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3. Reflecting on Paraliminality as a Theoretical Lens to Understand Experiences of Food Insecurity

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Abstract

In this chapter we reflect on how theoretical perspectives, such as liminality, can be useful for researchers seeking to understand and alleviate lived experiences of poverty. We draw on how we deployed liminality theory in a recently published paper (Moraes et al., 2021), to conceptualise lived experiences of food insecurity as transitional; as fluctuating between phases of everyday food access and food marketplace exclusion. By using liminality as an exemplar theoretical perspective, we discuss a concept that we developed and termed *paraliminality,* a hybrid of two types of liminality phenomena that is both empowering and generative of a lasting form of indeterminate state. In reflecting upon *paraliminality,* we argue that it can illuminate the social mechanisms, practices and spaces that co-construct people’s more enduring, but fluid, experiences and phases of food insecurity and food access efforts. We illustrate the main theoretical arguments being made with data from our study of food insecurity (McEachern et al., 2020), involving interviews with people who were experiencing food insecurity, volunteers who were providing access to food aid, and fieldwork photographs of the independent foodbanks and pantries who took part in the research. The chapter contributes to food insecurity, poverty and marketplace exclusion scholarship by reflecting on the importance of using theoretical lenses in qualitative research work, and by reflecting on, and deploying, an illustrative research project to explain how theory can be used and why it matters.

Key Words

Food insecurity, Liminality, Paraliminality, Poverty, Transitional Space, Theory

Introduction

In this chapter we reflect on, and draw inspiration from, the consumer research practice of “enabled theorising,” involving “the use of pre-existing theoretical perspectives, theories, or conceptual lenses to inform various moments in the conduct of qualitative research” (Dolbec et al., 2021, p.444). Enabled theorising can help to further ongoing conversations in existing relevant literature. It can generate significant contributions by illuminating conceptually an existing topic or under-theorised aspect of social processes, by advancing and extending aspects of the enabling theory itself, by aiding interdisciplinary dialogues, and by informing practice or policy (Dolbec et al., 2021).

In this chapter, we reflect on our liminality theory-enabled work (Moraes et al., 2021), illustrating how we conceptualised lived experiences of food insecurity as transitional, i.e., as fluctuating between unstable phases of everyday food access and food marketplace exclusion. We looked to liminality theory to help us conceptualise food insecurity transitions, which enabled us to advance ongoing conversations and contributions to research that strives to further understand and alleviate lived experiences of food insecurity. In doing so, we developed a concept that we termed *paraliminality,* a hybrid of two types of liminality phenomena that is both empowering and generative of a lasting form of limbo or indeterminate state. *Paraliminality* can illuminate the social mechanisms, practices and spaces that co-construct people's more enduring, but fluid, experiences and phases of food insecurity and of striving to gain access to food.

The joint effects of ongoing austerity measures (O'Loughlin et al., 2017; Shaw, 2019), welfare reforms (DWP, 2015), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Summers et al., 2021; White et al., 2021) have contributed to increasing levels of poverty and deprivation. Given the interconnections among poverty and food insecurity, rising poverty levels have also meant a rise in the numbers of people experiencing food insecurity.

Food insecurity emerges when people are unable to afford or access enough culturally resonant, healthy foods for themselves and/or their families to consume (Dowler, 2002; Furey, 2019; Purdam et al., 2016). While much academic literature focuses on issues of food insecurity in the developing world, data from 2019 suggests that over 10% of the UK population encounter daily challenges to feed themselves (Social Metrics Commission, 2019). Recent data on emergency and surplus food distribution indicates the current severity of hunger in the UK. According to their recent 2021 report, Trussell Trust foodbanks distributed 2.5 million emergency food parcels in 2020/21 compared to just 61,000 in 2010/11 (Trussell Trust, 2021). During 2020/21, FareShare (2022) also distributed surplus food to 10,542 community organisations and charities, with 1,108,064 people benefitting from their food supplies. In addition, IFAN (2022) estimates that there are over 3,500 independent organisations providing varied forms of community-based food aid that differ from the Trussell Trust's foodbank model. Growing demand for emergency food supplies is hardly surprising given the current economic circumstances, and it has been well documented in existing research (cf. Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013; Dowler, 2002; Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Lambie-Mumford, 2019; Loopstra et al., 2018; McEachern et al., 2020; Purdam et al., 2016; Sosenko et al., 2019; Geiger et al., 2021).

