it works'. I said, 'What we'll do is, we'll keep the voucher, and if you come back in eight weeks, and if you haven't got another voucher, you can use the one we're retaining for you.'* (Volunteer 4, TT FB 1, London)



We should note here that we also encountered incidents when managers and volunteers in both Trussell Trust and independent food banks acted ‘outside of the rules’: giving food to those without a voucher or to someone who had already exceeded the allocated number of visits; issuing vouchers on the spot; or ‘twiddling the figures’ in their data returns to the Trust so the food bank did not exceed the number of vouchers it was allowed to assign itself, for example (see also May et al, 2019). Yet, these individual acts of ‘subversion’ were themselves rationed according to perceptions of moral worth and deservedness (ibid) and, whilst enormously beneficial to the individual client, do nothing to challenge a system of rationing itself. Indeed, very often they were framed in such a way as to reify even as they appeared to subvert these systems. As one volunteer told a client: *‘We can give this as a one-off, next time you need to get a voucher’* (Field notes, TT FB, City in South West England).

A growing body of research, including on behalf of the Trussell Trust (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017), has shown many of those using food banks need to do so, even if irregularly, on a long-term basis or are unable to afford food for long periods of time (Black and Seto, 2018; Garratt, 2017). Yet the claim that food banks ‘never turn anyone away empty handed’ is clearly fallacious (Beck, 2018). In fact, the cruel reality is that by drawing on – and further reinforcing – a particular moral economy of scarcity, the rationing and referral systems used by many UK food banks is actively producing further scarcities: whether for those left with nothing because deemed ‘not really in need’, ‘undeserving’ or because they have ‘used up’ their allocated visits, or for other providers who end up trying to feed those who cannot access a food bank (Chirgwin, 2019).

Indeed, with the distribution of food bank vouchers carefully rationed we also found evidence of people in need of food treating these vouchers too as a 'scarce resource'- saving any they may have until they faced a 'real emergency', or 'absolute hunger':

*Interviewer: Have you been able to use food banks as much as you want or need to?*

*No, because you only get a certain amount of tokens a year ... I haven't actually used [all] mine. I mean, the one I gave to the gentleman is actually old. I don't use it, cause I only, like [Pause] if it's an emergency for me, an emergency ... (Client 2, TT FB 1, London)*

### **Challenging scarcity**

In his analysis of the displacement of a moral economy of hunger with a political economy of food security Nally (2011) argues that the resultant market liberalism (and subsequent 'neoliberal truth regimes') led to the 'elimination of non-market access to food' (2011: 46). Rejecting this reading, Lindenbaum suggests that just as food banks challenge this apparent 'neoliberal heterodoxy' by 'replacing market strategies (shopping at a store) with non-market ones (obtaining free food at the food bank)' (2015:7), they also provide a wider challenge to neoliberal doxa, in the sense that:

*Food banks ... do not reproduce neoliberal notions of individual consumer choice, entrepreneurialism, and personal responsibility ... there is little evidence that food banks propagate neoliberal discourse. Food bank volunteers and employees ... are aware that food insecurity is a result of poverty and unemployment, not personal weakness or an overall food shortage. (2015: 7-8)*

By contrast, our research suggests that though food banks may well usefully be understood as articulating an alternative moral economy of food that sits outside of, or at least alongside, mainstream market mechanisms, very often this moral economy is marked by decidedly

moralistic constructions of scarcity central to austerity and welfare reform, notably (un)deservedness and (the dangers of) dependency.

But it is also important to recognise the efforts made by some independent food banks in the UK to challenge these constructions. Perversely, perhaps, one of the ways in which they are trying to do so is by enabling clients to re-identify with normal(ising) consumer behaviour. At one food bank in London for example, though food is provided for free, goods are distributed through a 'shop' in which 'customers' choose what they want:

*As somebody who works in the shop, I think one of the things that I am really impressed with is the choosing your own items. I have heard stories of food banks where it's like, 'okay here's your bag of food, go away again'. And you know, some people have dietary restrictions, some people have got loads and loads of 'that' at home, but need some of 'this' ... I think it helps to have that dignity, to go and choose [your] own stuff. (Volunteer 2, Ind FB 2, London)*

In others, an emphasis is placed on providing people with recognised brands, rather than own-brand, wholesale, or surplus food so as not to re-enforce a sense of thrift or any sense that food banks supply only 'surplus food to surplus people'.

If there are obvious limits to the challenge such tactics might pose to broader processes of commodification and marketisation, they do at least serve to counter constructions of food bank users as somehow lacking the 'savvy' of the responsible austerity citizen:

*I'm almost always in the shop [and] ... you see [what] people ... choose, and how they go about choosing it. You get some people who are very, very quick ... And you get some ... who read all the labels ... weigh up the pros and cons of one item against another ... really thinking about it. (Volunteer 2, Ind FB 2, London)*

Some food banks managers and volunteers we spoke with sought to challenge these constructions more directly still, explicitly rejecting any notion that people using food banks were doing so because they were either profligate or lacking the budgeting skills of the virtuous 'austerity citizen'. For example, as one manager in the Midlands noted: '*[It] isn't that*

*they don't budget, or don't have the skills to budget ... They know how to manage their money, and they probably manage it a lot better than we would. They [just] don't have enough of it'.*

Others challenged the constructions of absolute hunger and of the 'empty cupboard' that frame the campaigning activities and practices of so many food banks and food bank volunteers:

*Some people seem to believe that if you are hard-up, even temporarily, you should not claim any sort of benefit until you have sold your television, sold your car and are sitting on bare boards (Manager, Ind FB 1, Coastal Community, South West England)*

