Understanding children's lived experiences of food insecurity: a study of primary school-aged children in Leeds

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mum and my uncle Col, who I really wish were here to see me finally submit it. I know they would have been really proud.

Pam Connolly, 1946 – 2021

Colin Thorne, 1943 – 2021

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to thank the children who gave me their time and trusted me enough to share their stories with me. They are the experts on children's experiences of food insecurity. Also, the staff at the school, who made me welcome and supported me – this thesis wouldn't have been possible without all of them.

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Abstract

This thesis explores what it means for British primary school-aged children to experience food insecurity. Food and how we access it is key to our physical and emotional health and also enables or excludes us from social relationships. Food insecurity occurs when people do not have enough money; it is not a discrete phenomenon but is part of being in poverty.

Since 2019, data collected in the Department for Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey tell us how many children are living in households experiencing food insecurity in the United Kingdom. However, we know very little of what this actually signifies for the children and their daily lives. Taking a child-centred approach, and via focus groups and one-to-one interviews with nine to eleven year-olds in Leeds, this thesis contributes to knowledge on this issue by providing a rich picture of how pre-high school children are impacted by living in a household experiencing food insecurity.

The thesis investigates the impact of living in an economically precarious household on children's diets, their mental health, and their social interactions. Contemporary dominant narratives relating to poverty which shape attitudes towards people experiencing food insecurity are explored. The findings demonstrate how children and their families engage in multiple strategies to try and achieve as 'normal' a diet as possible, and how the precariousness of the household's economic status has a significant negative effect on children's mental health and their social interactions.

These findings indicate the need to expand our conceptualisation of child food insecurity to ensure that the harmful impact of even 'mild' household food insecurity on children's mental health is sufficiently recognised, measured and tackled. This thesis argues and illustrates that food-based policy responses will not solve the problem, and that the only solution is a consistent and adequate household income.

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2022 it was reported that over two and a half million children in the United Kingdom lived in households that had experienced food insecurity in the previous six months (The Food Foundation, 2022). This is a shocking statistic, but we know very little about what this actually means for children in terms of their lived experience.

This thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap by providing a rich understanding of how the day-to-day lives of primary school-aged children are impacted by living in a family that is experiencing food insecurity. Food insecurity can be defined as a situation in which household income is not enough to allow the family to eat sufficient, appropriate or preferred food. However, as I demonstrate in this thesis, it can also mean that they are able to do so, but this is only possible as a result of deploying various strategies that have costs in terms of time, energy or mental health. (More on the definition of food insecurity as I understand it in this thesis can be found in Chapter 2.) This additional work that must be put in by many families on low incomes in order to have the diets that they need and want is not sufficiently recognised by policy-makers or in academia. It is key to understanding the true reality of the experience of food insecurity. This thesis is as much about poverty as it is about food.

In this chapter I open by providing some background as to why I chose this particular topic. I then situate the thesis within the political and economic context of the period in which I undertook the fieldwork and did the bulk of the analysis. Next, I explain why I chose to do research on children's experiences and why I focussed on a specific element of the experience of living in poverty, namely food insecurity. This then leads to my research questions. Finally, I provide a brief summary of each of the chapters that make up this thesis.

1.1 Background to this PhD

I have been thinking about and working on the issue of children's experiences of poverty and food since I set up a Healthy Food Team with a fellow parent at my children's primary school in 2010 and spent a lot of time in the dinner hall at lunchtimes. I saw first-hand what some of the children were bringing in to eat – a 'sandwich' made out of two slices of bread and some margarine and nothing else, or a Tupperware box of cold chips that their dad brought back the night before from the takeaway that he worked in. What I also saw was how the children tried to hide what they were eating because they were ashamed.

I decided to do an MSc in Food Policy and as part of this explored issues relating to children and food. I also started attending the All Party Parliamentary Group on School Food. This led to me joining the Holiday Hunger Taskforce and supporting its work as a volunteer. When I decided to do a PhD it made sense therefore to explore the topic of holiday hunger – whereby families struggle over school holidays because without access to free school meals their household food costs go up. I started my studies feeling that it was very important that I collect quantitative data – I thought at the time that statistics were what would capture policy-makers' attention and this is how I would be able to make a difference. It remains the case that the majority of research in this field employs quantitative methods. However, the first piece of research I did – a survey of headteachers in all Leeds' primary schools – made me stop and think about both my chosen research topic and the methods I would use to investigate it. I realised that I needed to step back and dig down, to understand what it meant and felt like for children to live in families in which accessing adequate or appropriate food was sometimes a problem. I also recognised that the only way to really understand children's experiences was to talk with children, i.e. to use qualitative methods.

The process of undertaking this PhD has been messy, iterative and challenging. From the beginning to the very end I have continually modified and refined my understanding of how research should (and can) be undertaken, analysed and the findings presented. Learning has come from academic papers, but also from the children that I met in the field. During this period I have also worked as a food poverty campaigner and volunteered in food banks, and this work and the people I worked with have impacted on my approach to my PhD. I have learnt a lot from making mistakes. I share what I have learnt (and the mistakes that I made) in this thesis as I believe that being open, honest and critically reflexive leads to higher quality and more valid research (Lather, 1994; McNair et al., 2008; Mortari, 2015) and is a key part of ensuring that ethical considerations remain a priority throughout the process.

1.2 Placing this thesis within the current political and economic context

I write this Introduction during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has impacted significantly on people's ability to access food, not only because of food shortages or being unable to visit shops, but also because jobs have been lost, income has been reduced and costs have risen for many families (Connors et al., 2020). This was illustrated by the dramatic increase in people claiming benefits -- for example, the beginning of the first national lockdown in Spring 2020 saw a tenfold increase in claims made for Universal Credit (Department for Work and

Pensions, 2021c) -- and in the soaring numbers of people having to rely on food aid (Goodwin and Forsey, 2020).

The result has been increases in experiences of food insecurity, particularly for households with children: government research undertaken between November 2020 and January 2021 found that twenty-four per cent households with children under sixteen years had low or very low food security[1] (Armstrong et al., 2021, p.30; see also Connors et al., 2020; Koltai et al., 2021).

The fieldwork and much of the analysis for this thesis were undertaken pre-pandemic, but the situation as regards food insecurity in the UK was already very concerning. The recession of 2007/8 saw the beginning of a growth in people accessing food aid in the UK (Boyle and Power, 2021), and numbers began to climb rapidly after 2011/12 (Loopstra et al., 2018). Academics and third sector organisations were highlighting an increasing reliance on food aid and an explosion in the numbers of food banks as early as 2013 (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013; Perry et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2014; Ashton et al., 2014; Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014; Loopstra, 2018). A United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation survey in 2014 found that in terms of levels of household food security, the UK was in the bottom half of European countries (Taylor and Loopstra, 2016). The upsurge in numbers of people in levels of poverty such that they cannot afford to feed their families has been attributed (including by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; see Alston, 2018) to reforms to the welfare system brought in by the Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 (Loopstra et al., 2018; House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2019; Pybus et al., 2020; Power et al., 2021; Reeves and Loopstra, 2021; Boyle and Power, 2021) and the policies introduced under the 'austerity agenda' (Ridge, 2013; Power et al., 2020; O'Connell et al., 2020).

Although there have been no data collected directly with children in the UK, we know that their experiences of food insecurity are linked to those of the adults with which they live (Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018b). A Food Standards Agency survey in 2018 found that only seventy per cent of households with children were food secure (Benson et al., 2019). In 2019 the government committed to undertaking annual surveys of household food insecurity

[1] The Food And You survey, administered by the UK Food Standards Agency, uses a definition of 'low food security' as households reducing the 'quality, variety and desirability of their diets'. 'Very low food security' is defined as 'eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.' (see Benson et al., 2019, p.37)

(Butler, 2019) via a set of questions[2] in the Food Resources Survey, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions. The first results, from the survey undertaken in the financial year 2019/20, found that eleven per cent of all UK households with children were experiencing low or very low food security, which means that they have 'a risk of, or lack of access to, sufficient, varied food' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021d). This increased to twenty-nine per cent for single parent families (Office for National Statistics, 2021b). A separate but important indicator of potential child food insecurity is the rise in child poverty levels: the number of children living in poverty, after dropping to a fifteen year low of 17.5 per cent in 2010/11, has risen rapidly since then, to 22.9 per cent in 2019/20 (Office for National Statistics, 2021a). This is the socio-economic context in which this thesis is situated.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing economic difficulties (Goudie and McIntyre, 2021) and disproportionately affected families already struggling on insufficient incomes (Bhattacharya and Shepherd, 2020). There is no way of knowing at this moment what will happen around levels of poverty and inequality during this period of economic and social uncertainty and afterwards, but studies which aim to understand how these experiences impact on children remain important and perhaps are even more crucial. As such, this thesis is timely and useful.

1.3 Why talk to children?

The end of the 1980s saw the civil and political rights of children recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Woodhead, 2010), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and, in the UK, the 1989 Children Act, which required that children should participate in decisions involving them (Thomas, 2000). This reflects a change in the way children are viewed: childhood is no longer seen as just a stage on the way to becoming an adult, i.e. a 'whole person', but children are recognised as social beings with agency and knowledge and the ability to accurately communicate their feelings and experiences (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Powell and Smith, 2009; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Thomas, 2000). There is an ethical and legal imperative, therefore, to learn about and respond to children's perspectives and experiences. In addition, and crucially, policy responses to issues such as food insecurity may not be appropriate or effective without 'ensuring that the views of children are incorporated' (Ridge, 2011, p.74).

[2] These questions are modelled on the United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module. See the following webpage for details: https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools.aspx#household

Although we have seen a shift towards an approach to research that values 'hearing and respecting the 'voice' of children' (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018, p.81), my review of the literature around children's experiences of food insecurity (see Chapter 2) indicates that many of the studies on this issue use proxies, such as parents or teachers. The literature provides no explanation or justification for the use of adult proxies, but children are often seen as being less competent than adults (Pyer and Campbell, 2013), and research involving them involves negotiating what is viewed by some as an 'ethics tightrope' (Morrow, 2012, p.18) of balancing children's right to agency and participation with adult responsibilities to protect them. Certainly, the academic ethics process may be more complicated and take longer as children are classed as vulnerable. I suggest that the extra resources and time that are needed when undertaking research with children may lead to the use of adult proxies.

