Gendering 'The Hidden Injuries of Class': In-work poverty, precarity, and working women using food banks in Britain.

Abstract

This paper presents the lived experience of white working-class women in the UK experiencing in-work poverty and dependent on food banks to survive. Whilst the precarious labour market emerges as a significant driver in the women's need for food charity, in-depth investigations into the lives that precarity produces and reinforces remain scarce. Contributing to this gap, our paper uses an ethnographic qualitative approach drawing on feminist research methods to identify women's experiences of in-work poverty and being in precarious work. Across two food banks, 10 women and 6 volunteers were interviewed, complemented by 24 months of comprehensive field notes where the lead author was a regular volunteer with the charities. The paper revisits 'The Hidden Injuries of Class' from Sennett and Cobb's (1972) classic study to use as a theoretical lens to draw out the internalised impacts that the participants experienced. We complement the theoretical framing with an intersectional sensitivity, finding that both gender and class were prevailing identities that influenced the women's lived experiences of the explored themes. The combination of these frameworks helped us to discover how the women face a complex internalised struggle in accessing food banks whilst being employed, heavily characterised by classed and gendered constraints associated with precarious work and other external structural disadvantages. The women experienced guilt, shame, the suppression of emotion and a struggle for self-validation. Interactions at the food bank were additionally found to be intersubjectively negotiated between the women and the present volunteers. The intersection of both classed and gendered identities exposes these women to ever greater inequalities both within and beyond the workplace.

Introduction

In the UK, 14.4 million people are living in poverty with half of these living in a family where at least one adult is in work (54%) (JRF, 2023). This phenomenon is defined as being in 'in-work poverty' (IWP). Many low-income families with working adults find themselves at the highest risk of IWP coping with the complex consequences that accompany it[1], despite government narratives of being in-work as the most efficient route out of, or to alleviate, poverty (Sunak, 2021).

Austerity measures introduced in Britain in 2010 led to heavy cuts applied to public expenditure - resulting in decreased budgets for local governments; welfare; social and health care; and youth and elder services (Maguire and Chakelian, 2018). Simultaneously, the UK witnessed a rise in jobs associated with low-pay, uncertain hours, and lack of employment protections, generally referred to as 'precarious work'. Rubery et al. (2018) note that such precarious working soon became the 'new norm' and others suggest it carries high risks of cultivating IWP (McBride & Smith, 2022). In a strained economy where employment opportunities have been reduced to such increasingly precarious positions, combined with the complexly interwoven wide-ranging impacts of austerity and the current cost-of-living crisis, the UK labour market has become increasingly polarised (Cominetti et al., 2023). Multiple inequalities are being experienced by those at the lower end of the labour market – the working class.

The impact of these changes is viewed as a 'triple jeopardy' for working-class women, considering the impact on work, wages and cuts to essential welfare services, women are often

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[1] Throughout this paper, this demographic will be referred to as the working-class (see also Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Savage, 2015) owing to the disadvantaged structural positions they occupy.

left disadvantaged in the withdrawal of such services (The Fawcett Society, 2012). Within a gender divided workforce, women continue to face barriers to meaningful employment for example because of occupational segregation (Irvine et al., 2022). Experiencing financial instability because of these complex challenges, many find themselves depending on food banks.

To date there is a scarcity of knowledge concerning the everyday experiences of life for white working-class women coping with insecure work, IWP and using food banks. We draw out these lived experiences and explores how such precarity[2] can be embodied with, as well as damage, other aspects of life beyond the confines of work and working (see also Smith & McBride 2021, 2022). We argue that qualitatively listening to first-hand accounts of these women living and working in such situations as outlined above, enables their realities of this precariousness to be more deeply understood.

To explore this in more depth, we use the notion of *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (THIC) (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) through a feminist lens. Using THIC helps to examine an individual's suppressed framing of their disadvantaged position through their structured socio-economic, or classed, position. It is unique in that it focuses on how unarticulated feelings of frustration, anger and humiliation are self-directed to personal failures and struggles for self-validation. As THIC focuses only on class, we also use intersectional theory, which is inherently feminist, to draw out the significance of gender and the complex tensions these women experience between their conflicting identities – for example as women, mothers, workers, and in this case also

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[2] This paper may use the terms precarity and precariousness interchangeably and these terms are widely used when discussing work and employment, social conditions and lived experiences. However, there is no consensus on the precise meaning of these terms or how they should best be used to explore social differences. As our paper is specific to 'work', we use a narrow conception of precarity in accord with that of Choonara et al (2022) who describe it as "...founded in the sphere of work and employment and approaches to precariousness that view it as an emergent form of subjectivity founded on the transfer of risk and responsibility to the individual" . We do not use precarity as a theoretical framework.

food bank users. We demonstrate how these intersect to offer powerful narratives of classed and gendered experience in the current UK economic climate. Whilst we acknowledge that intersectionality was originally conceived to explore the combined disadvantages of gender and race through research on black women's marginalisation (Crenshaw 1989), in our study, only the identities of gender and social class disadvantage emerged from the narratives - this is also discussed later. Our main contribution intended here is in drawing out the emotional, internalised journeys of those women who are active in work, yet still dependent on charity to survive, as additional knowledge to current discussions on food bank use and IWP. We further explore the organisational role of the food bank, particularly the volunteers. These are drawn out as a significant focus of the paper, as they contribute to the co-creation of the women's experience.

