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# Three Foodbanks in a Decade of Austerity: Foodbank Affective Atmospheres

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**Abstract:** Poverty in the UK continues to rise, making it more important than ever to understand lived experiences of poverty. This paper responds to a gap in understanding collective experiences of poverty by analysing the affective atmospheres at three foodbanks in two British cities in 2014 and 2019. Drawing on ethnographies at the three foodbanks, it approaches affective atmospheres through Spinoza and a focus on capacity: the capacity of clients to be in a situation different to that of their current experience of food poverty; and the capacity of foodbank volunteers and managers in terms of how they desired the foodbank to be run. Overall, the paper argues that affective atmospheres at the foodbanks were formed by an ever-changing relation between these capacities through the past, present, and anticipated future, and the ongoing context of austerity.

**Keywords:** foodbank, affective atmospheres, affect, austerity, poverty, capacity

## Introduction

The UK is now over a decade into the current period of austerity, and with it hunger has become a new norm in everyday life (Garthwaite 2016). Austerity has not affected UK society equally (Alston 2019), and poverty is intrinsically related to inequality (Poppendieck 2013). Human geographers have long engaged with poverty but less so with people's everyday experiences of poverty (a call by Miewald and McCann 2014), or with how poverty is collectively felt and experienced; one person's experience is not in isolation from others (as noted by Hitchen 2019). In response, this paper analyses the affective atmospheres from ethnographies at three foodbanks in two British cities—Bristol and Birmingham—in 2014 and 2019 in order to draw out people's collective lived experiences of poverty at the foodbanks. Affective atmospheres within affective geographies are an as of yet underexplored avenue of inquiry in relation to lived experiences of austerity, poverty and foodbanks. Whilst Ruth Raynor (2017) and Esther Hitchen (2019) have explored affective atmospheres in relation to austerity, affective atmospheres have not yet been extended specifically to foodbanks—indeed, there has been a lack of empirical engagement with affect compared with theoretical work in affective geographies (Michels 2015). Whilst the concept of affect does not have a single definition (for example, see Thrift 2004), in this paper I draw on Spinoza to understand affect as the body's changing power to act, and affection as how the

body is affected. In turn, the notion of affective capacity refers to what a body can do, which comes from the body's changing power to act (Spinoza 1996: III definition 3, III postulate 1). Affective atmospheres reflect the collective dimension of affective geographies to provide a means to rethink space and experience in terms of how human bodies collectively interact, how atmospheres form and dissipate, and are relational and subjectively felt (Anderson 2014; Woodward 2011). Indeed, the affective atmospheres of austerity and poverty are ever changing (Raynor 2017). Affective atmospheres at foodbanks are one way in which people's everyday lived experiences of poverty are played out; foodbanks having become symbolic of hunger and poverty in the UK, as, for example, typified in the 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake* (UK foodbanks being similar to food pantries in the USA).

The contribution of this paper is therefore twofold, first to the geographies of austerity and poverty, and secondly, to affective geographies: it utilises collective atmospheres to think through collective lived experience at the foodbanks, but in doing so the foodbanks become a way to think through the theorisation of collective atmospheres. I approach affective atmospheres with an emphasis on a Spinozian understanding of affect, power and capacity, it being apt to turn to Baruch Spinoza as a 17<sup>th</sup> century thinker who was isolated by his radical politics (Deleuze 1988) in order to critically analyse the foodbank affective atmospheres which were officially apolitical and yet often politically charged by the context of austerity. Through Spinoza (1996), I argue that the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks were formed by two varying capacities: first, the capacity of clients to be in a situation different to that of their current experience of food poverty; and secondly, the capacity of foodbank volunteers and managers in terms of how they desired to run the foodbank. In doing so, I draw on Spinoza's understanding of affect in relation to time to argue that client and volunteers' capacities—and therefore the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks—were affected by the past, present, and anticipated future, with each affected by the wider context of austerity.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, I expand upon affective atmospheres, and secondly, geographical scholarship on foodbanks and austerity. Thirdly, I detail the methodology utilised at three Trussell Trust foodbanks. I then take in turn capacities at the foodbanks of clients and volunteers to argue that each affected the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks through experience of the past, present, and anticipated future.

## Affective Atmospheres

Affective atmospheres are a relatively recent development in affective geographies that engage with collective dimensions of affect theory which has often been neglected in favour of a notion of affect and an individual subject or body (Anderson 2014; Anderson and Ash 2015; McCormack 2015). Affective atmospheres link the individual and the collective (Hitchen 2019) because they engage with how affect is transmitted between bodies and yet an affective atmosphere is more than the total sum of bodies (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2016). Affective atmospheres are therefore a means of thinking through affective spaces to emphasise

affect as lived rather than inert (Stewart 2011) and how affective life is continually forming (Anderson et al. 2020).

Amongst affective geographers investigating collective atmospheres there are several key characteristics of affective atmospheres. Affective atmospheres can be both a cause and an effect, and multiple atmospheres can co-exist in a single space (Anderson and Ash 2015). However, a single atmosphere cannot be identically repeated because atmospheres remain transient (Anderson 2014). Due to their transiency and subjectivity, it can be difficult to name a particular atmosphere, but this remains an important challenge to grasp if affective atmospheres are to be engaged with empirically (Anderson and Ash 2015). Furthermore, a body cannot generate or engineer an atmosphere on its own, and yet an atmosphere relies upon bodies to exist and emphasises the relationality between bodies (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2013, 2016). Affective atmospheres often engage with both human and non-human affects. Whilst this departs from the Spinozian understanding of affect which heavily influenced the Deleuzian strand of affective geographies, James Ash (2013) argues that this is important because the non-human should be considered as a valuable entity in itself, not simply in relation to humans.