This is a problem however, as adults may not be able to truly understand the lifeworlds of children (Christensen, 2004); indeed, studies have found that parental reporting on children's experiences of food insecurity may not always be accurate (Fram et al., 2011; Kuku et al., 2011; Nord, 2013; Bernal et al., 2014). Use of a proxy to gather data on children also does not acknowledge their agency. Qualitative methods may enable a 'greater insight' into children's lived experiences relating to poverty (Ridge, 2002, p.4) than quantitative methods, but there is a dearth of research employing them to investigate this topic. This thesis serves to fill this knowledge gap, using focus groups and one-to-one interviews to explore and better understand the lived experiences of primary school-aged children (in chapter two I explain why I have chosen to focus on this age category), as well as detailing the research process in order to inform future research.

1.4 Why focus on food?

In my role as a campaigner I have often stood in front of a group of people and started by saying, 'Food is not the issue. The issue is poverty.' So why have I written a thesis about *food* insecurity? This has been a tension for me through the whole PhD process. Does separating it off from the wider experience of living on a low income distract attention away from the need to tackle the structural causes of poverty? My response to this when writing this thesis has been to always relate the children's experiences around food to the key issue, which is that the families *do not have enough money*. I have chosen to centre my research on experiences relating to food but I do not see 'food insecurity' as a distinct and discrete phenomenon - every aspect of people's lives is impacted by having to live on inadequate incomes and this thesis recognises that food insecurity 'does not exist in a vacuum' (Caraher and Davison, 2019,

p.6). Like 'housing poverty' or 'fuel poverty', it is a construct in that we are separating out experiences relating to food in a way that does not reflect people's day-to-day lived reality (The Trussell Trust, 2019). It is a useful construct, however, because it provides a lens through which we can examine and better understand what is a particularly affecting feature of the experience of poverty. Food is fundamental to our physical, mental, and emotional health, and to our ability to interact with others within our culture and society; 'food is an expression of who a person is, what they are worth, and of their ability to provide for basic needs' (Dowler and Leather, 2000, p.208 in Lister, 2004).

1.5 Research questions

This thesis is built around a core research question:

How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity?

Over the course of the project I generated a number of sub-questions, in order to support the exploration of the different dimensions of the children's experiences of food insecurity. These are:

a) How do primary school-aged children identify food insecurity? How do they discuss it, think and talk about it?
b) What are the material impacts on primary-school aged children of living in households that are experiencing food insecurity?
c) What are the non-material, i.e. emotional and psychosocial[3] impacts on primary-school aged children of living in households that are experiencing food insecurity?

Finally, I considered the approach and the process via which I investigated this topic and the learning gained thereby to be a key part of the project. As such, I also sought to answer the following question:

1. What are the best methods to use to learn about children's experiences of food insecurity?

1.5.1 A note on research location

Leeds is typical of a British industrial city and in 2018/9 had slightly over the national average of children living in relative poverty (thirty-three per cent versus thirty per cent) (Leeds

[3] The online Collins Dictionary defines psychosocial as 'of or relating to processes or factors that are both social and psychological in origin'. (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.)

Observatory, n.d.). As such, it was an appropriate location for my research. I also grew up here and live here, so it is a city I am very familiar with.

1.6 Thesis structure

1.6.1 Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter presents and appraises the existing literature on children's experiences of food insecurity and, as such, lays out the background against which my research is positioned. One of the ongoing issues relating to research undertaken on food insecurity is that many different definitions are used. I open Chapter 2 with a discussion of the term food insecurity and its origins, and present the definition that I feel best encompasses what is in reality a multi-dimensional experience. In reviewing the literature I found that it could be loosely divided into two groups: research that had been undertaken using quantitative methods, often using proxy report (i.e. not talking to children themselves), and qualitative studies, much smaller in number, that engaged directly with children. This chapter deals with these two bodies of literature in turn.

A key learning from these qualitative studies is that children cannot be treated as a homogenous group – their ages and cultural backgrounds invoke different experiences. My review of the literature indicates that there exists a gap in the knowledge around younger children's experiences of food insecurity in the UK, and my thesis aims to address this gap.

1.6.2 Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter 3 tells the story of the complicated and rather circuitous route that I took to get from my initial research focus on holiday hunger to the question around which I structured this thesis: *How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity?*

This methods chapter is extensive, weighing in at 24,000 words, but this reflects the status that I assign to being explicit and honest about the process of planning, collecting and analysing the data. I recognise my role within the research and share examples of where things went wrong. My approach to researching with children is one in which considerations of power and possible harm are foregrounded, and I deem children to be the experts about children.

1.6.3 Chapter 4 - Poor choices, personal failings, and wrong priorities: Exploring teachers' and children's attitudes to people experiencing food insecurity

In the course of my research I found that attitudes towards people experiencing food insecurity appeared to be sited within individualised (as opposed to structural) explanations for families' financial struggles. This was the case with the children I spoke with, but was also evident in the responses of school staff to a survey that I undertook at the beginning of my doctoral studies. This chapter firstly explores the possible genesis of these particular attitudes and then engages with my findings via a presentation of a range of narratives that I name 'food poverty truths'. The final section of the chapter explores the way my participants talk about children who are from economically precarious families.

1.6.4 Chapter 5 – Exploring children's lived experiences of household food insecurity

In Chapter 5 I discuss the material aspects of the experience of food insecurity that were described by the children, i.e. when they don't get enough food or their diets change to become less healthy or less varied. I open by offering four case studies, painting a brief picture of the situation that the children and their families are in. The children have varied experiences but they are all in households in which various strategies are employed in order to achieve as stable a diet as possible for the children. I explore the different strategies described by the children that I interviewed, and then present my findings on how the children are impacted materially. Finally, I discuss the ways that children play their part in trying to mitigate the effects on the household of being financially insecure.

1.6.5 Chapter 6 – Precarity as a way of understanding children's emotional experiences of food insecurity

Chapter 6 is the first of two that deal with psychosocial impacts on children of living in households experiencing food insecurity. Here I present the argument that the effect on children of food insecurity can be understood as an outcome of precarity. Precarity is a concept that is used in different ways, and differs from insecurity and precariousness in that it expresses a 'politically induced' condition (Petrova, 2018, p.16; see also Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). I share what I observed in the school in which I did my fieldwork and explain how this played a role in my analysis, and demonstrate how and why I think precarity is a useful way of explaining children's lived experiences of food insecurity. I close by discussing the impact that stress and worry about food can have on children.

1.6.6 Chapter 7 – 'Because they're like secrets': Understanding stigma and shame in the context of children's experiences of food insecurity

In the final analytical chapter I deal with another of the non-material impacts of household food insecurity on children - the harmful experience of stigma and shame. I begin the chapter by introducing these interlinked concepts, and explore them in relation to the wider experience of poverty and then more specifically of food insecurity. After introducing the literature (of which there is very little) on children's experiences of shame in relation to food insecurity, the main body of this chapter consists of the presentation of my findings. Lastly, I show how children resist the stigmatised identity that is associated with food insecurity via the construction of the other.

1.6.7 Chapter 8 - Conclusion

In the final chapter I provide an overview of the findings. I return to the research questions to respond to each one in turn and then explain how the thesis has contributed to the knowledge on children's experiences of food insecurity. I share the limitations of the research, and then offer some ideas for future areas of research. I close the thesis with three policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores and critically engages with the existing literature on children's experiences of food insecurity and locates my research within this field. As such, it provides a context for the empirical and analytical work presented in the later chapters of this thesis. I begin in Section 2.2 by introducing the concept of food insecurity, including its key features and how it is defined. I then discuss and critique the different methods used in research into child food insecurity.

The literature on children's experiences relating to food insecurity can be roughly divided into two – the first group being quantitative, population-level studies which seek to capture associations between food insecurity and various outcomes for children, often by proxy report; these are discussed in Section 2.3. I begin this section by presenting what I see as the limitations of trying to understand child food insecurity using quantitative methods. The literature on these studies is then discussed by category – I have categorised them in terms of the impacts on children of food insecurity on: mental health; physical health and development; behaviour and psychosocial functioning; diet and overweight/obesity; and academic achievement. The suggestions put forward in the quantitative literature as to why children suffer negative outcomes are then addressed.

Section 2.4 is concerned with the second group -- qualitative studies -- which are much fewer in number. These are small scale studies that seek a richer understanding of *how* children experience food insecurity by talking directly to children; what food insecurity feels like for them, and what it means to them on a day to day level. The papers and books that comprise the pertinent literature are discussed in depth; first, they are categorised into two groups: studies concerned with gaining an understanding of children's experiences in order to generate an accurate instrument for measurement of child food insecurity, and those for which gaining a deeper understanding of children's experiences is an end in itself. The two different conceptualisations of the way children experience food insecurity that are proposed in this literature are then reviewed. Section 2.4 closes with a discussion of the gaps in the literature and why it is important to undertake research into primary school-aged children's experiences of food insecurity.

2.2 What is food insecurity?

Up until the late 1970s, the term *food security*[4] (or a lack of it) was used in relation to hunger and undernutrition, and the policy emphasis was on food supply on a global and national level (FAO Economic and Social Development Department, n.d.; Jones et al., 2013). The focus was on countries, mainly those in the Global South, being able to access sufficient food to meet basic energy and nutrition needs for their populations (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). The shift in interest to household and individual level food *in*security appears to have come about in the 1980s (Maxwell and Smith, 1992; Connell et al., 2005), as hunger increasingly became a 'major issue of social concern' (Radimer, 2002, p.859) in high-income (i.e. the US) as well as low-income countries (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2013). Some qualitative studies (Anderson, 1990; Radimer et al., 1992) were done in the late 1980s and these served to provide a deeper understanding of what food insecurity means in terms of lived experience. The findings of Radimer et al. (1992) in particular have shaped our understanding of food insecurity (Tarasuk, 2001; Coates et al., 2006), and how it is experienced both on a household and an individual level.

