A community-based participatory research approach to understanding social eating for food well-being [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

Nadina R Luca1, Marsha Smith2, Sally Hibbert3

1York Management School, University of York, UK, York, Yorkshire, YO10 5GD, United Kingdom
2Centre for Business in Society (CBiS), Coventry University, Coventry, CV1 5FB, United Kingdom
3Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG8 1BB, United Kingdom

Abstract
'Social eating initiatives' are a specific type of community-based food service that provides opportunities for people to eat together in local spaces using surplus food. These initiatives provide a meal that is fresh, affordable and more environmentally friendly than fast or convenience foods. In this research, we build upon the food well-being model to explore how food consumption is experienced in these community settings and the role of social eating projects in shaping the different dimensions of people's foodscapes. We adopted a community-based participatory approach and engaged in a series of dialogues with staff volunteers and coordinators at four 'social eating initiatives'. We also conducted 45 interviews with service users and volunteers at three sites in the Midlands region. The role of community-based food initiatives responding to hunger by utilising surplus food to feed local populations is often conceptualised critically. The conjoining of food insecurity and surplus food appears to instrumentally feed customers and reduce food wastage, but in ways that are stigmatising, and which position customers as passive recipients of food charity. However, closer attention to the experiences of staff, volunteers and customers at these spaces, reveals them as sites where knowledge and experience of food is being developed with this contributing to a sense of well-being beyond nutrition. Shared food practices and eating together contribute to social capital and are important dimensions of food well-being that are significantly restricted by food insecurity. The ‘food well-being’ model envisages a shift in focus from health, defined as the absence of illness, towards well-being as a positive relationship with food at the individual and societal level. In the concluding remarks of this article, it is suggested that this holistic conception is required to understand the role and function of social eating initiatives.
Keywords
social eating initiatives, community food, food insecurity, food waste, surplus, community-based participatory research, food well-being

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Corresponding authors: Nadina R Luca (nadina.luc@york.ac.uk), Marsha Smith (smithm93@uni.coventry.ac.uk)

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**Introduction**

Food insecurity is a multi-faceted and iniquitous social problem in contemporary UK society (Caplan, 2017). It is described as the inability to access an adequate, healthy diet or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so, as well as having concerns about accessing foods that are socially and culturally appropriate (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015). Against this backdrop, WRAP (2020) estimates that in 2018, 9.5 million tonnes of food were wasted within the UK, 70% of which was intended for consumption. Surplus food aid is positioned as ‘the second tier of our food system’ (Tarasuk & Bublitz et al., 2019) with recipients of free food parcels feeling obligated, ashamed, and stigmatised (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Garthwaite, 2016; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). Being in receipt of food aid also positions individuals as passive beneficiaries with little agency and choice over the food they consume (Caraher & Furey, 2017) with community food organisations characterised as distributing ‘leftover food for left behind people’ (Riches & Gerlings, 2019).

Moreover, food insecurity in the UK coexists within a broader foodscapes, where the traditional structuring of mealtimes has undergone a transition to ‘culinary plurality’, as eating practices continue to diversify and fragment (Mäkelä, 2009: 45). The diminishment or ‘de-structuration’ of mealtimes limits the capacity to engage in mealtimes and has impacts beyond physical sustenance and nutrition, which may be amplified for those experiencing food insecurity.

In response, there has been an unprecedented scaling-up of food-provisioning organisations, one of which are ‘social eating’ initiatives. These initiatives utilise surplus food to create cheap, public meals, which are eaten at social mealtimes. Generally, these social eating initiatives access surplus food distributed by FareShare and other organisations including supermarkets. Local volunteers use this surplus resource to cook and provide nutritious meals in a community venue for a suggested donation (such as £2.50) per three course meal for adults and children eating for free (Luca et al., 2019a). These initiatives are not well-conceptualised by the current critiques of food aid, and a more sensitive framing which considers broader dimensions of food may articulate a clearer understanding of the role and function of social eating initiatives, beyond the provision of cheap meals. This also calls for more research to understand consumers’ experiences in the context of these initiatives using surplus food.