To expand upon these characteristics I briefly consider recent empirical applications of affective atmospheres. First, Ben Anderson (2016) utilises both affect and affective atmospheres in relation to neoliberalism, and Angharad Closs Stephens (2016) explores affective atmospheres in relation to nationalism. Anderson (2016:749) argues that affective atmospheres contribute towards the formation of neoliberalism, not as one particular affect but as a culmination of affects which vary temporally and are represented as “dynamic structures of feeling”. Closs Stephens finds that nationalism operates through affect, and affective atmospheres provide a means to understand how nationalism prevails over time. Anderson’s and Closs Stephens’ work is notable for this paper to show how affective atmospheres can contribute towards and relate to political atmospheres and moods. Secondly, Paul Cloke and David Conradson (2018) analyse the affective atmospheres around the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand to show how neoliberal atmospheres were disrupted by the generation of new affective atmospheres by participatory and third sector organisations’ activities in the time after the physical earthquake. These examples highlight how affects and atmospheres can culminate but can also challenge each other. Thirdly, in his empirical work in relation to balloons, Derek McCormack (2015:96, 100) questions the use of the term “method” in non-representational thinking:

Atmosphere provides a way of foregrounding the fact that affective spacetimes of variable reach and intensity can be and are felt as forceful gatherings without necessarily being formed ... For non-representational styles of thinking, concepts are not applied to the world, no more than methods are. Concepts are recreated every time they are thought with.

I follow McCormack’s (2015) argument that affect as a concept is recreated in each “real world” situation. This is important: affective atmospheres are not a concept to apply but rather change how the world can be understood; a methodological challenge which I return to.

## Foodbanks and UK Austerity

Austerity in the UK is contested both politically and in how it is defined. In this paper I follow economic geographer Sarah Marie Hall's understanding of austerity: austerity is both an economic state policy to reduce government public spending in order to reduce the government's budget deficit, and a lived experience in people's daily lives (Hall 2019). The current period of austerity in the UK began following the 2008 global financial crisis. At this time no major political party in the UK presented an alternative to austerity which meant that austerity was presented as a necessity (Cooper and Whyte 2017). However, austerity was a political choice and other countries—for example Iceland—show that there were alternatives to austerity (Cooper and Whyte 2017). Arguably, it was presenting austerity as a necessity that legitimised subsequent cuts to the welfare state and provision (Hitchen and Raynor 2020). Coinciding with austerity cuts to spending, there has been an increasing focus in the last decade on means testing for benefits claimants (Edmiston et al. 2017) and Tom Slater (2014) has argued that the government facilitated public ignorance around welfare reforms and understanding of poverty in order to help justify these reforms. It was claimed multiple times in 2018 and 2019 by leading politicians that austerity is ending, but this has not proved to be the case (Hitchen and Raynor 2020).

Despite government denial, evidence from the academy and third sector consistently shows that austerity in the last decade has increased levels of poverty (Alston 2019). Under neoliberalism, this reflects a shift in the last decade from the state to the individual in terms of responsibility for people having enough to eat (Sonnino and Hanmer 2016). One way in which this has played out has been through people turning to foodbanks. Whilst foodbanks may not be explicitly named as places of austerity, the three main causes of people using Trussell Trust foodbanks—low income (including through benefits), benefit delays, and benefit changes (Trussell Trust 2020)—show that the existence of foodbanks is in response to austerity and the retraction of the welfare state. Experiencing a lack of food is therefore not only physical, but also political (Miewald and McCann 2014). However, the government has denied the link between austerity and poverty, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Phillip Hammond, saying in response to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights' report (Alston 2019), "I reject the idea that there are vast numbers of people facing dire poverty in this country ... Look around you; that's not what we see in this country" (BBC News 2019). Instead, as foodbanks have become increasingly critical of welfare cuts and research has shown a link between welfare reform and foodbank use, the government has pushed forward a narrative that blames the individual for needing to use a foodbank with associated narratives of poor money management, decision making, and lifestyle choices (Garthwaite 2016). However, as argued by May et al. (2019) it is overly simplistic to present welfare reforms negatively and voluntary sector responses—such as through foodbanks—positively: there are both convergences and divergences between the operation of the welfare state and foodbanks in the context of austerity. Austerity is therefore both absent and present in people's daily lives because its effects are not always named as austerity but are felt in everyday life, for example through welfare cuts (Hitchen and Raynor 2020).