As more people transition into food insecurity, it becomes important to reflect on and unpack how these transitions occur, their nature, and whether people living through these circumstances see them as transitory, which is what liminality theory and our concept of paraliminality enable us to do. The next section provides an overview of liminality theory and is followed by a section reflecting on how we researched food insecurity in our original study (McEachern et al., 2020). The remaining sections focus on the *paraliminality* concept and concluding thoughts. Throughout this chapter, we use quotes and images from our qualitative research involving interpretive interviews, photographs and informal observations, including the voices of people experiencing food insecurity and those of the volunteers who help to provide access to food aid in independent foodbanks and pantries in the United Kingdom.

Why Use Liminality Theory to Understand Food Insecurity

Liminality theory originated in anthropology and seeks to understand the nature and role of rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960[1906], Turner, 1974). It is used in several disciplines (Thomassen, 2009), including sociology and consumer research (e.g., O'Loughlin et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2017). The appeal of the theory lies in its ability to help illuminate how people transition from one social role or state to another, passing through a period of suspension, in-betweenness or limbo that can create lack of certainty and that tends to be connected to critical life challenges for people (Kimball, 1960; O'Loughlin et al., 2017). Further, liminality theory enables a way to understand and challenge "normative social structure" (Turner, 1974: 60), and "moments between structure and agency" (Andrews and Roberts, 2015: 132).

Drawing upon the data and findings from our original research (McEachern et al., 2020), we utilised liminality as the enabling theory in Moraes et al. (2021) to gain further understanding of how and whether people are transitioning into, and through, food insecurity. In that paper, we focused particularly on how food aid is being accessed and experienced at independent foodbanks and pantries in two of the most deprived UK districts, namely Birmingham and Greater Manchester (Moraes et al., 2021). We used this theory because food insecurity is inevitably liminal, given its inherently transient qualities, as people cannot exist in a permanent state of severe lack of food. Another reason for using this theory was that foodbanks in the UK tend to position themselves as stakeholders who can address a short-term, emergency food need and that people can transition back into normalised food access practices in the marketplace. This thinking is reflected in how the Trussell Trust – the main emergency food provision network in the UK – and some independent foodbanks have restriction policies on the amount of food they can give to a single household. Usually, such restrictions entail three parcels of emergency food for every six months and up to one year, highlighting their view that foodbanks exist to help with emergency food aid only, in cases of extreme need and hardship (Trussell Trust, 2020). Food pantries, which are also termed food clubs and social supermarkets, tend to address needs that go beyond emergency food aid, however, and can offer ongoing food access subject to small peppercorn fees. In food pantries, access to food is more constant than in Trussell Trust foodbanks, reflecting what Blake (2019) sees as ladders of support, which is about food access support that is adaptable according to changes in people's food access circumstances.

However, as we argue in Moraes at al. (2021), whether people accessing food aid understood themselves to be going through food insecurity only momentarily still needed investigation. By using liminality as a theoretical perspective, we were able to conceptualise instability and transitions through the various stages and places of food insecurity (van Gennep, 1960[1906]). The liminality perspective helped to illuminate how people made sense of their experiences of food insecurity against stigmatising rhetoric (McArthur and Reeves, 2019), considering the wider structural disadvantages they experienced (Irwin, 2018; Saren et al., 2019). Thus, as an enabling theory, liminality is apt at unpacking and clarifying the interconnectedness of structure and individual agency, and how they jointly impact people's fluid routes into, within and through food insecurity.

Reflecting On Our Food Insecurity Liminality Research

We reflect on the main theoretical arguments being made about liminality by illustrating them with qualitative data from our study of food insecurity (McEachern et al., 2020). The project received ethical approval from our respective institutions, and we collected data between 2018-2019 in the Greater Manchester and West Midlands regions. We chose these regions because they feature regularly as the top 10% most deprived UK areas (IMD, 2019). The data consisted of in-depth, interpretive interviews with 24 participants experiencing food insecurity, 10 participant-volunteers representing organisations that provided access to food aid, and fieldwork photographs of the foodbanks and pantries who took part in the research project.

