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Why do people use food banks? A qualitative study of food bank users in Bristol

Introduction

Charitable giving to the poor has a long history and has rarely been seen as a cause of controversy, but rapid growth in the number of food banks, (FBs) in the United Kingdom has recently sparked debate about the reasons behind their proliferation. For critics, FBs are an emblem of 'Broken Britain' and rising poverty, (Ashton et al 2014, Butler 2015a), while for others they signify the 'Big Society' in action, (Nelson, 2015). The Daily Mail has lamented the vulnerability of FBs to abuse by the 'undeserving poor', while recognising that they "provide a valuable service for many genuinely needy people" (Bird 2014). Researchers have begun to address this issue, often using quantitative methods, and focusing on 'push' factors, such as, putative increases in rates of absolute poverty and hunger, and the role that austerity measures and changes in welfare benefits might play in the uptake of FB services. Less attention has been paid to 'pull' factors, by which we mean characteristics of FB organisation and delivery that might encourage uptake. There is a gap in the literature relating to the complex interplay of push and pull factors in shaping demand for FBs.

Our study aimed to address this gap by conducting qualitative interviews with FB users, to explore their perceptions of the different factors that led them to attend and how they made sense of their experiences at the FB. In order to meet this aim we posed four research questions: What are the reasons given by participants for using the FB?; How do they use the support they receive to manage, not just their hunger, but also other problems associated with low income?; How does the experience affect them?; and How does use of the FB compare with using statutory welfare provision, particularly regarding the relationship between users and volunteers?

Our contribution to knowledge lies in reconceptualising FB usage as not simply an unmediated and mechanistic response to hunger, but as a complex form of social behaviour in which FBs are used not just to ameliorate hunger but as a strategy for managing other needs arising from low income. These needs are largely material, but also social and psychological. FBs are not simply outlets for dispensing food, but offer a way of relating to the poor that is often very different to that of statutory welfare services.

We begin by reviewing the research literature on FBs and link this to a broader discussion of where FBs sit in the rapidly changing and increasingly blurred relationship between statutory services and the voluntary sector, and how this position might shape users' experiences. Then we describe the *modus operandi* of the Trussell Trust and our research methods. Our findings are presented under four themes: Reasons for attending the FB; How use of FBs affects people; How the experience of using FBs compares with that of using statutory welfare services; and, The relationship between users and volunteers. In the discussion we place our findings in the context of other research and explore their implications for the broader debate about the relationship between statutory services and the voluntary sector. The contribution to knowledge is summarised in a brief conclusion.

Literature review

Quantifying Food Banks and their activity

FBs are informal agencies which makes their number and rates of activity difficult to measure precisely. An audit by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN, 2017), claims that in May 2017 there were 1,981 food bank outlets operating in the UK, 1,235 (62%) of which were part of the Trussell Trust network. For the purposes of our study we have focused on Trussell Trust FBs, first

because they have a clearly defined *modus operandi* (of which more below), but also because they collect and report statistics on their activity.

The Trust launched its network in 2004 with the number of FBs rising to 428 at May 2017 (Trussell Trust, 2017), (some FBs have multiple outlets, thus the number is lower than that reported by IFAN that refers to outlets). The activity levels reported by the Trust have proved controversial, (Smith 2015, Butler 2015b), but this appears to be largely due to misunderstanding and misreporting of the data. The Trust counts the number of food parcels issued and multiplies this by the number of family members provided for in each parcel, (1,332,952 in 2016/17), but most users receive two parcels per year, so the total number of users per year is around half of that, (Trussell Trust, 2017).

Absolute poverty and austerity

Despite uncertainty about the extent of FB usage, the number of FBs has clearly increased significantly, the question is whether this is attributable to an increase in absolute poverty or other factors. The increase coincides with the aftermath of the global recession of 2008 and with benefit reforms introduced in the same period, but there are supply-side factors that might also have contributed, such as the decision by the then Minister for Work and Pensions to allow Job Centres to refer people to the FBs, and the willingness of volunteers to grow the FB network. The Trussell Trust collects self-report data on why users are attending, which suggest that benefit problems and low income are the principal reasons, a finding supported by independent surveys of FB users, (Prayogo et al 2017, MacLeod et al 2018), but it is not possible to conclude with certainty whether such reports indicate: an increase in absolute poverty; meeting of a previously unmet need; or an increase in supply generating an increase in demand.

FBs are a relatively new phenomenon in the UK and while research evidence is emerging, it has been hampered by a lack of consensus on the meaning of key concepts, such as hunger, destitution, or food insecurity, (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2015, APPG 2014). Loopstra *et al* (2015) addressed the question of whether the rising number of FBs is attributable to economic hardship, austerity measures and benefit sanctions, or to FBs stimulating their own demand.