There has been a wealth of attention in human geography to the question of foodbanks in the UK. Much of this attention has been on the causes of food poverty (Silvasti and Riches 2014) and to the rising levels of food poverty in the last decade. Examples include statistical analyses of Trussell Trust data on the number of children using foodbanks (Lambie-Mumford and Green 2017), and on the relationship between benefit sanctions and the number of people using foodbanks (Loopstra et al. 2018). Statistics have an important role to play, but they cannot fully represent people's everyday lived experiences; the latter being the focus of calls for attention (Miewald and McCann 2014). Indeed, as Strong (2019b) advocates and this paper follows, we need to move beyond descriptive accounts of foodbanks to attend to the processes at play at foodbanks. One way in which to do this is through ethnographies. Therefore, I now turn to three examples of geographical engagement with Trussell Trust foodbanks that exemplify how ethnographies have engaged with people's everyday experiences of using foodbanks in a way that moves beyond description to understand processes, practices, and politics at play. First, Kayleigh Garthwaite undertook a two-year ethnography volunteering at the Stockton-On-Tees Trussell Trust foodbank. Her subsequent book *Hunger Pains* (2016) portrays how the foodbank ran, tackles myths around foodbank users and why people use foodbanks, highlights the stigma and shame that people may experience at the foodbank, and concludes with policy recommendations for the future of foodbanks in the UK. Secondly, Samuel Strong's 15-month ethnography at a Trussell Trust foodbank in the South Wales valleys engages more directly with the question of austerity. Strong (2019a:211) considers austerity in terms of "actually existing austerity", arguing that gaps in welfare provision that are a result of welfare reform and austerity have caused uneven responsibility, and often placed responsibility for their own welfare upon people who are already excluded. Thirdly, Paul Cloke, Andrew Williams, Jon May, and Live Cherry have undertaken extensive foodbank ethnographies. Their work has focused on the complex relationship between foodbanks and volunteers (Williams et al. 2016), theorised foodbanks as a politicised response "in the meantime" as opposed to accepting state withdrawal (Cloke et al. 2017:703), and has argued that there is a convergence between the welfare state and voluntary sector responses to poverty because both are bureaucratic, and that there are active power dynamics at foodbanks (May et al. 2019). What these three ethnographies show is how research can engage with human experience at foodbanks: experiences of poverty, austerity, and volunteering; the relationship between foodbanks, politics, and the welfare state; and the change in foodbanks and people's experiences over time. Understanding these themes is important if individual, foodbank, and political responses are to truly address the situations in which people living in poverty in the UK are existing, in order to work towards reducing levels of poverty. By also utilising ethnographic methodologies at three foodbanks, this paper follows these ethnographies in this intention.

Taking this further, this paper not only examines the processes at play at foodbanks, but utilises the concept of affective atmospheres in order to draw out collective experiences. To date, affective atmospheres have lacked attention on foodbanks, and more widely within affective atmospheres there has been little

attention to austerity. Exceptions that have addressed austerity include Esther Hitchen's (2019) work on affective atmospheres in public libraries in austerity in which she raised how austerity is felt individually and collectively yet there has been a lack of attention to the collective elements. Using an 18-month ethnography at a borough-wide public library in the North East of England, Hitchen identified two specific affective states through affective atmospheres, paranoia and the uncanny, which shows how austerity is affective, temporal and spatial. In addition, Ruth Raynor's (2017) work with women to write a fictional play on austerity found that austerity is an affective atmosphere that is ever changing, and is contested. By drawing on affective atmospheres in relation to foodbanks, this paper tackles how individual's experiences at foodbanks—with foodbanks being symptomatic of UK austerity—are not only never in isolation to other bodies at the foodbanks, but are also relational to their experiences and capacities of the past, present, and anticipated future.

## **Methodology: Foodbank Ethnographies**

The empirical grounding for this paper is short-term ethnographies at three Trussell Trust foodbanks: two foodbanks in Bristol in 2014 (North Bristol Foodbank and Bristol North West Foodbank), and one foodbank in Birmingham in 2019 (B30 Foodbank). All three foodbanks were established and run by or in churches and relied upon volunteers, but not all of the volunteers were Christian. Like all Trussell Trust foodbanks, the foodbanks required people coming to the foodbank for food to have a voucher issued by a referral agent (for example, a doctors surgery, or job centre), and at these particular foodbanks the people receiving food were called clients. Clients received three days' worth of predominantly non-perishable food to take home and officially could only use the foodbank three times in any six month period.

The ethnographies at all three foodbanks began with observing volunteers and clients when the foodbanks were open with some participation in volunteer activities such as greeting clients, and packing and sorting food. All of the foodbanks followed a similar pattern: clients arrived at the foodbank, were greeted by a volunteer, and asked for their voucher. Their voucher would be checked, and then a volunteer would offer the client a hot drink and sit with them to fill out a second form to indicate any dietary requirements. Whilst other volunteers packed the food, the volunteer often talked to the client whilst waiting and signposted the client onto other services depending on the reason they used the foodbank. The food was then brought out to the client who signed a form and left with the food.

In Bristol, I visited North Bristol Foodbank and Bristol North West Foodbank 26 times between May and June 2014. In 2014 the two foodbanks had seven outlets between them meaning that there were seven different locations where people could collect food. The outlets included traditional church buildings, community centres, church halls, and a charity shop. The outlets were spread across North and North West Bristol on housing estates and high streets which were some distance from the city centre and the leafy affluence of areas such as Clifton. I kept a

research diary from each visit to record my observations and reflections and undertook 54 semi-structured interviews and 25 questionnaires with 79 people (37 clients and 42 volunteers). The interviews often took place in the noisy outlets so audio recordings were not practical and detailed notes were taken instead. The ethnographies in Bristol took place five years into the current period of austerity. Key austerity policies by this point in time included that child benefits had been frozen since 2011 rather than rising with inflation, and there were ongoing local authority cuts. In 2013 the Welfare Reform Act of 2012 came into force which introduced several measures and cuts including the controversial so-called bedroom tax and personal independence payments to replace the disability living allowance (Denning 2020).

In Birmingham, I visited B30 Foodbank 16 times between February and May 2019, again keeping a diary from each visit. B30 Foodbank is one of the largest foodbanks in the Midlands and distributes food from one church rather than having multiple outlets. It takes its name from the B30 postcode where it is situated; to the south-west of Birmingham city centre on Cotteridge high street. At B30 Foodbank there were 32 research participants: semi-structured interviews with 18 clients and five volunteers, and a focus group with nine volunteers. Both the interviews and the focus group took place in side rooms at the church and so it was possible to audio record and transcribe these. By 2019 at B30 Foodbank the UK was ten years into the current period of austerity. Key austerity measures in place by this time included further benefit caps and a benefit freeze since 2016, the roll-out of Universal Credit in Birmingham since 2017, as well as the closure of many job centres and the two child benefit cap (Denning 2020).

