

## article

# Stigma, shame and 'people like us': an ethnographic study of foodbank use in the UK

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Foodbanks and other charitable activities are fast becoming an established part of austerity Britain. This paper is based on ethnographic research undertaken over a two-year period in North East England, exploring the lived experiences of health inequalities for residents in the most and least affluent areas. Findings show how the majority of foodbank users experienced stigma, fear, and embarrassment, which was at times aggravated by representations in 'poverty porn' television shows. Stigma could be overcome once people recognised that 'other people like us' were receiving a food parcel. Finally, the practice of 'Othering' was evident across the research sites.

**key words** foodbanks • stigma • shame • poverty • welfare reform • 'Othering'

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## Introduction

Between 2014 and 2015, for the first time, over one million people accessed a Trussell Trust foodbank (Trussell Trust, 2015). In the UK, the most well-known charity operating foodbanks is the Trussell Trust, a large, national, Christian franchise which operates a voucher system for people seeking emergency food provision. Overall, however, it is difficult to quantify the exact number of foodbanks in existence as there are many organisations and independent groups that offer emergency food provision in the UK. Despite this rising phenomenon, the UK government has struggled to explain why foodbank use is growing, and have continually dismissed the links between welfare reform and foodbanks, even when faced with empirical evidence from academics and frontline charities which has shown how benefit sanctions and delays, fuel poverty and low paid, insecure work drive people towards foodbanks (see: Lambie-Mumford et al, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016; Loopstra et al, 2015; Perry et al, 2014). General growth trends in the UK, particularly in relation to the Trussell Trust foodbank network and amount of food redistributed, are being experienced elsewhere in Europe and internationally (Poppendieck, 1998; Pfeiffer, 2015; Silvasti, 2015; Tarasuk et al, 2014).

Accompanying the rise of foodbanks in the UK is a discourse where myths, moral judgements and misconceptions exist, fuelled by Conservative government rhetoric and ‘poverty porn’ representations of people seeking emergency food, resulting in many ‘hidden costs’ (Purdam et al, 2015) of using a foodbank. Such ideological myths of ‘shirkers and scroungers’ (Garthwaite, 2011) have become increasingly visible as welfare reform and austerity has grown. Wells and Caraher (2014) note how a frequent theme of newspaper articles from Conservative politicians characterised people using a foodbank as ‘unable to manage their personal finances, [they are] freeloaders abusing the service the foodbank offers or they are opportunistically taking advantage of the burgeoning network of foodbanks offering free food’ (2014, 1436). People accessing a foodbank are then perceived as the ‘undeserving poor’ seeking out free food so that they can spend their money on ‘luxury’ items such as alcohol, cigarettes and large televisions. Explanations for rising foodbank use from Conservative MPs have therefore focused upon individualised behaviour, specifically poor financial management, addiction and, in some cases, selfish and neglectful behaviour. Vale of Glamorgan MP Alun Cairns blamed an ‘inability to manage money and to budget, addiction to alcohol or substance misuse, bullying at home, neglect by the benefit recipient and a range of other reasons’ (cited in Shipton, 2013). Wrekin MP Mark Pritchard has questioned whether some people using foodbanks could be spending some of the money they save on alcohol and cigarettes. The MP made his comments on Twitter, asking: ‘Foodbanks serving a need – but how many folks can still find funds to pay for alcohol and cigarettes but not food?’ Guto Bebb, Conservative MP for Aberconwy, has said: ‘There are some who appear to use foodbanks while being able to smoke and pay for a Sky TV package’ (cited in Monroe, 2013). Conservative councillor Julia Lepoidevin deemed foodbank users as ‘selfish’ and suggested that they ‘make a conscious decision not to pay their rent, their utilities or to provide food for their children because they choose alcohol, drugs and their own selfish needs’ (cited in Elgot, 2014).

Alongside the escalation in the number of foodbanks in the UK, Jensen (2014a, 3.4) has argued that these myths are ‘rampant across the new commonsense of welfare, and are key narrative threads’ in ‘poverty porn’, a new genre of television which generates a spectacle of the everyday lived experience of poverty and insecurity. Shows such as *On Benefits and Proud*, *Benefits Street*, *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole*, and *The Great British Benefits Handout*, frequently portray ‘repeat imagined connections between welfare recipients and moral laxity, greed, and even criminality’ (Jensen, 2014a, 1.1). For Tyler (2014) ‘the accumulation and repetition of televisual figures of “the undeserving poor” exerts powerful limits on the political imagination by establishing a consensus that Britain, in the words of one viewer, is “crawling with workshy, malingerers”’. Pemberton et al (2016, 30) have described the coming together of this rhetoric as a ‘perfect storm’, with ‘derogatory images and stigmatising features of behavioural discourses’ forming the basis of well-circulated myths that become fixed in the moral gaze of the public.