Prior to looking at these in depth, the paper builds a contextual framework for the paper by introducing class and gender in terms of the UK labour market. It then connects and contextualises the phenomena of food bank use to demonstrate how these are all relative to the rise of IWP. Following that, it introduces a discussion of the value of using THIC and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks followed by the research methodology used, key findings, and a discussion and conclusion.

Class and Gender in the UK Labour Market

IWP is at an all-time high in Britain. Many of the active working-class require multiple low-paid jobs to survive, and yet still find themselves vulnerable to IWP (McBride & Smith, 2022). These vulnerabilities are complexly associated with the increasing prevalence of precarity within low-paid employment.

The impacts of low-pay and precarious work include poor remuneration; insecurity; the lack of opportunity for progression; and limited access to benefits of a standard employment relationship such as paid leave (Heyes et al., 2018; Rubery et al., 2018; Shildrick et al., 2012; Standing, 2011). Such effects extend into individuals' personal lives, for example in intense schedules, tensions in managing and achieving work-life balance (Smith & McBride 2021); and rising debt (Shildrick et al., 2012). On precarious work, Heyes et al. (2018) stress that the unpredictable nature creates further unpredictability for example in household finances, managing childcare and family responsibilities, and personal and recreational time (Alberti et al., 2018; Standing, 2011; Smith & McBride, 2023). This all has detrimental impacts on an individuals' mental health including the anxiety that stems from uncertainty (Heyes et al., 2018).

Around 60% of all UK low wage workers are women[3] (The Living Wage Foundation, 2022) thus face a higher probability of engaging in precarious work than their male counterparts. Sectors with the highest number of women workers, notably health, social work and retail are recognised for their insecure nature of employment (Buchanan et al., 2023). In the domestic sphere, it is predominantly women who disrupt their working situation compared to men (ONS, 2019). For those with caring responsibilities – either children or elder care – whilst part-time work is a common path to take, most part-time roles are in lower paid positions and sectors. Of course, women are not the only vulnerable group to experiencing IWP but are suggested to be those who would find it the most challenging to escape from (Palmer and Eveline, 2012).

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[3] We acknowledge that working-class women are not homogenous, for example in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, and disability amongst other identities. A closer analysis of this lies beyond the scope of this paper.

All considered, to explore the impact of gender and class in relation to IWP and the precarious labour market, we use THIC with an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1994) to frame their disadvantage as multi-layered. This theoretical development will be discussed in more depth later, but prior to this, the papers introduces the food bank as a key influence in our findings, as well as the research location.

The Changing Nature of Food Bank Use

Growing numbers of workers are finding themselves driven to food banks, relative to the factors which have already been discussed. Food banks are charities predominantly organised by volunteers, with most of these individuals becoming involved either through affiliations with churches or faith-based organisations. (Buckingham and Jolley, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016). Armour and Barton (2019) found that many food bank volunteers experience unemployment or social isolation, and therefore volunteering is an opportunity to experience solidarity both with the other volunteers and the charity service-users. Our findings support this and consider the way the actions of the volunteers impact the women's experiences of food bank use relative to both precarity and IWP.

In 2022, 5.7 million emergency food supplies were provided to people in need (Bull et al., 2023). In 2023, 20% of food bank users were accessing the support from within work (Bull et al., 2023) – these workers were predominantly engaged in insecure, low-paid, or intermittent work (Coughlan, 2017). For women in particular, non-standard work practices play a fundamental role in hardship connected with food bank use (Beatty et al., 2020). Claimants meanwhile face a demonisation from the UK mainstream media, attaching a damaging stigma to the claiming of food aid (Swales et al., 2020).

Studies of the social and psychological impact of food bank usage demonstrate that claimants experience shame, degradation, humiliation, powerlessness, and frustration (Garthwaite et al., 2015). Based on their own perceptions of 'those who qualify or need the assistance of food banks', many do not view themselves as applicable (Nugent, 2000) therefore accepting help becomes difficult and/or uncomfortable (Garthwaite et al., 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2013). These inner, emotional perceptions and experiences all resonate with key elements of the notion of THIC, to which we will now turn.

The Hidden Injuries of Class

Sennett and Cobb's (1972) The Hidden Injuries of Class (THIC), although fifty years after its publication, remains relevant today. The study explores the lives of male working-class labourers in Boston, USA, and the way they grappled with an individual framing of their disadvantaged structural position in neoliberal capitalist America. Unarticulated feelings of their lack of status were highlighted as being primarily attributable and self-directed to personal failings amidst struggles for personal validation. THIC draws out how 'being working-class' concerns the suppression of frustration, anger, and humiliation. Whilst externally being perceived to be otherwise 'coping perfectly well from day to day', in a constant struggle for self-legitimisation, the underlying damage to their dignity and pride is essentially hidden. This manifests as an individual internalised conflict for those who measure their individual value largely through their constrained socio-economic position.

