My experience of volunteering at The Food Bank has influenced this critical examination of the practices and values of The Food Bank as a contemporary vital institution. The need for emergency food is escalating, as The Food Bank at which I volunteer recorded a 70% rise in food parcels over the last two years (MKFoodBank, 2013). The global issue of hunger is localised in the rationale of UK Food Banks and a social analysis of this charity is important, as exhibiting patterns of social inequalities is one way in which we can recognise our society’s excluded and notions of a new poor (Crompton, 1996, cited in Elliott, 2002).

Viewing The Food Bank hub as a floor plan of organised labour, standardisation of work practices in the routine factory system of volunteers has a fixed time frame of 9am until 12pm with a tea break at 10.30am. Paid employment requires flexibility of The Food Bank office worker with zero contract hours. The leading volunteer on shift in The Food Bank hub initiates and oversees the “picking” and “packing” phases, instructed by The Food Bank serving centre, orders for quantity and type of food parcels are needed for the next serving sessions. Food items donated are sorted by date, with food close to expiring being “booked in” and stacked onto the shelves in the “picking” phase by the volunteers. Food picked for a “single adult” contains tea bags and sugar, whereas a “child” parcel does not, but sweetcorn is given to children over adults. Each volunteer is assigned a task within the food parcel production process.

As a charity, The Food Bank service is not regulated by the state. Food voucher policy maintains discipline in clarifying “emergency food need” and restricting food parcels per annum per person. Applying Foucault’s (2004, cited in Schirato et al, 2012) conception of state surveillance and his notion of discipline, internal purposes of The Food Bank act as a governing body through regulation and control under food voucher policy. This is an example of how surveillance aims to deter deviant behaviours to uphold competence and supply food parcels fairly.

The project manager gave me the chance to apply my combined academic and Food Bank Production line skills to an office role. “A “Post-Traditional” society that is characterised by intensified reflexivity of actors and institutions hinges on information/knowledge” (Giddens, 1994, quoted in Webster, 2006: 57), highlighting how I could import institutionally verified knowledge to generate an information rich
environment of the charity. Social science graduates are of the highest ranking in the “industry adaptability index” (Onrec, 2013), exhibiting their reflexivity in the contemporary economy.

Through processing information into knowledge, weekly records of food issued by The Food Bank’s mobile service and serving centres are used to identify the locations most in need of food and interpret this data to comprehend the demands for their service.

Information societies are surveillance societies, utilising and tending to personal data to impact everyday life (Lyon, 2001). The Food Bank replicates this concept, as information is gathered using Excel software to input data and illustrate trends in graphs to predict future supplies of food parcels. A technological shift evidenced in ICTs incorporated into institutional organisation and functioning is arguably characteristic of an “Information Society” (Webster, 2006: 11).

Updating The Food Bank website to update the public, its contributors, on its operations and service demand suggests the societal impact of ICTs on up-to-date information is a trait of technological change.

“The action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity” (Castells, 1996, quoted in Webster, 2006: 101) was demonstrated by a member in Regeneration of the Local Council inviting my knowledge after hearing of The Food Bank data analysis I was undertaking. I was appreciated as an information provider.

Areas of residences in the most need of food and subsequent response of The Food Bank were identified through tracked patterns of demand by locality. Effects of current welfare changes in Britain are observed in rising demand upon The Food Bank and charity services alike, suggesting more reliance on non-state welfare services. Incidences of using The Food Bank are surveyed at food serving sessions; accounting for the predominance of benefits changed, stopped or delayed, profiling its scope of clients and current unemployment-related issues. Applying Webster’s (2006) emphasis on routine surveillance, data trends are a prerequisite to a surveillance society’s social orchestration, so the Council utilise knowledge on populations and policy to exercise reducing food poverty.

The Food Bank’s food supply provides a short-term response to food poverty whilst the State aims to address food poverty issues in the long-term. These two social institutions, through their observation and organisation of people facing UK poverty, display Giddens’ (1991) concept of established modern-day social organisation (cited in Webster, 2006).

Criticising Marx’s theory of calculative intent articulated to only commodity exchange, viewing all objects and experiences as potential commodities would be more beneficial than segregating commodities from non-commodities (Shepherd, 2002). Viewing volunteering as a commodity, calculative intent is present in not-for-profit charity work in exchange for benefiting another’s life chances. Volunteering is not materialistic in its returns, but the time spent is valued by self-satisfaction, arguably a self-seeking motive, but the exchange is not typical of profit-orientated work in contemporary society whereby exchange is for material consuming access for the self. “All commodities...function as both “objects of utility” and “depositories of value”” (Keen, 1993, quoted in Shepherd, 2002: 186). This is exemplified through the volunteers utilised in the production line of food parcels and in the service of The Food Bank. The volunteer
reaps the value of volunteering itself, seeking the productivity that labour would bring to retirement, seeking the meaning of charity work as self-fulfilling for the part-time worker and certifying experience for the human capital of a student.

