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Unknotting the complexities of food vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

As levels of food insecurity rise, understanding food vulnerability is increasingly pertinent. To date, food vulnerability is under-theorized and studies tend to focus on particular food insecurity/poverty influencing factors, associations of food vulnerability with health and well-being, and mitigating policies/initiatives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty participants. Adopting a social constructionist perspective, this paper conceptualizes vulnerability in the context of food by bringing together the views from both “insiders” (such as food aid recipients) and “outsiders” (such as food aid providers), as well as those who used to be food insecure but managed to “escape.” Consequently, a novel conceptualization of how food vulnerability is produced and reproduced is proposed by drawing from a dialectical interplay of agency and structure in individuals’ life circumstances, as well as stigma and marginality and previous conceptualizations of vulnerability. Our findings show that food vulnerability can be exacerbated in the presence of inequality, exclusion, stigmatization, poverty-related addictions, and moral and policy judgments. The study advances theoretical understandings of food vulnerability by highlighting its nuanced multidimensionality, and factoring in the systemic, structural constraints of welfare provision that often trigger food vulnerability and entrap individuals within a vicious circle of food insecurity. Wider policy implications are discussed.

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Introduction

About 14 million people are affected by hunger and food insecurity¹ in the UK (Trussell 2025). Shocks such as the pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis have led to a significant growth and reliance on food charities (Loopstra 2020; Trussell 2025). Therefore, it is important to understand the complexity of this important societal challenge. Current research mainly focuses on certain factors that affect food security (e.g., Denney, Brewer, and Kimbro 2020; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000), or investigates the use of food banks/aid (e.g., Lavery 2019; Surman, Kelemen, and Rumens 2021) and broader food security governance (e.g., Lohnes 2023; Ranta et al. 2024), as well

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as associated stigma stemming from neoliberal discourses (e.g., Villegas et al. 2022). In addition, there are ongoing debates on the role of food aid and social policies around issues of entitlement, human rights, and the welfare system in helping combat vulnerability (e.g., Dowler and O'Connor 2012; Lambie-Mumford 2019; Lavery 2019).

These studies provide valuable insights into aspects of food insecurity, yet they also underline the importance of further research to provide a more rounded, holistic understanding of vulnerability associated with food insecurity. Indeed, whilst food insecurity refers to the state or condition in which people do not have access to sufficient quantities of healthy and nutritious food, vulnerability in the context of food “refers to the group of factors that places people in a situation where they are at risk of food insecurity, including factors that undermine people’s capacity to deal with the situation” (FAO 2000, 24). In addition, as highlighted by Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel (2017, 506):

.. there is an imbalance in vulnerability studies with much research focused on theoretical debates and policy critiques and fewer accounts that centre on the empirical realities of vulnerability from the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholder groups such as practitioners, service managers and service users/clients.

Building on Brown’s identification of this literature gap and previous research on food insecurity, the aim of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of food vulnerability (FV) by exploring the way it is produced and reproduced through the optics of the different stakeholders involved. By adopting an insider–outsider (emic–etic) approach (Spiers 2000), it provides a multifaceted understanding and conceptualization of FV. By utilizing a social constructionist approach and factoring in personal social contexts and interactions, this study develops a comprehensive framework to understand people’s complex lives and diverse interpretations of FV. Using interviews with volunteers and workers from food banks, food support networks, government bodies, academics, and recipients of food aid, this study provides an insightful analysis on the multidimensionality of FV from the viewpoints of outsiders (welfare providers) and insiders (recipients).

In this paper, we also outline existing research on food insecurity and food poverty whilst incorporating theories of vulnerability and related concepts such as stigma, as a conceptual lens through which to understand how FV is produced and reproduced. The study contributes to the growing body of work around food insecurity and related vulnerability (e.g., Caplan 2017; Lavery 2019; Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016; Willis 2021) by bringing together both evaluative and experiential perspectives of FV.

Vulnerability in the food context

Discussed within the context of food insecurity, food poverty, and malnutrition, FV is embedded in the plight of people struggling to make ends meet and to eat regular meals (Lambie-Mumford 2019). It has been linked to the absence of economic, social, and physical resources to ensure a sufficient supply of nutritionally appropriate food and it can be linked to homelessness and mental health difficulties arising from job loss, relationship breakdowns, addictions, and benefit sanctions (Azhar et al. 2024; Dowler and O'Connor 2012; Lambie-Mumford 2019). Other demographic factors such as age, gender, and family status have been linked to increased vulnerability as the evidence

suggests that those with low income, households with children, and people with disabilities are more vulnerable to food insecurity (Francis-Devine 2024; Trussell 2025). Inequalities also enhance vulnerability as they lead to stress, social isolation, and health issues (Willis 2021). Moreover, sudden life events, such as illness or loss of a spouse, have been linked to vulnerability even for people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, wherein support networks and structures have proven important factors to protect people from becoming vulnerable (Dickinson et al. 2021). Unemployment, homelessness, and other factors such as addictions and wider lifestyle circumstances, however, reveal a deeper complexity, whereas systemic issues are often treated as individual choices that lead to food insecurity (e.g., Gist-Mackey and Dougherty 2023).