To date, studies that are theoretically underpinned by THIC are scarce, with many using it simply as a reference point (Crawley and Sparks, 2005; Cieslik and Simpson, 2015) or with

very different themes to this study (for example Rondini, 2016; Dick, 2008). Nevertheless, the theorisation of their findings using THIC demonstrates its strengths, as it allows 'hidden injuries' of 'being working-class' to be explored to inform deeper understandings of phenomena alongside rich reflections on individuals' emotions, frustrations, and experiences. There are no studies to date that specifically use the THIC theoretical framework to explore precarity, IWP, or food bank usage thus we see this as an opportunity to further investigate the lived experience of all three themes which are complexly interlinked. We focus on the realities of white working-class women who are active in precarious work and driven to food banks. We aim to discover how these women vocalise their experiences, the impact it has on their lives, the strategies they develop to cope, and their broader perceptions of their own situations. Using THIC as a theoretical framework is considered helpful here as it will help to frame these individuals internalised conflicting disadvantages.

To add to this, as two social identities prominently emerged from the narratives – gender and class - we therefore recognised an alignment with intersectional theory. As mentioned earlier, we do acknowledge that this theory was   originally proposed as a framework to understand oppression faced by African American women (Crenshaw 1989), but our participants were all white working-class women. We also recognise that recent writings demonstrate how intersectionality is a more multi-dimensional approach being increasingly advocated (see Kele et al., 2022) as it helps to better understand the lived experiences of individuals by 'recognising [that] socially constructed identity categories (e.g. race, class, gender and sexual orientation) simultaneously interact with each other and with wider societal and power structures to construct experiences of oppression and privilege unique to each individual' (Kele et al., 2022:2; Crenshaw, 1991). This is important to our work as we align two identity categories with two theories to aid in our understanding of the experience of being a working woman yet

still needing to use a foodbank. Aligning THIC with intersectional theory and the characteristics of gender and class helps us to acutely understand how the social construction of categories of difference are intersected with external disadvantages such as oppression and inequality (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Kele et al., 2022). Together the frameworks allow us to contextualise the lived experience of white working-class women afflicted by IWP in relation to the multiple disadvantaged identities they occupy both internally and externally and the way these are manifested (Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). We also reiterate that the volunteers of the food bank played a significant role in the co-creation of the women's experiences thus their interactions are also considered within the theoretical approach.

To summarise, we demonstrate that THIC is a powerful analytical tool to use in examining and appreciating an individual's delineation of their own disadvantaged structural position. Using THIC with an intersectional sensitivity focussing on gender and class allowed us to empirically explore women active in work and accessing food banks more deeply, helping us to understand the way that identity impacted the struggles they faced, impacted by several structural conditions. Having established the theoretical grounding, we will now discuss the methodology used for the study.

Methodology

Our ethnographic study was carried out at two food banks in the North of England. The demographics for Tyne and Wear on gov.uk are cited as 90.5% people white, 5.1% people asian, 1.5% people mixed. In the specific locations of the foodbanks the demographic statistics are 96.9% people identify with a White ethnic group, 1.4% as Asian, Asian British or Asian

Welsh, 0.4% as Black, Black British, Black Welsh. Therefore, conducting ethnographic and qualitative research using convenience sampling in this region was likely to reflect these demographics. The lead author worked both as a volunteer and a researcher at the food banks for twenty-four months in total. Spending extended periods of time with the charities allowed for relationships to develop due to the immersive nature of the field work. The detailed and rich set of experiences which were captured during the study strongly resonated with Sennett and Cobb's (1972) motivation and desire to find meaning beyond words – ethnography was thus able to capture the behaviours, emotions, and relationships that unfolded at the food bank.

The stories that were gathered derive from both participant observation and transcripts from semi-structured interviews with women who were using the food bank whilst active in (or in periods between) work. Interviews were also conducted with front-line volunteers from the food bank. Nine women accessing the food bank were interviewed, ranging from 24 to 55 years older, working in a variety of roles and sectors for example as cleaners, in administration and in retail. All were on non-standard, precarious work contracts such as zero-hours contracts and agency work. As anticipated from the regional demographics all the women participants were white and working class. Whilst we do acknowledge critiques by for example Bilge (2014), on the whitening of intersectionality and the erasure of race in its deployment, we did not purposely omit race from our study. The demographics of the locality combined with the fact we used ethnographic research, led our sample of participants to be white, working-class women. This was also the case of the six volunteers interviewed, who were essential to the study as they described their perspectives gained from working with the food bank alongside their experiences working and interacting with those accessing the service. The interviews lasted from around 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted in the food bank, often in a quiet area

or unused room. Detailed field notes were produced of around 1,500 words at the end of each shift and covered a variety of observations and sentiments both practical and emotional.

Accessing women to interview for the study posed many challenges which, with hindsight, reflect many of the empirical findings later presented such as embarrassment and the preservation of dignity. Over time, trust was gained amongst the other volunteers therefore they acted as gatekeepers to facilitate relationships with participants (See Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Even so, many of the women who were accessing the food bank and employed were unwilling to agree to an interview, with some showing suspicion of the motives of the project and others did not have the time due to their already hectic schedules. Amongst those who were interviewed, the interviews were personal, and often became emotional.

