

Is
Poverty
invisible
to
those
who
don't
experience
it?

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Introduction

In the Autumn of 2023, I embarked on a new adventure into higher education, driven by my building concern around Food Security issues and the certain reality that the UK is running the increasing risk of suddenly finding itself without sufficient food supplies for all of us to eat.

The journey that had taken me to a Postgraduate Course at the Royal Agricultural University in Cirencester at the age of 50 had been a long one. I very quickly began to feel as if I was meeting all of my accumulated experience head-on, quite literally by coming at it from the other direction. Or in what is the academic, abstract or theory-based way, as opposed to the predominantly experiential route my life has typically taken me before.

It was a mixed blessing. And whilst my concern that academia looks backwards to try and work out solutions for the future may have grown, I also experienced thinking of a kind which although restrained by the machinations of the UK's current higher education environment, certainly helped me close that circle and helped me to view the difficult periods of my own story as one that I can fully appreciate and own.

One Module of my Course of Study was being trialed in a different way. The Course Tutors invited students to undertake what might be called a mini dissertation. Doing research on the real-life implications of poverty, with the suggestion that we might relate this research to our own life experience in some way.

With the childhood experience of being in poverty, it was not many moments before the opportunity to share something deep that might benefit others was flashing across my internal thought screen. And I was very happy to embrace the project with the aim of giving it everything that I have got.

The following pages represent the completion and submission of that work.

My final Report has been reprinted with only the details that could easily identify the personal information of those taking part removed.

The main body of the work has been adapted to form [an e-book published on Amazon in June 2024](#) and has been reset with some very minor editing for the purpose of making this PDF available as a download from my Blog www.adamtugwell.blog in late 2024.

I have shared this content, as the work has been assessed, marked and forms part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security that I was awarded by the RAU.

After filming and publishing [a video about Poverty in the UK](#) which leaned heavily upon what I have learned and not least of all the understanding that *You have to experience or be touched by Poverty to understand it*, I have concluded that its relative popularity suggests that it will be helpful and of benefit to others if I were to publish the original (academic) work in different formats.

Poverty IS a problem that CAN be solved. It is a blight on UK society that simply shouldn't exist. However, Poverty and our inadvertent acceptance of it is also symptomatic of the greater ills that we have to face, but which those so far untouched by Poverty are happy to avoid. *Because to many, Poverty is something that happens only to other people, who are someplace else.*

Thank you for reading and giving thought to what the realities of Poverty today really are.

Adam Tugwell

October 2024, Cheltenham. UK

The Structure of this Booklet

In as much as it can be, the content of this e-book reflects the structure of the academic submission that I made to the RAU in December 2023, as a requirement of my Postgraduate Course.

The process followed should be self-explanatory through Parts 1 – 3 of this Booklet.

Parts 1 – 3 are then followed by the Reference List and the 1st Appendix, which includes the list of questions that I asked as part of the research project you are about to read.

The References used include academic standard sources and it is possible that some of these may not be accessible to readers who are not currently studying or working within the UK Higher Education system, without paying a fee.

Where this is the case, and you would like to consider the wider work offered by those sources, it is likely that a full Internet search will identify alternative pathways and/or sources.

I make no apology for the 'grey' information referencing, such as links to pictures of mail-order catalogues and other such materials. I believe these can only be of help to someone reading about the 70's and 80's as a child in Poverty, without their own experience of it, attempting to picture the being there and 'living it' for the very first time.

AT

Is Poverty invisible
to those who don't experience it?

Is Poverty Invisible?

Part 1: How we perceive Poverty in the UK

Despite the heavily publicised cost of living crisis and 14.4 Million People in the UK living in Poverty in 2021/22 (*HoC Library, April 2023*), the perception that ‘poverty is something that happens to someone else’ remains prevalent.

Poverty is neither new nor a temporary phenomenon. William Beveridge’s 1942 Report suggesting ways the Government should rebuild after World War II identified Poverty as a major issue. Albeit one identified as consisting of five ‘Giant Evils’, namely ‘Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness’ (*BBC, 2014*) which are unrecognisable in the language of today.

However, Poverty has been recorded as a social problem since at least the 18th century (*King, 2000*), with the first notable legislation relating to Poverty being The Henrician Poor Law of 1536. (*JSTOR*)

It was the early 19th century before recognition of the need for considered legislation (*UK Parliament*), when work was undertaken to ensure that poor families received a basic education (*Adamson*).