Our data were transcribed verbatim, and the analytical approach involved a thematic method, including iterative readings of the transcriptions, theory, and their interconnections (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, we produced a report of our findings for policy and practice audiences (McEachern et al., 2020). Subsequently we framed our data with the theoretical lens, focusing our analysis on food insecurity transitions, the role of food aid providers in seeking to alleviate food insecurity, and how the data could contribute to advancing liminality theory. We reflect on the analysis and theorisation in the sections that follow, using quotes and images from the project to illustrate our main arguments.

Reflections On The First Stage

In Moraes et al. (2021), we applied liminality theory to suggest that participants' food insecurity experiences start with a departure from their established social positions, including their ability to access food through the market as per what is relatively, symbolically and socio-culturally considered normalised food consumption practices (Hamilton, 2009; Baker et al., 2005). Such a departure can be triggered by a multifaceted interplay of interconnected critical life incidents such as accidents, bereavement, caring responsibilities, health issues, homelessness, issues with benefit claims, low wages, job losses and debt, limited social capital and relationship breakdown. In our work, it was clear that these life incidents drive people to access emergency food (Purdam et al., 2016; Loopstra et al., 2018), and typify this first liminality stage (Turner, 1974). Such critical life incidents impacted participants deeply, including their social status (Kimball, 1960; O'Loughlin et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2002), perceptions of stigma, and capacity to navigate the food marketplace as consumers, in turn leading them to progress into a food insecurity phase of accessing emergency food aid. Peter's quote illustrates these points:

> *"I'd just got out of hospital, and they gave me a food voucher because my benefits took ages to sort out…My biggest problem is I struggle to go in supermarkets with lots of people in. It's like smash and grab really…They want to give me counselling but I don't know if I want it. I lost my son four weeks ago…It won't bring him back, will it?" (Peter).*

In his quote, Peter exemplifies some of the structural and personal factors (i.e., no job, benefit delays and conditions, mental health issues, stress, bereavement and inability to cope with essential everyday activities such as shopping), that can lead to seeking out emergency food support. In line with existing relevant research, participants accessing food aid discussed their transitions into food insecurity as difficult, full of stigma and, at times, traumatic (Garthwaite, 2016; Peterie et al., 2019; Purdam et al., 2016). For some, shame and stigma could act as impediments to seeking food aid support when people needed it most, with participants often commenting on how their first visit to a foodbank made them feel, as Yasmin described:

> *"I thought, I'm never going to be that bad… but I did get to that position. So, I did some research and came down here - the first time would be after Christmas last year (…) You're embarrassed, quite ashamed to want to admit that you've got to come to somewhere like…" (Yasmin).*

In the quote above, Yasmin appears to express shame in not being able to access food through the mainstream marketplace. Shame is discussed widely in food insecurity research (Walker et al., 2013). But our findings and analysis (McEachern et al. 2020; Moraes et al. 2021) show that the way in which some food access spaces are set up can also contribute to the stigma that people felt when accessing food aid through foodbanks as they transitioned into food insecurity. For example, many participants mentioned that glass partitions (Figure 1) and non-obscured glass-paned front doors could make them feel anxious about being seen by people that they knew when queuing at a foodbank.