In terms of ethics, voluntary participation, consent, and anonymity were all exercised to safeguard the participants. With this said, as the participant observation was ongoing it was not always practical to inform every entrant to the food bank of the research activity therefore a more pragmatic approach was required. The role and identity of the lead researcher was communicated and disclosed wherever possible, and where informal conversations happened or comments were documented from key informants, the research was discussed in more depth to give the women the opportunity to opt-out from their stories being shared. In line with feminist approaches to research, feminist ethics of care were valuable in informing decisions made during the research, for example the particular attention that is paid to power differentials and minimising oppression (Porter, 1999). A feminist care perspective also considered that an approach must be relational and contextual therefore avoiding homogenising principles of gender and experience (Noddings, 1984). For example, although several of the women seemed comfortable and sometimes enthusiastic to take part in the research, most were in a situation

where they needed the provisions from the food bank to survive. Approaching conversations and interviews therefore had to be sensitive to not further stigmatise women to the point where they felt unable to access the food bank for example if they were made to feel uncomfortable or pressured to be involved in the research.

To build on the ethics that underpinned the research, the vulnerability of the women, additional to the sensitive nature of the research context, meant that reflexivity was invaluable throughout the study. Strategies of reflexivity acknowledge and explore the role of researchers and the way they can affect the processes and outcomes of research (Haynes, 2012), for example both the relationships, dynamics, and ways of understanding which may be influenced by a researcher's personal characteristics such as race, age, gender, or background (McCabe and Holmes, 2009). What was particularly important in this study was that neither member of the research team, in contrast to the women whose stories are represented, have experienced IWP nor ever needed to use a food bank. Self-reflexivity therefore is exercised with caution to ensure that perspectives or interpretations derived from privileged identities and experiences do not further marginalise or take priority over those of the participants, for example by avoiding a patronising stance or misrepresentation that could come from assumptions (Berger, 2013). With this considered, the research diaries that were produced as part of the participant observation were a useful tool as they evoked a critical exploration of emotions, anxieties, and tensions in the field, both researcher and the researched, leading to more informed and considered reflexive analyses. Furthermore, open, and honest conversations occurred about the complex themes both amongst the research team and with other peers, for example the other volunteers at the food bank. These were at times pivotal to maintain a focus on the empowerment of the women throughout each stage of the study.

Further drawing on feminist methods, analysis of the interviews and observations was an ongoing process throughout the ethnography to remain close to the stories and indeed the participants who had shared them (Maynard, 2004). The strategy incorporated a first and second order analysis (Gioia et al., 2013) in which the first order was informed by resonating themes that were identified between both elements of THIC and the gathered testimonials whilst the second-order analysis was driven by common themes and concepts that emerged primarily from the field notes and interviews. Quotes were highlighted that encapsulated key themes and sentiments and form a crucial element of presenting the experiences allowing both the women and the experience of the fieldwork to speak for themselves. It must be noted that this was not a linear process, and relative to the previously discussed themes such as ethics, reflexivity, and sensitivity, the first and second order were revisited and revised several times based on reflections, conversations, and reconsiderations. The established themes also considered the embodied experience of research for both the researcher and researched, for example the sentiments and tensions experienced throughout the time spent in the field - many which were noted in the field notes and then incorporated into consolidating the final themes. Turning to present the findings, the paper will follow a structure guided by the overarching themes drawn out of the analysis: dignity, freedoms, and strength through adversity.

A Fight for Dignity

Time spent at the food bank revealed that women from varying jobs, sectors and forms of employment were using a food bank. The women took pride in their experiences, speaking of hard work and 'graft'. As a result, the experience of needing a food bank as workers for many women was frustrating, emotionally burdensome, and conflicting. An example of this was Abby who worked in an administrative role at a local utility company, and as a single mother

facing financial difficulty, had found herself struggling to provide for herself and two teenage children. Abby's presence was warm and uplifting and she stood out in smart, brightly coloured clothes – appearing confident and professional whilst proudly displaying her work lanyard around her neck. Our discussion highlighted an identity conflict that she grappled with whilst using the food bank from within employment. Reflecting on the field notes relative to meeting and interviewing Abby, it must be noted that the lead researcher also grappled with conflicting perspectives based on Abby's dress and appearance, concurring with her own sentiments that she seemed somewhat 'out of place'. There are two issues of note here. Firstly, this acted as an important reminder for the need for reflexive research practice to minimise stereotypical assumptions that we too as researchers experience, especially considering the time spent at the food bank confirmed that there was indeed no 'typical' food bank user. Secondly, in terms of using THIC framework as a conceptual lens here, externally, Abby's demeanour suggested that she 'was coping' but the underlying damage to her dignity and pride and the guilt she was feeling were hidden as emerging from her narrative.

> *'I feel like I shouldn't be here…that I don't belong here…and that somehow, I should have managed this situation so that it didn't get to this…when you go to these places you don't get the chance to tell your story, and partly you don't want to…but you have got this kind of self-conscious guilt, as if there is somebody else more worthy or more needy than you are.'* (Abby, Food Bank User)

Abby disassociated herself from others using the food bank in both what she said and did not say – avoiding the use of the word 'food bank' and instead ambiguously referencing 'these places'. Others too used similar evasive language, referring to their food parcel as a 'shop' or their referral form as a 'voucher'.