Despite documented history, contemporary thinking suggests denial of genuine poverty. MP and Deputy Chairman of The Conservative Party Lee Anderson recently referring to ‘poverty nonsense’, stating that ‘real poverty’ was something that existed in the 1970’s. (*Independent, Oct 2023*)

From theories underpinning Malthusianism, where the first documented attempts were made to explain the mechanics of Poverty (*Harvey & Read, 1992*) to current exponential growth of Foodbanks reaching a total of 2,572 across the UK (*HoC Library, Oct 2023*), there is a disconnect between evidence of Poverty and the perception of what Poverty is.

My own experience of Poverty

I grew up in a one parent family, without a dad until I was a teenager. My parents separated when I was 7 months old, and I was 6 when my mother secured a 3-bed council house’ so my brother and I could have rooms of our own.

This was before the Child Support Agency and my father never paid any form of maintenance. My mother, brother and I were dependent upon ‘Social Security’ and ‘Family Allowance’, collected weekly, when mum walked to the Post Office to ‘cash’ a ‘Giro’, before the ritual of immediately buying whatever we were out of, or replacing anything broken that couldn’t be secured in another way such as paying a small amount weekly using the Gratton catalogue (*Vintage Catalogues*).

Although conscious that money was ridiculously tight, I never felt like I was going without. I didn’t miss the things other people had. *Because they were things that I’d never had.*

We received free school meals, had free school milk (*Eastern Daily Press, Jan 2006*), regular School Uniform Vouchers and I recall an emergency grant from the DHSS so that I had a proper mattress to sleep on. Hand-me-down clothes were often as cherished as I feel now about something new.

The signs of parental struggle were hidden from view, until either a distant family member had to step in financially, *whilst charging a heavy emotional price*, or I became aware of the abnormality of what I considered normal, like getting myself up, ready and walking the mile to my junior school, *because one of the ways mum coped was to stay in bed.*

The day the electricity coin meter was removed was one of celebration. I knew there was no more risk of being sent out late on a cold night to knock on doors or ride my bike to the garage to change a note for some coins.

I've heard it said, "Privilege is invisible to those who have it" (TED, 2015). And in the context of my own life, I question, *'Is poverty invisible to those who do not experience it?'*

Considering poverty in the UK today

I believe everything to be relative to the life experience each of us has.

From this perspective and the limitations of time and scope to complete this project, I felt the most effective way to compare my experiences with the realities of poverty in the UK today, was to speak to a professional dealing with Poverty daily. Someone who could provide an objective, first-hand view of what people in poverty are experiencing, as opposed to today's 'accepted' view.

Although I recall a Christmas Food Parcel from the local Church as a child, there was no regular access to Foodbanks, which have only become prevalent in the past 15 years. (HoC, Oct 2023).

Foodbanks are the obvious change in Poverty since I was a child, and I concluded this would be the ideal focus for my research.

Part 2: My Interview at a Gloucestershire Foodbank

Overview of the Foodbank

The Gloucestershire Foodbank [GFB] is housed and governed by a local Church. GFB runs as a separate organisation under the Trussell Trust umbrella, using their referral pathways and quality frameworks.

GFB operates three sites of its own within a Gloucestershire Town area, with the Salvation Army operating a linked site in the Town.

Discovery (Questions asked, Please See Appendix 1)

I asked Interviewee A (IA), for an overview of their role and what the Foodbank does. (Q1)

IA said the *“Principle is that its people who are in food crisis and needing immediate support with food.”* GFBs work is about *“Crisis support, rather than ongoing. However, what used to be a crisis is harder to get out of, so we see people more regularly than we used to.”* (Q2)

“We provide an immediate food parcel that will support people for a minimum of three days and we also have Citizens Advice workers on site to provide ongoing support as well.” (IA, Q2)

The presence of Citizens Advice (CAB) on site was a surprise. CAB have been providing support for the past year and GFB would no longer continue without it. (Q2)

I then focused on the use of GFB (Questions 5 – 20). 2022/23 had been GFB’s busiest year ever with a 40% upsurge in use. Numbers had already exceeded the Covid peak (which had been the previous peak) (Q6)

Whilst the largest demographic of users are single males *“Because they rarely qualify for anything else.”* (IA, Q16), the most significant change in user numbers in the previous year had been a 95% increase in the number of Pensioners using GFB. (Q16)

The reasoning given by IA for the rise in numbers was *“Things cost more. Basic stuff has increased hugely”*. *“People have seen their rents go up by at least a couple of hundred [Pounds].”* *“You get ‘no reason evictions’, because they [Landlords] want to put the rents up.”* (IA, Q7). They then added, *“There’s an increasing issue with debt, [it] exacerbates the issue further.”*

The growth in the number of GFB users came primarily from the existing demographic, areas around the Town with significant social housing numbers. However, there had been an *“Increase in referrals from everywhere, from people who are working and not working.”* (IA, Q8) It was also notable that 10% of GFB users are working, with this number increasing. (Q8).