As part of her doctoral research, Radimer talked to mothers from low-income families in the US about their experience of hunger and being 'close-to-hunger' (Radimer et al., 1992, p.37S), and then created a conceptual framework that comprised four components: quantity of food consumed; quality of food consumed (i.e. how nutritious the diet is); the way their experience affected them psychologically; and whether they were excluded from engaging in 'socially normal' food practices. In their 1992 paper, she and colleagues set out how these components are experienced at two levels – the level of the household and the individual. An explanation of how these components, or dimensions, are actually experienced is provided in Table 2.1, below. Radimer's pioneering work is valuable as it extended understandings of the phenomenon of hunger beyond that of a physiological experience and located it as a multi-dimensional lived experience within the broader context of having insufficient resources to put adequate or appropriate food on the table.

There is no existing 'internationally consistent' (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015, p.500) definition or conceptualisation of food insecurity, but there exists a general understanding that is based around these four dimensions – quantity, quality, psychological, social -- that were set

[4] It is not clear when the term food *insecurity* began to be used as well as food *security*. At a global and national level, both are used; when discussing household level, food *insecurity* is the prevailing term. The term food security is used by the UK government when referring to the sustainability of the country's food production and supply system. For example, a Select Committee Report examining this topic was titled, 'Food Security: demand, consumption and waste' (HM Government, n.d.).

out by Radimer. For example, the field-leading research undertaken as part of the Families and Food in Hard Times study[5], led by a team at University College London, presents food insecurity (or as they call it, food poverty) as consisting of material, social and psychosocial or emotional dimensions (O'Connell and Brannen, 2021, pp.34–39 for an excellent explanation of their 'relative and political approach' to conceptualising food insecurity).

Table 2.1: Levels and dimensions of food insecurity as proposed by Radimer et al. (1992)

Dimension	**Levels**	
	Household	**Individual**
Quantity	Food depletion	Insufficient energy intake
Quality	Unsuitable food	Nutritional inadequacy
Psychological	Anxiety about food supplies	Lack of choice and feelings of deprivation
Social	Disrupted eating patterns / sources of food	Food acquisition in socially unacceptable ways

Adapted from: Radimer et al. (1992) Understanding hunger and developing indicators to assess it in women and children. *Journal of Nutrition Education* 24:1, 36S-44S, and Radimer (2002) Measurement of household food security in the USA and other industrialised countries *Public Health Nutrition* 5:6A, pp. 859-864

It is important to note that food insecurity is generally understood as an experience that arises out of having insufficient resources. As such, a high-income household could also experience food insecurity if there is an imbalance, transient or more long-lasting, between income and expenditure. It is recognised, however, that in the vast majority of cases, household food insecurity is a result of low income and low socio-economic status (Dowler et al., 2001; Fram et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018).

2.2.1 Use of the term food insecurity

Many of my colleagues whose work I admire, both academic and within the third sector, prefer to use the term food *poverty* instead of food insecurity, as it reminds us that this particular experience is located within the wider experience of not having enough money to cover the costs of living. They argue that using the term food poverty foregrounds the cause of the

[5] See https://foodinhardtimes.org/ for details of the project.

problem (Caraher and Furey, 2018), and recognise that it is 'a set of experiences which both result from and contribute to social exclusion and injustice' (Lambie-Mumford, 2014, p.36).

In this thesis I absolutely agree that the concept of food insecurity is essentially about inadequate income, rather than food. However, food *insecurity* is increasingly being used interchangeably (Caraher and Furey, 2018), and was used by the organisations with which I worked outside academia as a campaigner, so I am most accustomed to using this term. In addition, one of the benefits of using the term insecurity is that it expresses more explicitly perhaps the condition of 'teetering on the edge', (Standing, 2011, p.20) and the state of precarity that are, I have found in my research, key to understanding children's experiences of food insecurity.

2.2.2 Features of food insecurity

In her 2001 *Discussion Paper on Household and Individual Food Insecurity*, Tarasuk explains that food insecurity can be identified via four main features (see also Coates et al., 2006). The four features are useful in that they add to Radimer's findings and flesh out our understanding of the lived experience of food insecurity.

The first, following Radimer, is that household and individual level food insecurity are experienced differently. Food insecurity as experienced at a household level centres on problems relating to the key food provider not being able to afford to access adequate amounts of appropriate food for the family. It also includes emotional and psychological impacts on the household members relating to 'food supply management' (Tarasuk, 2001, p.5). Individual level food insecurity describes the experiences lived, felt and responded to by a particular person.

The second feature of food insecurity is that it is 'not static, but dynamic in nature' (2001, p.6), i.e. it can be persistent or short-lived (Hernandez and Jacknowitz, 2009), and households can experience it as a one-off, or can transition into and out of food insecurity over time (London and Scott, 2005; Jacknowitz et al., 2015; Jansen et al., 2017; Loopstra, 2020).

The third feature is that the experience of food insecurity appears to follow a sequence of increasing severity (Tarasuk, 2001; see also Radimer et al., 1992; Hamelin et al., 2002; Bhattacharya et al., 2004). This progression – from being food secure, to being impacted psychologically, i.e. worrying about being able to get enough food, via reduced diet quality, to eating less, to going whole days without food -- has been represented as a scale (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.). This is depicted in Figure 2.1, on page 15.

I suggest that classifying food insecurity in this way is somewhat problematic as it does not fully reflect people's lived experiences. For example, I would argue that living with chronic anxiety about being able to feed your children enough food may not feel 'mild', and may for some people feel more severe than having to skip a meal on occasion. The use of extensive strategies to ensure a sufficient and appropriate diet, which may be exhausting and stressful, is also not captured within the scale. However, I do recognise the value of the creation of a scale of increasing severity in that it simplifies an experience that encompasses different elements and as such enables the monitoring and measurement of food insecurity.

The final feature of the experience of food insecurity as suggested by Tarasuk (2001) is that different individuals within the same household may have distinct experiences relating to food insecurity; family members experience 'different components of [food insecurity] at different times and to different degrees' (Radimer et al., 1992, p.39S). This can be for a number of reasons. For example, it has been found that the age of a child may be significant in their experience relating to food insecurity (Nord, 2013). One of the explanations for this again comes out of Radimer's (1992, p.39S) work: the women with whom she spoke described how they 'managed' the food situation, and to some extent controlled the experience of others in the household; for example, they went without food themselves to increase the amount available to their children. This buffering or shielding of children from the impact of household food insecurity by adults is a common finding (amongst others, Radimer et al., 1992; Hadley et al., 2008; Hernandez and Jacknowitz, 2009; Nalty et al., 2013a; Ghattas et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019).

Tarasuk's presentation of food insecurity via these four main features is useful in that it encourages an understanding and awareness of the multi-dimensional experience of food insecurity. What it lacks, perhaps, is a sufficient emphasis on the social dimension of food insecurity, as highlighted by O'Connell and Brannen in their important book *Families and Food in Hard Times* (2021, pp.37-38). Food and eating, they note, have a value and significance outside of the body's need for fuel, and not being able to take part in normal practices around food excludes people from society and make them 'poor in relation to others' (2021, p.38). I agree that this is a key element of the experience of food insecurity that is often not adequately appreciated or acknowledged.

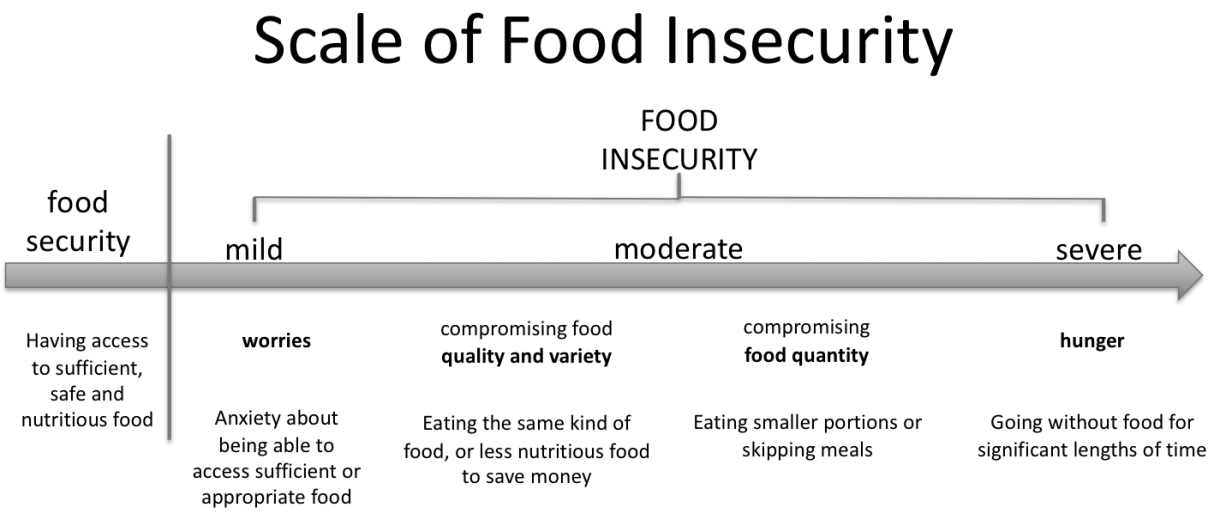

Figure 2.1: **Scale of Food Insecurity.**

Adapted from: (Ballard et al., 2013)

Finally, another issue with the features of food insecurity as described above is that the focus is on adults' experiences. The following sections discuss the existing literature but, as will be suggested, there has not, up to this point, been sufficient exploration of how and if children's experiences of food insecurity differ from those of adults'. There is a dearth of UK-based research in this area.