Food insecurity in developed countries, often fueled by vulnerabilities exacerbated by a failure of the welfare system, has led to the growth of and reliance on food aid (Loopstra et al. 2018), which consequently highlights the increasingly political nature and conditionality of food distribution and access, including a religious ethos underpinning many providers, changing social policies, and a shrinking welfare state (Lohnes 2023; Surman, Kelemen, and Rumens 2021). Food insecurity is inherently political due to unequal power dynamics and existing inequalities that must be addressed for food justice (Tyler and Slater 2018). Current neoliberal policies, reflected in benefits distribution and sanctions, are seen to be dismantling the welfare state and institutionalizing food aid provision as an extension of the welfare state (Lohnes 2023).

Food aid providers like food banks, in turn, are often criticized as an inappropriate response to hunger because of the social stigma attached with their usage (Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016), while alternative models, such as social supermarkets, are viewed more positively as they offer dignity, choice, and inclusion (Ranta et al. 2024). Research into foodbank and charities reveals that volunteers, often aware of neoliberal connotations surrounding austere government policies, seek to provide compassion, care, and empowerment to service users, and food aid organizations sometimes become places of care where people can build networks of support (Laverty 2019; Surman, Kelemen, and Rumens 2021). Despite awareness of the consequences of austerity, however, there seems to be a clear relational ambivalence in support whereby many still reproduce dominant discourses by blaming the poor for their suffering, or are seen to simply play reactive stabilizing roles rather than longer-term empowerment and supporting roles (Thomas, Wyatt, and Hansford 2020; Williams et al. 2016).

The foregoing literature demonstrates how vulnerability has been implicitly explored from various angles, including personal characteristics or external factors, and different contexts, such as food insecurity, poverty, and malnutrition, as well as the role of political discourses and welfare structures in producing and reproducing food insecurity. What is increasingly evident is that within this area of research there exists a level of complexity stemming from the multifaceted nature of vulnerability, requiring more in-depth study to bring together fragmented elements of FV into a holistic conceptualization.

Understanding production and reproduction of vulnerability

Vulnerability has been described as having multiple causes ranging from the individual or innate to situational and structural factors, which in turn can impact exposure to social risks – these range from personal experiences and behavior and material deprivation to

access to welfare provision; vulnerability is therefore seen as a product of internal and external influences (Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel 2017). Moreover, the boundaries between what is personal choice and what is structurally driven is often blurred, due to the way vulnerability is associated with lifestyles and how often stigma and marginality stem from perceptions of lifestyle “choices.” Building on Weber’s (1978) interplay of life choices and life chances, Cockerham (2010, 12) maintains that “health lifestyles are collective patterns of voluntary health behaviour based on choices from options available to them according to their life chances which include race, gender, age, ethnicity and other structural variables.” However, research suggests that most drivers of vulnerability are not a result of personal choice, but rather a consequence of economic and social structures and the way narratives of vulnerability are developed, disseminated, and eventually embodied (Thomas, Wyatt, and Hansford 2020).

Vulnerability is not, however, immutable. It may be described as simultaneously “immediate and imminent” (Emmel and Hughes 2014) causing small but deep disruptions to individuals rather than existing as a permanent state where certain people and groups are characterized as vulnerable per se (Mitchell 2020; Turkkan 2021). This is reflected by Gillespie (2012), who criticizes statistics that put people in “risk” categories because this leaves them with feelings of “measured vulnerability,” which alters their health identities and potentially decreases resilience. Similarly, resilience discourse is often judged to be permeated by value judgments and assumptions with an over-emphasis on individuals rather than social structure and social forces, so it is suggested that policies should focus on reducing the barriers that force people into vulnerability (Mladenov and Brennan 2021).

Vulnerability is frequently experienced as stigma, which has the potential to impede the person experiencing vulnerability from seeking or accepting support (Dougherty et al. 2018). Vulnerability has been linked to the re-moralizing of the welfare state in an era of greater regulation around entitlements (Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel 2017). Cultural scripts of vulnerability specify criteria that make some welfare users more easily recognized as needy and deserving compared with others (Mitchell 2020; Turkkan 2021). Consequently, the notion of “performing poverty” or “cultural scripts of vulnerability” that inform the context of welfare practitioners/agencies and clients, and support, need to be considered (Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel 2017). This idea of performing poverty to become vulnerable enough to receive builds on Goffman’s (1963) account of stigma and how people seeking support must constantly describe their hardship, turning their experiences into a narrative. Stigma is seen as a means to produce, legitimize, and reproduce inequality and injustice by individuals, communities, and governments (Tyler and Slater 2018). Stigmatization is seen to arise from contexts shaped by unequal power relations; policy discourses, state adoption of neoliberal economic policies, and weaponization of stigma in terms of both its production and its targets (Tyler and Slater 2018). Class-laden stigmas related to issues such as unemployment and homelessness – e.g., lower-class unemployment is due to laziness while higher-class unemployment is due to privilege – often enhance vulnerability and disempower people (Dougherty, Rick, and Moore 2017). However, stigma is not always associated with vulnerability and can be refused, reworked, and resisted by those it affects (Lavery 2019). This idea brings the concepts of resilience, agency, and human rights to the forefront of investigating any type of vulnerability. Wacquant (2016, 1078), in focusing on the predicament of the “post-

industrial precariat” and urban relegation, emphasizes that sociology of marginality must not focus on “vulnerable groups” but instead concentrate on the institutional mechanisms that produce, reproduce, and transform the positions to which people are relegated. Therefore, Wacquant’s (2016) notion of “advanced marginality,” which adds to theories of power analysis of the management of spoiled identities (Goffman 1963), and the most recent reconceptualization of stigma (Tyler and Slater 2018), provides a theoretical framing that considers the lived experiences of vulnerability including stigmatization. It is, therefore, important to understand how these generic conceptualizations of vulnerability relate to FV and how the interplay of internal and external factors produces and reproduces FV.