Statistical analysis of a dataset linking Trussell Trust activity to local authority budgetary and socioeconomic data suggested that FBs were significantly more likely to open in local authorities with higher rates of unemployment and greater cuts in benefit spending, and that the number of food parcels distributed increased most where unemployment, welfare cuts and sanctions were highest (Loopstra et al 2018).

Although the effect sizes are small, these results suggest that the rising number and activity of FBs might be at least partly attributable to greater levels of financial hardship and it is plausible that those considering founding a FB would be more likely to do so in areas where they have witnessed greater need. It should be noted that demonstrating an association between measures of hardship and increased FB provision does not in itself exclude the possibility that FBs stimulate their own demand, nor does it necessarily lead to the conclusion that FB users are experiencing “food insecurity”, (Blake, 2015).

The founders of a FB may well be responding to personal encounters with people who cannot afford to buy food, but once established a FB might attract users on a low income who can afford to eat, but use the availability of food parcels to free up income for other purposes (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2014). The Loopstra et al (2015, 2018) study thus provides some support for the claim that the rising number of FBs reflects increased need, but it tells us little about what that need comprises or the types of experience that lead people to make use of the FB.

By the same token, FB activity may substantially under estimate the number of people struggling to afford food. A Canadian study, (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015), compared FB activity with a survey of 'food insecurity' and found that the number reporting food insecurity was 4.6 times the number of people receiving FB support. The study adopted the following definition of food insecurity "food insecurity exists whenever availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain".

How closely food insecurity maps on to traditional notions of hunger is a moot point, (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2015), but FB usage appears to be a questionable indicator of either. Ethnographic studies have identified FB users facing extreme hardship, (Garthwaite 2016), but further research into how FB usage fits into recipients' budgeting is required before it can be concluded that FBs are an unmediated response to hunger, or that the increase in FB numbers is a direct function of post 2008 austerity. Thus our primary aim in exploring why people use FBs, is not simply to record the triggering event, such as a benefit penalty or other short-term crisis, but to contextualise uptake with a more in-depth exploration of how FBs are used to manage the problems of deprivation and hardship.

The experience of using Food Banks

In their 2014 review of food aid research Lambie-Mumford et al note that while food insecurity is a driver for FB uptake, many more choose not to use them because they feel their needs are not extreme enough, or that the provision would be insufficient, or that the experience would be degrading. Whether charitable donations are sufficient to meet demand, and the appropriateness of using volunteers to run the FBs are also raised, but again they present no systematic evidence from the UK to address these concerns. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty (APPG) also noted this concern in its 'Feeding Britain' strategy and proposed closer local collaboration between FBs and supermarkets in the donation of surplus food as a potential solution, (APPG 2014).

FBs do more than simply hand out food parcels, for example, providing advice and information on benefits, debt counselling, and advocacy, and these are reported as positive, (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2014), although advice on budgeting and healthy eating might be construed as moralising. Garthwaite et al (2015) have suggested that poverty severely limits the ability to act on such advice, but they stop short of suggesting that advice should not be given.

A Dutch study (Van der Horst et al 2014) found that interaction with volunteers was a source of shame for users, but this appears to stem largely from the context rather than the behaviour of the volunteers. Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015) raised questions about the training of volunteers, and the absence of formal child protection, indemnity, monitoring, and accountability, but do not suggest volunteers pursue a moral agenda. A mixed methods study commissioned by the Child Poverty Action Group, (Perry et al 2014), found evidence of shame and embarrassment among FB users, with FBs used as a last resort in the face of acute financial crises, but did not link this to the attitudes or behaviour of volunteers.

Baumberg et al (2012) suggest that benefit uptake is often reduced by stigma, particularly where benefits are means tested, so perhaps the charitable nature of FB donations might reduce sense of entitlement and increase stigma (see also Caplan 2016, on the 'pure gift'), public discourse has also implied that FB users are morally deficient (see Purdam et al 2015), but again this is not evidence of moralising attitudes or behaviour from volunteers. Our study looks at how FB users are affected by the experience, with particular reference to feelings of shame or stigma.

Food banks and the welfare state

In our review of the research literature we found many criticisms of welfare provision, but they were usually articulated in terms of underfunding or benefit penalties, and where broader concerns about bureaucratic inefficiency and depersonalisation were raised they tended to be explained as a function of underfunding or punitive policies, (Spencer et al 2015; Perry et al 2014). There was very little interest in whether FBs might be able to deliver support in a more flexible or humane way than the statutory services, rather FBs are dismissed as “a symbolic gesture” (Tarasek and Eakin 2003), or an insufficient substitute which “allows the state to avoid its obligations” (Caplan 2016). For most researchers working in the field FBs are part of the problem rather than a potential part of the solution, thus Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015:424) conclude that “it is not part of the current social contract that social protection be replaced or supplemented by unaccountable, unsystematic volunteer help”.