2.2.3 Defining food insecurity

As noted earlier, there is no internationally agreed definition of food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015). In the UK, Radimer et al.'s definition of food insecurity, or something very close to it, is often used by academics, in the third sector, and by policy-makers (amongst others, McIntyre et al., 2003; Casey et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2007; Ashiabi and O'Neal, 2008; Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; Aceves-Martins et al., 2018; Public Health Scotland, 2019; Department for Work and Pensions, 2021b). This definition is as follows:

> *The inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.* (Radimer et al., 1992, p.37S)

However, this definition does not recognise the many dimensions of food insecurity. Importantly, it does not, for example, acknowledge that food insecurity is caused by having insufficient income. The following definition offered on the *Evidence and Network on UK*

Household Food Insecurity website incorporates more features of the experience of food insecurity:

> *… a lack of the financial resources needed to ensure reliable access to food to meet dietary, nutritional, and social needs. It can be acute, transitory, or chronic, and ranges in severity from worry about not being able to secure enough food to going whole days without eating.* (Evidence and Network on UK Household Food Insecurity, n.d.)

This definition adds to the previous one in that it recognises the dynamic nature of food insecurity and that it is a result of insufficient funds, but still does not encompass all the elements that are described in the literature. Important aspects of food insecurity that are not captured by existing definitions include the work that is put in by families in order to mitigate their food insecurity, and the importance of the context within which they live/operate - the local retail offer for example, and whether they have a support network. If being able to provide their family with a consistently nutritious and culturally appropriate diet involves the key food provider having to expend large amounts of time, emotional and even physical energy (for example walking a long way in order to access cheap fresh food) because of limited financial resources, then, even though they consistently eat well, this should be recognised as food insecurity. Food insecurity is complicated and multi-dimensional (Fram et al., 2015; Pereira et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2018) and constructing a definition that captures every feature of it would be difficult. Yet it is problematic that existing definitions do not express fully what the lived experience of food insecurity actually feels like and involves, because measures and policies to reduce or eradicate food insecurity may not target or tackle what really matters to people.

2.2.4 Research on child food insecurity

There has been extensive research, much of it in North America (Aceves-Martins et al., 2018), on the outcomes for children and adolescents who live in food insecure households or who have been classified as being food insecure. This research has been conducted, for the main part, via cross-sectional studies, using parent or other proxy (teachers, for example) report, and the majority of it has used quantitative methods. I argue that research done on children via proxies will not provide as accurate a picture as that done with children, as whilst it provides helpful data it is not able to offer insight into children's experiences from their own point of view (Willis and Fitzpatrick, 2016). Although a number of papers have submitted that parents can be 'reliable reporters' (Weinreb et al., 2002, p.3 of 9; see also Murphy et al., 1998)

of child food insecurity, many others have found that parents do not always accurately report and may not even be aware of their children's experiences of food insecurity (Fram et al., 2011; Kuku et al., 2011; Fram et al., 2013; Nalty et al., 2013a; Nord, 2013; Bernal et al., 2014; Harvey, 2016; Landry et al., 2019b). The discrepancies that have been found are concerning as it could mean that the prevalence and severity of child food insecurity is being underestimated (Fram et al., 2011). For example, one study found that parents only identified 35.7 per cent of all the children who reported themselves to be experiencing the physical impact of food insecurity i.e., hunger or tiredness (Fram et al., 2013). A more recent study (Landry et al., 2019b), found that parent and child reports of the child's food security only matched 21.7 per cent of the time; in 70.1 per cent of the cases parents perceived children to be more food secure that the children themselves did. Potential reasons for this discrepancy are that parents perhaps do not want to share with researchers that they are not able to provide food for their children, and that perhaps parents are just not fully cognisant of their children's lived experiences (Harvey, 2016; Willis and Fitzpatrick, 2016).

The use of parent or proxy report rather than asking children about their own experiences of food insecurity does not allow the active role that children play in managing the situation to be captured, and does not acknowledge their agency (Willis and Fitzpatrick, 2016). This is problematic in terms of acquiring a full and authentic understanding of children's experiences of food insecurity as qualitative studies (discussed in detail in Section 2.4 below) consistently show that children and adolescents respond in different ways and regularly use strategies to mitigate the impacts of living in a household which is food insecure (for example, Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Cairns, 2018; Ghattas et al., 2018; Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018; Mott et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019).

In addition, using household or even child level data[6] as reported by a proxy may obscure the reality of children's experiences of food insecurity because they do not capture possible intra-household differences in experiences. We know that adults and children may have different experiences related to household food insecurity (Kuku et al., 2011; Nord, 2013), but the

[6] 'Child level' data refers to data gathered on the child/ren in a household, via questions to parents or carers. In the Household Food Security Survey Module, used in the US and Canada, the adult being surveyed is asked to report on food issues relating specifically to the children. One of the questions, for example, is, 'In the last 12 months were the children ever hungry but you just couldn't afford more food?' (see USDA Economic Research Service, n.d.). Since 2019 this data is collected in the UK as part of the Family Resources Survey (see https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020/family-resources-survey-background-information-and-methodology#the-frs-questionnaire for details). Unless they explicitly state otherwise, papers referring to 'child food insecurity' will be measuring child level food insecurity, not each or a specific child. It is only individual level research with children that provides data on the experiences of one particular child.

experiences of children in the same family may also vary (Kuku et al., 2011; Kaur et al., 2015). These differences of experience can be attributed to age/developmental stage (Huang and Vaughn, 2016; see also Fram et al., 2015)[7] or gender (for examples of differences of experience between genders see for example Jyoti et al., 2005; Casey et al., 2006; Hadley et al., 2008; Belachew et al., 2011), but of course each individual child has 'their own story to tell' (Ridge, 2002, p.7). Qualitative research methods are therefore essential when aiming to gain a deep understanding of children's lived experiences of food insecurity. Crucially, without this, the efficiency of interventions used to attempt to alleviate this problem is limited.

However, with all the above limitations in mind, the majority of what is understood and accepted to be knowledge about children's experiences in relation to food insecurity is gathered via proxy report using quantitative methods and so I feel that it is important to include this literature in my review. The following section presents the literature undertaken using quantitative methods.

2.3 What the quantitative research tells us about children's experiences of food insecurity

Outcomes of food insecurity discussed in this section include impacts on mental and physical health, and changes to behaviour, dietary intake, eating habits and academic performance (Niclasen, Molcho, et al., 2013; Shankar et al., 2017). I also discuss (and challenge) the explanation put forward in many papers that children's experiences are a result of parental behaviours.

2.3.1 Impacts on mental health

There is a well-reported association between the experience of food insecurity and an increase in the risk of mental health issues for children and adolescents (Whitaker et al., 2006; Molcho et al., 2007; Belsky et al., 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Kimbro and Denney, 2015; Poole-Di Salvo et al., 2016; Darling et al., 2017; Maynard et al., 2019). In a study of ten to seventeen year olds in Ireland (Molcho et al., 2007), children and teenagers who were experiencing food insecurity reported lower life satisfaction. Alaimo et al. (2001) found that children and teenagers who were food insecure had a higher probability of seeing a psychologist and of finding it difficult to make friends. Rates of depression have been found to be 27.9 per cent higher (Thomas et al., 2019; see also McIntyre et al., 2017), and stress and anxiety are often

[7] This corresponds with differences of experience relating to age as described in the child poverty literature. See Lipina et al. (2011) for examples.

reported for children living in food insecure households (Slopen et al., 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Burke et al., 2016; Darling et al., 2017; Maynard et al., 2019). Also, an association has been found for teenagers between experiencing food insecurity and having suicidal feelings (Alaimo et al., 2002), and between going hungry and increased odds of suicide attempts (Koyanagi et al., 2019).

There also appears to be a relationship between the *severity* of the food insecurity and the increased probability of experiencing mental disorders which are defined by the US Department of Health and Human Services (1999, in Burke et al., 2016, p.2020) as 'serious deviations from expected cognitive, social and emotional development'. Those children experiencing severe hunger because there is not sufficient food to eat have been found to be twice as likely to be anxious as their food secure classmates (Weinreb et al., 2002). In Venezuela, a study with children aged seven to seventeen years old found that those with higher levels of food insecurity (i.e. those reporting going hungry) had higher levels of shame relating to their limited access to food (Jaffe et al., 2014; see also Bernal et al., 2016). (See Chapter 7 for my findings on children's experiences of shame and stigma in relation to food insecurity.)

Explanations provided in the literature for the impact of food insecurity on children's mental health

A number of potential explanations for the relationship between the experience of food insecurity and negative mental health outcomes are suggested in the quantitative research-literature. One of the pathways suggested is that there is a direct physiological link between the food consumed (or lack of it) and psychological and emotional responses. The reduced quality and quantity of food eaten by children in 'truly vulnerable material conditions' (Willis and Fitzpatrick, 2016, p.237) can lead to a nutrient imbalance (Slopen et al., 2010) and an inadequate consumption of calories, and this can produce 'physiologic [sic] or emotional changes' that can affect a child's mental state and their capacity for dealing with stress (Weinreb et al., 2002, p.7). McLaughlin et al. (2012, p.1300) provide further explanation of how food insecurity may affect mental health via physiological pathways -- they refer to studies that have found that a reduced intake of calories has been associated with increased production of the stress hormone cortisol, and that this increased 'reactivity' has been associated with mental disorders. Certainly, for adults it has been found that there may be a connection between inadequate levels of micronutrients and depression and anxiety (Kaplan, 2007, in Weaver and Hadley, 2009). However, Whitaker et al. (2006), whose sample was pre-school aged children in the US, argue that a low quality diet is unlikely to be a mechanism for

explaining the link between food insecurity and mental health issues as no difference was found in the nutrient intake of children living in food secure households and those living in food insecure households.

A second explanation provided is that the unpredictability of a family's food situation can be extremely stressful for children and can give rise to feelings of anxiety (Weinreb et al., 2002; Pickett et al., 2015). As noted by Slopen et al. (2010, p.450), 'routines involving food are important for the child's comfort and feelings of security', and so feelings of insecurity may arise for children when normal eating patterns are disrupted or the way food is accessed in the family changes – when they experience what Weaver and Hadley (2009, p.266) refer to as 'uncertainty in the household ecology'.