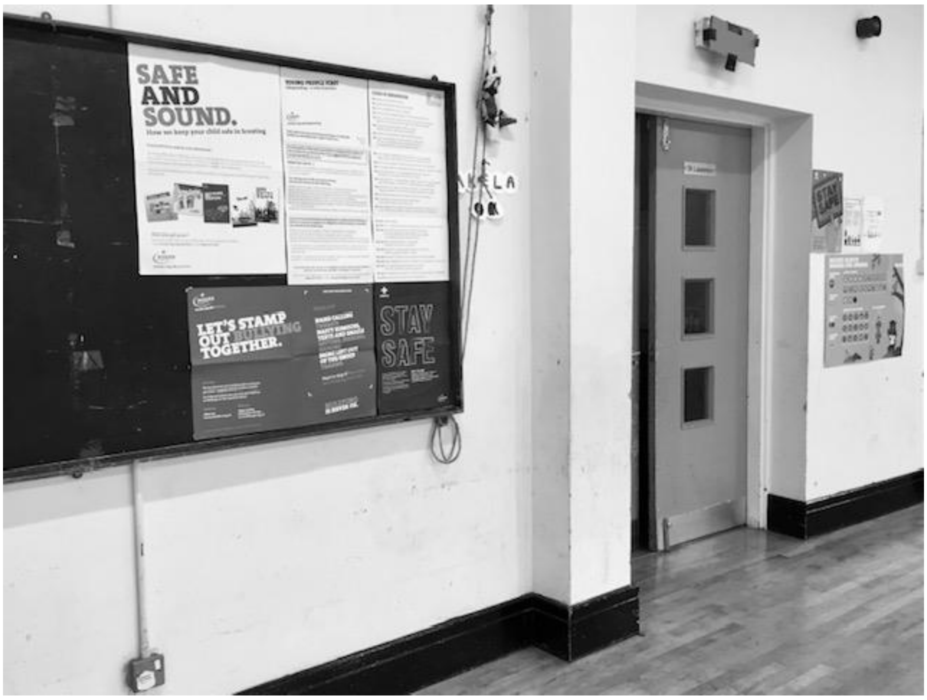

Figure 1: An example of doors with glass partitions at a foodbank

Interestingly, in attempting to respond to existing stigmatising discourses (McArthur and Reeves, 2019), some of our research participants explained the need to show their deservingness by volunteering and offering classes (e.g., karate lessons) to "give something back" (*Arnold*) in exchange for the help that food aid organisations had provided. This socio-cultural shame in accessing emergency food demonstrates that the inherent social stigma of transitions into food insecurity flows through places, spaces, situations and times (Andrews and Roberts, 2015; van Gennep, 1960[1906]).

Indeed, stigma is a devaluing stereotype that serves to justify discriminating against, and excluding, societally devalued people. Simultaneously, it reifies the devalued stereotype itself through shame and, thus, reproduces and perpetuates societal-level food inequalities and its stigmatising consequences (Clair, 2019). However, as echoed by O7, these inequalities and consequences are seen as a product of the ruthlessness of capitalist ideologies. As Sandel (2018) would argue, such ideologies govern the acceptance of individual responsibilisation for the structural failings of a system that is based on false ideas of meritocracy, where everything is for sale (Sandel, 2012), including what is most essential for people to survive. A foodbank representative spoke about these issues:

> *"Both the broader capitalist ideology and the more specific austerity policies and the current government, drive inequality. Inequality is bad for everybody whether you are poor or wealthy, but it's especially bad for those who've got very little. I've seen Manchester, in the last 10 years, parts of the city have never seen any recession; they have thrived, they are very wealthy and well-off…but for those without, it's just become more and more difficult, and there's been more and more people affected by poverty" (O7, Greater Manchester).*

Despite their sense of shame in transitioning into food insecurity and having to access food aid, participants felt that foodbank volunteers often helped them counteract their negative feelings:

> *"But they don't make you feel like that at all; they talk to you about your circumstances and what you're claiming and what you're getting" (Yasmin).*

As Yasmin's quote above exemplifies, food aid providers were perceived to care about the people they helped. Here, care and caring were potentially subversive of stigmatising ideologies in that they necessarily entailed dignifying and re-valuing people who were at the margins of consumer culture. The very act of caring means that people accessing food through foodbanks felt that they were worth caring for, thus helping to counteract the sense of shame and the stigma that participants felt in having to rely on charitable food access. In this way, foodbank volunteers helped to create spaces of non-judgement, compassion, care and safety for people transitioning into, and through, food insecurity. Some food aid organisations were even able to offer welcoming spaces where people could talk and support each other through their circumstances (Figure 2), characterising the welcoming support available during this first stage of liminality.