In the face of this ‘perfect storm’, this paper argues that stigma, fear and embarrassment were everyday realities for people who used a foodbank. Fear of being labelled a scrounger meant that people delayed accessing foodbank support until they had no other choice. Stigma was aggravated by ‘poverty porn’ TV shows, together with media and government perceptions of benefits receipt and foodbank use, which resulted in some people not accessing the support they needed. This perceived stigma

could be overcome once people using the foodbank recognised that 'other people like us' were receiving a food parcel.

## Research design

This article draws on data from the project 'Local Health Inequalities in an Age of Austerity: The Stockton-on-Tees Study', a five-year, mixed-methods project examining localised health inequalities in an era of austerity in the town of Stockton-on-Tees, North East England. Stockton-on-Tees has the highest health inequalities in England with life expectancy gaps of 17.3 and 11.4 years among men and women respectively between the least and most deprived wards (APHO, 2015).

The ethnographic research involved spending time in some of the most and least deprived areas of the borough. In one of the most deprived areas, participant observation was carried out in the local Citizen's Advice Bureau, children and family centres, community centres, gardening clubs, cafes and coffee mornings, alongside other events and engagement with charities and services in the area. Weekly volunteering began at a Trussell Trust foodbank in November 2013. The volunteering role included preparation of food parcels, distributing food parcels, liaising with referring agencies and administration of the red vouchers that all foodbank users are required to obtain in order to receive emergency food provision. Field notes were taken before, during and immediately after volunteering in the foodbank and included observations, conversations and reflexive experiences. Interviews that took place in the foodbank were not digitally recorded, but detailed notes were taken immediately afterwards. From March 2013, participant observation began in one of the most affluent areas. Observation took place at coffee mornings, yoga classes, delicatessens, churches, mother and toddler meetings, a credit union and community centres. To ensure a varied sample, in-depth interview participants were sampled across these locations to include variation in age, gender, occupation, marital status.

In total, over 100 qualitative interviews were completed across both areas between 2014 and 2016, alongside detailed observation and field notes. Participants were asked to discuss: their background; their education; the area; employment and benefits; budgeting practices; health; perceptions of health inequalities and their causes; health behaviours such as exercise, alcohol, and smoking; austerity and welfare reform; and the future. Interviews with Trussell Trust foodbank users ( $n=60$ ), volunteers ( $n=12$ ) and staff from referral agencies ( $n=8$ ) typically lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and took place either within the foodbank or in participants' homes, and were transcribed verbatim. Of the 60 foodbank users interviewed (38 men and 22 women), the age range of the sample varied from 16 to 63 years old. Interviews with residents living in the most affluent area ( $n=22$ ) either took place in their home, at the university, or in coffee shops. Of the 22 residents interviewed (16 women and 6 men), the age range was between 38 and 78 years old. The gender patterning of the sample reflects the wider demographics of both the foodbank and those who were recruited from the research sites.

Field notes were taken before, during and immediately after volunteering in the foodbank and included observations, conversations and reflexive experiences. Observational notes and interview transcripts were analysed with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 10). Participation was voluntary, confidential and secured by either verbal or written informed consent. Data were fully anonymised

before thematic analysis was undertaken. Although the research for this paper is drawn from one Trussell Trust foodbank in a particular place in North East England, emerging evidence on foodbank use from charitable organisations, front line professionals, GPs, church leaders and academics paints a similar picture to the findings presented here. Finally, the research was approved in advance by Durham University Department of Geography Ethics Committee.