We build upon the food as well-being model (Block et al., 2011; Bublitz et al., 2019) to examine the food experience of social eating cafés service users and the role of such initiatives in addressing key dimensions of food well-being. Food well-being is defined as ‘a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food at both individual and societal levels’ which is influenced by socialization, literacy, mapping, food availability and policy (Block et al., 2011: 5).

**Methods**

We adopted a community-based participatory approach to support co-creation of the project with the organisations and customers involved in this service context. Participatory mapping was used to allow participants to contribute their views of the initiatives, their needs, challenges and impact. We engaged in a series of dialogues with staff volunteers and coordinators at four ‘social eating’ initiatives. We also conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with service users and volunteers at three sites in the Midlands region in order to understand how the role and function of community food services fit within their wider foodscapes (see Table 1 for the interview guide). These are briefly described in vignettes, which contextualise the research topic and the social eating initiatives participating in this research in an attempt to both ‘bring life to research [and] bring research to life’ (Ellis, 1998: 4). The interview length ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. Two researchers visited the social eating venues during mealtimes and invited volunteers and service users to participate in the study. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and the data were inductively and deductively coded and organised thematically. The authors iteratively reviewed the coding framework and emerging themes at team meetings. The study received approval from the University Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent for participation in this research was obtained from all participants.

Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities and the research sites are anonymised.

**Vignettes**

**Cool Café** is located in an inner city in the East Midlands. It offers a mixture of ethnic and traditional UK cuisines from a church hall space. The café with its £2 weekly lunch offer attracts a diverse array of around 30 customers from students, local residents, food bank attendees, the church congregation and members of a local arts hub.

**Orange Café** is located in a small church on a side street in a small town in the East Midlands. The café has revitalised a space that was due to close because of dwindling church attendance. A small but busy kitchen serves a free weekly soup made from surplus alongside a two or three-course meal. There is a fruit and veg ‘stall’ at the side of the space where customers can leave a donation and take fresh foods. Volunteer greeters welcome around 30 diners each week.

**Participate Community Centre** is located in a smaller adjunct to a large council estate in the south of a city in the East Midlands area. The café offers a weekly, table service meal, as well as a pay-as-you-feel food shop. Staffed by a team of long-standing, dedicated volunteers, this social eating space primarily caters for families and elders. The borough is a predominantly white, working class area and this is reflected in the make-up of the diners. The café serves traditional meals and a friendship group also operates in the same venue at the same time to encourage isolated people to socialise. Approximately 55–60 people come for a meal each week at this social eating venue, which has
### Table 1. Interview topic guide (service user and volunteers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Examples of guiding questions</th>
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| Perceptions of the café and its operations                          | • Can you tell me about the community food café that you visit?  
• What things are done at your café to make people feel welcome?  
• Why do you volunteer at this place?                               |
| The value of surplus                                                | • What role do you think your community café/group has in providing foods to people in the community?  
• How would you characterise the food surplus received?  
• How does this project work?  
• What kinds of initiatives or strategies have been used at your community café to influence the nutritional quality of food provided? |
| Food practices, nutrition and perceptions about the idea of food made with surplus | • How much time do you spend cooking and preparing your meals?  
• What is your typical meal?  
• What percentage of your household income do you believe is spent on food?  
• How is the food offered in this outlet?  
• Have you tried any new foods since you've started coming here?  
• What do you think of this idea to use food surplus in this way?  
• Do you normally eat with other people or on your own?               |
| Food and social connections                                          | • Why do you come to this place?  
• Have you met other people or have you made any friends since you started coming to this place?  
• Do you feel that you learned anything since you've been involved with this community group?  
• Can you talk a little bit about your social life?  
• Could you describe the community here?                             |
| Awareness of food issues; the experience of food insecurity          | • What do you think there are some problems around food in today's society?  
• Have you heard of the term 'food insecurity' or food poverty?  
• Do you think something is missing in terms of the food provision in your community?  
• How would you describe the local food culture?                      |
| Perception of impact                                                | • What are the changes generated by this project in the community?  
• How well is the programme engaging with intended beneficiaries?  
• What would you change about this project?                          |

Engaged widely with local supermarkets and food retailers to augment their FareShare delivery to produce a three-course meal each Friday lunchtime.

