

Sexualities, Queer and Trans research in troubled times: theory, experience, politics and praxis

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Beyond Food: Food Assistance Initiatives, Actors, and Dynamics

Fábio Rafael Augusto

My doctoral thesis originated from my involvement in the international research project “[Families and Food in Hard Times](#)”, which explored poverty and food insecurity among families with children in the United Kingdom, Norway, and Portugal. While collaborating on this project, I observed that the interview guides for adults and children included questions about the use of formal and informal institutional support. The contrasting perspectives on food assistance initiatives and the starkness of some accounts inspired me to independently develop a doctoral project aimed at examining these responses in greater depth.

This initial motivation was shaped further by broader contextual factors. Across Europe, the growing demand for food assistance, alongside the expansion and consolidation of initiatives in this sector, has sparked widespread debates about the role of these organisations (Hebinck et al., 2018). In Portugal, as in other European countries, civil society has increasingly taken on the moral responsibility of addressing food insecurity (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012). This reflects a broader trend where the welfare state has partially delegated its

responsibilities to civil society and third-sector organisations, fostering alternative approaches to addressing hunger, poverty, and food insecurity (Teixeira et al., 2012).

For my doctoral research, I focused on the social role of food assistance initiatives in Portugal, with a particular interest in understanding how these initiatives were perceived by key stakeholders, including supervisors, volunteers, and beneficiaries. The scientific literature offers critical perspectives on food assistance organisations, highlighting their limitations and risks. These organisations are often seen as inadequate for upholding the right to food because they primarily function as short-term emergency responses (Dowler, 2002; Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020). Their permanence risks normalizing them as acceptable solutions to systemic problems like hunger and poverty, which require structural interventions (Cloke et al., 2017; Silvasti & Tikka, 2020; Tikka, 2019). Additionally, they may facilitate the welfare state's retreat from its responsibility to guarantee food security (Lambie-Mumford & Loopstra, 2020; Riches, 2002; Riches & Silvasti, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2014). Partnerships with companies contributing to food insecurity through precarious labour practices, and the privatization of food assistance driven by neoliberal ideologies, further exacerbate these issues (Dowler, 2013; Hackworth, 2012; Riches, 2011; Trudeau & Veronis, 2009; Williams et al., 2016).

While these critiques are crucial for understanding the sector, they often neglect the positive impacts these initiatives can generate for their communities (Cloke et al., 2017; Mirosa et al., 2016). Although food assistance organisations may perpetuate and even deepen the social problems they aim to address (Hanson, 2015; Lupton, 2011; Valenzuela-garcia et al., 2019), they also create opportunities for integration, empowerment, and the development of positive social and emotional connections (Cloke et al., 2017; Lindberg et al., 2014; Mirosa et al., 2016). I approached these initiatives as ambivalent spaces and aimed to explore their multifaceted roles. Drawing on a theoretical framework grounded in the critical perspective of care, I analyzed these organisations as "spaces of care" that offer material resources, a sense of refuge, and opportunities for therapeutic encounters (Beacham, 2018; Cloke et al., 2017; Surman et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016).

Methodologically, I adopted a qualitative approach with an institutional ethnographic orientation. This research was conducted in two phases. First, I engaged in participant observation over approximately one year in three distinct organisations: a surplus food redistribution charity, a soup kitchen, and a social supermarket. This was followed by 39 semi-structured interviews with

supervisors (3), volunteers (18), and beneficiaries (18). This approach facilitated an understanding of different organisational models and the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, building on well-established research methods in similar contexts (e.g., Garthwaite, 2016; Valenzuela-garcia et al., 2019).

The findings revealed that beneficiaries often experienced negative emotions, such as shame, resentment, and fear of judgment, during their initial interactions with the food assistance initiatives. Over time, these emotions were often replaced by a process of normalization, as beneficiaries adjusted to their interactions with these organisations. However, adaptation proved more challenging when the initiative involved prolonged engagement, as seen in the case of the Soup Kitchen, where beneficiaries' daily routines were significantly disrupted. Informal integration processes, such as seeking guidance from experienced volunteers or beneficiaries, played a crucial role, revealing gaps in the formal integration strategies provided by the organisations.

Beneficiaries managed their food resources through diverse strategies, including personal cultivation, repurposing leftovers, and exchanging items with other beneficiaries. The operational model of each initiative shaped how food resources were utilised, as organisations offering hot meals imposed different demands than those supplying groceries for meal preparation.

Relationships within these initiatives were characterized by strong emotional bonds and the frequent emergence of care practices. Beneficiaries and volunteers often described these relationships as akin to familial ties. These "symbolic families," (Grau Rebollo et al., 2019) though temporary, reflected beneficiaries emotional needs and volunteers' willingness to offer both material and emotional support. Care practices included performing favours, providing emotional support, and donating goods and resources. In some cases, these practices extended beyond organisational boundaries, such as volunteers accompanying beneficiaries for coffee, or were embedded within religious frameworks, such as those rooted in Catholic Christian ideology.

Despite these positive relational dynamics, challenges persisted. High volunteer turnover, insufficient training, long waiting lines, and tensions over food distribution were recurrent issues. Conflicts often arose from organisational disorganisation, limited resources, and the coexistence of diverse beneficiary groups with varying needs and expectations.

The collected data also revealed significant gaps in stakeholders' awareness of the organisations formal identity and culture, which weakened their sense of belonging. Organisational leaders highlighted additional challenges, including

difficulties in securing partnerships, managing resources, and systematically evaluating activities. Although both beneficiaries and volunteers generally evaluated the initiatives positively, these assessments often emphasized relational aspects, suggesting a compensatory mechanism for the inadequacies of formal services.

The research demonstrated that the social role of food assistance initiatives extends beyond the distribution of food, encompassing diverse practices that ensure access to other resources and forms of support. Within these contexts, volunteers and beneficiaries engage in unexpected forms of sociability (Darling, 2011), temporarily suspending traditional roles of giver and receiver, which alters power dynamics typically associated with food assistance (Llewellyn, 2011; Williams et al., 2016). These interactions foster empowerment, capacity building, and positive emotional experiences (Surman et al., 2021). While care practices among stakeholders serve as compensatory mechanisms for organisational shortcomings, they do not resolve the structural issues underlying food insecurity. Nonetheless, given the likely permanence of these initiatives in the absence of functional alternatives, it is essential to understand them comprehensively and explore ways to enhance their capacity to meet the needs of their stakeholders.

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Author

**Fábio Rafael
Augusto**

Instituto de Ciências
Sociais, Universidade
de Lisboa

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