Participation in the research was opt-in and not a condition of receiving food at the foodbanks. The ethnographies in Bristol and Birmingham that are brought together in this paper were part of different research projects and so different interview questions were asked in Bristol and Birmingham, but all of the interviews asked volunteers and clients to reflect on their experiences at the foodbanks. People to interview were identified through gatekeepers at the foodbanks (foodbank management and foodbank volunteers), or through my own interactions with people at the foodbanks. Full explanations were given about the research and consent formally given before interviews/questionnaires and the focus group took place, and all participants were given the option of anonymity. This methodology follows Cloke et al. (2017) that a participatory approach with affect theory was advantageous because it allowed me to develop relationships with the volunteers and clients, and to experience the spaces of the foodbanks to a greater extent than if I had only carried out interviews or questionnaires. This not only informed the interview questions that I asked, but also informed the depth of analysis and understanding that I gained of people's experiences and issues faced at the foodbanks.

Analysis was undertaken thematically using my field diaries, responses from interviews and the focus group, and questionnaire answers. This allowed themes to be drawn across the data as a whole, plus themes in terms of responses being location specific (Bristol or Birmingham) or role specific (volunteers or clients). This paper makes use of quotes from specific clients and volunteers, but through this method



of analysis the argument was informed by all of the research participants. As discussed in the previous section on affective atmospheres, there is a methodological challenge in utilising affective atmospheres to change how empirical situations are thought through and analysed, rather than simply applying affective atmospheres as a concept. More specifically, there is a challenge when affective atmospheres are matched with “real world” situations (McCormack 2015) because too easily empirical application can become description of a generic atmosphere, and in this way cease to be a non-representational approach but rather a pure representation. The aforementioned work by Cloke and Conradson (2018) gives an example of the difference between description and affective analysis. They could have described the atmosphere at the participatory and creative third sector responses to the earthquakes; however, their analysis goes further than this by analysing how these affective atmospheres were generated, and how they interrupted the prevailing neoliberal atmospheres. Yet as Hitchen (2019) notes, there is also a methodological challenge of both austerity and affective atmospheres being present but fluctuating. Care must therefore be taken in naming affective atmospheres so that one atmosphere is not privileged over another, and made more permanent in writing than in its existence. This paper embraces these methodological challenges by emphasising the multiple atmospheres that were present at the foodbanks, whilst also recognising that a particular atmosphere can dominate in moments. The affective atmospheres in this paper are drawn from the narrative of clients and volunteers and my own experience at the foodbanks. I have therefore played a role in identifying these atmospheres from others’ narratives and cannot claim to account for others’ experiences in their entirety. However, having spent time at the foodbanks rather than solely relying on interviews draws closer to bridging the gap between writing and experience. It is also necessary to emphasise here that discussion of the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks relates to specific moments in time that were experienced by myself, volunteers, and clients. The atmospheres discussed therefore cannot generalise for the foodbanks as a whole. That said, when an atmosphere is experienced similarly on multiple occasions then generalisations about the foodbanks can begin to be made.

## **Affective Atmospheres: Three Foodbanks in a Decade of Austerity**

This paper’s focus on affective atmospheres is through capacities. The body’s capacity to act is another way of understanding Spinoza’s (1996: III definition 3) conceptualisation of affect theory in *Ethics* in terms of the power of human bodies to act (affect) and to be affected (affection). Indeed, affective geographers often take forward affect in relation to a body’s affective capacity to mean what a body is capable of doing (for example, Anderson 2014; Hynes 2013; Ruddick 2010). Drawn out from the thematic data analysis of the foodbank ethnographies I analyse bodies’ capacities and the subsequent affective atmospheres in two ways: the capacity of clients to be in a situation different to that of their current experience of food poverty; and the capacity of foodbank volunteers and managers in terms of how they desire the foodbank to be run. These capacities combine, collide and

contest with each other to form the temporally elusive affective atmospheres at the foodbanks. Ultimately, as affective atmospheres are formed by bodies and affects—whilst not being reducible to bodies (Anderson 2014)—bodies' capacities at the foodbanks are integral to the affective atmosphere(s) at the foodbanks.

Before turning to the particularities of the foodbanks in Bristol and Birmingham, a further passage from Spinoza's (1996: III proposition 18) *Ethics* is helpful for understanding the relationship between bodies' capacities and the resulting affective atmospheres:

Man is affected with the same affect of joy or sadness from the image of a past or future things as from the image of a present thing.

Demonstration: So long as a man is affected by the image of a thing, he will regard the thing as present, even if it does not exist.

This passage on affect means that to Spinoza affects of the past or anticipated future can be the same as if the thing were affecting in the present; recollection or anticipation can affect as powerfully as what is happening. If we take being in poverty as the "thing" to which the proposition refers, then a person can be as affected by having been in poverty in the past or anticipating poverty in the future as they are in the present. The scholium following proposition 18 introduces hope and fear, and confidence and despair, in relation to affects of the past, present and anticipated future. The scholium starts with the image of a past or future thing, from which hope and fear are identified as joy and sadness when the outcome of the thing is doubted, whilst hope and fear are confidence and despair respectively where there is no doubt of the outcome. This scholium therefore not only shows us that the past and anticipated future can affect as much as the present, but also that doubt about the past or future changes the affection, and hence each of these will also contribute towards how bodies affected the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks.