An etic–emic approach to conceptualize FV

To conceptualize FV we examine the multilevel structures and processes that often assist but also reproduce marginality and vulnerability. Inspired by critical feminist epistemologies, we wanted to “pause for asking” (Fine 2012, 3) – whose evidence counts and what we are not seeing – to ensure this research has policy and theoretical implications based on the voices of those with lived experience: the vulnerable, who are often ignored. We therefore adopt an emic–etic approach to allow us to capture both the insider and outsider voices and overcome inequalities and injustice in research. The etic and emic perspectives as a framework highlight the complexity of vulnerability, taking into account both systems and structures with power to transform as well as restrict the lives of the most vulnerable, alongside lived experiences of poverty, marginality, stigma, and exclusion. The etic perspective considers vulnerability as viewed by someone on the outside, so risk becomes quantifiable, and people are categorized accordingly.

The emic approach refers to the understanding of phenomena as described by those experiencing vulnerability, hence adopting a psycho-sociocultural perspective. This focus on lived challenges is seen to remove stereotyping that regards vulnerability as a direct consequence of a person’s race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Webb and Harinarayan 1999). It carries the assumption, though, that people have the cognitive ability and willingness to identify themselves as vulnerable, which might not always be possible (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006). So, within this study, by building on Spiers (2000), we combine the understanding of FV from an outsider (etic) and an insider (emic) perspective: a risk versus experiential understanding of vulnerability that considers systemic, structural constraints against choices or agency that individuals possess.

Methods

By adopting a social constructionist approach² this research seeks to understand the lived experiences and meanings of FV (Baert, Weinberg, and Mottier 2011; Goffman 1963; Parr 2023) and capture perceptions of FV from different viewpoints, something that is missing from the vulnerability literature (Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel 2017). We conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews and one joint discussion with two friends/recipients of food aid. The sample included professionals involved with FV, food charities’ workers, and recipients of food aid. Some participants had experiential knowledge of being food vulnerable and now worked with others currently experiencing it,

providing another dimension to the discussions. Our sample provides responses from people based in England ($n = 11$), Scotland ($n = 8$), Wales ($n = 2$), and Northern Ireland ($n = 1$). For analysis purposes and to capture “emic” and “etic” views, participants were divided based on their FV experience into “insiders” (currently receiving food aid), “outsiders” (working in the area of FV without ever been recipients of food aid), or those with experience of both (those who work in the area of FV and previously received food aid; not food vulnerable anymore). The participants’ details are included in [Table 1](#).

A purposive, non-probability sample was used. Participants were recruited through professional networks and via FareShare, a national organization redistributing surplus food to charities, with involvement and experience of food insecurity. We sought representation of “outsiders” from various areas (government, NGOs, and academia) and “insiders.” This study was approved by the University of Hertfordshire Ethics Committee (BUS/SF/EXT/00002), anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and all interviewees gave informed consent before participating. Participants were recruited until we reached data saturation using an empirical approach when we considered that interviews from insiders or outsiders were no longer yielding new ideas or insights into perceptions of food vulnerability (Hennink and Kaiser 2022).

Two slightly different interview guides were developed: one for food aid recipients and one for those who were not; both were used in a flexible way to allow participants to discuss topics that had greater importance or relevance. With the emic–etic framework in mind, participants were asked to describe their experiences of food aid and then what they considered to be food vulnerability (no prompts were given at that point). We then discussed the current conceptualization of FV (see literature review section) as captured from the literature review done in advance of the fieldwork and used to shape the earlier sections of this paper. Participants were subsequently asked to share their views on current conceptualizations of FV. Finally, participants’ views on overcoming FV were sought.

Table 1. Participants

Participant ID	Background	FV experience
1	Charity board member and lunch club volunteer	outsider
2	Foodbank volunteer who used to be food aid recipient	both
3	Volunteer at a centre that provides hot meals	outsider
4	Community centre volunteer	outsider
5	Community café employee	outsider
6	Church food aid volunteer	outsider
7	Community café support worker	outsider
8	Employee of a centre for adult support that also provides food. Used to be food aid recipient	both
9	Dietitian	outsider
10	Academic working on food poverty/vulnerability	outsider
11	Public health dietitian	outsider
12	Runs city-based foodbank and used to be food aid recipient	both
13	Director of a meals-on-wheels organization	outsider
14	Town councillor involved in food aid	outsider
15	Researcher at a think-tank organization concerning inequality and poverty	outsider
16	Food aid recipient - homeless	insider
17	Academic working on food matters who used to be food aid recipient	both
18 & 19	Food aid recipients	insiders
20	Food aid recipient	insider
21	Food aid recipient	insider

The interviews, ranging between 19 and 60 minutes, were conducted face-to-face or by telephone, based on participants' preferences, and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed using a thematic analysis process (Terry et al. 2017). Two authors coded all the interviews independently and coding was checked to ensure consistency and reach agreement. One of the coders was not involved in the data collection so acted as an unbiased coder. Triangulation was achieved by reviewing relevant literature to further support our themes' generation process. The codes were initially informed by the interview guides and further analysis was done by applying the theoretical concepts already described (second-order codes and themes). The emic and etic approach was used to further categorize our data. For example, first-order codes such as income changes, family changes, and job status changes were grouped together under the second-order code "ad-hoc drivers of FV," which in combination with the second-order code "chronic drivers of FV," such as addictions, poverty, long-term unemployment, and family status, comprised the theme "drivers of FV."