The “spread of educational certification” in the rise of “theoretical knowledge as a criterion for distinguishing an information society” (Webster, 2006: 58) is present in accumulation of education certification, charity service experience, volunteering and networking in an information-rich organisation like a council. Reflexivity as a knowledge worker and my human capital are vital in what I can import into our contemporary society. Giddens (1994, cited in Webster, 2006: 57) suggests social change to an “information-intensive” contemporary society, motioning a spread of educational certification and commodification in an information-centred economy, but not “Information Society”. The commodification of education encourages students to view the self as a consumer investing in their human capital to reap high economic returns (Swain, 2011, cited in Karpov, 2013). Education as a commodity to benefit economic growth is on the basis of a competition-orientated Anglo-American model (Karpov, 2013), supporting a knowledge-competitive culture, but not a current “information society”.

Capitalism is the “cultural logic” of postmodernism in contemporary society (Jameson, 1991, cited in Delanty, 2000:143). Transcending capitalist ideas into the culture of charity, “choice is the consumer society’s meta-value...the “choosiness” of the consumer is but a reflection of competitiveness, the lifeblood of the market” (Bauman, 2005: 58). The high concentration of “competitors” in the charity market means high competition of “selling” the charity to potential contributors in a capitalist-cultural society. I attended a marketing meeting to discuss the corporate identity of The Food Bank, drawing on how I once viewed The Food Bank before volunteering and understanding the charity now as a volunteer, how could its “brand image” be innovated? Applying Bauman’s (2005) logic of a consumer-targeted market, The Food Bank has to understand the consumer (the contributor) in its perception to succeed and be known as a worthwhile charity.

Partaking in and assisting organisation of a Tesco food collection was an opportunity to relay my knowledge of The Food Bank charity to the public, and make known the food items in short supply so that they could donate accordingly. My food bank experiences of producing and serving food shaped my knowledge as a strategic source for the emotional labour, as discussed by Hochschild (2003), of this charity collection branded under “FareShare” but supplying the local food bank.

Attending a serving session, insight into the not-so stereotypical food bank client was a heart-wrenching experience. The emergency state people can find themselves in is evident of a contemporary global capitalist society with increased consumer choice (resources such as time and money) increasing our access to goods in everyday life (Bauman, 2007, cited in Davis, 2011). A shortage of resources means restricted choices, characterising a food bank client’s choice of heating or eating. This expresses Lyon’s (2001: 59) contemporary consumer society caption: “to avoid the fate of non-consuming - or of choicelessness - that is the lot of the poor”. Beck’s (1992) “Risk Society” and the individualisation of risk explain how “human agents confront socially produced risks individually” (cited in, Elliott, 2002: 305). Understanding the “Risk Society” in conjunction with certified experience in an information-intensive society, my navigation through a University education and individual responsibility to import knowledge into the labour market characterises contemporary risk-avoidance, particularly regarding avoiding
unemployment. The deliberate downsizing of staff examined by Bauman’s (2005: 53) concept of the contemporary capitalist approach to labour suggests “more and more, the hiring of labour is turning from an asset into a liability”. Waste and reduction in opportunities to import human capital into the labour market mark the failure of risk-avoidance, which is consequential of socially-produced unemployment, emanating the need for a response of The Food Bank due to unemployment-related issues of debt and benefit troubles (MKFoodBank, 2013). A “proliferation of class inequalities and economic exclusions” (Elliott, 2002: 304) could be a direct consequence of society’s spread of educational certification and individual competitiveness in employability and employment. Profiles of food bank clients exhibit current socio-political issues of distributions of wealth and income due to current governmental deregulation, correlating a socially-produced privatization of risk (Elliott, 2002). A “risk society” is apparent in the unpredictability of who will resort to using The Food Bank, be it the individual unsuited to the flexible specialisations of a Post-Fordist economy (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), or the individual excluded from educational competition due to issues of inequality of opportunity in contemporary society.

References:


Picture 2: [http://www.haylefoodbank.co.uk/get-involved/](http://www.haylefoodbank.co.uk/get-involved/)