The relationship between state welfare provision and voluntary sector organisations rooted in civil society, has re-emerged in response to the profound restructuring of the welfare state that has occurred since the 1980s, (Acheson and Hodgett, 2012). There are at least two competing narratives relating to this transformation; one economic and the other about social cohesion and democratic renewal, (Ketola and Hughes (2018).

The economic narrative focuses on the rising costs of state welfare provision in the context of austerity, and the belief that pluralistic provision can improve efficiency and drive down costs, (Clayton et al, 2016). The social cohesion narrative is more complex, suggesting that the welfare state tends to impose services rather than engaging people in decision making (Blunkett, 2002), and that fostering mutual-aid within voluntary organisations that are largely independent of the state can help to build social capital and empowerment, (Leonard, 2004).

Both of these narratives can be found in the welfare policies adopted by the New Labour government from 1997, and the coalition and Conservative governments that followed, even if the emphasis placed on each narrative differs between Blair’s ‘Third Way’ and Cameron’s ‘Big Society’, (Ketola and Hughes, 2018). The two narratives are not necessarily incompatible, but they do give rise to the question of whether FBs are simply a less costly means of providing for the poor, or, whether they offer a less stigmatising and more socially inclusive alternative to state welfare.

A related question, raised by Acheson et al (2005) is whether extensive civic engagement and the generation of social capital influence the form of welfare provision and the role of voluntarism within it, (Putnam, 2000), or conversely whether it is the state that determines the extent and form of organisations in civil society, (Foley and Edwards, 1999). This question can be applied to FBs, do they offer a means of transforming welfare provision, or do they simply duplicate the existing form of statutory services through a process of co-option? The first part of the question, whether FBs can transform welfare agencies, lies beyond the scope of our study, but the second, the extent to which FBs have come to emulate the form and practices of statutory agencies, is amenable to study by asking participants to compare their experiences of both forms of provision.

Concern with mapping the structural determinants of FB use has distracted from exploration of the lived experience of FB use and how this experience influences attitudes and behaviour, particularly in comparison with the uptake of statutory benefits. The research suggests that FB users can experience shame, but we do not know whether this is less than or greater than the stigma of

claiming benefits. We know that many FBs provide more than food parcels, but we do not know how advice and guidance are received by users.

Our aim is to address the gaps in the evidence base identified above by exploring what FB users have to say about their experiences of poverty and welfare benefits and how this has influenced their use of FBs, but we also examine how their experience of using FBs compares with uptake of state benefits, and what they see as the positive aspects of the FB model.

The Trussell Trust Model

We conducted our study in FBs affiliated to the Trussell Trust, because it has a clearly stated *modus operandi* to which all of its FBs are obliged to subscribe. Other FBs may operate differently, and so our findings cannot be transferred to others without a degree of circumspection. The Trussell Trust operates as a franchising organisation within the charitable sector. Organisations, usually church groups, wishing to join pay an annual fee to the Trust in return for support and guidance. Central to the advice given is a detailed 'Operating Manual' which provides guidance on establishing and running the FB, including, the content of food packages, and regulations governing the donation and distribution of food. To obtain a food parcel recipients must first demonstrate that they are facing a food emergency to one of the 40,000 professionals (including doctors, social workers, etc) who are able to issue FB vouchers. The aim is to provide emergency food aid rather than ongoing food provision, in order to avoid creating dependency. Each voucher enables the recipient to claim a three day supply of food for each person covered by the voucher (usually the recipient, a dependent partner and/or children). The referral agency may issue up to three vouchers per crisis, although it is not clear what counts as a crisis or how many crises may occur in a given period of time. If the emergency is not resolved by then, the agency must contact the FB to discuss the problem and the possibility of extending support. The model allows for flexibility, but appears to limit routine use of the FB – Trust data show that most recipients only receive two vouchers per year. Importantly, Trussell Trust FBs do not see their role purely as a dispenser of food parcels, but also as a source of information and advocacy about benefits and other welfare issues and a provider of informal social support.

Method

In order to assess the research aims, we designed a qualitative study of FB users in three different FB outlets in Bristol, South-West England. One FB (pseudonym City Central) was in a deprived inner-city area and two were in suburbs mainly comprising social housing, (pseudonyms High Tide and Green Grass). Researchers had the agreement of FB managers to attend the FB and display a poster inviting participants, who either came forward as a result of the poster, or sometimes after FB volunteers directed their attention to the poster. Twenty-nine FB users considered participating; four decided not to, giving a total sample of 25. The inclusion criteria were that users had to be aged 18 or over, able to give informed, written consent, and were using the FB that day. Fifteen participants were female and ten were male. All participants read and had the chance to discuss a participant information sheet, before signing a consent form if they were happy to participate.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured schedule, enabling us to respond to participants' leads while gaining similar information from all participants. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were digitally recorded then transcribed verbatim. We also made contemporaneous field-notes.