Willis and Fitzpatrick (2016, p.237) suggest that child food insecurity can generate stress that is 'related to perceptions of social status'. This mechanism by which children's mental health can be affected by food insecurity is tied in with the (low) social positioning awarded to those families who are struggling to be able to afford to access and consume food in a way that is socially acceptable. This relates to my (and others -- see Lambie-Mumford, 2014; O'Connell et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019; O'Connell and Brannen, 2021) understanding of food insecurity as being as much a 'social problem' (Pickett et al., 2015, p.533) as one of food; food is not just fuel, but is 'fundamentally meaningful' (O'Connell et al., 2018, p.4), and there are societal expectations about how, when, where and with whom one eats and drinks . Townsend (1979, p.50) gives the example of tea drinking; it has little or no nutritional value, but can be 'psychologically essential' and 'socially necessary'. When because of their economic situation a family or a child is unable to buy, cook and eat food in a normal and normative way, their self-worth may be affected (Coates et al., 2006), and this awareness of the inferior position in society conferred on them by their food security status (Weaver and Hadley, 2009) can be a 'salient stressor' (Willis and Fitzpatrick, 2016, p.237). This was found to be the case by McLaughlin et al. (2012) who, in their work with a nationally representative sample of American thirteen to seventeen year olds, observed that the link between food insecurity and mood disorders was most strong for those teenagers who lived in households with low income and high relative deprivation.

What is interesting as regards these different explanations for poor mental health in relation to food insecurity is how they require very different responses or solutions: providing a nutritionally balanced diet (if the issue is seen as a physiological one) versus all families having a stable income (if the issue is one of stability of income) versus ensuring socio-economic equality (if the issue is recognised as being related to relative poverty). What this illustrates is

how important it is to undertake research that is flexible and open in its exploration of issues in order to truly get a grasp of children's lived experiences.

2.3.2 Impacts on physical health and development

Children and adolescents who live in food insecure households have self- and parent-reported general health that is worse than those living in those that are food secure (Casey et al., 2005; Kirkpatrick et al., 2010; Ramsey et al., 2011; Niclasen, Petzold, et al., 2013; Kimbro and Denney, 2015; Thomas et al., 2019). In a ten year longitudinal study in Canada, Kirkpatrick et al. (2010) found that nearly a third of children who had ever experienced hunger were reported to be in poor health, as opposed to 12.8 per cent of those who had never experienced hunger. They described experiencing severe food insecurity, i.e. hunger, on multiple occasions as 'particularly toxic' (2010, p.754).

Research suggests that the experience of food insecurity increases the frequency of headaches, stomach aches and backaches that children suffer, as well as contributing to experiences of dizziness and difficulties with sleeping (Molcho et al., 2007; Niclasen, Petzold, et al., 2013; Pickett et al., 2015). In a Canadian study of over 25,000 eleven to fifteen year olds (Pickett et al., 2015), it was shown that, as with mental health issues (see Section 2.3.1 above), the more severe the food insecurity, the greater the probability of suffering from these physical symptoms: 24.1 per cent of children who never went to bed or school hungry experienced them, versus 55.1 per cent of children who often or always went to bed or school hungry. Weinreb et al. (2002) found that children who experienced *severe* hunger were significantly more likely to suffer from chronic illness then those with *moderate* or no experience of hunger. A recent nationally representative study of US children aged two to seventeen years old also found worse chronic health issues relating to food insecurity; for example, as opposed to children from food secure families, children in food insecure households were 19.1 per cent more likely to suffer from asthma (Thomas et al., 2019). (Another study echoed these findings vis-à-vis asthma (Mangini et al., 2015). However, the longitudinal Canadian study referenced in the previous paragraph did not find any associations with chronic conditions or asthma (Kirkpatrick et al., 2010).)

The mechanisms via which food insecurity is responsible for poorer health however, are not clear: Bronte-Tinkew et al. (2007), for example, did not find a direct association, but suggest that it is the parental depression that arises out of the experience of being food insecure that leads to the negative impacts on children's health. As seen in the literature outlined above regarding mental health impacts, and below in relation to the other negative outcomes of the

food insecurity for children, this understanding of a causal pathway – that it is the parents' behaviours/emotional state that is responsible for producing adverse effects on children rather than the experience of food insecurity in itself -- is a common theme. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.3.6. below.

2.3.3 Impacts on behaviour and psychosocial functioning

As well as exploring the links between food insecurity and mental health issues (internalising disorders), many quantitative studies have looked, often during the same study, at whether it has a negative impact on children's behaviour i.e. behaviours such as aggression, irritability, inattention and hyperactivity (often referred to as externalizing disorders) (for example Kleinman et al., 1998; Slack and Yoo, 2004; Whitaker et al., 2006; Slopen et al., 2010; Melchior et al., 2012; Kimbro and Denney, 2015). The literature on how the experience of food insecurity affects children's behaviour does not present a clear picture however.

A number of studies found that children experiencing food insecurity were more likely to demonstrate a range of behavioural problems than their food secure peers (Kleinman et al., 1998; Murphy et al., 1998; Kimbro and Denney, 2015). Melchior et al. (2012) found that children from food insecure families had increased odds of hyperactivity/inattention but not aggression. Two studies which measured the impact of food insecurity as distinct from the 'general experience of poverty' found associations between adverse behavioural outcomes for children experiencing food insecurity but not for those children who lived in low-income households but were not experiencing food insecurity (Slack and Yoo, 2004, p.7; Slopen et al., 2010). Other studies, however, have found a more complicated relationship between children experiencing food insecurity and negative behaviour outcomes, and some have found no relationship at all. In a paper using data from a longitudinal UK study, Belsky et al. (2010, p.809) report that 'after accounting for difference in the home environments in which children were reared', food insecurity related to emotional problems but not behavioural problems. Huang and Vaughn (2016, p.994) acknowledge that the evidence points towards 'both nutritional and non-nutritional' impacts on behaviour, however their analysis of a longitudinal nationally representative study of US children did not find an association over time between experiences of food insecurity and variations in children's behaviour problems. What they do suggest is that perhaps the impact of food insecurity on children may be greater during different developmental stages (during teenage years for example) or that its effects may be transient. Gee and Asim (2019, p.1480) found no 'direct effect' on children's behaviour of household food insecurity. They submit that in fact the impact of food insecurity on both

children's internalizing and externalizing behaviours derives wholly from 'parents themselves via their parenting behaviours' (p.1481). Once again we see an explanation of children's experiences in relation to food insecurity as being mediated by parenting and parents' actions and emotional states. I critique this explanation in Section 2.3.6, below.

Other proposed mechanisms for the relationship between food insecurity and externalising behaviours (where a relationship has been found), echo those put forward to explain the impact on children's mental health. It is suggested that poor diet and inadequate quantities of food may make children feel tired and irritable and that feeling in this way leads to changes in children's behaviour (Rose-Jacobs et al., 2008; Melchior et al., 2012). Aggression and being oppositional is recognised as 'an understandable behavioural response' to the stress and worry of living in a household in which food is not always readily available (Kleinman et al., 1998, p.5; see also Whitaker et al., 2006).

2.3.4 Impacts on diet and overweight/obesity

We have moved on from the time when the coexistence of food insecurity and obesity was described as a 'paradox' (Dietz, 1995); now, for adults at least, it is 'expected[,] given that both are consequences of economic and social disadvantage' (Frongillo and Bernal, 2014, p.286). The literature on the relationship between food insecurity and overweight/obesity for children however is not clear cut (McCurdy et al., 2010a; Eisenmann et al., 2011; Kuku et al., 2012; Frongillo and Bernal, 2014).

For instance, Ramsey et al. (2011), did not find a correlation between child food insecurity and weight, and Speirs et al. (2016) found no significant association between BMI and household or child food insecurity. However, others (Casey et al., 2006; Dubois et al., 2006) did find a relationship; in the case of Dubois et al., up to double the odds of being overweight at age four and a half for children in households that they described as food insufficient. Additionally, low household income and socio-economic deprivation, which we know are what cause food insecurity, have been found to be a predictor of obesity in children (Kinra et al., 2000; Goisis et al., 2016).

Interestingly, Casey et al. (2006) found that overweight (BMI of or over ninety-five per cent) in children that is correlated with household food insecurity is associated with certain ages and genders, i.e. those who are twelve to seventeen years old, or girls. Although not universal (Dubois et al., 2006), this gender difference of girls gaining weight in households experiencing food insecurity when boys do not, has been found in various studies in children aged from three up to eleven years (Jyoti et al., 2005; Jansen et al., 2017; Esfandiari et al., 2018). No

explanations have been offered for these findings, but we know that mothers will sacrifice their (food) needs in order to provide not only for children but also other adults within the household (among others, DeVault, 1991; Attree, 2005; Martin and Lippert, 2012) and it is perhaps possible that this behaviour is copied by young girls. The mechanism for how this would translate into increased rates of overweight/obesity is unclear however.

The results of research looking at children's quality of diet in relation to food insecurity are also equivocal. Fram et al. (2015) found that individual children who had been reported to be experiencing food insecurity – as distinct from children living in a food insecure household (who may or may not have been experiencing food insecurity) – had a poorer diet, in which more sugar, fat and total calories, and fewer vegetables were consumed. A British study found that eleven to fifteen year olds who were in a group low on what they defined as the Family Affluence Scale ate fewer fruit and vegetables and drank more soft/sugary drinks (Simon et al., 2018). A US study of middle and high school students (eleven to eighteen years old) observed that although they 'perceived similar benefits' to eating healthily, self-reported food insecure young people ate more fast food than their food secure peers (Widome et al., 2009, p.822). However, a systematic review (Hanson and Connor, 2014, p.684) assessing the evidence on the association between food insecurity and dietary quality discovered that although there was a clear relationship shown for adults, for children living in food insecure households the only 'substantial evidence' was of lower fruit consumption. Indeed, Howard (2013) found that *more* fruit and vegetables were eaten by children in food insecure households in the US. The picture regarding the diets of children in households struggling on insufficient incomes is unclear, however, we do know that a diet made up of fresh, healthy food costs more than one based on processed products (Walker and Andrade, 1996; Ross et al., 2009; Kern et al., 2017; Puddephatt et al., 2020), and may be harder to access in more deprived areas (Caraher, Dixon and Carr-Hill, 1998; Lloyd et al., 2011).