We moved to qualitative and experiential issues for GFB users. IA listed challenges with rent, challenges with benefits and sanctions (Q9). Debt repayment within the benefit system *“Takes people over the edge with what they can manage.”* (IA, Q9)

IA added, *“It’s been really interesting with Citizens Advice [working on site]. They say, ‘If you work with people, you can get almost anyone out of that crisis point’. Because usually there was an [identifiable] cause of it. But there isn’t always now. Sometimes there just isn’t enough money to cover everything.”* (IA, Q9)

Relating the perceptions of Poverty in the media, I asked about users abusing GFB. It was clear that whilst there is a small amount of abuse, this was attributable to people, where *“Their survival technique is to work the system.”* IA later added, *“I don’t think for many people it would be, ‘This is the way I want to live’”*. (IA, Q10).

Asked about the typical experiences of GFB users, IA was clear that those suffering food poverty would also be suffering fuel poverty [energy poverty] too, and that there are simple realities at work such as being unable to cook food without electricity or gas. (Q13)

Attempting to understand how IA perceived the view of the public, IA felt that there is a lot more public awareness than there used to be, and that lots of people really do care. (Q19).

When asked if they felt Politicians [and government] understood the need for Foodbanks, IA said *"If you've never experienced life like that, it's very difficult to know what it's like to live hand to mouth, in that place of crisis."* IA then added, *"The minute you are removed from the ground, it becomes theoretical."* (IA, Q18)

IA suggested the perception society has of food Poverty and the use of Foodbanks is key to any solution. IA was considerate of how the system [government] works, and felt that working with other organisations was key. IA said *"If we work together, there's a lot more hope than if people come through between different agencies."* (IA, Q17)

Foodbank users are apprehensive, feel shame, have a sense of failure and benefit from experiencing a 'safe space'. (Q20). Foodbanks are most effective when they *"Make people feel like they matter"*. (IA, Q20)

Part 3: What I found - A critical review of the research, reflection and reporting process

My experience of this project was sobering. Although I lived with Poverty growing up, that experience was quickly put in the context of how a child in Poverty might feel today.

The role of *cultural expectations*, media advertising and the disproportionate influence of pester power on parents navigating Poverty was brought into sharp focus when IA said, *"The one thing they [parents] don't want is for their child to feel excluded again."* (Q14)

The comment took me to the experience of a schoolfriends visit to our home and being ridiculed the following week because we had a black and white TV [when it was 'normal' to have colour]. In no time at all, my mum did a deal with the TV repair man and bought an old colour 'set'. One that had probably been condemned.

Whilst *"The expectations of life have changed."* (Q14), it was clear the commonality in the experience of the effects of poverty, or *what being in poverty feels like*, are very much the same now, as when I was a child. Particularly as IA's view of poverty was *"It leaves people in a continual state of crisis, because even if there is money coming in, you are never quite sure there's going to be enough. You are never able to have peace about the situation, so there is always that anxiety"*. (IA, Q11).

I was right there, *feeling Poverty*, as a child. But when IA shared *"If you want to move people into work, they need to be able to work; not just survive."* (Q15), I was able to relate a range of more recent life experiences too.

Is anything really different about the way we look at Poverty now?

The recognition of Poverty as a social problem from the 19th century onwards has encouraged growth in academic thinking and commentary.

Highly valued work such as Rawls 'Veil of Ignorance' (JSTOR, 1999) help identify that society lacks basic *Poverty awareness*, and that the solution will require people to think differently.

However, whilst highly regarded commentators like Daniel Chandler (*Free & Equal*, 2023) consider Rawls work to be groundbreaking, the use of changing perspective as a tool to instigate fairness through behaviour modification is not new. It is documented as the principle of 'Divide and Choose', and has references in Genesis, Chapter 13 and 1 Kings, Chapter 3. (*King James Bible*).

