

**'ONE PAY CHEQUE FROM POVERTY':
AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON 'IDENTITY' AND THE NATURE OF 'GIVING' INSIDE A DUNDEE
FOODBANK**

Brooke Gall

Food is an essential material for human existence. However, in the United Kingdom (U.K.), an overall prosperous country, poverty has led so many citizens to rely on emergency food provisions, which are becoming a prominent fixture of the welfare landscape. Watching a BBC documentary on foodbanks across Britain, I decided I to conduct my fieldwork with people involved in the Dundee foodbank community.

It was relatively easy for me to become involved in the life of one Dundee foodbank. I simply emailed and explained my work and was met with an enthusiastic manager who was willing to let me come down for a few days to conduct my research. My focus is on two days I spent at the main Trussel Trust foodbank and on an afternoon I spent helping at a food drive in Tesco. I conducted interviews inside Tesco with people unconnected with foodbanks, to gain an 'outsider' perspective on foodbanks and their users.

When I started in the foodbank, staff raised concerns about intrusion into the privacy of foodbank users (who will be referred to as clients from here onwards). Understandably many clients might not feel comfortable with someone documenting their time at the foodbank. I wanted to respect the fact that they may be in vulnerable situations and did not want to impede on them asking for help or by distracting staff. Consequently, when clients were in, I mostly observed, asked a few questions and guided the conversation when I could. However, most clients told their stories without much prompting from staff or myself. This was ideal for me as I wanted the conversations to be situational and informal. It was interesting to see how willingly clients disclosed their personal stories about how they ended up at a foodbank. This also allowed me to be seen by clients as an 'insider' who would not pass any judgments. It is for these reasons that I chose not to record the conversations but rather took notes at the end, and it is also why I will use pseudonyms throughout.

I went into my project initially looking to focus on the health aspect of food parcels. However, I found that whenever I began to talk about the issue of health I was interrupted by interjections that, 'you get what you're given' and 'take what you can'. I realised that neither staff nor clients cared much about the quality of the food given so I abandoned this. I gathered all my data and then reflected on common themes throughout the fieldwork. The first area I will analyse is the topic of identity; discussing personal, social and cultural models. In the second section, I will consider the notion of individual giving, looking at staff and the food donor's interpretations. I will begin by detailing my time inside the foodbank, to project an image of what life is like inside a foodbank.

INSIDE THE FOODBANK

The foodbank is based in a small church on a residential street in central Dundee. There were two main rooms, referred to as the 'picking room' and the 'waiting room'. Before the foodbank opened for the day, we lay out the waiting room similar to a home living room; comfortable sofas and chairs surrounding a coffee table complete with biscuits, magazines, cookbooks and flowers. The manager, James, introduced me to the staff members, some of whom were professionals in a field of care or support and others who just helped out to have something to do. I was then given a tour and familiarised with the 'Trussel process'.

Being a foodbank 'chain', so to speak, everything was done, I was told, identical to the operations of other Trussel trust foodbanks. They take all referrals over the phone and ask several questions including, ethnicity, age, number of people in the household, dietary requirements, pets and appliances they have to cook on. This information is relayed/passed on to the 'picking room' where food parcels are made up and distributed. This room is laid out in a particular manner; each section of the table holds a certain category of food, signposted as soup, meat, vegetables and so forth. On the wall are 'picking lists' allocating what foods should go in bags for certain people; 'one person picking list' or 'family picking list'. When an order comes in, the packers can refer to the list and make up an appropriate bag of food. The staff moved around the picking room as methodologically as it was laid out, each knowing exactly what their role was. Stopping to chat was a man in his early 60s, who had been working

at the foodbank for 18 months. He took me through the various stages of packing foods, he told me one story of a man who only had a kettle to cook with and they found it extremely difficult to send him away with a filled bag. Memories like that cropped up all day from staff members reflecting on clients gone by. It was obvious that some people's stories stayed with staff long after they left for the day.

Once clients began to arrive they would be taken to the waiting room and offered tea or coffee, which were great tools for facilitating conversation. Most clients accepted the offer, and helped themselves to the biscuits on the table. People address each other in a very friendly, welcoming manner. Clients were always asked by staff 'how are you today?' which almost always led to meaningful conversation. Clients would candidly and directly tell their stories of how they ended up there, each story different and each situation unique. I appreciate that I cannot meaningfully tell the majority of stories shared here. However, I will attempt to find a middle ground representing the client's personal stories, along with staff and outsiders' views, to find commonalities and themes that they share.

IDENTITY

'Social identity', commonly the focus of ethnographies, labels someone via their social positions ('lawyer' or 'student') which determine the role they play in a society ('customer' or 'sister'). This differs from 'personal identity' which refers to exactly the characteristics of a person, labelling them outwith social roles ('joyful' or 'hostile') (Caughey 1980: 174). Caughey, points out the limited literature looking at personal identity as a category for study. This is due to the 'personal' never able to be truly represented by another (*ibid*). Keeping this in mind, I will consider personal identity with reflection on how it may direct social identity.