## Findings

### *Stigma, shame and embarrassment*

Purdam et al (2015) found that while the food parcel from a foodbank may be seen as 'free', there are hidden 'costs' of social stigma and shame. Baumberg (2016) has observed a growing academic interest in the 'psychosocial' dimensions of poverty, including disrespect, embarrassment and shame (Jo, 2013; Pemberton et al, 2016). Chase and Walker (2013, 743) observe how the words 'awkward', 'embarrassed', 'guilty', 'rotten', 'degraded', 'crap', 'useless', 'worthless', 'a failure', 'uncomfortable', 'funny' and 'dirty', were all used to convey how people in poverty felt about themselves or were made to feel in certain social interactions. Chase and Walker use the work of Scheff (2003, 255) in order to define shame and its relationship to poverty: 'Shame is the large family of emotions that includes many cognates and variants, most notably embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, and related feelings such as shyness that originate in threats to the social bond. This definition integrates self (emotional reactions) and society (the social bond).'

Shame, embarrassment and fear can manifest in different ways for foodbank users, worsening existing health problems and creating further stigma. Overall, stigma was produced not from how people were treated at the foodbank, but instead through what other people would think, or through how people using the foodbank perceived themselves. Tracey, 49, and her husband Glen, 52, came to the foodbank because of problems with a zero hour's contract Glen had recently taken on, leaving them without money for three weeks. They told me about their experiences coming to the foodbank for the first time:

Tracey: I said to Glen 'Get inside, don't let no one see us', 'cos obviously we'd never had to go anywhere like that before.

Glen: Ashamed, just felt ashamed.

Tracey: We were just so ashamed we had to go.

Me: And how did you find it once you got in?

Glen: It was alright 'cos there were other people in there like us, y'know what I mean? It was, like, funny when we were going out, thinking 'Is anybody watching?' all these shopping bags coming out of a church, putting it in the boot of the car. People'd be thinking 'They've got a car and they're going to foodbanks?' The car's our life, I get to work and back in it, but me car's paid for, there's nothing [finance] on it.

Chase and Walker (2013, 740) recognise that the shame felt by people in poverty is co-constructed, and features: 'an internal judgement of one's own inabilities; an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others; and the actual verbal or

symbolic gestures of others who consider, or are deemed to consider, themselves to be socially and/or morally superior to the person sensing shame'.

Expectations of how people should behave when using a foodbank were ingrained in the accounts of people like Tracey and Glen, who experienced this co-construction of stigma and shame not just due to the act of having to use a foodbank, but the related stigma they felt that others would attach to them because they owned a car. Purdam et al (2015, 12) reported similar findings when discussing foodbank users and mobile phones. Having a mobile phone was a way of keeping in contact with family, employers, benefit and advice agencies and in emergencies. A reliance on other informal sources of food as part of their food planning, including from family members, was common for participants in the study by Purdam et al (2015, 11). Some participants in this study did rely on networks of support, but others mentioned an entrenched shame that prevented them from disclosing their problems to friends and family. Denise, 49, came to the foodbank during the first spell of unemployment she had encountered in her working life, having previously worked in pubs, hotels and restaurants since leaving school. After separating from her husband three months ago, Denise's health problems deteriorated (both physically and mentally) and the difficulties she faced in gaining employment again were worsening her health even further. Describing how she refused to ask for help from the foodbank and her family, Denise told me:

I didn't sign on for ages, I was just hoping I'd get a job. I was living off my savings and then next thing there was nothing left...Mam always offers me a sandwich but I tell her I've already eaten, it's just...I feel ashamed. I fill up on cereal or yoghurts or herbal tea, things like that.

Others did not have networks of family support to draw on. Anna, 51, came to the foodbank with her 11-year-old daughter after experiencing anxiety and depression which led to her withdrawing from her job as an administrator for the police. Anna told me how she and her daughter had been 'eating tinned foods that were often out of date', and told me that they had recently been foraging for food to get extra fruit into their diets:

We've eaten all the plums off the trees out the back. Most years they just get wasted. We've gone brambling in the six weeks and made bramble crumble, it helps us get fruit into our diets which we wouldn't have had ordinarily.

Stigma led to people not accessing a foodbank due to embarrassment. Foodbank volunteer Maureen reflected on her experience of a woman she met who could have got a food voucher, but was too embarrassed to ask for one:

She came in with this woman and she could have had a voucher as well but she said 'I couldn't get one because I was just too embarrassed about getting it.' It is hard, but I said to her 'It's no good being embarrassed if you can't eat.' Y'know, I mean, there's no need to be embarrassed because you are entitled to it and you're in need, and we're happy to do it for you. But at the end of the day, you can't stop people feeling that way about it.