We applied thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in which the themes we identified emerged from the data rather than from a pre-conceived theoretical framework. All three of us listened to the

interview recordings to familiarise ourselves with the data, and noted down initial ideas. We generated initial codes (salient features of the data), to organise the data into meaningful segments. We then began the main analytic phase using qualitative data analysis software, considering how different codes combine to form broader themes, for example, one of our themes was 'how FB usage affects participants, and this comprised data coded under the following labels: morality; dependency; stigma; shame/embarrassment; and reciprocity. We then interpreted our data in order to make arguments about the phenomena of interest. We checked our interpretations with each other, debating differences until consensus was reached and we had defined and named all our themes.

A key ethical concern was whether to reward participants for their time. Our participants faced financial hardship and we recognise that monetary rewards might be seen as exploiting their vulnerability. On the other hand it seemed unfair to deny rewards to poor participants that are routinely given to more affluent research participants. We consulted other studies with deprived participants and found that modest rewards have been used under similar circumstances, (see for example, Lawson and Kearns, 2018). After discussion with the Chair of our Departmental Ethics Committee and with managers from the FBs, it was agreed that a High Street Voucher with a value of £10, would be sufficient to reward participants without overriding any concerns they might have about participation. The study was granted ethical approval by our Departmental Ethics Committee.

Findings

The study yielded rich data, with several analytical themes, here we report those relating to our research questions. Our main question is about why people attend FBs and our first theme 'reasons for attending the FB' relates directly to that. The second question concerned the differences between FBs and statutory services, and the other themes relate to that, they are: 'how does use of FBs affect people?'; 'how does the experience of using FBs compare with that of using statutory welfare services?' and, 'the relationship between users and volunteers.'

Reasons for attending the Food Bank

All participants reported significant financial hardship and we found no evidence to suggest that FBs are used by the affluent. Some participants were in low-paid employment, but were facing short-term financial difficulties due to changing jobs, moving home, servicing debt, or other unusual costs. More frequently, participants were benefit claimants whose income had been reduced by delays in processing new or revised claims. We also heard many reports of benefit penalties causing financial hardship, such as the under-occupancy penalty or 'bedroom tax' which reduces housing benefit payments, or cuts in Job Seeker's Allowance for example for those who had missed job interviews:

I'm here today because my benefits were sanctioned. The reason why they were sanctioned is because I was in a hospital with my father who had a stroke. That wasn't a good enough excuse. (City Central 4)

I missed an interview by five minutes with the Job Seekers Allowance people and they sanctioned me so I lost two weeks' money. This is why I'm here today. I was just five minutes late, and I phoned them up beforehand and told them as well, but they still didn't accept it. (City Central 9)

The Trussell Trust FBs offer short-term food supplies to people in emergencies and their referral process and rules limiting the duration of support reinforce this focus on acute crises rather than long-term poverty, so it is not surprising that participants reported just such reasons for attending

the FB, but as we explored their past experiences we found that many had a long history of poverty. Long-term unemployment was common, as was receipt of multiple benefits including Job Seeker's Allowance, Child Benefit, Housing Benefit, Incapacity Benefit or Employment and Support Allowance. Many reported lengthy periods of getting by in low-paid jobs or on benefits, interspersed with short-term crises caused by unexpected reductions in income or sudden costs. Some participants felt that the frequency of these crises had increased and that this was linked to benefit changes and broader austerity measures.

Yeah, it must have been a couple of days before Christmas, it was. I haven't been paid on any benefits which I was entitled to, but the benefit system said you're fit for work, basically, so we're going to stop your money. It's as simple as that. I did appeal, it took months and months. I won the appeal. That was okay, all start rolling again. We're back round again, a year later and the same thing's happened again. In the 35 years I've been unemployed, I've been on the sickness benefit. They seem to think I'm fit for work. (City Central 2)

Our findings support the claim that FB users face genuine hardship and that the precariousness of their situation is perceived to have worsened as a result of benefit reforms. Several participants stated that they had no food and that without the parcel provided by the FB they and their family would go hungry.

I wouldn't have any, [food] yeah. No, because I haven't got the money, you see. I've only just claimed it. It's not just filling up the holes in the cupboard. I really haven't got the food there. (High Tide 3)

We found no evidence that any of our participants were living in a stable state in which they were routinely unable to purchase sufficient food. Typically, participants could afford food most of the time, but occasionally dipped into absolute poverty as a result of short-term crises. We also found that FB users often had other sources of support to help them cope with crises, including, emergency payments from the state, loans or gifts from family or friends, as well as an extensive network of other charitable food providers.

I get paid fortnightly now see, so when I was getting my DLA, I was getting paid every week. Now it's every 2 weeks. So I got paid last week, I was all right for food last week but I don't get paid now until next Thursday so this weekend, I'm going to be stuck. I'm going to the Salvation Army for a meal in the week but on the weekends there ain't much about, so that's why I come today. It should be all right today, tomorrow and Sunday. Hopefully. (City Central 14)

For other users the FB was used not as a direct means of avoiding hunger but as a means of freeing up income that would otherwise be spent on food for other purposes. One participant needed a new pram, so the referring agency offered two FB vouchers on the basis that the money otherwise spent on groceries would be put towards a pram.