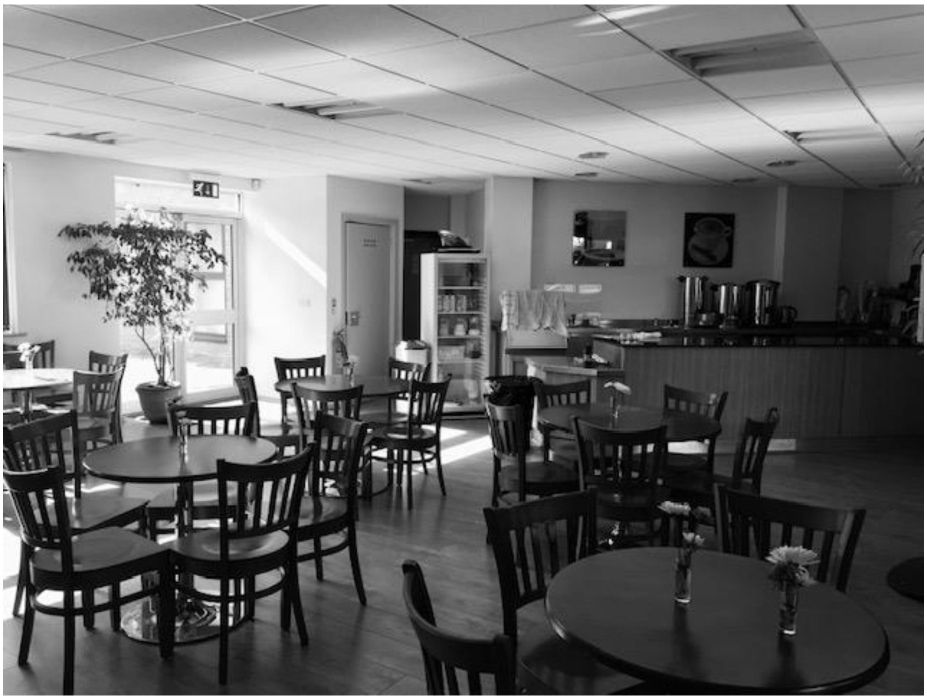

Figure 2: A food and drinks space at a food aid organisation

In fact, our research participants emphasised the significant support that independent food aid organisations provided in terms of supplementary services, tackling several of the many needs of people having to access food aid. For example, in some cases independent foodbank organisations were providing free clothes and furniture in addition to food parcels.

In sum, the first phase of trajectories into liminal food insecurity was typified by internal dimensions such as health issues, bereavement and job losses, internalised factors including stigma and trauma, meso-level factors such as the caring support participants received through their first encounter with independent foodbank organisations, and structural factors such as social welfare issues and the precarious conditions created by austerity policies. Upon reflecting on this work, we believe these liminal dimensions add to existing understandings of the first phase of liminality, acknowledging but also going beyond the individual and their immediate social relations (Turner, 1974). Our research shows how “the more lasting and solid qualities of structure” (Moraes et al., 2021, p. 1180) – qualities that “constrain or facilitate the wider categories of actions of large masses of people” (Sztompka, 2019: 326) – affect individuals, contributing to liminal transitions into food insecurity in the case of our research participants. It is important to note that food-related liminal trajectories – which of course happen out of necessity – are not linear. Thus, participants’ phases of food access limbo fluctuate across liminal phases due to the uncertainties and complexities of their lives.

Reflecting on the Second Stage

The second phase of liminality is the in-between, limbo state. Food insecurity means that people go through this state of uncertainty; a limbo where accessing food and food-related practices are reliant on the food aid that is available and accessible through charitable organisations. The limited kinds of foods available through food aid provision is widely acknowledged (Garthwaite, Collins and Bambra, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016) and were a significant problem that many participants highlighted in our research. Of course, health and safety were a main concern for foodbanks. As fridge storage tends to be limited if available at all, this means that usually most foodbanks can only provide canned foods (Figure 3). Nevertheless, some independent foodbanks go beyond the Trussell Trust foodbank model and provide fresh fruits and vegetables to their clients where possible.

Figure 3: Food stock at a foodbank

This stage of liminality is a period involving experiences of uncertainty (van Gennep, 1960[1906]), which are stressful and unavoidable for people in need of food aid. In this phase, participants spent much time and energy trying to navigate the benefits system and access food. At the same time, participants must come to terms with the loss of their past consumer identities and previous food consumption practices while remaining uncertain of what the future holds for them in terms of being able to access food.

Often, participants described being unable to afford the electricity needed to cook or not having cooking utensils and trade-offs may include keeping the heating on or making food (the widely recognised “heat or eat” debate [Bhattacharya et al., 2003; Beatty et al., 2014]). Sometimes participants’ lives were too consumed by trying to access benefits or coping with the mental health problems that understandably arise from living under precarious conditions for a long time. This prolonged precarity can then create an extended liminal condition whereby food insecure individuals moved from accessing emergency food to having to rely on food aid for more prolonged periods of time.

Nevertheless, from the stresses, uncertainties, limbo and challenges that participants experienced in this second phase of liminality, new possibilities and opportunities could also arise for crafting new food practices and identities for the future (Andrews and Roberts, 2015; Turner, 1974). For example, some of our participants reflected on “creative” food access strategies and sharing practices as well as resourceful cooking strategies that enabled a sense of enhanced food choice through ingredient swaps, rota cooking and food sharing among themselves.