Although Maureen describes foodbank support as something to which people are 'entitled', because of the stigma, shame and embarrassment, people would postpone asking for foodbank support until they were truly desperate. Simon, 46, was a volunteer at the foodbank but had also received a voucher three times since coming out of prison after serving ten years for armed robbery. Simon received Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) of £146.20 a fortnight due to his paranoia, anxiety and sciatica. Simon described using the foodbank as "a little bit intimidating, a bit of nerves. I was conscious of what people might think, but that soon went." He continued:

Even when I had the bags, when I come away I thought people would be looking at me coming out of a church with shopping bags, and there is some kind of stigma on it. I bet there are people who would say 'I'm not going anywhere near a foodbank', and then they'll suffer.

Because of the stigma, shame and embarrassment, people would postpone applying for foodbank support until they were truly desperate. As Simon identified, it was the anticipation of coming to the foodbank that was the main obstacle for Naomi, 36, who had been receiving ESA and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for five years due to her physical and mental health problems. She had arthritis, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), depression and anxiety. Naomi was also recovering from a heroin addiction that she had been dealing with since she was 18. Naomi told me "sometimes it can take me five changes of clothes before I feel comfortable to go out, and when I am out I feel everyone's looking at me, paranoid." When I asked her how she felt about coming to the foodbank, she said:

I felt a bit embarrassed at first but at the end of the day if it's going to help me out, my health, if it's going to feed me instead of being starving for days until I get my money, then I'm going to use it. I thought people [at the foodbank] were gonna look down their nose at me, not even have a smile for me, snatch the paper out of my hand but it was the total opposite. I felt comfortable there, the fact that I actually stayed there about an hour and a half... (laughs) I think for me it was a nice experience, really."

As Naomi's narrative shows, once inside, the physical environment of the foodbank could help to alleviate predetermined feelings of stigma. Inside the foodbank, tables were set up cafe style, with pretty orange, pink and white checked tablecloths, with plates of biscuits and crystal bowls of sugar on top, as the volunteers attempted to create a non-judgemental and relaxed atmosphere. Denise explained:

I think I expected to walk into a cold church with the benches and things like that and when I walked in I thought 'Well it's nothing like that.' When I walked in I thought 'What a lovely atmosphere.' I expected queues out the door, that type of thing but... if I'd have had more time, I'd have stayed longer."

Foodbank manager Angie said:

A few people have actually said they dreaded coming because there's been the shame or bad experiences at other places going to ask for food and they've

said 'Oh I felt so welcome here.' That's what you want, to be a welcome place that they don't feel they're getting judged or looked down on. I think we've managed it but we don't know what it feels like walking in.

### 'Poverty porn'

The genre of television shows some have labelled 'poverty porn' was a key site of stigma production for people using the foodbank. Tracey Jensen (2014a) has explained how the 'highly contested' term 'poverty porn' has 'been used to critique documentary television in post-recession Britain which focuses on people in poverty as a-political diversionary entertainment'. These are shows which seemingly take pleasure in depicting people as lazy, criminal, violent, undisciplined and shameless, playing into the media and government rhetoric around people living on a low income. As Jensen (2014a, 2.6) has observed: 'It is not surprising therefore to see a similar pejorative shorthand used in *Benefits Street* as that used in earlier waves of "underclass" media mythologising – the sofa abandoned in the street, piles of windswept rubbish, the satellite dish, cigarettes, tins of cheap lager, kids loitering in the street after dark.'

These well-circulated myths are not without consequences, and are translated into the everyday experiences of people living across Stockton-on-Tees. The impact of 'poverty porn' is particularly relevant given the second series of Love Productions' *Benefits Street* was set on Kingston Road, Tilery estate in Stockton-on-Tees. Aired in May 2015, just after the general election, the opening episode of the second series of *Benefits Street* pulled in almost three million viewers, and its opening five-part run went on to average 4.7 million in the overnight ratings. Queues of cars circled round the Tilery estate, sometimes having driven hundreds of miles for a glimpse at the road (Panther, 2015), and the 'Kingston Road' street sign was reportedly sold on eBay for £65,000, reflecting the reach and appeal of the genre. The show placed a magnified emphasis on frequent criminal activity, unemployment and a lack of education. Julie Young who appeared on the show was portrayed in a slightly different light, as viewers saw her caring for her severely disabled 15-year-old son Reagan, who tragically died during filming. The press picked up on Julie as 'the one deserving case on *Benefits Street*', with the Sun newspaper reporting 'amid the wasters, drug dealers and layabouts on Stockton-on-Tees' Kingston Road was single mum-of-six Julie Young, for whom benefits are a lifeline' (Carlisle, 2015).