## ***Clients***

Building upon Spinoza's notion of affection and the image of the future, an important capacity for clients and the atmospheres at the foodbanks was whether they could envisage a different situation to that of their current experience of poverty. At the most basic level clients' capacities were changed at the foodbank in that they could eat:

I met a client today who said he had not eaten for ten days and would have starved had it not been for the foodbank. (Author's diary, North Bristol Foodbank, 2014)

I have to rely on the foodbank to keep me going for the next couple of days until I do get paid and it's just one big struggle after another. (Client, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

In Bristol and Birmingham, I met foodbank clients who were parents and had not eaten so that their children had enough to eat, whilst others shared that receiving food from the foodbank meant that they would not feel the only option to get food would be to turn to crime. To some extent clients therefore expressed an

attitude of gratitude and relief at having food and associated with this a change in mood, as expressed by this client who was using the foodbank as a result of benefit delays:

Many times [I have] come here on the verge of tears and left with a smile. (Client, Bristol North West Foodbank, 2014)

From such quotes it could be inferred that there was a positive atmosphere at the foodbank resulting from an increase in clients' affective capacities as a result of their having food to eat again. Whilst such aspects were a part of the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks, it would be overly simplistic and overly romanticised to stop at this point.

The official line of Trussell Trust foodbanks is that they provide emergency food provision rather than ongoing food provision, although they recognise that poverty is an ongoing problem for many people. The clients that I met in 2014 and 2019 were increasingly in situations of ongoing poverty which affected them on a daily basis as a client using the foodbank due to benefit issues and poor health described:

It's quite depressing to see ... being here today and I'm not the only one here, and looking at people they look drawn, tired, helpless, shouldn't be living like that they shouldn't. That's the effect it has on me, just seeing the whole world falling apart daily ... it's hard when you look in the cupboards and there's nothing there. (Client, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

For this client their experience of poverty was of the past, present, and anticipated to continue into the future: this was not an emergency situation in terms of being short-term, but rather an ongoing situation of poverty and daily struggle without enough food. Such experiences and reflections negatively affected clients' capacities which in turn affected the affective atmospheres at the foodbank through the visible sense of people's need and at times desperation that could be shared between clients, and sensed by and shared with volunteers, as evidenced when one B30 Foodbank volunteer called one of the days "harrowing". This reiterates that it would be overly simplistic and romanticised to only argue that foodbanks increase clients' affective capacities and have positive affective atmospheres.

As austerity progressed there was an increasing sense amongst the clients whom I interviewed in Bristol and Birmingham that it would be difficult for their current situation of poverty to change. At B30 Foodbank in Birmingham I asked clients what, if anything, the word austerity meant to them. The majority gave replies such as:

I've heard of it before, I just don't know what it means. (Client, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

However, one homeless client at the foodbank responded that austerity meant:

The poorer are getting poorer and the richer are getting richer. (Client, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

Although the foodbank was officially a non-political space, austerity policies affected the causes of people using the foodbank, and therefore the foodbanks existed

within the wider context of austerity. Austerity hence affected the atmospheres at the foodbanks, although as Anderson (2014) argues, one element cannot be claimed to singularly cause an atmosphere. Indeed, Hitchen and Raynor (2020:189) raise a tension that is at the centre of austerity and affective atmospheres: "Austerity is on the one hand elusive, yet on the other hand it is also sticky and inescapable. Yet austerity cannot be fully registered by one atmosphere". Austerity therefore cannot be said to be the single cause of the atmospheres at the foodbanks but it did play a role, and clients' narratives from Bristol and Birmingham show that their affective capacities were fundamentally changed both by living in poverty, and by austerity; poverty and austerity being themselves interrelated.

To take this point further, the welfare change that was mentioned repeatedly at B30 Foodbank was the introduction of Universal Credit. Universal Credit was announced by the government in 2012 to combine six benefits into one. It was piloted from 2014 before being rolled out nationally, and remains a controversial policy. It was this that particularly fed into the aforementioned increasingly depressing atmosphere at the foodbank, and a sense of people being weary. The effect of Universal Credit—and other austerity policies—was outside of individual clients' control and presented a significant affect upon their ability to perceive an image of the future that was different to their present situation.

I've changed over to Universal Credit so you have to go for an assessment, a disability assessment which I did ten weeks ago. It's meant to take four to six weeks for the results but it's ten weeks now and they still haven't done it. So in the meanwhile I've been on £40/week because they've sanctioned me as well because I missed an appointment even though they gave me two appointments the same day so I missed one of them and it's all messed up. As soon as I'm past this thing, I get my money backdated, it's just waiting, just so slow and phone up and the computer says, you know ... Even though they've told me they've made the decision I'm waiting for somebody to tick a box! ... Yeah they said it's in my favour ... Well four weeks ago they told me the decision's been made. And still now, they need to tick the box. But every time you speak to someone they say they can't do it. (Client, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

In 2019—and still at the time of writing—there was officially a five week wait from a person applying for Universal Credit to receiving their first payment, although in practice people often waited longer. The client in the above abstract had been assessed for their disability and waited over ten weeks for their payments to increase, as despite hearing that the decision was positive for receiving the disability payment this was not yet on the system. The affect of this for the client most literally was the experience of only £40 per week on which to live. In turn, the affect of this upon the atmosphere at the foodbank was that it was yet another client at the foodbank who shared a story of being negatively impacted by Universal Credit. To read this situation through Spinoza: where there is doubt of the outcome then clients have hope or fear, but where there is certainty of the outcome then fear becomes despair (Spinoza 1996: III proposition 18, scholium 2). Whilst the client knew that they should in theory receive the benefit payment and they therefore knew what the outcome would eventually be, they were experiencing more despair than hope. Fundamental to clients' experiences of Universal

Credit was a lack of control and uncertainty over payments, sanctions, and assessment decisions which resulted in an element of despair in the atmosphere at the foodbank.