... the nursery said, you know, we [sic] need to get a new pram, 'cause ours was tied up by string. And we said, we will but we're going to have to save up and we can't get a pram straightaway 'cause if we get a pram and blah-di-blah. Well, they said, if we give you a food stamp that will save you on [food] money and therefore you can use that to get a pram. (Green Grass 8)

The referral mechanism adopted by Trussell Trust entails a third party, often health and welfare professionals, or people from other voluntary sector agencies, assessing needs and issuing a voucher

which is then brought to the FB. The definition of need appears to be quite broad. As the episode described above indicates, need was often interpreted in terms of relative poverty or hardship, rather than in terms of absolute poverty or hunger. We found several examples of this:

I know I couldn't really afford to get a car, but it's a Catch-22 thing really. I need a car to get a job, because I can't really do a lot of work without a car, but then I can't really afford the car. [...] Basically if I didn't have to do the car then I would have been all right. The head gasket. I would have been all right. (City Central 12)

My reason for being here today is I have ... I had a pet lizard that got ill. I had to take it to the vet because, obviously it's the right thing to do. I didn't expect it to cost as much as it has, but I've been landed over the past month with £140 of vet's bills. I only get £200 per fortnight in benefits, so the only thing I could do was to pay that straight away. Because of that, obviously I have to go without. (Green Grass 10)

These two examples are perhaps extreme, (although they come from a relatively small sample), and many participants reported a lack of food as their reason for attending. Typically, a sudden loss of income, caused by benefit penalties/delays, job loss/change, or else equally sudden unanticipated costs, often relating to housing or heating, had created a short-term budgetary crisis, which had caused hardship. Whether such hardship means that the individuals deserve support is a value judgement, but the fact that many FB users had been denied emergency support from the welfare services suggests that the FBs have a more generous approach to this judgement. FBs do provide food for people who would otherwise go hungry, but they also provide a means by which those on very low incomes can manage other forms of hardship.

How does use of food banks affect people?

One of the central arguments behind the establishment of the welfare state was that it would reduce the stigma of help-seeking, because benefits are based on entitlement rather than charity. The question, therefore, arises of whether the receipt of charitable food aid through the FB increases users' sense of stigma. Our findings in relation to this question are nuanced. Certainly, some participants felt embarrassed about using the FB:

I don't like scrounging, I don't like asking, and I don't like borrowing. I'd be ashamed to tell our mum that I've been down here getting food for nothing. (City Central 2)

Several participants commented that their initial apprehension was reduced by the supportive and non-judgemental attitude of the FB volunteers:

I used to be apprehensive and embarrassed and, not shame exactly, but embarrassment I guess sums it up. To have to come and admit that I can't afford to feed myself. I don't have the same feeling anymore is all I can say. I've been a few times and the way you're treated, you know? You're not made to feel any less a person. (Green Grass 10).

We found no evidence to suggest that the charitable nature of FB provision increased the stigma or shame experienced by users. Some participants felt that their personal circumstances justified their use of the FB and simply viewed it as another "safety-net" similar to state benefits, but we also found some evidence from participants who recognised that they had been 'given' help and, therefore, felt the desire to reciprocate by giving back:

In a year's time, I'm hoping to be back at work full-time, so we don't have to rely on these sort of people, and giving it back to them, as well, because that's what ... I'm thankful for them giving me help, but I would like to help give them back something [...] I'm just trying to get ahead and then, once we're ahead, I can say, "Well, we'll go and give the food bank so much food," and just go buy a load of shopping and just give it to them for free. (High Tide 4)

The difference between stigma and awareness of reciprocity is a subtle one which we return to in the conclusion. If the experience of using the FB created a sense of reciprocity in some users, it is important to note that others were affected very differently:

I was quite happy to, well, spend all my tax-paid benefits on drugs and then know I can come to the food bank and stock up for the week. You could see it as a disincentive for me to correct my faults. (City Central 3)

The picture that emerges is nuanced, for some, FBs are simply another source of goods to sustain a life of dependency, for others though, they may offer a different perspective on the support they receive that may, to a modest degree, contribute to positive behaviour change. Similarly the experience of stigma or shame at using the FB seems to vary significantly. How users are affected by their FB experience appears to be multi-factorial rather than being fundamentally determined by their charitable funding.

How does the experience of using FBs compare with that of using statutory welfare services?