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In expressing elements of humiliation about her situation, Abby individualises and distances herself from unknown others collecting food, and in a protection of her own dignity refers to these others as 'more needy' thus separating herself from the perception of being in need – which was evidently not a trait she wanted to identify with. Abby's acknowledgement of guilt also resonates with wider debates around the 'undeserving' poor (Romano, 2017) however what is different here is that the conflict and guilt is internalised about her *own* situation and need. Once again this reflects key elements of THIC whereby feelings of guilt derive from a sense of wanting to self-sacrifice, in Abby's case here, for those that she viewed as more in need.

Other women spoke or acted in certain ways to emphasise the realities of their situations. This appeared as a strategy to take control of perceptions or images that others may have of them, as a form of self-legitimisation, particularly when meeting someone for the first time. As an example, here is our first interaction with Lizzy.

> *Lizzy came in with another woman, it was busy so they took a seat while they waited. Lizzy was clutching at a set of papers and put these down on the table. I offered them a drink – straight away Lizzy pushed the papers across the table to me. She seemed flustered and panicked. 'I've got a printout of my last [in-work benefits] and a list of all my shifts this month…and she works with me too' and she signalled at the other woman next to her who was nodding frantically in agreement.* (Field Notes)

Lizzy seemed eager, much like Abby, to separate herself, in this case from the perception of being workless or inactive. She created an opportunity to justify her claim for recognition and

respect as an active worker. Here we can see comparable struggles of self-legitimisation and self-validation akin to those in THIC.

Aware of the damaging impact of shame - often fuelled by depictions in the media - the food bank volunteers tried to alleviate the stigma that individuals might experience at the food bank. Visitors are never required to 'prove' their situation, but instead are treated with trust and compassion. The charities adopt neutral branding, avoiding the direct word of 'food bank', and language is used carefully in and around the food bank – with claimants always referred to as 'clients' or 'visitors'. This interestingly draws parallels with observations made of Abby and others' choice of language to move away from the terms associated with charity. Preserving dignity and minimising stigma was also a key determinant in decisions made around organisational changes, for example when one of the food banks moved its main distribution hub to a local shopping centre, one of the volunteers discussed the rationale.

> *'This move has been a big deal to us – we've made some big changes to make the whole experience 'better'. We were eager to get into [The Shopping Centre] so we could put stuff in normal shopping bags and put it all in a trolley so when you go outside you could just be anyone. We would hate anyone to feel branded as a 'food bank user'- they are just normal people like us.'* (Sarah, Food Bank Volunteer)

The volunteers at the food bank embodied high levels of empathy for those they supported, deriving either from their own experiences of food insecurity or from the time spent volunteering. As a researcher, learning from and talking to the food bank volunteers was pivotal in approaching the fieldwork and experience of ethnography with sensitivity. Certain individuals collecting food demonstrated or mentioned surprise at their treatment at the food

bank, claiming that they felt 'heard'– seemingly a rare occurrence. For many however, the experience remained characterised by humiliation and for some, the emotional impact remained after leaving the food bank. For example, Angie – a contract worker in an administrative role - reflected on her use of the food bank in terms of her children and her suppressed feelings towards the perceptions of wider societal judgement.

> *'...the shame...the indignity ...the blame...I felt like such a bad parent not being able to feed my kids. Because to me there is no other valuable job in the world than being a mother. It is not about going to work and making money for your boss ...but I do...so I can hold my head up high and blend in...but it hasn't been enough... I still now feel like a drain on society ...a bad mother.'* (Angie, Food Bank User)

Angie, like many of the women accessing the food bank from within work, was a single mother. She was employed on variable contracts yet found herself an unconscious competitor in a meritocratic society's contest for dignity - in her case not just as a worker but also facing the societal ideals of a woman's role as a working mother. Expressing a complex range of emotions to unpick, she seemed uneasy, even traumatised by her circumstance as she measures, vocalises, and affirms her individual worth and value through channelling what it means to her to be a good mother. Finding herself driven to the food bank catalysed feelings of personal failure, guilt, and inadequacy in being unable to independently feed her children. Angie claims feelings of self-deprecation surrounding the 'job' she derived value from – that being the work she dedicated to raising children. She found no solace from the paid employment that she discusses having lost hope in its ability to provide her independence.

The Limits of Choice

With time spent at the food bank, it became visibly evident that accessing the charity's help was, for most, a last resort as opposed to a favourable 'choice'. *'I never thought this would happen to me'* was one of the most common phrases raised at the food bank amongst those who were active in work. The internal frustration of unease and damaged pride felt by individuals appeared visceral – one woman confessed that she had waited twenty minutes outside the food bank trying to gather the courage to enter. Many others were tearful, emotional, distressed and even apologetic to the volunteers.