People using the foodbank were fully aware of how they were being portrayed in the media. "Most of the people down there (Kingston Road) work," people said to me, and felt that "The producers just want it to look like a shithole." People I met at the foodbank who lived on Kingston Road, but who weren't taking part in the show, told me the lure of fame and fortune had attracted their neighbours to the show. "They're wanting to be famous like that White Dee" a couple who came to the foodbank from Kingston Road told me, laughing. "They think they're gonna make big bucks, gonna be stars." It's easy to see the temptation of taking part for people living on a low income; during the broadcasting of the first series of *Benefits Street*, one of the central characters, 'White Dee', was 'the subject of several newspaper stories every single day' (Jensen, 2014b).

The stigma that was created by 'poverty porn' shows at times influenced the views of those seeking emergency food. Jamie, 34, came to the foodbank after he received his second food voucher from CAB. He left work in 2014 after a shoulder operation



and tried to claim for ESA, but got zero points in his work capability assessment (WCA) and was found fit for work. Jamie had debt and relationship problems alongside his physical and mental health problems. He told me how he waited outside of the foodbank doors for over an hour because he was too embarrassed to come in, and had received a food voucher a few weeks ago but was initially 'too ashamed' to use it:

You see these programmes on TV about foodbanks and they think everyone's a scrounger. I had a job, I had everything. But now I'm here.

### **Foodbank use and 'Othering'**

'Othering' can be understood as a process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between 'us' and 'them' and through which social distance is established and maintained (Lister, 2004). These are 'negative value judgements that construct "the poor" variously as a source of moral contamination, a threat, an "undeserving" economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species', for Lister (2004, 10). The practice of 'othering' by people living in poverty has become increasingly well documented in academic literature in recent years (Chase and Walker, 2013; Garthwaite, 2014; Patrick, 2014; 2016; Pemberton et al, 2016; Shildrick et al, 2012; 2013; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013).

For residents in one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Stockton-on-Tees, perspectives on what foodbanks did and why they were needed ranged from sympathetic and supportive, to disbelieving and misunderstood. Heather, 72, a trustee of various mental health and addiction charities across the borough, told me:

I think it's appalling that we have to have them. Most people if they sit and think about it would also think it's appalling; it's going back 100 years, we shouldn't need a foodbank for goodness sake. The other thing about a foodbank is it breeds dependency, doesn't it? It doesn't help people to become independent and manage, and neither does the bedroom tax and the benefit cuts, shifting people all over the place. When you're on that edge, and a lot of people are on that edge, things like the bedroom tax can push people over, even a lot of people who are in work 'cos their wages haven't gone up.

Heather recognised the everyday hardships people living on a low income can face, such as the extra strain of the bedroom tax, and low wages – but she still felt that foodbanks 'breed dependency', and wasn't aware that a voucher was required to receive a food parcel, or the time-limited nature of the available support.

With few exceptions, drugs, alcohol, poor cooking skills and poor financial management were blamed for foodbank use, reflecting popular political messages attached to foodbanks in recent years (Garthwaite, 2016). Foodbank use was quite regularly linked to ideas of choice and faulty organisation: "I just can't imagine not having enough food to live on – is it poor choices?" and "I think people must not be very well organised if they don't have money for food" were sentiments I heard regularly during participant observation. Catherine, 65, a former midwife, felt the rise of foodbanks in the media could be linked to political messages from the opposition:



I feel as if they keep telling me everybody needs them, lots of people need them and I don't believe they didn't need them before, it's the political implications sort of thing. I suppose in some ways I think it's a good thing to have the foodbanks in so much as if people need something as basic as food, there's somewhere for them to get it. If you just give them money it can go on anything, can't it?