So, whilst such solutions may be 'new', they may only be original in so far as context or the subjectivity of the viewer is concerned.

The importance or relevance of context in understanding Poverty

It is striking that technical understanding or acknowledgement of Poverty is present throughout history, both anecdotally and documented form. Yet Poverty continues to exist.

Historically we had Workhouses and Paupers. As a child, we had 'Social Security', 'Family Allowance', Council Houses and Black, and White TV's. Today we have Universal Benefit, Benefits sanctions, Social Housing and Xboxes.

The tools Poverty uses to touch lives are forever changing. But the impact of Poverty remains the same.

The lived experience of Poverty reflects the time and how the world around us operates.

The tools Poverty inflicts harm with can be so different, that a different language is required to fully elucidate and contextualise the lived experience of Poverty at that moment in time.

Yet knowing *only* this may prevent translation of the message about Poverty, that everyone needs to hear.

The experience of visiting GFB and reflecting on what I learned made clear that when an individual is not experiencing the specifics of Poverty, in that moment, *even when that individual has first-hand past experience of living in poverty and arguably therefore has the ability to relate to it very well*, they can *and will* view Poverty in a mechanical way. Rather than the emotional way that is only possible for those enduring the lived experience at that time.

I agree with IA, that *“The minute you are removed from the ground, it becomes theoretical.”* (IA, Q18)

Reflections on Poverty in the UK today

I have become aware that:

1. The technical existence of Poverty is widely accepted, but its impact and reach is not.
2. The interpretation of Poverty is relative to the understanding of the viewer or those experiencing it.
3. Poverty is itself highly subjective and constantly evolving.
4. Because the universal acceptance of Poverty is technical, no official effort is made to understand what *lived experience of Poverty* really is, leading to public policy solutions that make the subjective or experiential nature of Poverty *considerably worse*.
5. Poverty requires a permanent solution that is objective and universal, that fully considers the subjective elements that make lived experience of Poverty real.

Whilst models for modifying collective and individual behaviour to create change exist, (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), it is clear the need for change must be accepted before change is possible.

Regrettably, the historic tolerance of Poverty indicates an ongoing resistance to that change.

Within the current system, paradigm or ‘the way the world works’, self-interest is an embedded value. The relationship with the value of money is prevalent in everything. Whether conscious or not, the mindset is *for some to be rich; others must be poor*.

It is also notable that academic work and commentary considered helpful by identifying alternative approaches, economic models, and the use of tools such as Universal Basic Income may also hinder progress. It has become common for solutions tabled on the basis of instigating voluntary change at a universal level, when that change can only create a difference within the restrictions of the existing paradigm and how today’s world and economic system works.

Ending Poverty is possible. But the need to do so is not widely accepted.

The level of change necessary to end Poverty at the objective level, rather than merely seeking to alleviate Poverty at the current technical level is one that must be appreciated objectively through a process of valuing it at the subjective and experiential level too.

The proponents of that change must be fully accepting of the universal consequences of that change.

The journey to end Poverty for everyone begins with the question of how we make the consequences of lived experience of Poverty something that everyone understands.

In Conclusion

On the basis of life experience and what I have learned about Poverty in the UK today, I conclude that the true impact of Poverty IS invisible to those who don't experience it.

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Appendix: My Questions

1. Please could you just confirm your name, role and that you are happy for this interview to be recorded?
2. Please could you talk me through what you do here and how the Cheltenham Foodbank works?
3. Why was the Cheltenham Foodbank established and what were the initial aims that were set out to achieve?
4. Are the aims of the Cheltenham Foodbank any different now?
5. How many people are you helping each week?
6. Have you experienced any changes in numbers of users?
7. What factors do you consider to have influenced the change in numbers of users?
8. Where do your foodbank users come from?
9. What are the typical experiences that your foodbank users are having?
10. Do you believe that Foodbanks are being abused?
11. How would you describe poverty today?
12. Is it possible to measure poverty and if so, how?
13. What do you consider to be the most common factors amongst people experiencing food poverty?
14. Do you think that poverty in general has changed?
15. Does the benefit system genuinely support poor and vulnerable people?
16. What kind of people are seeing at the foodbank regularly?
17. What could be done to remove the need for Foodbanks?
18. Do you think politicians understand the need for Foodbanks?
19. Do you think the wider public understand the need for Foodbanks?
20. What are the impacts of the experience of using a foodbank on users?