> *'I shouldn't be here this week… [the employment agency] said they had something come up last week - I thought 'great! I'll have some wages and I'll do a shop'… but nothing. I waited as long as I could, but we need to eat. I'd rather be at work…no offence… I just feel useless'* (Perry, Food Bank User)

Perry was effectively trapped by the agency as she sat with her eyes glued to her phone waiting for information of incoming shifts. Supported by in-work benefits, Perry had to accept any work that came available, however the ad-hoc nature meant that the support she received from the in-work benefits took time to be administered, thus rarely arriving on time for when it was needed. Perry longed for stability to regain control over her life.

For many women, their visit to the food bank was accompanied by the admission of complex choices and such decisions were interwoven with their work and personal situations.

> *As I worked through [Lisa's] forms I made small talk, asking her if she would be spending the festive season with family. She talked about the impact of Christmas and*

the way her life changed when her son wasn't at school. She had tears in her eyes, admitting her guilt for wishing away the time with her son but confessing the constant anxiety she felt for not working, telling me that her expenses went 'through the roof'.
(Field Notes)

Like Angie previously, Lisa viewed the meaningful time of her life being that which was spent outside of work but instead with her child. She faced a difficult balancing act, experiencing a psychological burden worrying about her finances whilst spending time with her son. As a Teaching Assistant at a local school, Lisa worked on a casual contract during term time and therefore during the holidays she was supported by welfare. The benefits she received were lower than her usual income and household expenses were higher whilst her son was not in school - she therefore used the food bank for relief. Nevertheless, the freedom that she had to spend quality time with her son was compromised. School holidays were notably difficult for many parents and the number of referrals increased during these periods. The food banks responded through initiatives such as providing lunches for children and additional food parcels in the Christmas period to help in any ways that they could.

The expansion of food banks has undoubtedly been driven by a surge in demand. Over time however, this greater need and awareness of the existence of the food bank led to opportunities to access food share networks such as Fareshare. These networks with local retailers allow food banks to collect left-over produce at the end of a shop's working day. With this in place, the food bank can offer a degree of choice to their clients in the food they receive., which for many made the experience more *satisfying* than receiving a bag of basic supplies.

'[The food bank] always has some sandwiches in from Greggs and I love it! I picked a few different one's last time and took them in for my lunch – it was like I'd just been to the shop like anyone else.' (Kirsten, Food Bank User)

These arrangements and the ability to offer extras and 'treats' were appreciated and praised at the food bank amongst both volunteers and claimants, however reflecting on the field notes there was a lingering discomfort at celebrating what was effectively waste and unsuitable for general sale. Also, Kirsten seemed more concerned about 'looking like anyone else' than commenting on what she was eating, for example the nutritional value. the appearance of access to certain products seemed to overshadow what the food tasted like or provided for her nutritionally. The food bank nevertheless remained limited in its ability to offer choices or alternatives to the basics. The standard 'parcel' rarely differed, and was only altered in certain cases of intolerance, allergies, religious reasons, or lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism. Abby spoke of the impact of this when it came to mealtime, particularly regarding feeding her children who were too young to understand thus sheltered from the reality of Abby's situation.

'…even though it is a massive help…I still feel pressured to try and get more stuff in. I find it really hard when the kids say that it is not stuff they like…because I am thinking well I have got no money to go out and get anything else. But it is not their fault…why should they just have to eat what I am trying to give them?' (Abby, Food Bank User)

For parents, the experience of using a food bank manifested not only in their lives but of those of their children. As mothers, the women carried a guilt for their role in the restricted access to the 'normal' freedoms and choices that their children may have had before or witnessed

amongst their peers. As described by one of the food bank volunteers, '*they feel inadequate – like they have let their family down'*.

Strength Through Adversity

The food bank volunteers, who were predominantly women, demonstrated care not only through their attempts to minimise stigma, but also through empathetic and supportive communication and behaviours (Buckingham and Jolley, 2015). They tried to create a positive, or at least not a negative experience for those accessing the support - many who had experienced apathy, indifference, or sometimes cruelty in their struggles at the hands of welfare providers, employers, and/or other institutions.

> *'It can be intimidating, frightening, especially the first time, you must feel so vulnerable – so we help build confidence up. We always welcome people with a friendly face and try to make them feel welcome, and that they are not a burden and that anyone could be in their position'* (Mary, Food Bank Volunteer)

The volunteers strived to foster courage and optimism, cognisant of the complex psychological consequences of poverty and food bank usage. They hoped that through support, compassion, and empathy, additional to the food provided, they could inspire encouragement. This was significant for those working, many feeling that visiting the food bank signified 'rock bottom' and hopelessness. Marie commented on the way that humane treatment could be transformative, particularly when facing certain expectations and apprehensions of what using a food bank would be like.

> *'I was embarrassed at first going in, but the woman was so lovely, and she really made me feel like…well…that I wasn't just a bit of a tramp. You know, I left thinking everyone needs help now and again – don't feel bad about it.'* (Marie, Food Bank User)

Marie was working in a precarious hospitality role with one of the UK's biggest charities, yet the shocking derogatory language she uses about herself demonstrates a self-deprecation experienced whilst needing to use a food bank.

Other women validated their action or indeed strove for the strength to endure the negative associations of food bank use through differing external factors and responsibilities relative to their personal situations. For example, Jazzy was working at a local mobile phone shop whilst caring for both her mother and brother at home.