**Meal-centred interviews**

Food and the sharing of food can facilitate one of the creative kinds of empirical research that are described as ‘community-based participatory research’ or CBPR (Chun-Chung Chow & Crowe, 2005; Faridi et al., 2007; Pettinger et al., 2019; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). CBPR moves beyond ‘traditional research approaches that assume a phenomenon may be separated from its context for purposes of study’ (Holkup et al., 2004:162). In its commitment to involve communities in the research process, CBPR may employ a diverse and creative methodological approach to better understand complex problems and find solutions or points of intervention for participants, using both logic and systematic thinking, as well as intuition and imagination (Heck et al., 2018). This approach seeks to make visible and articulate mundane and hitherto concealed activities and expressions that nonetheless provide insights into the role that social eating initiatives play in constructing experiences of well-being.

One route into understanding the role and function of community food initiatives within communities is through enquiries into the types of commensality they construct. The ‘mingling, observing, and lingering’ (Cattell et al., 2008) around informal mealtimes is framed here as an entry-point to deeper understanding of how well-being is constructed and expressed in non-formal ways. Interpersonal sharing of food is a fundamental feature of social life, both as a ‘mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations’ (Davies et al., 2017: 136). Food sharing, or commensality, involves...
the creation and reinforcement of social relations; fabricating and consolidating social connections (Giacoman, 2016; Masson et al., 2018), and it can also be considered as a means of undertaking research alongside eaters.

Eating together engaged research participants and created a focus for rhythm to the research dialogue. Sharing food with participants created convivial conditions which helped the research participants feel comfortable, and generated descriptions of their broader foodscapes. Taking this approach, moved the emphasis away from solely conveying experiences of food insecurity towards drawing upon the varying organisational emphases and remits in a spirit of mutualism (Björgvinsson et al., 2010; DiSalvo et al., 2012).

The research occurring in these spaces afforded everyone involved an opportunity to understand how citizens can become ‘beneficiaries and co-creators of value’ (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) as the descriptions provided by customers were reported back to the organisers to help shape the services of local social eating initiatives. Grassroots commensality-activism can be understood here in terms of progressive possibilities, articulating newly emerging and not-yet-formed responses to broader social challenges around the access, availability and affordability of food (Blake, 2019a; Blake, 2019b; Marovelli, 2019; Smith, 2020).

Eating with the ‘social eating’ organisations and customers, then created opportunities to gather data not necessarily afforded during formal consulting events. It immersed us in the foodscape of the initiative and enabled us to draw upon the foodscapes of both the organisers and customers in situ.

Findings
Our emerging findings support other studies regarding the positive role of community-based surplus food initiatives (Midgley et al., 2014). In the UK, community-based initiatives such as social eating initiatives use surplus food to provide an integrated model for recovering and using surplus food, localising food and providing spaces for interaction that can contribute to alleviating food insecurity and support health and well-being. In this research note, we briefly present one of the key findings of our study:

Social eating initiatives go beyond supporting community food availability. They play a key role in facilitating social connections and addressing social isolation.

Our findings show that these initiatives serve people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Service users range from older people to people who cannot work, people with mental health conditions and local residents who simply appreciate the good food which is served in these spaces. These initiatives provide opportunities for people to access a homemade nutritious meal once a week:

‘I think it has a very important role in that, some people may not be able to have a substantial meal during the day or whatever, and this is one where they know they’ll get quite a lot of different food and it’s for low-cost…’ (Janis, service user).

Our findings emphasise the social dimension of eating and food more broadly. The social eating initiatives emerged as ‘social hubs’, which can facilitate community belonging and address social isolation by emphasising the commensurate qualities of food. These initiatives add to the body of evidence that food insecurity means not only hunger but also limited ability to participate in a range of food practices (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015). They enable socialising spaces and create opportunities for people to contribute to their community. Some of the service users choose to volunteer and support the social eating café showing the potential for these initiatives to stimulate participation:

‘...you [through this initiative] give volunteers a sense of belonging to something and a sense of usefulness.’ (Matt, volunteer).

Bella reflects on how her experience with the social eating café and seeing other people help each other made her see things in a more positive way and volunteer:

‘...I’ve been on my own for about three years. I suppose it were just me on my own, and I’d got used to that, and then I’d come to have a meal here and that changed my outlook on [life]… [...] I do help out here now and again, yes.’ (Brenda, service user).