Statutory services spend public money for which they are accountable. As such, they are governed by bureaucratic rules and regulations about what can be spent on whom. Those working in benefit offices, for example, have little discretion in the distribution of benefits. They must check entitlement carefully and ensure that benefits comply with centrally determined limits. Faced by people with needs that require greater urgency or which extend beyond what their agency is able to offer they are unable to respond in ways which they as individuals might wish to respond – they occupy what Max Weber (1930) described as “the iron-cage of bureaucracy”. Some of these constraints might be unnecessary, the result of inefficiency or error, but others are an intractable consequence of the need to govern public expenditure. For recipients, who might be in urgent need, this often results in a long wait while forms are completed, assessed and arrangements for payments are made.

The Trussell Trust also has rules about what can be given to whom. There is a referral process which must be followed and there are limits on the number of food parcels that can be issued in a given period of time, however, perhaps because the goods that FBs disburse are charitably donated, or because they are staffed by volunteers, FBs are more agile and flexible in responding to their users' needs. A common story, repeated by many of the participants in our study, was one of attending statutory services with urgent needs, being told that those needs could not be met quickly, and then coming to the FB where their needs were met promptly. Our data include several examples, but we have chosen to illustrate this theme by focusing on the experiences of one individual, whose name we have changed to Tom:

I recently came into emergency custody of my children. Long story short, it turned out that my daughter had been sexually abused by my ex's partner, so all three of the children were taken and social services asked me to take them. Basically, that crashes your benefits; that stops everything dead, because everything's got to be restarted. It was actually the benefits

agency that said there's a place down the road called the food bank, and if you ring this number they'll help you out. This is my third time here now, because obviously, the benefits agency are terrible with getting everything sorted out on time. These guys have helped me out every single time. (High Tide 2)

In some respects the statutory agencies responded promptly. Tom's children were removed from his ex-partner's home on the day that abuse was uncovered and the children were brought to Tom's house by the police late the same evening. The benefit office quickly stopped his benefits when he reported the change in his circumstances, but in other respects the response was unacceptably slow – our interview with Tom was conducted three and a half weeks after this incident and his benefits had not been restored at that point, even though the social services and the police could vouch for the fact that he now had three children to look after. Not surprisingly, this resulted in considerable hardship:

Obviously, as you can imagine, that put everything exploding in the air, because I'm a single man living in a one-bedroom flat that now has myself and three children in it; one of which, being my 8 year old daughter, who's suffering after an act of sexual abuse. (High Tide 2)

The principle role of the FB is of course to provide emergency food supplies, which they did for Tom, but in fact he received much more support from one of the FB volunteers who helped him to chase up his benefit claim, helped him arrange school holiday activities for his children and even provided him with shoes:

The shoes I had have holes in them because I don't have money to buy new ones, because every penny I had saved up was going on the kids and getting them things like school uniforms, and things like getting them to their social services appointments and back, and getting to the police station and back, to the interviews and whatnot. It was all adding up, and I was sat talking to [VOLUNTEER], and she just said "Is that a hole in your shoe?" I said "Yeah." She said "Oh, we've got some shoes here. What size?" I told her, and she went off and had a rummage in her little mystery box or wherever she gets these things from, and came out with a pair of shoes. (High Tide 2).

The ability to meet Tom's material needs depended on what was available at the FB at the time and the next person in need of shoes may well have been unlucky. Again, this marks another difference between the FBs and state services; there is little room for serendipity in the latter, nor can there be. But it is precisely the degree of informality and flexibility that enables FB volunteers to respond to people's needs in such a bespoke and humanistic way and enables them to establish quite a different relationship with their clients than many welfare professionals are able to achieve.

The relationship between users and volunteers

The FBs we studied were located in church premises, and informal conversations with volunteers and organisers, (recorded in our field notes), revealed that many volunteers had become involved through their previous involvement with the church. These circumstances might arouse concern that interaction between volunteers and users might be used as an opportunity to promote a Christian worldview or that negative moral judgements might be made and communicated to an extent greater than that likely to be found in the secular institutions of the welfare state, but we found no evidence to substantiate these concerns. On the contrary, many participants praised the volunteers for their non-judgemental, friendly and supportive approach.

I was slightly nervous and a little bit embarrassed, but once I came down it disappeared. It was so nice when you walked in and wasn't what I was expecting. People didn't judge me. I felt like I was begging, and I shouldn't be begging, but when you come down here they're so friendly and they put you at ease. You understand that there are a lot more people out there, like myself, who struggle as well. (High Tide 7)

The apparent absence of an overt moral or Christian agenda, does not exclude the possibility of social support, advice, or the promotion of positive norms and values. During our visits to the FBs we were able to observe interaction between volunteers and users as well as interviewing users about their experiences. It is important to note that many such interactions were brief and largely limited to voucher checking and obtaining the food parcel, and the limitation on the number of times that users can visit the FB in a given period of time is not conducive to establishing confiding relationships with volunteers. Even so, many participants reported that their relationship with volunteers was markedly different to the ones they had with welfare professionals:

You get treated like a human being here. At the benefit place, they just look at you as though you're a name and number, and they look at you and think, "Well, you should work. You shouldn't be on benefits." [...] This is better, voluntary style. It's a lot better, a lot more human, where before it's like more pen and paper, everything's got to be done by the book. You don't get nothing for nothing from them, but these places are a lot better. (Green Grass 9)

These differences between the FB and state agencies are partly contextual. FBs are located in community settings; High Tide and Green Grass were in church buildings and City Central was in a church building/community café, rather than in the formal offices of welfare agencies. FB users are welcomed and offered warm drinks and biscuits. These small things help the users to feel relaxed and valued. Another difference is that the role of the volunteer is quite different to that of the welfare professional. Welfare professionals can, of course, be sympathetic and supportive, but their role often necessarily entails assessing eligibility and ensuring compliance with regulations, which users can experience as being 'judged'. FBs also have their regulations, with the voucher system for instance, but the initial assessment of eligibility is done by a third party, (the voucher issuing agent), and is in any case less formal than applying for benefits, and FB volunteers have no role in applying benefit penalties. These differences make the relationship between users and volunteers less antagonistic than those with welfare professionals, and thus more conducive to the establishment of a good rapport:

They're really helpful and lovely and, you know, if my daughter wasn't at school, she'll come in. She plays and they let her play. They are really nice people here, really friendly and helpful. Yeah, I do love it here, to be honest. It's nice. (High Tide 4)

We found instances where FB volunteers had acted as advocates for users in their dealings with statutory and other agencies, and leaflets and advice were available signposting other sources of support. While this form of informal 'case-work' is possible in the setting of a FB, in our study it was more common for volunteers not to engage in these kinds of problem-solving quasi-professional activities, but simply to engage users in conversation:

They normally just ask me what I need. So, they'll give you toothpaste if you need toothpaste. Then you can say, "Yes" and "No" to stuff. Then one time this lady give me a bit of a blessing which at the time, it was quite sweet really because I was quite down. I'm not religious but it was just nice that she had nice thoughts really. She just talked to me about it

because I was with my two children and I was pregnant and pretty tired not having money. That was quite sweet. They normally they're really nice to the children and try and keep them occupied and give them some juice and stuff. (City Central 1)

Typically then, the type of support offered by FB volunteers is different to formal welfare interventions or case-work, and is much closer to the informal social interaction that occurs in networks of family, friends and homogeneous communities. At the least, this adds to users' satisfaction with the FB and may provide them with some emotional support at their point of contact. Again, it is important to note that not all participants engaged much with the volunteers. Some reported very brief and functional interactions with the volunteers; they were simply there to obtain a food parcel with minimal engagement:

The girl I spoke to, I gave her my voucher and she was perfectly, you know, likable, fine and efficient [...] I mean she gave me a bit of choice as to what I want. Do I want tea or coffee? Do I want pasta or rice? Do I have any allergies or food intolerances? So, no, I wouldn't expect any... She made a really good cup of coffee. (City Central 3)

Although the numbers are small, we did find more evidence of meaningful engagement in the two suburban FBs than at the inner city site. The reasons for this can only be speculated upon, but where users of the inner city FB were ethnically mixed, with a high proportion of people who spoke little English, the users of the suburban FB were more homogeneous, with both volunteers and users mainly drawn from a long-established white working-class local community. While meaningful social engagement is by no means impossible in a heterogeneous community, it is perhaps more easily accomplished where there is greater homogeneity, (Putnam 2007).

For those who did engage more extensively with the FB volunteers, the social interaction seemed to bring rewards of its own:

They're real helpful. Even just come in there for a chat. You know what I mean. Even if it's not to do food that often. Just come in for a chat. They help you so much. [...] Their hearts are always in the right place, like. They don't judge you, which is the best thing. You go to certain places, they will judge you. (High Tide 6)

Interactions with welfare professionals were often referred to in negative terms, with the suggestion that they could be dehumanising or alienating. By contrast the non-judgemental and by definition de-professionalised character of the volunteer-user relationship can be quite different. The hope would be that by providing such support the volunteers contribute to the enhancement of social integration, but such a conclusion lies beyond our data. It is unlikely that a small number of brief contacts will transform individuals or build social cohesion. Such outcomes do not result from a single intervention, but from the accretion of multiple micro-interactions across a plurality of settings. Our findings at best reveal a splinter of a much broader process of change that might be brought about through similar forms of engagement.

Discussion

We set out to explore why people use FBs. Our findings support those of other studies, and the Trussell Trust's published data on reasons for uptake, which point to benefit penalties and delays as primary causes, (Trussell Trust 2017, Prayogo et al 2017, MacLeod et al 2018), but deeper exploration of users' experiences revealed that short-term precipitating factors, were often part of a longer standing experience of poverty in which precarity and insecurity were frequent. All of our

participants faced long-term disadvantage. Many were benefit recipients, but some had poorly paid jobs.