Yet, simultaneously amongst this atmosphere there were also elements of hope: whilst the foodbanks should not be romanticised, the tension at the heart of the foodbank atmospheres is that they also should not be unnecessarily besmirched. The majority of clients asked at the foodbanks in Bristol responded that they did associate the word hope with the foodbank. Whilst asking this question may have increased the number of positive responses, clients expanded on why they associated hope with the foodbank which is important in drawing out that these clients could envisage a different future situation to that of their current experience—as a client on Jobseeker's Allowance who was behind on his rent reflected:

Yeah, it's less stressful [the foodbank], there is hope out there to make everything better. (Client, North Bristol Foodbank, 2014)

For Spinoza (1996: III proposition 18, scholium 2), hope is an affection that contrasts to fear and is experienced when there is doubt about the outcome. Therefore, whilst in the above extract the client was uncertain about the future, he did anticipate that it could be "better". At B30 Foodbank clients more commonly described the foodbank atmosphere as "friendly" and "welcoming" which they related to the attitudes of volunteers:

These guys are non-judgemental, friendly, amiable, they show empathy, yeah. Very impressed, generous. (Client, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

In this vein, clients related this atmosphere to the foodbank affecting them to be able to "carry on", thereby linking the present with an anticipated future.

Overall, clients' capacities—and therefore the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks—were affected by whether clients could envisage a different future to the conditions in which they were currently living; whether there was doubt over their future, and hope or fear with uncertainty, or confidence or despair without doubt. Whilst not all of the foodbank clients were recipients of state benefits, the progression of austerity affected their future (particularly Universal Credit), and so as austerity measures progressed the atmospheres around the possibility for a more positive future became less certain.

## **Volunteers**

Secondly, I turn to affective capacity in terms of foodbank volunteers and managers. None of the volunteers who I spoke to were also foodbank clients: austerity has not affected UK society equally, as one volunteer commented when asked if austerity had affected her personally:

Me personally? No. I am very lucky—middle-classed, middle-aged, the right demographic. (Volunteer, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

To some extent volunteers had the most control over the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks. One way in which this played out, as discussed by Cloke et al.

(2017), was how the physical environments at the foodbanks were engineered by volunteers with the aim of showing an atmosphere of care: tables and chairs were laid out in a café style, often with tablecloths and the offer of a hot drink when clients entered the foodbank. These aspects demonstrate the affect of inanimate objects upon the affective atmospheres (Dufrenne 1976, cited in Anderson 2014), and therefore the importance of non-human bodies in affective atmospheres (Ash 2013). However, the atmosphere that volunteers aspired to create was always relational to the capacity of clients, and positive reactions from clients in response to these efforts could not be guaranteed:

I heard a client being introduced to a volunteer who asked if she would like a hot drink. The client replied “No, I just want to get out of here”, and the volunteer led her through to the church and tried to reassure and calm the client. (Author diary, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

Whilst the client needed food, they did not want to be at the foodbank: people could be embarrassed to use the foodbank and often did so as a last resort (Garthwaite 2016). Volunteers recognised the stigma that clients could experience in using the foodbank, which fed into their desire for a welcoming atmosphere, but as shown in the above extract there could still be a conflict between atmospheres of care with atmospheres of stigma and discomfort. The atmosphere that volunteers strove for through their own capacities was therefore inherently relational to clients’ capacities, and varied both spatially and temporally.

Therefore, whilst it is possible to analyse dominant atmospheres at the foodbanks, by their very nature the affective atmospheres were continually evolving and were dependent not only on the capacities of volunteers, but also on the capacities of clients. The affective atmospheres were contingent upon each moment at each foodbank, particularly in relation to the reactions of clients which could be unpredictable. This reflects Duff’s (2010) point that an affective atmosphere cannot be identically recreated even if in the same location as there is always an intangibility and uncertainty around an atmosphere. For example, whilst the majority of clients expressed gratitude or some level of positivity in receiving food—for example in Birmingham one client, Samantha, shared “thank God for this foodbank”—in both 2014 and 2019 I occasionally met aggressive clients who were unsatisfied with what they were given. When clients were aggressive the affective atmosphere at the foodbank changed as volunteers became more alert and the tension was palpable:

There was a commotion at the front door as a man shouted: “Call yourself a good Christian! How do you sleep at night?” The volunteer at the door calmly said she wasn’t Christian and asked him to leave. He continued shouting obscenities as he walked out. Another volunteer told me they have a policy of how to deal with potentially violent clients but on this occasion hadn’t been too worried as they didn’t think he had a knife. (Author diary, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

In the above extract concerns over knife crime heightened the tension as the man started shouting, and volunteers became alert and ready to aid if the situation escalated. The man tried to challenge the volunteer as a Christian but was

misplaced in assuming that she was Christian. This shows the complexity of affective atmospheres as whilst B30 Foodbank did have a Christian ethos, the volunteer who the man was speaking to happened not to be a Christian and so did not relate to his accusation. The situation also reiterates that volunteers' capacities could not entirely control the affective atmospheres because others within affective atmospheres are not neutral and enter with their own expectations and affective capacities (Ahmed 2007, cited in Anderson 2014).