When talking to people who used the foodbank themselves, it was clear they, too, became active participants in the labelling of others whom they saw as 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. Typically, this form of 'Othering' tended to be attached to those with substance misuse problems, 'immigrants and foreigners', and homeless people who used the foodbank. 'They' apparently received brand new cars, large houses and more benefits or income than people using the foodbank. Katie, 29, used the foodbank for the second time after her zero hours contract was only providing her with two hours per week employment. Katie said: "I'm getting evicted and there's asylum seekers on this street getting free houses, you see them in these big cars, [they get] whatever they want. It's not fair and I'm sick of it." Anna agreed, and told me:

I've gone from getting Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit but I'm on the basics [JSA] at the moment which is £72 a week unemployment for the both of us. Obviously I get Child Allowance which is £80 a month and the only other is the £60 a week Child Tax Credit that I still get. My mortgage is £432 a month. We don't watch TV any longer. I know a lot of people who live on benefits for years and go on to have more children. They don't deny their children TV, but unfortunately I feel I have a responsibility to make it work myself and that's what I want to do. I don't want to sit around all day and rely on the state, but I feel as though I'm struggling to get by on the minimum when I seem to see other families who seem to be able to spend an awful lot more than I can in the supermarket, and they've got four or five children and don't appear to be working.

## Conclusions

This paper has explored foodbank use from the perspectives of residents in two socially contrasting areas in Stockton-on-Tees, showing how stigma, shame and embarrassment are created and reproduced in their accounts. Receiving food through charitable means is not a widespread and acceptable act, with Riches (2002, 650) arguing that it is a 'socially unacceptable way to obtain food'. The process inevitably creates stigma due to the lack of choice, and expectations surrounding gratitude and deservingness of emergency food recipients. Using the foodbank was described as something only to be drawn on when people 'had no choice'. People waited until they had exhausted all other avenues of support available to them, such as relying on family and friends to lend them money, have meals with, or pay off their debts before they asked for a foodbank voucher. Yet the powerful political, media and public discourse continues to question the lifestyles and personal attitudes of people using the foodbank, branding them 'undeserving' of support and responsible for their situation.

What is important is that stigma can stop people accessing foodbanks. The 'new welfare commonsense' identified by Jensen (2014a) was visibly apparent in the

accounts of both people using the foodbank and residents in the most affluent area. Unsurprisingly, this moral discourse had a strong influence on beliefs about foodbank use and deservingness, and led to the co-construction (Chase and Walker, 2013) of stigma, shame and embarrassment for people using them. This then became embedded in the lived experiences of people seeking emergency food aid, at times creating a stigma so powerful that it could not be overcome. This resulted in people skipping meals, eating foods that were out of date and foraging for food, which could have notable negative outcomes for both physical and mental health.

Public attitudes towards benefits recipients and people living in poverty have continued to harden despite rising foodbank use and increases in people seeking charitable assistance to weather the further erosion of the social security safety net. The 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey showed that 73 per cent of people supported the 'benefits cap' (Ormston and Curtice, 2015). This was clearly a popular idea, with as many as 60 per cent saying that 'benefits should be paid in such a way that it is clear what each benefit should be spent on, for example, like in other countries where food stamps are given to go towards the cost of food'. Conservative ministers have suggested that some welfare payments should be made in the form of a voucher that only covers the kind of expenditure for which the benefit was intended (Williams, 2013). More recently, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) tested the viability of using prepaid card systems to make benefit payments to claimants. The evaluation concluded that it would be feasible for DWP to carry out a more extensive trial of using prepaid cards to support vulnerable claimants (Cole et al, 2016). Humpage (2016, 2) explains how in Australia and New Zealand, compulsory income management programmes have been introduced which quarantine a percentage of benefit recipient income for approved expenses for all 16- and 17-year-old benefit recipients and 18-year-old parents. Such a misshapen view of the lives of people living on a low income is not without consequences, as the findings have shown. As John Hills wrote (2014, 263) 'misconceptions about the welfare state and the way it is abused are not just a matter of harmless misunderstanding'. In this sense, stigma is linked to some of the most corrosive effects of poverty.

Finally, stigma was legitimated and authorised through 'poverty porn' TV shows, of particular relevance to Stockton-on-Tees as the second series of *Benefits Street* placed a judgemental lens of the people of Kingston Road in the borough and their lifestyles. Branding people who use a foodbank as inherently different to the rest of 'us' is fundamentally problematic. Such language is dangerous, and negatively affects people who need help from a foodbank, at times preventing them from seeking the support they need. It is therefore particularly important to encourage a wider understanding of the lived realities of foodbank use, and avoid the stigmatising concept of the 'undeserving other'.

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