Beyond the choice functionality that these practices offered to people accessing food aid, we identified a subversive side that was sometimes evident. This is because such practices challenged the very essence of how food access was configured for those in need in three key ways. First, these practices countervailed the food choice restrictions of food aid access systems. Second, they enabled mutual help, care and support among participants experiencing food insecurity without those who are being helped feeling dominated by the helper (Freire, 1978, in hooks, 1994). Third, and consequently, they undermined or suspended – even if only limitedly – some of the socio-cultural and economic conditions that created patterns of, and that give continuity to, food insecurity and its liminal nature.

Consequently, a characteristic of this second phase of liminality included the creation of communitás (Mulligan, 2015; Turner, 1969, 1974), namely a sense of community among participants who were experiencing food insecurity and the need to access food aid. This sense of community manifested due to a shared sense of kinship rather than formal social ties. In line with Cumbers et al. (2018) and Newbrough and Chavis (1986), we found that communitás could create an inclusive sense of personal belonging among groups of food-insecure participants, involving spontaneous relationships, meaning-making and the development of shared norms through such relationships (Turner, 1974). Shared lived experiences of accessing food aid were a vital connecting tissue in such relationships, as they helped to co-create and co-reinforce this sense of community. This newly found communitás is important for participants going through food insecurity liminality, as a foodbank volunteer explained:

> *"For some people it's also the social aspect…if you're living on the estate, you are living on your own, or you're quite isolated, a space where you can go and meet the same people every week, actually, there's other reasons than just the food"*
> *(O4, Greater Manchester).*

The quote above illustrates that communitás helped to counteract isolation, for example. To some extent, it helped support those participants who were removed from previous social relationships that are entrenched in market-enabled food consumption practices and spaces, which had become unavailable to those experiencing food insecurity. Examples of unavailable practices included going to a coffee shop to meet friends or going out for dinner with family. Consequently, we built on Turner's (1974) arguments by establishing that people who share experiences of food insecurity and of having to access food aid developed social ties and mutuality, while collectively experiencing what it meant to be marginalised from the food marketplace (Moraes et al., 2021).

Explaining the Third Stage through Paraliminality

Turner (1969) suggests that the third phase of liminality involves reintegration into society with a renewed social standing. In the context of food insecurity, this phase would entail people's reintegration into the food marketplace as food consumers (Figure 4).

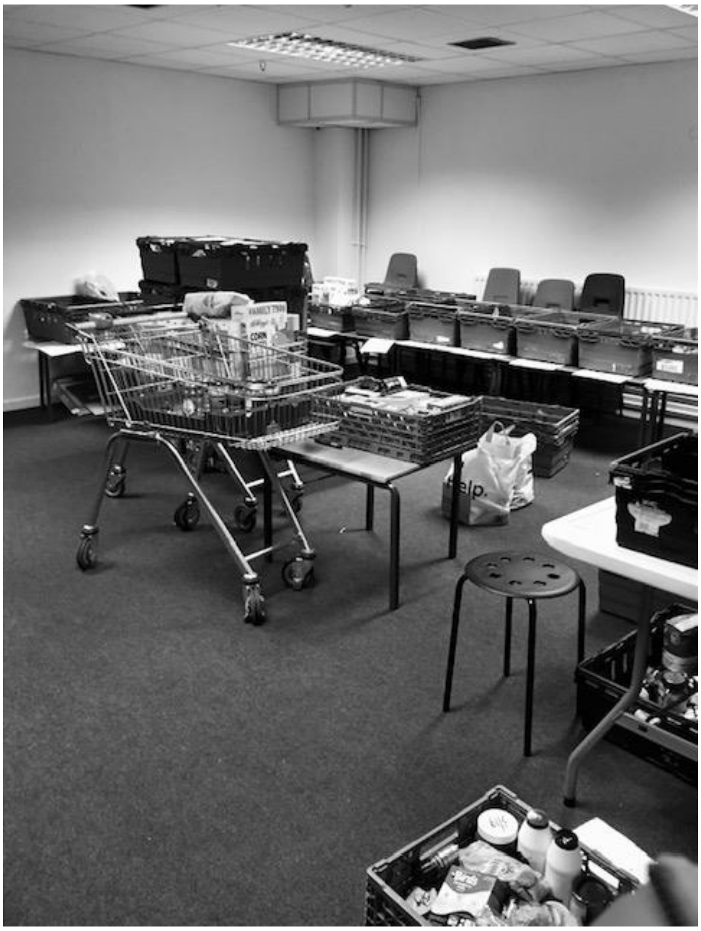

Figure 4: The supermarket shopping trolley in a foodbank's food stock space reminds us of expectations around a return to normalised food shopping practices.