Through an iterative process and discussions among the team members, the final themes included the drivers of FV, the vicious circle, and escaping FV. Our analysis allows a juxtapositioning of the objective and subjective: the personal, embodied, and frightening experience of food insecurity versus support services permeated with value judgments and stereotyping. It allows a window into the complex causes of vulnerability and the approaches to dealing with it. These complexities are evident in the discussions with all participants, whether providers, academics, or recipients, as exemplified in the following quotes, and all this has allowed us to conceptualize the production and reproduction of FV.

Findings

Through our analysis, we demonstrate the drivers of FV and two main avenues for those who experience FV; one leads to a vicious circle where FV is reinforced and the second leads to the possibility of an escape route. The vicious circle is created from (a) stereotyping and stigma, (b) a lack of structural support, and (c) neoliberal sentiments that "blame the victim." The escape route is enabled by support structures.

Drivers of food vulnerability

Our findings echo previous literature (see Azhar et al. 2024; Dowler and O'Connor 2012; Gist-Mackey and Dougherty 2023; Lambie-Mumford 2019) in identifying factors that put people at risk of being food insecure. As shared by our interviewees who have experienced, witnessed, or researched FV, the drivers that produce and reproduce FV stem from changes in people's personal circumstances such as relationship breakdowns, health issues (both physical and mental), unemployment or insufficient income levels, and entrenched poverty, among others, and this was described by both insiders and outsiders. An insider talked about how he "was sleeping on the street for a while ... but my mental health is probably one of the reasons why I still come here" (Interviewee 21, insider). Another insider highlighted the multifaceted nature of food vulnerability:

Lots of people that come here obviously are on low incomes. They're receiving some kind of benefit. And a lot of them are on sickness benefits because they've got a long-term health issue. (Interviewee 19, insider)

Moreover, as many participants highlighted, these drivers are in many cases not isolated but deeply entrenched within the socioeconomic system, enhanced by insufficient infrastructures. Institutional neglect and failure of safety nets is an underlying issue for many:

.. the underlying problem is poverty so, and from our perspective there's three major drivers of poverty. So people's incomes aren't high enough zero hours contracts, minimum wages isn't high enough so people don't have enough money, linked to that the Social Security system isn't fit for purpose, it isn't giving the people the resource they need, and then the costs of living are too high as well, especially housing costs. (Interviewee 2, both)

The vicious circle of FV

We illustrate the notion of a vicious circle of vulnerability expanding on discussions of stigma and how inequality can be produced and reproduced by individuals, communities, and the state (Tyler and Slater 2018). Being locked out of resources, relegated to positions that perpetuate inequality, and then experiencing a litany of wider psychosocial experiences inevitably results in a cyclical wheel of marginality and vulnerability.

Stereotyping and stigma

For many of our insider participants, accessing food aid became a stigma-laden exercise and this was recognized by some outsiders. Often already struggling physically, emotionally, and psychologically, their interactions with providers have to be seen in terms of what is considered "normal" and "acceptable." In addition, we show how neoliberal power structures at a macro level determine what happens at the micro levels: systemic discrimination and categorization within the welfare system (Goffman 1963; Mladenov and Brennan 2021). In particular, many interviewees described the embarrassment and stigma experienced when accessing food support services, and differing levels of non-judgmental support from providers. A food aid recipient discusses several barriers many vulnerable recipients are forced to deal with:

I was going to a foodbank but didn't like the way it was being administered. It's some of the people that visited the foodbank, some of the volunteers made it not so welcoming. It's almost like a stigma . . . with the foodbank you need to go with ID, you need to say if you are on a benefit, which makes it a bit more impersonal, you'll feel it's maybe a bit intrusive because you are going to have to share your personal circumstances. (Interviewee 18, insider)

Providing ID becomes the "cultural script of vulnerability" within those spaces, showing how these practices create barriers and become "intrusive" (Mitchell 2020; Turkkan 2021). One recipient highlighted visual stereotyping that determines how the vulnerable are distinguished and dealt with by the system and how their circumstances may be misinterpreted:

Because what does "need" look like? So, you're telling somebody maybe who appears to dress roughly, so then you're seeing a visible thing and making a statement that that person's

got a need. When in actual fact the person that's got a clean T-shirt on is the one that is homeless. (Interviewee 19, insider)

As one recipient stated, there is a control and systemic bias in the structures that prevents people accessing support or being able to overcome FV – stereotypes by which people are judged when receiving support:

So sometimes socially there is a stigma attached to it or people that look like this or that or what have you. So, I think some of it is about inclusion – because it's a diverse thing, it's not a colour thing, it's not an age thing, it's a people thing. (Interviewee 18, insider)