As with other potential negative outcomes for children experiencing food insecurity, it is proposed in some of the literature that overweight, certainly in young children, is mediated through parental depression and its resulting parenting behaviour, i.e. 'less competent and responsive relationships with the child' (McCurdy et al., 2010, p.145; see also Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007). (See Section 2.3.6 for further discussion on this suggested pathway.) Unlike many others, Dubois et al. (2006, p.1512) look more widely for explanations. They present a number of reasons why there may be a link between what they describe as food insufficiency and overweight in children aged five and under: that parents who are struggling to provide adequate food may over-compensate with younger children by giving them more food than

necessary; that children may go and eat at friends' and neighbours' houses; that they are being fed more energy dense food because it is cheaper; they may be over or binge-eating after a period when there was little food available. As such, they are recognising the structural causes and social determinants of food insecurity.

2.3.5 Impacts on academic achievement

The literature on the impact of the experience of food insecurity on children's academic performance is quite limited but offers, for the most part, findings of a significant association with a negative outcome. A 2001 nationally representative study found that both younger children (six to eleven years old) and teenagers (twelve to sixteen years old) from families that 'sometimes or often did not get enough food to eat' were more likely to get lower scores on standardised tests and were more than twice as likely to repeat a year of school than their food secure peers (Alaimo et al., 2001, p.45). Jyoti et al. (2005) found that being from a food insecure household at kindergarten age (three to five years old) predicted a poorer achievement in reading and maths. They also found that children from households that had moved into food insecure status between kindergarten and age seven to eight years were poorer readers, and that this was particularly the case for girls. A Canadian study (Faught et al., 2017) found that living in households with very low food security aged ten to eleven years old was negatively associated with results of standardised tests that they took a year later.

Once Kimbro and Denney (2015) took account of the covariates such as children being in homes of a lower socio-economic status and having more siblings in the house, they found no association between transitions into or out of food insecurity between kindergarten and the first year of school and academic achievement for children. When they did a simple bivariate analysis, i.e. just looking at the relationship between food insecurity status and academic achievement, however, they found that children who were food insecure during one or both waves scored significantly lower in reading, maths and science. A study in Iran of children aged ten to twelve years old found that both household and child-level food insecurity were 'strongly associated with lower academic performance' (Esfandiari et al., 2018, p.113).

Explanations for the impact of food insecurity on children's academic achievement follow those offered for other negative outcomes: reduced food intake or reduced nutrient intake that then affects cognition (Jyoti et al., 2005; Esfandiari et al., 2018); poorer general health (Alaimo et al., 2001); emotional distress than can affect motivation and behaviour (Alaimo et al., 2001; Jyoti et al., 2005; Esfandiari et al., 2018); and 'parenting practices' (Esfandiari et al., 2018).

2.3.6 Putting child food insecurity into context: an outcome of poor parenting or poverty?

As we have seen repeatedly above, the conceptualisation of child food insecurity as an experience mediated by parents' emotional states and resulting parenting behaviours is a common one. This follows the Family Stress Model (Eamon, 2001; Conger et al., 2002; Neppl et al., 2016; Masarik and Conger, 2017), which proposes that the pathway via which children are adversely impacted by poverty and economic hardship is one of negative parenting behaviours that are precipitated by the stress of their situation. The 'economic pressure' (Conger et al., 2002, p.179), i.e. the psychological impact of contending with and managing a household on inadequate resources, causes stress and distress for parents, which can then 'disrupt parenting' (Masarik and Conger, 2017, p.87) as well as affecting their ability to cope (McCurdy et al., 2010a). The way this might work in relation to household food insecurity is, for example, that a mother who is depressed because of the financial pressure that she is under is not able to use 'active and responsive food acquisition … and management strategies' (McCurdy et al., 2010a, p.145), i.e. she hasn't got the capacity to put in all the extra food work that is needed to provide a healthy diet on a low income. This could mean that she relies on quick food that is more processed, or that she isn't able to access enough food for her children.

I think that recognising the psychological impact of living in poverty is important and can be useful. However, the relationship between food insecurity and parental responses and behaviours that stem from it and adverse outcomes for children is expressed differently in different papers. (Note that in this section I am referring only to those using quantitative methods.) Some do not look to any other influence to explain the link; for instance, Gee and Asim (2019, p.1481) suggest that the behaviour problems that are associated with food insecurity are 'fully transmitted through parents themselves via their parenting behaviors [sic]'. Others suggest that the association is important but do not claim that it is the sole agent. McCurdy et al. (2010a, p.144) for example suggest that the psychological state of the mother (they do not mention fathers) is a 'key mediator' in terms of children's experiences of food insecurity and overweight. Some use language that reflects a narrative of the parents being personally responsible. (See Chapter 4 for my findings on and a discussion of this narrative.) Esfandiari et al. (2018), for example, when suggesting 'parent-child interactions' as a mechanism for explaining the association between food insecurity and poor academic achievement in children, describe findings from other studies in a way that focuses on personal failings -- for example, having poor self-control -- on the part of the mother:

> *Children in food-insecure households are usually cared for by mothers who have poor self-control and exhibit depressive and antisocial tendencies and*

> *live in families that provide less structure and nurturance.* (Esfandiari et al., 2018, p.115)

This stands out against other approaches which apply a Family Stress Model approach to the outcomes of food insecurity but tackle the issue in a more sympathetic way: this statement made by Alaimo et al. (2001) acknowledges the impact of stress but reinforces that it is not the parents' fault:

> *This does not mean children who live in food-insufficient families necessarily have bad parents but rather that the stresses that accumulate on parents can affect how well they are able to care for their children. It makes sense that parents with more resources are better able to care for, support and cherish their children.* (Alaimo et al., 2001, p.50)

Unlike in the quote from Esfandiari et al. (2018) above, Alaimo et al. (2001) are explicitly recognising how hard it is to live on a low income. This recognition – of the direct link between a family's financial situation, food insecurity, and impacts on children – can be seen sometimes in the policy responses suggested in the literature. Weinreb et al. (2002, p.9) recognise that the stress felt by the parents and the behaviours and emotions associated with it are due to the financial hardship that they are experiencing, and propose social policies that provide cash rather than food; they recommend 'public policies to ensure that families, especially children, have adequate resources with which to purchase food' as well as being able to access local food aid. Husz's concluding remarks (2018, p.241) reflect this position – she argues that 'the task of government in reducing child food poverty should mainly be to increase monetary support for low-income families'. With this response these researchers are recognising the need for people to be able to access food in socially acceptable ways, i.e. they can buy it themselves as opposed to having to use a voucher or being provided with food aid – a tenet of the concept of food security. Bronte-Tinkew et al. (2007, p.2164), on the other hand, suggest that policy solutions to the issue of toddler overweight that is linked to family experience of food insecurity should focus on ensuring 'sufficient, predictable and reliable food'. They do not step back and acknowledge the bigger picture i.e. that it is the situation that produces the maternal depression in the first place – that of living in poverty – that needs to be dealt with.

Graham et al. (2018, p.1863) propose – and I would agree -- that the approach used in most research done on food insecurity is 'nutritionistic, deficit-orientated and ignores wider socio-economic issues'. Rather than being treated as an issue related to 'a broken social protection system and the failure of the State to meet its obligation to its people', as suggested by Olivier

de Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2012, in McIntyre et al., 2016, p.845), food insecurity is often treated as an issue of nutrients, calories and physical health (Graham, Stolte, et al., 2018). In treating child food insecurity as a problem that stems from parents' behaviour and as one that can be resolved with food-based solutions, the role of poverty is not adequately recognised and the multi-dimensional nature of child food insecurity is not acknowledged. To give one example, in response to the finding that children in a certain area of Texas are more food insecure over summer, Nalty et al. (2013b, p.712) suggested that the solution was 'summer feeding programs enhanc[ing] availability, recruitment, participation and retention rates to ensure that children satisfy energy needs'. Although of course it is vital that the immediate need of adequate food intake is tackled, this response is problematic as it does not acknowledge possible issues of shame arising out of receiving food aid (Fram et al., 2014; Fram and Frongillo, 2018; Husz, 2018; Gooseman et al., 2020), it disconnects child food insecurity from being an issue of injustice, and it does not challenge the structural causes and inequalities that precipitate food insecurity; this means that responses will be sticking plasters rather than real solutions. This contrasts with Niclasen, Molcho et al.'s (2013, p.10) proposal that 'a variety of social, economic, political and environmental factors must be considered when addressing food insecurity through policy instruments'. Unfortunately, Nalty's approach is echoed by much of the research on child food insecurity.

There have been quantitative studies, including those discussed above, that have surveyed children directly (for example Kleinman et al., 1998; Molcho et al., 2007; Kirkpatrick et al., 2010; Bernal et al., 2014; Jaffe et al., 2014; Pickett et al., 2015; Bernal et al., 2016), and as such have gained a fuller, less mediated insight into children's experiences. Gaining an in-depth understanding of how children experience food insecurity, however, cannot be realised via an objective, statistical exploration of the phenomenon of child food insecurity, but I argue requires a qualitative approach in order to gather children's personal, subjective understandings and experiences. The following section discusses the qualitative studies that have been conducted with children about their own experiences of food insecurity.