Mary, a lady in her late 60s, recently became the guardian of her teenage granddaughter. With little extra in the way of benefits she found herself struggling between 'heat or food'; a very common dilemma for people with little money. Mary explained her struggle with coming to the foodbank, she said that 'in my day' things were not done this way and she was embarrassed to ask for help until now. She told her story of how she had worked all her life,

raised her children the best she could and would never normally find herself here. She was providing excuses, or ensuring, staff that she was not the 'type' to use a foodbank. Although she is a client herself, she deflected this as part of her identity. This resonated with another client, diagnosed with schizophrenia, who commented, 'don't worry, I'm not a junkie'¹ and 'I don't like the sort of people who hang around outside here.' Clients who felt they ended up at the foodbanks out of their own control or to provide for families showed a sense of hierarchy and a greater sense of worth over those who were considered simply 'junkies'. The image of themselves, as worthier, was shared by staff members who commented on their characteristics using pitying terminology. Using the condition of family ties or mental illness as a legitimate reason for being in poverty (and as standard by which their personality was viewed by staff) indicates that particular behaviours are compared with the social relation (grandmother to grandchild/ man to disease) in which they occur, linking personality to social relationships (Caughey 1980: 184).

In contrast, another client, Sam, aged 47, came in, looking terribly thin and pale, and was acknowledged by staff member, Lisa, as a returning customer. Sam rejected her offer for any further help services whilst discussing how it was too late for him to quit (he was a heroin addict). He used personal identity phrases which emphasised pity for himself, such as, 'worthless' and 'weak'. Considering Hallowell's view that 'self-conceptions are culturally coded' and that individual ideas about yourself project into your own motivations (cited in Caughey 1980: 188), it can be causally related that Sam feels unmotivated to change his life due to his self-perception, and that these attitudes are constructed by a dominance in society to dismiss or look down upon drug users; for negative labels are internalised as 'feared self-images' (*ibid*: 189).

This leads to the ways which 'outsiders' identify foodbank users. According to Leve, a kind of 'identity machine' is grounded by a group of socio-political frameworks which produce 'ethnological identity' as well as 'the very ontology of "identity" itself' (2011: 517). 'Culture' is one of the powerful frameworks from which social identities form. Interestingly, one

¹ 'Junkie' is a dialect term for someone who does drugs and lives on benefits.

outsider, a middle-aged man I briefly interviewed, after he rejected a leaflet at the Tesco food drive, mentioned living in a 'benefit culture'. After speaking with him, I asked more 'outsiders' whether they believed more people were using foodbanks because we live in a 'benefit culture'. The notion prevailed with almost all people I asked. However, responses can be grouped into two different categories.

Firstly, those who referred to the term in a negative light, accusing the clients for poor lifestyle choices or decisions and secondly, those who had a sympathetic view and agreed with Julie, an outsider, that 'we are at a stage where benefits are necessary for lots of us to survive.' The first group of people present a problem, similar to Maxwell's proposal about 'a poverty of culture'. In that, poverty is explained through poor people's mental states, in this case they are to blame for ending up at a foodbank (1996: 212). With this, anthropologists must be careful not to deliver a 'quasi-scientific' explanation for 'right-wing' viewpoints (*ibid*). However, in this context the 'privileged' are expressing individual's abilities to control life choices, instead of understanding the driving force of a structured cultural identity. As such, this allows inequalities by believing that their advantage comes from personal merit, and those using foodbanks must take personal blame for their lack of work ethic or bad luck (Borell et al. 2009: 35), again shaping the cultural identity of 'poverty' in general and foodbank users personally.

In this section, I have discussed personal and social identity and how the creation of individual viewpoints, from clients, staff and outsiders creates a social system of varying judgments and interpretations, all building to create a 'cultural identity'.

GIVING

Another area I will discuss is the concept of giving. Particularly, the act of immediate giving. First, in an expressive giving of one's self and second in 'the downward spiral of charity' (Bhatnagar 1970: 214). The 'idiom of the gift and gift exchange is commonly employed to define volunteering and the social benefits it is said to create' (Hayakawa 2009). Each volunteer that I spoke with explicitly used the word 'give/giving' when describing their

reasons for working at the foodbank. Irene, a single mother with five grown children, has just finished her degree in social work at the age of 50. She notes that she 'can *give* up some of [her] free time to help out a good cause'. Josh, who was outside trying to build a vegetable patch was obsessively digging while I talked to him. He told me that he does not have a lot but he is a 'decent handyman' and if that is all he has to *give* then he is going to do it. Lisa commented that she volunteers because she 'has been in their position' and is '*giving* back to a system which helped [her] family'.