Another way in which volunteers endeavoured to affect the affective atmospheres at the foodbank was how they desired the foodbank to run. Fundamentally at all three foodbanks, the managers and volunteers endeavoured for the foodbanks and their atmospheres to give food and help to people in need. For example, two volunteers who volunteered during their retirement expressed their desire to change the capacity of clients:

If they [clients] walk out through that door broken we haven't done our job. (Sue, volunteer, Bristol North West Foodbank, 2014)

The principle thing is if somebody goes away happier than they came in. (George, volunteer, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

The intentions described by Sue and George are strikingly similar despite them being given independently by Sue in Bristol in 2014, and George in Birmingham in 2019. They both refer to wanting a change in clients' capacities from when they entered the foodbank to when they left. This change was physical in terms of receiving food but also shows a desired change in clients' mood, and in Spinozian language, Sue and George had confidence that such a change was possible. In varying regards the foodbanks were affected by a Christian ethos. The Trussell Trust is a charity that is based on, shaped, and guided by Christian values but through its social franchise model the Bristol and Birmingham foodbanks each had a level of independence meaning that the explicitly Christian element of the foodbanks and the degree to which this affected the affective atmospheres varied.

B30 Foodbank ran in a church but the volunteers and management team were a mix of people who were Christian and not Christian (predominantly atheist or agnostic rather than of other religious faiths). Several volunteers specifically told me that they were not like other foodbanks where people prayed with the clients. Despite this, one volunteer who was an atheist shared:

But the ethics of Christianity, you can't deny and that's what we are trying to live to. And this is true Christianity in operation. (George, volunteer, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

George's understanding of the foodbank as "true Christianity in operation" puts emphasis on the actions at the foodbank in terms of giving food and aiming to help people in a non-judgemental manner as being the important tenements of a Christian ethos, rather than more explicitly religious action such as prayer. This relates to a wider point on the relationship between Christianity and social action which is beyond the remit of this paper but explored by others (for example, see Cloke et al. 2012). In Bristol the foodbanks were run by churches and had

Christian managers who spoke of their Christian faith motivating them to respond to food poverty by establishing the foodbanks. It was not a requirement to be Christian to volunteer, but the majority of Bristol volunteers were Christian, and at several outlets volunteers offered to pray with clients although this was not a requirement for receiving food. The manager of Bristol North West Foodbank explained the Christian element:

So we don't hide it [being Christian] but it's just part of, it's woven in. And I think people, it depends how open they are, I just hope they all feel equally respected and cared for while they are here really. (Manager, Bristol North West Foodbank, 2014)

Through this extract it is explained by the manager how the foodbank atmosphere was infused with a Christian ethos which was "woven in" to how the foodbank ran, which she specifically linked to the values of respect and care. Conversations with clients in both Bristol and Birmingham showed that they recognised the atmosphere of care and welcome at the foodbank which adds evidence to such an atmosphere existing in both volunteers' intentions and reality at the foodbanks.

Finally, the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks were affected by volunteers in terms of how they managed foodbank resources; both food and time. Over 2014–2015 the Trussell Trust foodbanks in Bristol gave 10,605 food parcels (North Bristol Foodbank 2016). The Bristol foodbanks were therefore much used but there was enough food to meet demand, and time for volunteers to sit and chat with clients over cups of tea. In 2014 in Bristol it had been notable to write in my diary that a client had arrived before the foodbank opened yet five years later at B30 Foodbank I wrote:

As I now know to be normal, there were already people sat waiting in the entrance hall to the church when I arrived over 30 minutes before the foodbank opened. (Author's diary, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

Whilst the Bristol and Birmingham foodbanks were in different parts of the UK (the South West and the Midlands respectively) and so a direct comparison on demand changing over time cannot be made, I regularly witnessed a busier foodbank in Birmingham in 2019 than I had in Bristol in 2014. This echoes the national increase in Trussell Trust food parcels given out in the last decade; over 1.2 million in 2015–2016 and over 1.9 million in 2019–2020. As I argued when addressing the causes of people using the foodbanks, this increase is directly linked to austerity measures. Indeed, B30 Foodbank became busier as 2019 progressed and the austerity policy of Universal Credit was implemented: it gave 26% more food parcels between September 2018 and August 2019 than in the previous 12 months (B30 Foodbank 2020). I observed how volunteers had little time to chat with clients, and less time for signposting:

As we sat with the client there was a further announcement that there were twenty people waiting and so could volunteers see two clients at once. (Author's diary, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

In the above diary extract the volunteer did not respond to the announcement and remained with her current client and gave her information about help



managing her bills. In foodbank terms this was referred to as signposting a client to another service with the aim of providing help to address the cause of a person needing to use the foodbank. Signposting was important in both Bristol and Birmingham, but by February 2019 B30 Foodbank was receiving so many clients that on particularly busy days volunteers were asked not to signpost clients until there were fewer clients queuing for food—this was not the preference, but was considered necessary to give everyone food.

Physical capacity at the foodbanks therefore centred on a balance between the number of people receiving food and available resources; food, volunteers, and time. The fallout from this balance affected the foodbank atmosphere both in the present, and in remembering the past. Volunteers at B30 Foodbank often told me how the foodbank had been less busy in the past. Hence, with reference to Spinoza's (1996) conception of affections in the past, present, and future, the foodbank atmosphere was always busy compared to a quieter past:

Well those of you who have been here six years, I keep hearing stories about what it was like at the start that you had to turn food away and thought we'll never shift that, and now we're shifting a tonne and a half a week. (Bob, volunteer, B30 Foodbank, 2019)

To some extent capacity at the foodbanks expanded to meet need, however, comparing the Bristol and Birmingham foodbanks showed how this changed the atmosphere: the foodbank became more rushed, signposting was more difficult, clients had to wait longer for food, volunteers were pressured and rushed to meet clients, and the sheer scale of need in the area could be overwhelming. Care that could be given was therefore affected by limited time and resources, and the wider context of austerity.