However, in reflecting upon our research this specific kind of reintegration had proven elusive. Many of our participants accessed food aid repeatedly, with only 3 out of 25 participants envisioning a future where food insecurity was no longer a problem for them. Several participants explained that emergency food parcels were not sufficient to address periods of food insecurity within their household. In fact, we found that food insecure participants were transitioning from accessing emergency food through foodbanks to accessing food through food pantries in a protracted manner. As such, rather than going back to the marketplace for food access, which would represent the reintegration stage that Turner (1969) conceptualised, our participants were leaving the precarity of emergency food consumption to a different kind of third stage of liminality, which we conceptualised as *paraliminality* (Moraes et al. 2021).

In his theory, Turner (1969, 1974) highlights a difference between liminality and liminoid experiences, which are important to understanding food insecurity. According to Turner (ibid), liminoid phenomena seem like liminal ones in the sense that they happen away from normalised socio-economic practices (Taheri et al., 2017), but there are distinctions. In Turner's (1969, 1974) original work, liminal phenomena and their stages seek to address pre-industrial societies, where there were no such clear distinctions and separations between work and leisure compared to what we see today in contemporary socio-economic configurations (Andrews and Roberts, 2015). Thus, what Turner (1974) argues is that, given the separation between work and leisure in contemporary societies, liminal phenomena is transformed into fleeting, *liminoid* instances of fun, artistic, playful and leisurely phenomena (Turner, 1974; Andrews and Roberts, 2015).

Liminal transitions require work and, in the context of food insecurity, evolve into food-related status shifts. Therefore, liminal phenomena can be illustrated by the difficult, labour-intensive procedures and processes of getting access to emergency food out of necessity (Patrick, 2014). Liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, imply the more exploratory, perhaps fun, voluntary, choice-based and somewhat rebellious kind of involvement in moments away from normalised practices (Andrews and Roberts, 2015; Turner, 1974). Liminoid phenomena are more diverse, unpredictable, tentative and liberating than their liminal counterparts (Turner, 1974; Willey, 2016). They have the potential to be transformative for people and are characterised by engagement out of choice rather than necessity. Crucially, Turner (1974) argues that they happen in spaces other than those of the liminal.

However, what we found in our research is that transitional phenomena need not involve the food-related status changes and the end to the transitional phase in the third stage – at least not in the way that Turner (1974) suggests. For example, we found that food insecurity transitions from a lengthy second phase of emergency access to a third stage of liminality were characterised by accessing food through food pantries rather than the marketplace. This transitioning was also characterised by collaborative strategies of coping and resilience that emerged because of communitás:

> *"We have a positive community of people here for people to belong to" (O7, Greater Manchester).*

As discussed previously, this communitás emerged via participants' collective experiences and understandings of what it means to be food insecure and the need to use spaces of food aid access. However, we also found that the liminal and the liminoid can co-exist and co-occur within the same food access spaces, whereby people were accessing food aid as well as leisure practices:

> *"Like I say, it's like a little social club now. (...) We've actually got a community area - a communal area where we can all sit" (Julie, Greater Manchester).*

Such optional, leisure activities ranged from karate lessons, to crocheting meetings, to chatting in communal areas of food aid access spaces, exemplifying how liminal and liminoid phenomena can co-exist in the same "temporary, erratic and heterogeneous social space" (Willey, 2016:132). These activities "illuminate empowering practices of social integration and co-organising, which would not exist if people were not socialising at pantries" (Moraes et al., 2021: 1182). Although they seem like Turner's (1974) notion of liminoid and its voluntary and liberating nature (Turner, 1974), they are not the same. This is because food insecure people are not getting involved in such practices for leisure. What these activities do is help to strengthen social bonds, creating new norms and de-stigmatisation. The activities are happening within the food aid access places and helping to encourage a positive, safe social environment of non-judgement, compassion, respect and collective care.