The idea of gift giving can be seen as a universal phenomenon. It is a method that 'integrates a society' (Sherry 1983:157). Many models of gift giving are characterised with the nature of reciprocation, inspired by Marcell Mauss. According to Gouldner, exchange behaviour is based on giving, receiving and reciprocating (1960, cited in Sherry 1983: 158). However, as a volunteer, the giving is not returned by recipients. Therefore, the dynamics of giving are changed and refocused. 'Giving without return' produces many ambiguities, that do not fit a traditional model of gift exchange. A 'pure gift' is likely to occur in 'differentiated societies' who operate with a high 'division of labour and a significant commercial sector' (Parry 1986: 467), therefore, when focussing on a western idea of volunteering it is useful to note Graeber's points about reciprocity not being expected amongst unequals (2001: 225). This is interesting as Lisa commented that she feels a sense of achievement and enjoys coming into help when she can. A student who volunteers was doing so as part of her college course, to gain skills and enhance her CV. Although Graeber might be correct, in that staff, who are unequal to clients, can be described as philanthropic with no expectation of a material return for their time, they are in fact gaining something whilst helping there. Social approval, internal feelings of good conscience or a tool to excel all explain generalised charity giving. 'Pure gifts' therefore can be argued to include a 'psychic' return (Bhatnagar 1970: 210). The value of return in this sense located in the 'direct gratification experienced in the act of giving itself' (*ibid*: 214). This gratification can stem from social relationships created between staff and client. Every single client thanked the staff for their food, although the staff probably had not donated the food themselves.

Giving can also be associated with the donors of food. Food exchanges are a well discussed topic by anthropologists. In many societies, it is a key part of their organisational structure and social relations. In this case, it is slightly different as food is exchanged, but recipients have no connections to the people who donate. Shuman includes Riches (1981) explanation that 'people give because of their interests and justify giving by invoking their obligations' (2000: 498). He views a difference between an 'altruistic' act and a 'redundant' act, placing a greater emphasis on social relationships through redundant acts. When outsiders gave food to the Tesco food drive, they had no idea who or where the food would go, as all food collections are spread out to the neediest foodbanks. A couple who handed in cans of soup both agreed with the negative image of a 'benefit culture', yet still donated. Large businesses, such as KFC and Greggs, also handed in left-over food, along with a large sum of money collected at a football match and a church donation. This style of giving, although similar to the philanthropic acts of volunteers, I shall call 'distant giving'. Rooted in Riches' view of social obligation, it is a transfer of 'gifts' which goes through a process of national collection to local distribution to individual gain. Lost along the way is the connection of where the gift originated. Not one client asked where their food was from and staff, although grateful for donations, did not dwell on this topic for long. 'Distant giving' therefore can be considered a unilateral transfer, with no dependency to recipients. Considered part of the downward spiral of charity, this is a social expectation that creates the need to help others in need, no matter your social standing. At the food drive, staff informed me that 'people without a lot are the ones who give the most.' I was told to wait until the 'high school kids²' came in with their parents. Considered wealthy by staff, only two adults, with children wearing the Dundee High uniform, picked up leaflets, neither of them donated. This is of course a generalisation, but the view was held by all staff members present. I asked the two adults who had taken leaflets if they would consider donating and they both said they donated to charity in other ways. Perhaps these 'people without a lot' can only donate food in ways which they have access too, like the food drive.

²Referring to pupils of Dundee High school, which is a private school.

Either way, it seemed all members of the community were donating to charity in some way or another. Volunteers were giving in a personalised way, expressing social bonds between clients and staff and donors of food were giving in a distant way, with a disconnection from clients themselves. Both however could argue they give without return, although as I have pointed out the idea of a 'pure gift' does not hold within the foodbank giving community as both staff and donors do receive some 'psychic' return for their charity.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show the process involved in organising and running the foodbank as well as two predominant thoughts on identity and giving which preceded throughout my time at the foodbank and food drive. Although there is much more than can be deduced from my field notes, I chose to relay my encounters which have displayed an ideology of personal and social identity and the individual processes of giving. I have explained how the personal identity for clients can directly influence social relations amongst them and staff, in positive and negative ways. As well as discussing how cultural identity influences outsider's views on clients and in general people in poverty. I conclude that cultural identity of foodbanks and the generalised notion of a 'benefit culture' is influenced by client, staff and outsider perspectives of identity. In the final section I discuss two views of immediate giving, that of the staff volunteer and that of the food donor. Arguing that the idea of giving to foodbanks, cannot be ultimately considered a 'pure gift' because, they do gain 'psychic' reciprocity, whether involved in expressive giving or distant giving. I hope that I have shown client, staff and outsiders perspectives in the true representation of what they stand for. Combining identity and giving creates a view of Dundee foodbank and its community in anthropological light.

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