Overall, whilst it might be expected that the foodbank managers and volunteers had the greatest control over the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks through their desire for how the foodbank would run around a Christian ethos, care, and a desire to help people in need, such control was not obtainable. This is because whilst volunteers' capacities did significantly affect the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks, their capacities were inherently relational to the capacities of clients and to the wider context of austerity and welfare cuts which each in turn affected the overall affective atmospheres at the foodbanks. In terms of the foodbanks, volunteers therefore partook in the collective experience of poverty and austerity but not identically to the clients; we are each affected by austerity, but not equally.

## Conclusions

Foodbank use in the UK and elsewhere is consistently increasing and the promised end of austerity has not arrived. Geographers have examined foodbanks in a variety of ways from the patterns in foodbank use to ethnographies of volunteering at foodbanks. However, the collective experience of poverty and austerity at foodbanks has to-date received less attention. In response to this gap, this paper has analysed collective experiences from ethnographies at three foodbanks

in 2014 and 2019 to argue that the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks reflected capacities in the past, present, and anticipated future of clients and volunteers at the foodbanks. A focus on affective capacity through Spinoza has drawn out how the foodbank atmospheres were affected by first, the capacity of clients to be in a situation different to that of their current situation; and secondly the capacity of foodbank volunteers and managers in terms of how they desired the foodbank to run. The affective atmospheres at the foodbanks were formed by an ever-changing relation between these three capacities, and so whilst dominant atmospheres have been drawn out, this paper has purposely referred to atmospheres in the plural.

Three further insights follow. First, this paper has added to empirical explorations of affective atmospheres. In particular it has approached affective atmospheres with an emphasis upon affective capacity: affective atmospheres are made up of affective bodies, and what a body can do is determined by its affective capacity. Through a reading of Spinoza's (1996) *Ethics*, this paper has critically questioned the role of varying affective capacities in forming ever-changing atmospheres. A focus on the 18<sup>th</sup> postulate from Book III of Spinoza's *Ethics* has drawn out how the affects of the past or anticipated future can be the same as if the thing were actually affecting in the present. This is poignant for affective capacity and affective atmospheres because it means that a body can be as affected by an anticipated or remembered affect, as an actually existing affect. This is a double adverse impact in terms of the lived experience of poverty and austerity: the foodbank atmospheres were not only formed in the present but were also affected by people's past experiences of poverty and their fears of future poverty as austerity measures became harsher and it became harder to imagine a more positive future.

Secondly, within social and cultural geography—and more specifically within attention to poverty, austerity, and foodbanks—this paper has put emphasis on analysis through affective atmospheres which brings together the experiences of clients and volunteers. This is important because it draws out *collective* experiences of poverty and austerity. This is not to say that austerity affects society equally, but rather that poverty and austerity affect in different ways and that this can be experienced in different ways collectively. In doing so this paper has responded to a call by Strong (2019b) to move beyond descriptive accounts of foodbanks to attend to the processes at play at foodbanks, and added with a particular focus on foodbanks to the work of Raynor (2017) and Hitchen (2019) on affective atmospheres and austerity.

Thirdly, the insights from this paper are political. This is because whilst the foodbanks were apolitical in terms of their charitable status, their very existence is political. The foodbank managers and volunteers were motivated to help people in need, but they did not want their foodbanks to be needed. Rather, the foodbanks' existence was in response to the levels of poverty in Bristol and Birmingham which we have seen were directly related to changes in the welfare state. Therefore, whilst one affect—in this case austerity—cannot be said to be the sole cause of an affective atmosphere, austerity and its associated welfare cuts and changes did affect each of the capacities of clients and volunteers that formed the affective atmospheres at the foodbanks. Whilst a direct comparison cannot be

drawn between the affective atmospheres of 2014 in Bristol and 2019 in Birmingham because these are different locations, the capacities of clients and volunteers were affected by the progression of austerity, particularly in terms of the care which could be given. The geographies of care have engaged with how the progression of austerity has changed the landscape of care in the UK with increased personalisation and commodification (Power and Hall 2018). The foodbanks could be seen as an example of this through the aforementioned signposting and attention to clients as individuals. Whilst in both Bristol and Birmingham the foodbank volunteers and managers aimed to follow this approach and to create an atmosphere of care, particularly in Birmingham this was affected by the busyness of the foodbank. Although B30 Foodbank generally had enough food for all the clients who arrived, the volunteers were often rushing to see clients which affected the time available for care, and therefore the atmosphere at the foodbank. Both clients and volunteers experienced more uncertainty in their ability to envisage a different future to the current experience of poverty which could be said to have affected the affective atmosphere from an aspiration of a different future in 2014, to weariness of the present in 2019. There is therefore political potential, for example through evidence for campaigning, if foodbank managers and volunteers gain knowledge of how austerity is affecting the affective atmospheres at their foodbanks. This is because such knowledge can give weight to political campaigning to question the morality of welfare cuts, first, in terms of people needing to use foodbanks as a result of cuts, and secondly, when cuts increase poverty levels to such an extent that care cannot also be consistently given in the foodbank spaces. To close, this paper echoes Riches (2018) in warning that foodbanks in the UK should not become institutionalised as they have in the USA. Moving forwards, following Hitchen (2019) this paper calls for more consideration of the affective atmospheres of austerity in order that collective experience is captured as well as individual experience and statistical analysis to engage with the collective impact of austerity upon society.

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