Together, these characteristics make up what we have termed *paraliminality*. Therefore, *paraliminality* is a hybrid, or the co-occurrence and co-existence, of liminal and liminoid phenomena in a specific social space, which is facilitated by the communitás that arises from the struggles and difficulties, but also from the voluntary “pay-it-forward practices and caring relational bonds formed through people’s food insecurity experiences” (Moraes et al., 2021: 1186). Upon reflecting on the idea of *paraliminality*, we believe it challenges the linearity found in Turner’s (1974) liminality theory, problematising ideas of food insecurity that portray it as short-term or as something that happens within a bounded time period including “rigid” phases.

Further, *paraliminality* exposes a permeability between an individual’s ability to act and the social structures within which they are embedded, highlighting the problems but also the generative potential of no longer being able to have either one’s pre-liminal, food-related consumer identity or a completely renewed re-embedding into the marketplace for food access (Andrews and Roberts, 2015). Our theorisation of *paraliminality* (Moraes et al. 2021), therefore, advances Turner’s (1974) third, reintegration stage, determining that a return to accessing food through the marketplace is not always possible, suitable or in fact wanted, as mainstream food retailers can create anxiety for vulnerable consumers.

In our work, we suggest that *paraliminality* is both positive and problematic. It is positive because it is helping participants at the margins of consumer society to expand their social networks of support, to find community, compassion and care, and to exercise their agency. It is also positive in the sense that it enables people to develop their own coping mechanisms via communitás. Nevertheless, *paraliminality* also has a problematic and likely disempowering effect, given that participants are not returning to the food marketplace, where other means to access food are not available or where the welfare system is not appropriately supporting people in need. This, in turn, reinforces precarity cycles that foster, and that are fostered by, recurring configurations of disadvantage both at individual and societal levels.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter reflects on food insecurity, poverty and marketplace exclusion scholarship by foregrounding the importance of using theoretical lenses in qualitative research work and by using an illustrative research project to explain how theory can be used and why it matters.

Throughout the chapter, we reflect and draw on our food insecurity research (McEachern et al., 2020) and subsequent analysis and publications (McEachern et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2021), to exemplify the way in which we conceptualised lived experiences of food insecurity as liminal transitions. By reflecting on our use of liminality as a theoretical perspective in our research, we developed the concept of *paraliminality*, a hybrid of two types of liminality phenomena that is both empowering and generative of a lasting form of indeterminate state (Moraes et al. 2021). *Paraliminality* highlights the social mechanisms, practices and spaces that co-construct people’s more enduring, but fluid, experiences and phases of food insecurity, and of striving to gain access to food. The concept of paraliminality is significant because it builds on prior research that problematises the distinction between liminal and liminoid experiences without necessarily developing a theorisation of how the liminal and the liminoid might co-exist and what this may mean for social practices. Paraliminality is also relevant because it sheds light on, further develops and foregrounds, the complexities of the societal forces that drive the perpetuation, but also the agency that can counterbalance, liminal trajectories in and through food insecurity.

Paraliminality is a concept that can be used in other contexts involving social adversities where identity state transitions and diverse forms of social support are needed. As we suggest (Moraes et al., 2021), this concept opens opportunities for future research that seeks to develop deeper understandings of liminal states and experiences in contexts other than food insecurity. Examples might include other kinds of insecurities such as energy, clothing or period poverty, or where people might encounter health difficulties or critical life incidents such as bereavement, divorce or fertility treatment. It also creates an opportunity to further investigate its various facets and dimensions, and how these might differ across contexts. More importantly, *paraliminality* highlights the need for policymakers and other stakeholders to acknowledge why people in food-insecure states continue to require the ongoing support of foodbanks and food pantries.

Our research and reflections demonstrate how these services are providing people with some of the caring, dignified support they need when going through stages of food insecurity and precarity. In doing so, food aid providers respond to people's complex needs in ways that a sole focus on cash-only or benefits-only services cannot, as important and fundamental as cash and benefits are. More importantly, although policymakers, food manufacturers and food retailers might see food insecurity as a temporary issue, it is actually an ongoing problem for people who dip in and out of lack of access to food, never returning to being able to fully use the marketplace for their food needs. This work therefore helps to illustrate some of the more fundamental issues that need consideration around in-work poverty, for example, including issues related to benefits adequacy in times of economic precarity reflected by the current cost of living crisis.

Further Reading

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