2.4 Qualitative studies conducted with children about children's experiences of food insecurity

In this section I discuss the ten publications -- eight papers and two books – that I have been able to find that report on qualitative research undertaken with children and young people about children's experiences of food insecurity (hereafter referred to as the 'studies' or 'papers'). These studies have been undertaken for the most part in high-income countries --

the US, the UK, Portugal, Norway -- with one based on research done in Venezuela, and one in Lebanon. A qualitative longitudinal study on and with older children/adolescents in impoverished rural Ethiopian communities (Hadley et al., 2008 for details) yielded an insightful paper on children's experiences of food insecurity (Morrow et al., 2017), but as the context is so different to that of children in the UK who are the focus of my research I do not include it in my discussion. The table on the following page presents the papers and books that represent the literature that I discuss in this section.

2.4.1 A note on the paucity of research undertaken with children on children's experiences of food insecurity

Connell et al. (2005) undertook one of the first studies that aimed to talk to children themselves about their experiences of food insecurity. One of the first obstacles they faced was children's reluctance to discuss their own personal experiences; instead, researchers had to change their approach and ask their participants about 'other kids' (Connell et al., 2005, p.1685). This illustrates, perhaps, why there has been so little work done with children on this topic: any child-centred research demands 'skill and sensitivity' (Ridge, 2002, p.7; see also O'Connell and Brannen, 2021) but work on this topic especially must be undertaken with utmost care in order not to do harm to participants, as food insecurity, related as it is to having insufficient money, is 'heavily imbued with stigma and prejudice' (Ridge, 2002, p.9). There are also additional complexities relating to access, recruitment and consent and thus doing research with children on their experiences of food insecurity requires an extensive time and resource commitment. These issues, and my approach to them, are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.4.2 Categorising the qualitative research

Although all the qualitative studies that I am reviewing here aimed to gain an understanding of children's experiences of food insecurity, it is possible to arrange them, rather crudely, into two groupings: (i) research that was done as a means to an end, which in these cases was developing an accurate survey instrument with which to capture data on children's experiences of food insecurity, and (ii) research in which understanding the experience of the children was the end in itself.

Table 2.2: Publications using research conducted with children on children's experiences of food insecurity

Authors, year of publication (by date of publication)	Country of study	Focus of study	Age range of sample and methods used
Connell et al. 2005	US	Children's perceptions of household food insecurity, in order to understand children's experiences of food insecurity (FI) Part of a project to develop an instrument to measure child food insecurity (CFI)	• 11-15 years old • 32 semi-structured interviews
Fram et al. 2011	US	Clarifying the nature, prevalence and severity of CFI and pathways through which HFI affects child's development	• 9-16 years old • 26 semi-structured interviews • also interviewed adults in family
Bernal et al. 2012	Venezuela	Explore, describe and conceptualise children's experiences of FI	• 10-17 years old • focus groups - 42 participants in total • 13 interviews
Harvey 2016	UK	Experiences of FI families - parents and children - in South London	• 5-11 years old • 19 semi-structured interviews • also survey of 72 parents
Cairns 2018	US	Explore interdependency of food relations through young people's accounts of FI	• 14-18 years old • 11 interviews • also participant observation
Ghattas et al. 2018	Lebanon	Explore children's experiences and perceptions of FI	• 8- 12 years old • 37 semi-structured interviews also interviewed mothers

Table 2.2 continued over

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Knight et al. 2018	UK	Paper discussing findings from research done in UK as part of Families and Food In Hard Times Study, exploring food insecurity amongst children and families in 3 European countries. 3 case studies presented in detail	• 11- 15 years old • semi-structured interviews with 45 families (one parent/carer and one child) • additional 10 photo elicitation interviews with subsample of households
Mott et al. 2018	US	What does it mean to be food insecure?	• 11- 14 years old • focus groups - 46 participants in total
O'Connell et al. 2019	UK	Book presenting findings from research done in UK as part of Families and Food In Hard Times Study, which explored food insecurity amongst children and families in 3 European countries	• 11- 15 years old • semi-structured interviews with 45 families (one parent/carer and one child) • additional 10 photo elicitation interviews with subsample of households
O'Connell and Brannen 2021	UK, Portugal, Norway	Book presenting findings from research done as part of Families and Food In Hard Times Study, which explored food insecurity amongst children and families in 3 European countries.	• 11- 15 years old • 43-45 semi-structured interviews families (one parent/carer and one child) in each country • additional 10 photo elicitation interviews with subsample of households in each country

The first group, consisting of Connell et al. (2005), Fram et al. (2011), Bernal et al. (2012), and Ghattas et al. (2018), were all published in nutrition journals, and tend towards a positivist approach (i.e. that used by the natural sciences). In fact all but Ghattas et al. (2018) were published in the American Society for Nutrition's *Journal of Nutrition*, which accepts research dealing with 'human, animal, cellular, and molecular nutrition', i.e. sitting within the natural science tradition. In all four cases, the findings from the qualitative studies were then used as the basis for generating a survey instrument (Connell et al., 2004; Fram et al., 2013; Bernal et al., 2014; Jamaluddine et al., 2019) via which children's experiences of food insecurity can be

measured by way of child report. The qualitative work was therefore understood as a first step towards the primary goal of being able to quantify the prevalence and impacts of food insecurity on children on a population level. Connell et al. (2005) and Fram et al. (2011) in particular focussed on condensing the findings of the qualitative research into components or elements that could then be used to generate a survey instrument. The survey instrument generated by Connell et al. (2004) is presented by the USDA on their website as a possible tool for assessing self-reported food insecurity in children over twelve year old[8]. Fram et al. (2013) suggest a different conceptualisation of child food insecurity to that of Connell et al. (2005) and devised and validated the Child Food Security Assessment for use with children over six years old.

The remaining five papers (Harvey, 2016; Cairns, 2018; Mott et al., 2018; Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019), on the other hand, are focussed on gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences that children who are from low-income families have in relation to food. This is a subtle but important difference to the first group in that the complexities of personal experiences do not have to be tidied up and simplified into survey components. Although they may discuss the quantity and quality of their participants' diets, these papers place the children's experiences more explicitly within a wider context of poverty. Cairns (2018, p.174), who I have included in this second grouping, also does this, but she uses teenagers' descriptions of their experiences of food insecurity to explore 'the relational construction of mother and child'; child food insecurity is not her principal focus and so her research slightly stands apart. Harvey's paper (2016) emulates most closely in tone and structure the papers in the nutrition journals. Knight et al. (2018), O'Connell et al. (2019) and O'Connell and Brannen (2021) report on data from the same research project, Families and Food in Hard Times, and share the way that they situate their research within the poverty and child poverty literature. They also set out their understanding of poverty, following Townsend (1979 among others), as relative, and emphasise the social aspects of exclusion that arise from what they term food poverty. Three of the papers (Cairns, 2018; Mott et al., 2018; Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018) are in *Children & Society*, which is published by the National Children's Bureau and covers topics relating to 'the health, education and welfare of children', and the book by O'Connell et al. (2019) was published by Child Poverty Action Group. I provide the detail of the subject matter covered in *Children & Society* to illustrate how it differs to the nutrition journals that the first group of studies were published in. I think this is important as

[8] See https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools.aspx for details.

the choice of journal or publisher indicates an approach taken by researchers to a piece of research.

Although papers in this second group may relate their findings to the policy landscape and discuss implications and suggestions for policy – O'Connell et al.'s book closes with five pages of recommendations on employment and benefits, dignity and human rights, and school policies, among others -- their research was not done to act as a foundation upon which the generation of a survey instrument and quantitative research could be built; it is stand-alone and the qualitative research is the end in itself.

The findings and outputs of the two groups of research work undertaken are different but equally important. It is crucial to be able to measure and assess how many children are being impacted by household food insecurity and in what ways so that appropriate responses can be put in place by policy-makers. It is also equally important that we explore and identify children's subjective experiences in all their complexity – a deep understanding is also essential to ensuring that we know what the issues facing children really are so that appropriate policy responses are generated, and that when we do survey children, we are measuring the right things.

2.4.3 Different understandings of how children experience food insecurity

Radimer's (1992) findings from her doctoral work with mothers on hunger and 'near hunger' are seen as the base upon which research on household and individual level food insecurity has been built (Tarasuk, 2001). I would argue that the qualitative work done by Connell et al. (2005) and Fram et al. (2011) acts to some extent as the foundational research in the field of child food insecurity; certainly these two studies are often cited in later papers and their findings discussed (Bernal et al., 2012; Harvey, 2016; Ghattas et al., 2018; Mott et al., 2018). The understandings of how children experience food insecurity offered by these two studies vary quite significantly, however. Connell et al. (2005, p.1689) propose that children experience food insecurity in a way that 'bear[s] a strong resemblance to that of adults', in that it can be explained using the dimensions proposed by Radimer (1992) e.g. physical, psychological, and social. In contrast, Fram et al. (2011, p.1117) suggest that this is not the case; they propose that child food insecurity can be understood via two main components of awareness and responsibility and that children experience food insecurity differently from adults because of their 'developmental vulnerability [and] limitation in managing financial resources' (Bernal et al., 2012, p.1343). The key difference is that Fram et al. (2011, p.1118) argue that children's experiences and understandings of household food insecurity relate to

food and their interactions with it and not with the 'money/economic context' that the family exists within. They argue that:

> *Because children generally do not earn the money for household food or do the family's grocery shopping, their experiences of food insecurity flow not from the economic context of family life but from the relational and resource contexts that they actually encounter day to day: what they get to eat and how they interact with their parents, relatives, neighbors [sic], teachers, and friends.* (Fram et al., 2011, p.1118)

These two different understandings – (i) that children are aware of and situate their experiences relating to food within an economic and resource-restricted context and (ii) that children do not do this, but instead experience food insecurity in terms of food; lack of it, accessing it, the impact of not having enough of it, i.e. they do not relate it to money – are reflected in the literature that came after the papers by Connell et al. (2005) and Fram et al. (2011) were published. Harvey (2016, p.239), for example, notes that the children she spoke with 'tended to focus on the immediate household environment'*;* she states that her findings tie in with those of Fram et al. (2011) who write that the children they spoke with did not automatically associate problems obtaining food to issues relating to money. Conversely, Bernal et al. (2012, p.1346) tell us that in terms of children's understandings of the causes of household food insecurity, a 'lack of economic resources stand[s] out'. The picture provided by other studies is not always very clear on this issue however, as early on in their paper Ghattas et al. (2018, p.29) state that children 'did not necessarily equate running out of food with lack of money', but then they begin their discussion section by telling us that children 'perceived lack of money as the primary reason for food insecurity' (2018, p.35). Aside from Harvey (2016), the papers in the second group make no attempt to isolate the experience of food insecurity from that of living in poverty or on a low income; food insecurity and insufficient financial resources are intertwined in interviews with participants and in analysis and discussion of the findings.