The communal meal offered at these social eating spaces becomes a reason for people to visit ‘the community’ and to escape their routine. This is also an opportunity for reaching those who may experience consumer vulnerability, and those with mental health conditions who may not have access to community services. This is illustrated by Rachel’s reflections on the benefits of the social eating café:

‘Just coming out, because I do struggle coming out. That’s a big importance in my life because I struggle getting out, and obviously meeting my friends. I love meeting my friends here and having this dinner together. [...] It’s just done so much for me because if I didn’t come here, I’d just be at home in bed...’ (Rachel, service user).

Social eating spaces facilitate conversations and connections, but also act as hubs where people can ‘establish, receive, or be signposted to other services.’ (Luca et al., 2019a). More than food, often these initiatives facilitate access to other resources such as health and well-being services, cooking classes and holiday clubs for children, as well as arts and crafts. Service users can access support to deal with paperwork and health and hygiene training:

‘Somebody was bringing in a laptop where you could do Food and Hygiene Certificate. [...] Whether it’s training as in cooking skills, or whether it’s training as in qualifications, there’s quite a bit of scope for that, or just building confidence, building self-confidence, self-esteem.’ (Dan, service user and volunteer).

Discussion and conclusion
Our findings highlight the key role that such community groups promoting social eating could play in supporting health and well-being, and the role of food in community development. Our
research indicates that surplus food is revalued through these initiatives and employed to facilitate the delivery of services concerned with sustenance, as well as those designed to enhance health and well-being (Luca et al., 2019a). Our study suggests that these initiatives improve food availability and have potential to support both social capital (Edmondson, 2003) and community development.

Healthy eating programmes would benefit from collaborating with social eating initiatives in accessing harder to reach populations and reframing the issue of ‘healthy diets’ to account for the social, emotional and experiential nature of food and eating. Such programmes can also learn from the experiences shared in these spaces to consider ‘behaviour in context’ (Luca et al., 2019b) and how food insecurity shapes individuals’ perception of healthy food, ability and motivation to adopt a healthy diet (Luca et al., 2019a).

A community-based participatory approach to researching these social eating initiatives affords us an opportunity to understand the social values expressed by people who may be ‘below the level of consumption adequacy…’ but who are nonetheless ‘beneficiaries and co-creators of value’ (Baron et al., 2018).

Social eating initiatives and their focus on group eating, or commensality, food sharing and mealtime inclusion, participation and contribution can be viewed as expressions of a food well-being-oriented approach, which seeks to prioritise food as a means of developing and sustaining both physical and social capital. These initiatives therefore operate contra to the social eating initiatives in accessing harder to reach populations and reframing the issue of ‘healthy diets’ to account for the social, emotional and experiential nature of food and eating. Such programmes can also learn from the experiences shared in these spaces to consider ‘behaviour in context’ (Luca et al., 2019b) and how food insecurity shapes individuals’ perception of healthy food, ability and motivation to adopt a healthy diet (Luca et al., 2019a).

Our research points towards the need to reframe these initiatives as an alternative form of community provision, which is more than aid to tackle food insecurity and food waste. De-stigmatising these projects has the potential to broaden participation, expand community food capacity (Dunbar, 2017; Kneafsey et al., 2017) and avoid a ‘two-tier’ food culture that creates further social inequality (Caplan, 2017; Luca et al., 2019a). Furthermore, these emergent findings argue for a more sensitive means of articulating the experiences of both food insecure and broader ‘social eaters’, and their foodscape.

Adopting a ‘food as well-being’ approach shows potential for understanding the different dimensions that influence eating behaviours and diets in order to better contextualise efforts to tackle obesity and food insecurity. It is proposed that further analysis using this framework would form the next stage of scholarship beyond this Research Note.

Data availability

Underlying data cannot be shared owing to anonymity and ethics approval considerations. University of York researchers interested in the data should contact The Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee of the University of York (elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk) to inquire about the research ethics application process. Each application will be assessed on a case by case basis. More information about data sharing policies at the University of York can be found here: https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/sharing/#tab-1.

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Toward new forms of meal sharing?

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