Building on these critiques, some also operated very different systems of distribution - rejecting rationing and offering either an open-ended service or extended visits. In the food bank below, for example, the decision to offer people the opportunity to visit the food bank up to fifteen times rested on a rejection of the 'myth' of the empty cupboard and absolute hunger and recognition of the on-going needs of many people suffering food insecurity, but also a recognition of the very real problems of finitude and futurity with which they as an organisation sometimes struggled:

*I think it's very difficult. I mean ... the limitations on the number of visits a client can have ... But ... is it better to help more people a bit? Which I think it probably is. [Pause] And the food bank does struggle with ... things coming in. You know, having the time and the volunteers to go and do supermarket runs ... have the money to go buy things. You can't help everybody as much as you'd like to be able to. (Volunteer 2, Ind FB 2, London).*

Far from resting upon the moral(istic) economy of scarcity constructed under austerity, for these volunteers the decision to ration was thus made reluctantly, and articulated a very real - and very painful - ethical struggle over the best use of (what for them are indeed) scarce resources:

Interviewer: *What do you think people do when they do run out of their ten visits? Do you know where they go?*

*No. I did speak to somebody who was just like: 'Well, there's nowhere'. They just said, there's nothing. So [pause] - that's really like, oh, I don't know - it's just heart-breaking. (Volunteer 4, Ind FB 2, London)*

## **Conclusions**

Taken together this paper makes four broad contributions to the growing literatures on the geographies of austerity, welfare reform and food banking, and on poverty, inequality and socio-spatial justice more broadly. First, a focus on questions on scarcity - and in particular, on the different moral economies that shape how issues of finitude and futurity are constructed - helps further explain both the nature and hold of austerity discourse. The true 'alchemy of austerity' (Clarke and Newman, 2012) may have less do with the ability of its architects to 'change the shape' of the 2007-8 financial crisis, than with the ways in which they have been able to restrict subsequent discussions of the need for moral probity and good housekeeping and the 'fair' distribution of 'scarce' resources to particular subjects and arenas – to the benefits system and benefit claimants rather than to bankers or those who continue to profit from the privatisation of that system – and transform questions of need into questions of moral deservedness. In critically assessing these transformations, a focus on constructions of scarcity reminds us not only that 'scarcity' and 'surplus', privation and profit are always inter-dependent (Panayotakis, 2011) but that these constructions always presuppose certain social ends and operate 'as a principle of rule and of personal conduct' (Watts, 2005: 99).

Second, though we acknowledge the hopeful possibilities of working in the 'meantime' (Clove et al 2017) and stand by arguments that food banks remain spaces with ethical potential where a progressive politics can be nurtured (Williams et al, 2016), here we want to

emphasise the forces that can work to quell this potential. Thus we have traced constructions of scarcity and of miserly thinking as a new common-sense shaping the UK food banking system. We have demonstrated how practices such as standardised provision, rationing, time-limited support and referral can exacerbate the hardships and stigma of those food banks seek to support, whilst the efforts of some to guard 'scarce' resources fuels shortages experienced by others - shaping new territorial injustices. As they continue to explore the ways in which discourses of austerity shape the practices of the local state and urban governance (see, for example, Fuller and West 2016; Penny, 2017), scholars need also to interrogate the extent to which austerity thinking has infiltrated the mundane practices and encounters of some third sector welfare organisations.

Third, we have suggested that even whilst the 'myth' of the empty cupboard and images of deserving, destitute and hungry bodies, misrecognises and misrepresents the realities of food insecurity in the UK, this iconography is both producing new forms of scarcity (discouraging people in need from seeking support, and leading to the self-rationing of food and food vouchers) and draws upon and further cements the deeply damaging distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor now shaping the wider welfare system. Such developments raise important questions about the entanglement of charitable aid and forms of structural and symbolic violence (Lopez et al, 2015). Our own starting point here is that food insecurity can only be effectively challenged through structural change but, whilst fighting for these changes, difficult questions remain over how best to respond to people in crisis. Cash entitlements will always be a more effective and less stigmatising way of meeting people's immediate needs (Menu for Change Scotland, 2018). But with little likelihood of an immediate return of these entitlements (in England and Wales at least) we need to think how

the current infrastructure might be adapted to provide people with more secure supplies of emergency food in more dignified ways. One way forward would be to embrace an unconditional ethos of open-ended access, removing rationing and the uncertainty and stigma that go with it. But this would necessitate a more co-ordinated effort on the part of providers, with food banks working together to ensure the adequate supply of food at times/in places of shortage. An obvious risk with any 'improvements' to the infrastructure of UK food banks, however, is that this additional investment will simply further institutionalise food aid itself (IFAN, 2018).

Fourth, we have shown the fundamental challenge scarcity thinking poses to food charity in and of itself. Irrespective of whether an individual food bank rations from a position of shortage or abundance, or indeed rations at all, charitable food aid is reliant on the purchase of food in spaces that are emblematic of commoditisation, over-production, and 'choice' (whether the supermarket or *Fareshare* depot) for donation to those facing privation rather than abundance, and with few or any choices. An analysis of the moral economies of scarcity exposes these fundamental contradictions in the current political-economy of food. Such exposure might in time encourage more radical experimentation with new forms of food distribution based around relationships of need, of sharing and mutual aid, trust and reciprocity rather than markets or charitable donations. Such experimentation is already underway but currently only at the margins of the sector (see, for example, Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018). Our hope is that a continued focus on 'scarcity thinking' may help shift these attempts to re-imagine 'food aid' from the margins to the centre.

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