This reflects discrimination and categorization within support structures that makes accepting and receiving help problematic. It is an example of an etic approach determining risk based on an impersonal, judgmental basis rooted in stigma/stereotyping as social control, which negatively impacts the mental well-being of the service users. Several insiders and some outsiders were critical of the current benefits system as part of the problem and the systematic failure leading to FV. Our findings provide evidence of the stigmatization and institutional categorization that governs access to food and support. For example, one food aid recipient described how stigma had a detrimental effect on their self-esteem:

I think that's the stigma with homelessness, is that we, or people who are on the streets are all either uneducated or alcoholics or drug addicts . . . but there are a lot of people who are on the street who are very intelligent and very willing to change their lives. . . Food banks is a tough one, because you've got to fit certain criteria to get the food. And I think, for people who are living on the street it's a bit, I don't want to use the word embarrassing, but I think your self-esteem takes a knock when you have to do that and you get refused. (Interviewee 21, insider)

Here, references are constantly about having to fit criteria to be considered in need, the prerequisite cultural scripts of vulnerability and/or having to “perform poverty” that creates discomfort and feelings of emasculation. For Goffman (1963), categories are used to anticipate attributes of individuals; categorization is institutionalized in the people-processing systems of human services. In addition, this may lead to measured vulnerability, which can affect people's identities (Gillespie 2012). The comments above reveal the manner in which welfare provision has a symbiotic relationship with marginalization and the social/political function of stigma as a form of power (Tyler and Slater 2018). While community spaces providing food aid can become spaces of care (Lavery 2019), Surman, Kelemen, and Rumens (2021, 1102) describe foodbanks as “contested and compassionate ‘spaces of encounter’ . . . where at the same time compassion can be entangled with structural control (users must feel gratitude) that further fuels stigma and marginalization.” This cause people to hide or obscure their food insecurity, driving food insecurity into what Dougherty et al. (2018) call a discursive underground, which may exacerbate the persistent nature of food insecurity. This resonates with a food service provider who suggested that “trying to destigmatize issues with access to food would be really helpful . . .” (interviewee 13, *outsider*).

This stigma associated with shame and negative feelings will exacerbate the vicious circle. This is because of the strains it places on mental and emotional well-being (Van der Horst, Pascucci, and Bol 2014). The vicious circle, mentioned by many recipients and

providers, highlights how trapped many vulnerable people feel, unable to escape the addictions and impact on their mental well-being. Feelings of shame and anxiety in respect of accessing help negatively impact on people's well-being and exacerbate their food insecurity (Tyler and Slater 2018):

I think it's really important that people are not made to feel ashamed that they may have an issue with food insecurity. So for example going to a foodbank for a younger person has quite a stigma to it, and when we deliver our [meals] we've been able to do that in a way that's really positive and respectful, and that has made it easier for people to ask for assistance. I think as well for older people we find that there is a real stigma around admitting that they are not coping... (Interviewee 13, outsider)

Echoing previous research, we found that stigma-related shame is prominent for those who tried to access support (Villegas et al. 2022). The fact that people who use food banks experience shame contradicts the social dimension of food security that associates it with "socially acceptable ways" of food acquisition, increasing rather than alleviating their FV:

[Food banks] do not resolve food vulnerabilities. It actually adds to the indignity of food vulnerability, the shame, the moralism. (Interviewee 14, outsider)

Lack of appropriate support

People deprived of appropriate support find it difficult to escape FV as they find themselves trapped in an exhausting reality, and this was described by both insiders and outsiders. Poverty normalization supported through inadequate welfare policies often fuels this circle (Caplan 2017) and the situation is worse for people struggling with health issues or addictions. In addition, the long-term physical and mental consequences of a poor-quality diet, such as impaired immune function and depression, can fuel ongoing FV. For example, the following outsider highlights the cycle of vulnerability, the difficulty of escaping from it, and ultimately the person becoming institutionalized:

... marginalized, hard to reach, socially excluded, I don't feel any terminology works very well. But I see it as being community groups that have a particular kind of need, I mean wider needs, but are vulnerable, and maybe don't have enough money ... don't have access to opportunities, and educational opportunities, and so access to and availability to good food becomes quite challenging ... they might suffer from institutionalisation. There is a lack of choice or lack of control over the choices they make about their food. (Interviewee 10, outsider)

Insiders highlighted the complexity and interrelated nature of FV, which makes it more difficult to escape; "people have multiple complex needs ... quite hard to see which problem came first. a mental health problem or substance misuse problem or maybe other factors like learning disability" (interviewee 1, outsider). They also highlighted the personal and embodied picture of the negative spiral into FV:

It's the long-term vulnerable ... more like street homeless, people struggling with and on benefits, things like that, because then you get payday loans and then got to pay that back, then short next month, so do the same again, it's a vicious spiral, circle. (Interviewee 16, insider)

The flaws in the welfare system, the level of support, and lack of joined-up thinking that exacerbates vulnerability were also highlighted, as described by an outsider describing how reducing provision by one agency influenced the need for food-related support:

I think because health and social care have retrenched into what they see as their absolute core statutory responsibilities . . . I've actually heard people within health and social care say "food is not our problem; food is not our responsibility." (Interviewee 13, outsider)

In addition, systemic flaws as well as the disconnect between structures and individuals' lives can fuel FV. These issues, in particular the acute lack of agency and choice that can arise in food aid setups, have been highlighted by this outsider who runs food banks and was once food vulnerable:

So my whole issue with foodbanks is there's no dignity in it at all, you're stripping away people's dignity and their choices of what they eat and it's not nutrition we're giving them . . . fuel bills have gone up, everything has gone up but the benefits haven't so there isn't enough money at the end of the week to buy food basically and that's the only way it's going to change. I feel bad because in our foodbank we can't provide fresh, we do have a few bits of fruit and veg that we give but basically we're giving a tin of pie, a tin of ham, a tin of potatoes and it's not nutritious, kids are growing up with that week on week so we're putting a sticky plaster on a massive big gaping wound . . . I give them pasta and they don't know what to do, they don't know how to cook. During the winter I was writing down recipes of how to make homemade lentil soup because it's cheap, it's nutritious, it heats you up, it feeds the family but . . . they don't know how to cook from scratch so what they're eating is jars and tins and they've got children and their children are growing up not learning how to cook anything. (Interviewee 2, both)

Neoliberal sentiments of choice and blaming the victim

The issue of choice came up a lot in our data from both insiders and outsiders. Current policies that shape the wider society are crucial in determining the kinds of choices that exist for individuals, particularly those in need. In many cases, however, there are no real choices as these are limited by structural and societal labeling and constraints (Cockerham 2010). Many providers (outsiders) talked about "choices" and how people suffering from FV need to make choices and made the wrong choices again and again. This perception of an unwillingness to make changes was found even amongst more empathetic providers and even some recipients who had internalized the wider stereotyping.

An outsider talked about choices:

One of the things I find fascinating is the fact that people are choosing to do things that are not good for them, but they're addicted to and then they've got no money left for food. . . . So, some of the people who are vulnerable are making what I would call bad choices. . . . It may sound conservative to say but maybe some of the people are making bad choices, which is down to education and a society needs to help people to make the right choices. (Interviewee 14, outsider)

While this illustrates the role that choices are perceived to play in FV, it is clearly from the perspective of an outsider. Understanding the factors influencing choice, or lack of choice, from an insider's viewpoint is needed to plan how to address the problem of FV. Life choices that shape people's lifestyles and life chances (Weber 1978) were what

many outsiders focused on to understand FV. The emphasis on “bad choices,” blaming those in need of food, ignores the fact that for many people levels of self-agency are severely limited by social and structural constraints and sanctions that govern many aspects of their lives (Cockerham 2010). For example, one food recipient primarily blames Universal Credit for causing many problems, and focuses on mental health and debts, highlighting how it is not their choice to be in this situation:

There’s quite a few of us here, either street homeless, on benefits, struggling to survive. I’ve got mental health myself, I’m a gambling addict so I struggle to budget... You’ve got to swallow your pride sort of thing. (Interviewee 16, insider)

A volunteer providing food and support to service users refers to wrong choices and the need to encourage confidence and hope within their service users to help them escape FV:

The biggest challenge I think is to encourage people’s confidence and more positive resilience. ... It doesn’t mean the benefit problems are not there, or their employment, or the drug abuse, but if they begin to switch the light on inside then this can bring a wee bit of hope. ... (Interviewee 3, outsider)

Many outsiders unwittingly “blame” the individuals, and their reference to positive “resilience” and “switching the light on inside” suggest that the onus lies on the shoulders of the individual, without taking into account wider constraints, stigma, and lack of support networks. External support is needed to create a social ecology conducive to resilience, to encourage escape from FV. The neoliberal ideology and normative expectations clearly govern the services and provisions that people can access (Thomas, Wyatt, and Hansford 2020). This was illustrated by another participant with substantial experience in managing a service:

... and there’s this desperate desire to be seen to be managing, and also not to want to be any trouble to anyone. ... But no one talks about access to food, and there’s just this presumption that, “of course you can get food.” ... The Care Act says that social care has a responsibility to ensure appropriate nutrition and help with feeding, but it doesn’t talk about actually help to get to the food. (Interviewee 13, outsider)

These perspectives by those working closely with recipients highlight an awareness of the systemic biases and flaws that jeopardize the lives of the most vulnerable, which, if tackled, could potentially lead to better support services. The findings highlight the continuous challenges faced by those experiencing FV, a cycle of marginality, and the disconnect with professionals who understand the problem from a bird’s-eye view, and users who have a more embodied and personal experience of FV. This disjuncture highlights the lack of importance placed on seeing the individual within their social environment, before making judgments on their choices and resilience (Ranta et al. 2024; Ungar 2008; Webb and Harinarayan 1999).

Escaping FV

Many foodbanks, soup kitchens, drop-in centers, and charities are committed to providing advice, support, and long-term initiatives to help vulnerable people escape food poverty. Help and advice can be seen to emanate from an etic approach, building on

risk and resilience and an attempt to enable food recipients to take individual responsibility, directly in keeping with welfare policy-related measures. Morris (2020) argues that in the case of the welfare subject, agency can be driven by incentives, conditionality, and sanctions – a site of disciplinary control and a focus of contestation that eliminate the importance of understanding complexities of the lived experience. Cockerham (2010) similarly states that levels of self-agency are limited by structural constraints.