> *'My mum didn't feel happy about [using a food bank]…she felt bad…she felt guilty… […] …but at the same time I knew we needed to use these services because if we don't…like my brother is diabetic…he needs to eat…we need to eat.'* (Jazzy, Food Bank User)

Although only a young adult, Jazzy was the primary earner in her household and despite reservations from her mother she demonstrated a pragmatic attitude to accessing the food bank, driven by instincts to care for her family. Despite carrying the apprehensions, anxieties, and guilt of her mother regarding food bank use and the worries of the health of her brother – all whilst managing work – Jazzy expressed no grievances. Cate also found a drive for self-legitimisation through her hardship from a position of care and responsibility for her children.

'I've never liked asking for help…it's a pride thing. But I don't hide my situation from the kids, they came with me to the food bank and helped me with the bags…and yes, I am a single mum but I want to prove I don't need a man to be OK, you know? They seen the bad times but also, they see me working and busy and not just sitting around.'
(Cate, Food Bank User)

Working in multiple zero-hour cleaning roles whilst simultaneously doing a night class in beauty therapy, Cate sought to 'prove' her capability as a single mother and to be a good role model to her children. Collecting from the food bank, Cate had been quiet and subdued. Whilst admitting her pride had been damaged, she displayed more confidence as we spoke during the interview. On reflection we consider that, like Abby, she did not want to appear as a victim, measuring her individual value relative to pride.

Like Jazzy, Cate showed determination in ensuring that accessing a food bank would not be a barrier to providing for her family. Many of the women displayed similar behaviours, sometimes showing solidarity and support with each other whilst waiting for their parcels both amongst both the volunteers and visitors, for example sharing job openings and reassuring each other that '*things will get better'*.

On a final note, whilst the honourable intentions of the food bank volunteers nor the fortitude of the women should be understated, what was absent from the narratives was any frustration or anger towards the structural barriers and institutional neglect that marginalised the women. In the meantime, the responsibility for making the women's experiences more bearable, at the least, seemed to be carried by both the volunteers and the women themselves. This supports narratives of the complex position occupied by food banks and their volunteers, whilst also

drawing attention to the need for structural reform in lieu of more 'resilience' amongst those oppressed by the system.

Discussion

Our findings provide new empirical material which demonstrates the value of using THIC with an intersectional lens to investigate working women facing IWP and their experience of using food banks, inclusive of the way their interactions with the volunteers are negotiated. Using THIC helped to examine an individual's internally suppressed framing of their disadvantaged position through their structured socio-economic position focusing on how unarticulated feelings are self-directed to personal failures and struggles for self-validation. The complimentary use of an intersectional lens was useful in helping understand how the social construction of the categories, specifically gender and class, intersected with various external disadvantages associated with the precarious labour market. With this considered, we unpack the complexity of the women's experiences, for example concerning the lived reality of their overlapping identities and responsibilities as working women, mothers, and carers. These were interrelated not just with the relative drivers of IWP, and the women's need for the food bank but also their experience of accessing the support and the coping strategies that were co-created with the volunteers to manage the negative and often stigmatising implications.

Sennett & Cobb (1972) explore the impact of 'accursed freedoms' relative to choice and self-development and the way they result in alienation and barriers to dignity. The women's experiences were also characterised by barriers through structural constraints relative to their working and personal situations. The paper concurs and supports findings from Beatty et al. (2021) of the increasingly interwoven relationship between precarity and typically female-

dominated low-wage sectors such as cleaning and retail and women's food bank use. New insights are revealed into the way that women's intersectional identities as carers – including childcare and other familiar care responsibilities – were contributory factors to their need for food aid, particularly for working single mothers. This need is also bound with precarious working arrangements, further supporting debates concerning the damaging nature of low pay and precarity (Heyes et al., 2018; Rubery et al., 2018; Shildrick et al., 2012; Smith & McBride, 2021, 202). The impact of a low-pay trap and insecure, precarious employment was visible amongst women such as Perry, who appeared 'shackled' to her phone waiting for shifts to be released - alienated from the conversation that we were having. Further structural factors were significant in women's food bank use, for example the lack of employment regulation and transparency for part-year workers such as Teaching Assistants (Fazackerley, 2022) and the incompatibility of in-work benefits with precarious work (Jones et al., 2019). These external factors, heavily characterised by gendered inequalities in the labour market, influenced the internal struggles faced by our participants.

Neither the women nor the volunteers voiced anger, disgust, or shock – despite the cruel and degrading conditions that drove individuals to food banks. Like the workers in Boston, it could be determined that the women's mere plight for survival weakened their ability to resist or confront the limits imposed on them, furthering the evidence from THIC of the 'curses' they faced to their freedom and dignity (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Theoretically this could explain the lack of blame or acknowledgement of wider contributory factors to the women's marginalisation for example the role of the state, welfare and employment regulation, and the lack of paternal support. Contrastingly, for those who were mothers, the frustration was often directed inwards, and the women questioned their own ability of being a parent, once again demonstrating elements of THIC's notion of internalised perceived personal failures. Similarly,

the volunteers carried the burden of minimising the negative impacts of food bank usage, consumed with their own determinations to support their communities in both a practical and emotional sense.