The image of food parcels being distributed is redolent of the work of aid agencies in the developing world responding to famine or other natural disasters, and it is perhaps the potency of this symbol that has led to a popular perception that FBs only cater for those in absolute poverty, who would otherwise go hungry. Some of our participants reported being in this position, but others used the food parcels to free up income that would otherwise have been spent on food to meet other needs. People use FBs not just to address short-term hunger, but as part of long-term strategies for coping with life on a low income. The rising number of food banks may reflect rising rates of absolute poverty and hunger, but our findings reveal a more complicated pattern of usage and suggest that FB activity and numbers are not a valid or reliable proxy indicator for hunger or absolute poverty, reinforcing concerns raised by others, (APPG 2014, Blake 2015).

Returning to what users' experiences of FBs can tell us about the changing relationship between statutory welfare and the voluntary sector, our findings suggest that the relatively autonomous character of FBs has enabled them to largely avoid co-option by the state and preserve a relationship between volunteers and users that is less bureaucratically constrained and less professionalised. Some participants found using the FB embarrassing, but this seems to reflect a generalised sense of shame at needing to rely on support from others, rather than a specific form of stigma produced by the charitable status of the FBs or the attitudes exhibited by volunteers. On the contrary, many reported that their use of the FB and particularly their relationship with volunteers was less judgemental and more humane than their experiences of accessing some statutory welfare services.

These findings relate to a broader question relating to the changing relationship between the voluntary sector and the welfare state and the position of FBs within it. Since the mid-1990s the distinction between the statutory and voluntary sectors has become increasingly blurred. The need to contain the costs of statutory services, coupled with a communitarian desire to build social capital by incorporating charitable and not-for-profit organisations into statutory service provision, has led to the commissioning of voluntary sector organisations to deliver services previously provided by the state, (Acheson et al 2005). While voluntary organisations have often benefitted from this additional source of funding, it has also embroiled them in binding contracts, service agreements, and codes of practice. Milbourne and Cushman (2015), argue that these arrangements can lead to voluntary sector organisations taking on the form of statutory services and losing touch with their *"civil society origins and from the meanings and purposes that ground it with members, service users or community stakeholders,"* (p.6).

Our findings suggest that by maintaining financial independence from the state FBs have largely escaped the 'coercive isomorphic pressures' that have affected many voluntary sector organisations that have entered into contractual relations with the state. Central to this is the relationship between volunteers and FB users, which remains untarnished by the judgementalism that often accompanies the application of conditionality to service provision. FB volunteers are also able to respond more flexibly and opportunistically to users' needs, for example, providing a pair of shoes to a user who needed them. Services funded by and governed by the state are unlikely to respond in such a way, because they are bound by strict rules about needs assessment, entitlement and equity of provision.

lafrati (2018) has suggested that the increasing demands placed on FBs, coupled with limitations in the charitable supply of goods to distribute, might lead FBs to enter into formal partnerships and

service-level agreements that compromise their autonomy, and which lead users to have a greater sense of entitlement. Entitlement to what is in effect a state funded benefit, is quite different to the sense of reciprocity that can arise from support voluntarily funded by the local community.

We found some evidence that the inclusive and supportive character of the FB might make a modest contribution to building social cohesion, (although this should not be overstated), giving rise to a sense of reciprocity and the desire to 'pay back' into the community some of the support they had received, (Putnam, 2000). It might be argued that this sense of reciprocity is simply stigma by another name, but our data suggest that where such feelings were held they were viewed positively.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The use of qualitative interviews enabled us to explore participants' experiences of FB usage in greater depth than a quantitative study would have allowed. This enabled us to explore the complex interplay of push and pull factors in shaping uptake, and revealed how our participants were affected by their interaction with volunteers, in contrast to their exchanges with welfare professionals. Inevitably, the depth of understanding achieved through qualitative methods comes at the price of several limitations. While data saturation was achieved, our sample may not have been representative of all FB users. In addition, our study was limited to Trussell Trust FBs in the Bristol area. Thus, a degree of circumspection is required in transferring our findings to other settings and geographical locations.

Conclusion

The public debate about FBs has become highly polarised and politicised. For some commentators, they serve no other purpose than an alarm signalling the hardship caused by austerity measures and benefit penalties, (Tarasek and Eakin 2003, Caplan 2016). Our findings suggest a more nuanced reality. Certainly, our participants faced genuine hardship that was often exacerbated by an inflexible and unresponsive benefits regime, but they also benefitted from and appreciated the greater flexibility and de-professionalised support that FBs can offer. Many of these benefits are only possible because FBs sit outside formal welfare structures. A key implication of our study is that FBs should maintain their independence from the state, in order to preserve the benefits of flexibility and informal relationships with users. FBs can never replace statutory welfare benefits and services, but their expansion should not be characterised in entirely negative terms.

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