The quotes below by providers highlight how support is delivered by different agencies, illustrating the interplay between them as experienced by those providing support. They emphasize individual choices, references capabilities, obligations, and even moral dimensions in terms of personal responsibility and constraints:

We're on the ground and do kind of one-to-one workshops, y'know in different communities, and then our training, we deliver a tiered approach so we actually deliver the training, myself and the dietitian and we have nutritionists, we would deliver training then to community, voluntary sector organisations, to tutors, that would then cascade within the community. (Interviewee 9, outsider)

Another interviewee, who had experience as both an insider and outsider, mentioned work being done to educate people in healthy eating, being “savvy shoppers,” taking them through a supermarket and pointing out good offers, providing an example of integrating support with commercial agencies:

.. education and upskilling of people to ensure that they understand what food is healthy and give people the skills to be able to prepare nutritious meals for themselves. And also ensuring that their attitudes to food are less about instant gratification and more about hearty meals. (Interviewee 8, both)

One community café provider demonstrated how collaboration among services could support people to escape FV:

We do also challenge people, we don't have the same people every week coming in for a food parcel... We link them to other services... perhaps if it's an addiction we will try and say: listen you need to get help as well, we can't just keep giving you food parcels as a substitute for you spending all your money. (Interviewee 5, outsider)

A provider (interviewee 6, outsider), who works in a church soup kitchen, mentioned: “giving red slips for food banks,” especially to those people who have benefit sanctions, and they also run a counseling group for the area. In addition, as a church they offer “spiritual support”. One recipient mentioned the foodbank as a source of friendship and security. Another church-related organization had a drop-in and provided support through its socializing network, illustrating the interplay between different types of support that are provided:

The drop-in, it's not just a place for food but a place to socialise and feel welcome, so that's very important for many people. So it has that positive effect on mental health... (Interviewee 3, outsider)

Some agencies also check on how well the clients are managing at home in terms of food being cooked and whether it is nutritious through a “capacity building” approach (interviewee 11, outsider). For many recipients suffering from economic exclusion, social marginalization, and stigmatization, these initiatives are just one step on the ladder to

recovery, supporting Caplan's (2017) argument about making food poverty and vulnerability a social policy matter. Additionally, the fact that people found consolation in some food aid services is not enough to counteract the negative feelings of having to use food aid (Van der Horst, Pascucci, and Bol 2014). There is, however, recognition of differing levels of compassion and support provided within support structures, which determine where the recipient decides to go (Lavery 2019; Surman, Kelemen, and Rumens 2021). Many interviewees were critical of the role of food banks. A lunch club volunteer described the "need for change at a wider agency level" as soon as people enter the system as food vulnerable. This participant highlights the need for a more caring and comprehensive look at the micro causes of vulnerability rather than a detached problem-fixing approach.

By contrast, insider interviewees provided fewer comments on the organizational delivery of services, rather than practical aspects, but one identified a lack of communication regarding support:

The Council were not the people that was telling me that. You know, agencies like Job Centres are not telling you enough about these things, I'm hearing it through somebody who attends it as opposed to the organizations that you think would be telling you. (Interviewee 19, insider)

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study has been to explore "insider" and "outsider" perspectives to conceptualize FV by exploring the way it is produced and reproduced. This conceptualization has both theoretical and policy implications. Using the emic/etic approach of vulnerability, our participants became "outsiders" and "insiders" based on their status as providers and recipients respectively, although allowing for fluidity based on personal experience of FV. This approach gives "voice" to those who matter, the food vulnerable, and helped us understand the lived experiences of those who have managed to "escape" FV and those still food insecure. In Figure 1, we present a conceptualization that brings together the emic and etic views of FV, gathered through our qualitative interviews, and incorporates relevant literature, as presented in this paper.

In so doing, this paper adds to current literature by highlighting the complexity surrounding the debate and brings together the voices of various stakeholders. The framework identifies the drivers that aggravate FV (Figure 1, left-hand side), hence conceptualizing FV as a social construct influenced by health issues and addictions and personal characteristics, which can be a consequence of economic and social circumstances. These factors (individually and collectively) can create and reinforce stereotyping and stigma, as well as marginalization and social exclusion, resulting in a bidirectional impact (hence the double arrow in the diagram).

Additionally, all these factors can be interdependent (hence the box surrounding all the drivers of FV in Figure 1), which, in turn, can lead to complex choices and decision-making, thereby prolonging the cycle of vulnerability. Our findings show that support structures that go beyond food aid, such as welfare services and living wages, are vital in the way that the "vicious circle" is fueled or not. So, Figure 1 highlights the two pathways fueling the FV cycle. The first pathway is from a lack of institutional support that keeps