Many women spoke of the guilt of accessing support as workers, drawing on the way that Sennett and Cobb (1972) conceptualise certain behaviours as a 'cloak for class antagonism' (p. 147). The women expressed despair and disappointment that work had not shielded them from food insecurity nor provided them with *expected* intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in return for their labour, for example dignity, and reasonable remuneration. They grappled with the fear of judgement relative to food bank use whilst displaying aggravated tensions around their identities and responsibilities not only as workers but also as mothers and/or carers (see also Nugent, 2000. This often manifested in a complex conflict whereby the women deliberated over their *own* relative need or deservingness.

Closely interrelated with their guilt, was the shame the women spoke of - aligning with narratives of food bank use around sentiments of degradation and humiliation (Garthwaite, 2016). Food bank use catalysed feelings of self-deprecation, and inadequacy in the face of societal pressures and expectations of which the women felt they had not met in both the professional and domestic sphere. Whilst some women like Angie spoke directly of the negative impact that claiming from a food bank had on them, others such as Marie used derogatory language about themselves. This performative practice which reproduced the stigmatised identities of the women at the food bank was one of the stark differences amongst our participants in comparison with THIC. Others like Abby and Cate displayed other performative behaviours to hide the injuries they experienced and mask the emotional burdens of the personal sacrifice they made in accepting help from the food bank. As an additional

point, many of the identities which were interwoven with the women's feelings of failure and shame for example as workers and mothers, were also the central identities amongst the women's strategies of self-validation amidst their hardship. The way the women's behaviours in both struggle and survival were intricately bound with their identities highlights the value of applying intersectional considerations of gender and class in research in both food bank usage and working lives, and indeed the interaction of both.

Building on the previous point, the women, much like the working men of Boston (Sennett and Cobb, 1972), adopted strategies to maintain dignity through their hardship. Despite their conflicts, the women protected what they were proud of – for example their commitments to work, their personal responsibilities, and the sacrifices they made as mothers and carers. These strategies included disassociation from 'other' food bank claimants and from the food bank itself, in what Sennett and Cobb (1972) describe as a 'concern with a right to be exempted personally from shaming and indignity' (p. 150). The role of the food bank here is again particularly significant, as the need to access food brought classed and gendered anxieties to surface – bringing internalised injuries into a public space (Garthwaite, 2016). This is evidenced in the way some of the participants either spoke or behaved in ways that seemed that they were trying to prove themselves. The food bank, however, emerged as an ally to the women in the way that the volunteers – mirroring feminist ethics of care such as empathy, support, and compassion –sought to alleviate the negative impacts of food bank use. One example here is Marie, for whom the treatment she experienced was transformative. Others mentioned feeling 'heard' and 'understood'. The food bank was a space for solidarity amongst the volunteers and the women. Nevertheless, as an ending point, food banks face significant limitations and barriers in being able to wholly shield such individuals from the negative psychological and practical impacts of use both within and away from the food bank, acting as

a stark reminder of the need for structural change concerning the factors exasperating food insecurity and IWP.

Conclusion

To conclude, we argue that the theoretical underpinning of THIC (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) to investigate the stories we gathered helped us to look beyond visible observations and deeply appreciate the women's experiences of the disadvantaged structural positions they occupied. We explore the internalised conflict that the women faced particularly relative to the external constraints that impacted them, and the complex struggles they faced with guilt, shame, and maintaining dignity – all relative to their intersectional identities.

Our findings support other scholarly debates around the detrimental impacts of poverty and low pay (Shildrick et al., 2012, McBride & Smith, 2022), additional to the gendered disadvantages faced by women in IWP (McKay et al., 2012), and engaged in precarious and insecure work (Fudge and Owens, 2006). We recognise the food bank as a site of culminating tensions regarding IWP, thus also adding to debates around the polemic nature of their existence (Beck and Gwilym, 2020; May et al., 2019; Poppendieck, 1998) and we further these debates through exploring the nuanced experiences of women's food bank use. We demonstrate the importance of having both a classed and gendered intersectional investigative lens in studies of IWP, precarity and food bank usage.

What prevails from the accounts, and is linked directly with the use of THIC, is that the women's frustrations often manifested into an internalised contest for worth and dignity. Neither the women nor the volunteers however vocalised or displayed anger or frustration

towards the evident structural constraints and injustices that bound them, particularly the cruelty of navigating low-paid insecure work. Our findings provide first-hand detailed accounts of white working-class women experiencing IWP in contemporary Britain, which derive valuable insights to debates concerning the precarious labour market, food bank use, and gendered and classed narratives in the UK.

As a closing point, there are many characteristics in our paper that Sennett and Cobb proposed for 'hidden injuries' some 50 years ago that have shown to be neither limited to certain geographies, genders, nor have they dissipated over time. They are however relative to their context and aggravated by complex economic conditions, in this case austerity and economic change. Our findings support their research 50 years later in that they overall suggest that an individual's predicament 'is beneath the attention of the very system that commands one's confinement' (Sennett and Cobb, 1972: p. 347).

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