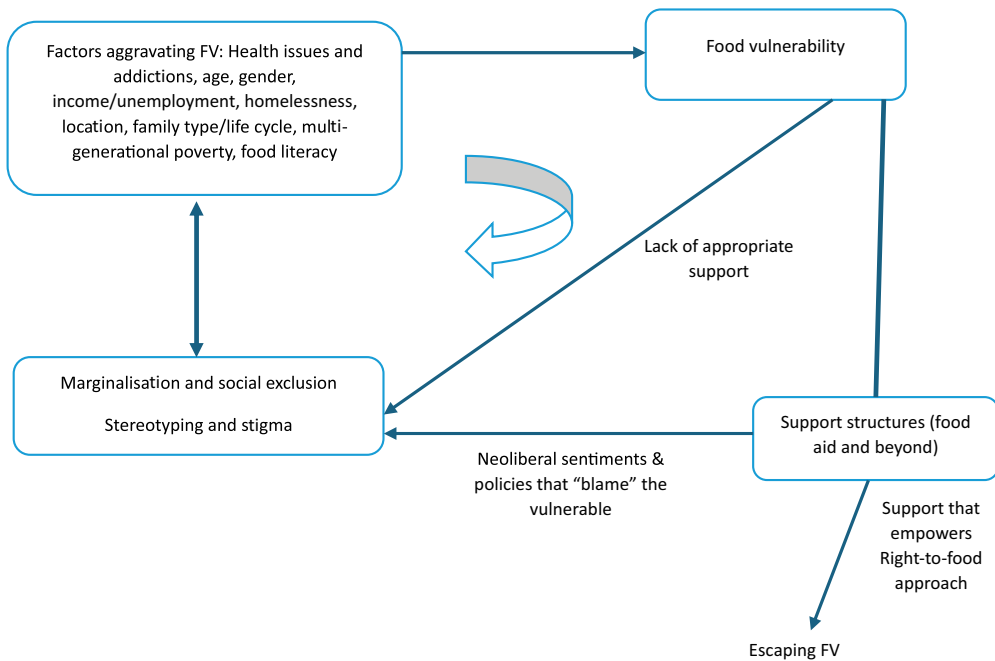


Figure 1. Conceptualization of how food vulnerability is produced and reproduced.

people food vulnerable. The second channel emerges when the food-vulnerable are faced with neoliberal sentiments in accessing support structures, which can further exacerbate stigma, low self-esteem, addictions, and poor mental health, showing that support is necessary but not sufficient for escaping FV as an inappropriate type of support can compromise the capacity to escape FV.

In our interviews, we found many “outsiders” adopted an etic approach to identify and evaluate the broad range of affected people drawing from physical, mental, and psychological characteristics adopting a risk and resilience approach. Long-term FV is described as individuals getting caught in a cycle of homelessness, addiction, and despair, a hopelessness with no social or human capital that could allow them to break out of it. In terms of defining FV, the providers described their perceptions of FV differently, “blaming the victim” and their “choices.” This regulatory aspect of vulnerability discourse has often been criticized for pathologizing certain social groups but not looking more closely at conditions that give rise to disadvantage and marginalization (Mladenov and Brennan 2021; Wacquant 2016). The weaponization of stigma also comes into play, with those providing support often requiring the vulnerable to use “cultural scripts of vulnerability” (Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel 2017; Mitchell 2020; Turkkan 2021).

Clear evidence emerges of the ambivalence in support, often stemming from increased professionalization of services that often reproduces the dominant neoliberal discourses, and rather than supporting and empowering individuals merely seeks to blame and stabilize them (Surman, Kelemen, and Rumens 2021; Thomas, Wyatt, and Hansford 2020) leading to a continuous circle of FV. Many of the food aid organizations in our study have become places of consolation,

socialization, and trust for recipients; however, they also assert structural constraints that fuel the vicious circle. Much of support structures' criticism was aimed at the intrusive and shaming nature of food banks and accessing benefits, and references to wider categorization and a neoliberal ideology that pervades support and reinforces stigmatization (Goffman 1963; Purdam, Garratt, and Esmail 2016; Dougherty et al. 2018; Villegas et al. 2022). The cycle of FV emphasizes how change is needed in institutional societal mechanisms that produce and reproduce this relegation, keeping the food-vulnerable in subjugated positions.

In seeking to conceptualize FV, our findings identified areas that are interconnected and further enhance FV. One of the key findings, supported by both insiders and outsiders, is a need to recognize the social conditions that cause disadvantage and marginalization. Lack of economic resources, austerity, and neoliberal government policies have not only socioeconomic repercussions but a psychological-emotional impact on individuals and households. This importance of understanding individual agency related to social structures leads to the conclusion that, structurally, transformative agency is necessary to tackle FV. In terms of policy implications, objective, *etic* approaches, based on risk evaluation, have been considered important for policy planning so resources are channeled toward those more susceptible to FV. However, our research shows that documenting and amplifying the lived experiences of those who are food vulnerable is vital, empirically and ethically, to understand the multidimensional nature of FV. This *emic* view of FV also justifies the call for the "right to food" for all to be incorporated into national legislation (Lohnes 2023; Scottish Human Rights Commission 2019), which could further alleviate social inequalities and stereotyping (Dowler and O'Connor 2012) and overcome the adverse outcomes of increased professionalization of support services that often reproduce neoliberal sentiments and normalize poverty and associated stigma (Hadley et al. 2025; Thomas, Wyatt, and Hansford 2020).

In conclusion, this paper contributes to FV in terms of policy and practice by highlighting problems that exist in food systems and wider support structures that, fuel food vulnerability. Our study provides a first effort to conceptualize the vicious circle of FV by capturing its complexity and identifying its multiple dimensions (see Figure 1). Building on this paper, larger scale research using an intersectional approach, with a focus on race, gender, class, disability, and migrant status, could provide a deeper understanding and exploration of FV, while taking into account social context, life course and the structure–agency interplay within individuals' lives.

Notes

1. Refers to when people do not have access to enough safe and nutritious food needed for normal growth and development and an active healthy life (FAO).
2. We draw from the work of social constructionists who bring the worlds of "knowledge and experience" and "objective structures and causes" together to shape empirically grounded social scientific inquiry (Baert, Weinberg, and Mottier 2011, 480).

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