Although the different studies may have slightly different approaches, the findings overlap, so in the following section I present the findings from the qualitative studies by theme.

2.4.4 What children tell us about their experiences of food insecurity

Purposive sampling was used in all of the studies in that the researchers targeted populations known to be on low or very low incomes. As such, it comes as no surprise that some of the participating children and teenagers reported that they had gone or were currently going

without food (Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Harvey, 2016; Ghattas et al., 2018; Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019). Children also discussed the impact that hunger had on them physically: 'your belly hurts and you feel sick' (Harvey, 2016, p.241); 'when I'm hungry I just can't concentrate' (O'Connell et al., 2019, p.43). Other children might not be missing whole meals but they talk about eating less: 'they sort of ration the food' (Connell et al., 2005, p.1686) and eating food that is lower quality or the same thing over and over again: 'I just eat like pretty much the same thing' (Knight et al., 2018, p.188). These are the quantity and quality components of individual level food insecurity discussed in section 2.1, above.

By talking with children directly we hear their own representations and stories of their lived experiences, and thus we get more of an insight into what it really feels like for children to live without food security. A crucial distinction between studies using qualitative methods and those gathering quantitative data via surveys is their ability to dig under the surface of children's experiences, and to explore the non-material impacts i.e. to get an understanding of how children feel and react to household food insecurity and how it affects their social interactions. We know from the quantitative literature that living in food insecure households can be associated with negative impacts on mental health (see Section 2.3.1, above). Via the qualitative studies we get to understand more about what is happening for the children: one of the things they report is that they are often worried. They worry about having enough food (Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012), they worry about their parents (Fram et al., 2011; Ghattas et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2018; Cairns, 2018; O'Connell and Brannen, 2021); they are aware that providing adequate and appropriate food is stressful for their parents (Connell et al., 2005; Cairns, 2018).

Children explain that their parents try to hide the difficulties that the family is facing in order to protect them (Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Ghattas et al., 2018). Despite this, children are aware that their household is not food secure (Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; O'Connell et al., 2019), and that their parents use various strategies to try and manage and ameliorate the situation, including relying on family and friends and going without food themselves (Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Ghattas et al., 2018; Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018; O'Connell and Brannen, 2021): 'my mummy sometimes doesn't eat' (Bernal et al., 2012, p.1346). Children respond with what Fram et al. (2011, p.1117) describe as 'cognitive vigilance', in that they take on various levels of responsibility for mitigating their own and their family's food insecurity (Bernal et al., 2012; Ghattas et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019). This includes worrying about and/or taking action

to enable their siblings to have more food (Connell et al., 2005; Bernal et al., 2012): 'I let all my siblings eat and when they are done, I eat whatever is left' (Ghattas et al., 2018, p.33). They also try to protect and/or help their parents, by obtaining food from other sources or trying to earn some money that can then be spent on food (Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Ghattas et al., 2018).

Children are therefore behaving as active agents (Lister, 2004, p.51) within the constraints of their experience of food insecurity. In a few cases researchers describe what could perhaps be seen as acts of resistance by the children, in that they hold on to their agency and the right to make choices within a constricting and sometimes overwhelming reality (Lister, 2004, p.127). Fram et al. (2011) and Harvey (2016) provide examples of children, despite having limited access to food at home, refusing to eat meals that are given to them at school because they think the quality is so bad. O'Connell et al. (2019) spoke with children who refused to be labelled as poor and also didn't eat the free school meals if they didn't like the food provided. Ghattas et al. (2018, p.32) spoke with a number of children who defended their parents, and were 'protective of their … efforts'. In this way, they are pushing back against potential negative judgements of their parents.

Connell et al. (2005), Bernal et al. (2012), O'Connell et al. (2019) and O'Connell and Brannen (2021) all make reference to the shame that children can feel when their families are experiencing food insecurity. 'Albeit perhaps unconsciously' (Connell et al., 2005, p.1688), children carry with them the societal stigma that arises with living in a household that is so economically vulnerable that accessing adequate food is an issue. They recognise that children from food insecure families are seen as 'different' (Connell et al., 2005, p.1688). Perhaps as a result, some of the children explained that they do not share their experiences with their friends (Connell et al., 2005; Bernal et al., 2012; O'Connell et al., 2019), and that their family's financial situation got in the way of friendships. As one young pre-teenager explained to Mott (2018, p.212), '[n]ot having food in your house makes you feel out of place around other people' (see also Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019).

2.4.5 Why do we need further qualitative research that is done with British children on children's experiences of food insecurity?

The studies described in the preceding section comprise the current literature of child-reported experiences relating to food insecurity in middle and high-income countries. In this section I will present what I see as the limitations of and gaps within this literature.

Different cultural contexts

Bernal et al. (2012, p.1344) suggest that we need to do qualitative work with children in different 'cultural, social and physical contexts' so that we can understand if there are commonalities or differences of experience between children in different countries (see also Fram, Bernal, et al., 2015). Knowing that different welfare systems can provide greater or lesser protection against household food insecurity (Loopstra et al., 2016), for example, means that we cannot assume that children living in high-income countries of the Global North – for example those in the US and the UK -- have corresponding experiences related to food insecurity. Indeed, the Families and Food in Hard Times study looked at the UK, Portugal and Norway expressly to 'identify the particularity of social conditions' (O'Connell and Brannen, 2021, p.231). Although, as evidenced in the preceding sections, there appear to be commonalities of experience, we also already know that children's responses to household food insecurity differ in different contexts. For example, Bernal et al. (2012) found that one of the strategies reported regularly by the children aged ten to fifteen years old with whom they talked in Venezuela was going out and getting work. Ghattas et al. (2018, p.35) also provided examples of Lebanese children who 'worked because we didn't have food in the house.' In US-based studies this was reported much more infrequently (Fram et al., 2011) or not at all . Neither Harvey (2016) nor O'Connell (2019) suggested that their British participants took on informal work in order to reduce the household's food insecurity. This is not surprising as child labour is not the norm in the UK, but illustrates that really understanding a child of a particular nationality's experience of food insecurity involves speaking to children within that country. As shown, qualitative research done with British children is very limited, being based to date on two studies (Harvey et al*.,* 2016, and the Families and Food in Hard Times research project). There is therefore a need for further research with British children on their experiences of food insecurity in order to provide a more detailed and nuanced picture of the particularities of children's experiences here.

Experiences related to developmental stage

Research that has been done with children and young people on their experiences of poverty suggests that the developmental stage that the child is at can be a factor in the way they understand, interact with and react to living on a low income. Ridge (2002), who undertook one of the key pieces of work with children on childhood poverty in Britain, states that she did not make prior assumptions based on age, but found nonetheless that the move up to secondary school (aged 11) was a key transition, that 'twelve appeared to be a critical age for

greater self-awareness and self-esteem' (2002, p.138) and that age did make a difference in some ways in that older children found 'the restrictions of poverty harder to bear' (2002, p.138). This finding is borne out by Roker's (1998) work with young people aged thirteen to eighteen, as the older adolescents expressed that living with limited resources had become harder the older they got. In terms of research specifically on food insecurity, Huang and Vaughn (2016) suggest that their findings show that differing sensitivity to the 'influences' of food insecurity could be attributed to age/developmental stage (Huang and Vaughn, 2016, p.1006). It does makes sense intuitively that British children at secondary school would have a different experience to those in primary school, as they have much more autonomy – they can choose their lunch (within the limits of their finances) in a school canteen, or in some cases they may be able to leave the premises to purchase it in local shops. They will spend more time without adult supervision, and are able to buy snacks or meals if they have the money to do so. They also spend more time outside the home with other young people. They may cook for themselves or the family within the home. In contrast, primary school children – because of their age -- usually have much less choice in terms of what they eat, and how the food is obtained, at school and at home.

Developmental stages and key transitions may differ for children in different countries, i.e. in the US a child may attend a middle school before going up to high school, and in the state in Venezuela where Bernal et al. (2012, p.1344) undertook their research, 9.1 per cent of children weren't even attending school. Taking on board what Ridge (2002), Roker (1998) and Huang and Vaughn (2016) found, it is important to ensure that we are capturing the experiences of children from across the age range. Of the ten qualitative papers discussed, however, only four -- Fram et al. (2011), Bernal et al. (2012), Harvey (2016) and Ghattas et al. (2018) -- spoke with children under eleven. There is only one UK study (Harvey (2016)) which involved primary school-aged children. There is clearly, therefore, a need to further explore the experiences of younger children, to which this thesis contributes.

Non-material impacts of food insecurity on children

Early qualitative research by Connell et al. (2005), Fram et al. (2011), and Bernal et al. (2012) revealed the non-material effects of living in families that were economically vulnerable to an extent that accessing food had been or was currently an issue. Indeed, Connell et al. (2005, p.1687) wrote that they were surprised by the 'magnitude of the psychological responses, emotional strain and social ramifications' for children. In terms of the research undertaken in the UK, these impacts on children have been captured to varying extents. In the interviews

conducted by Harvey (2016), for example, the children did not speak to her about non-material impacts of food insecurity; the very short interviews she conducted only yielded data on aspects relating to the quantity and quality of food and the physiological impact of hunger. The researchers on the Food and Families in Hard Times study, on the other hand, heard from their participants about the shame and stigma that children in low-income families can feel, and the way that they are excluded, as a result of their lack of money, from taking part in 'normal' social activities involving food such as inviting a friend back to their house for dinner. In the case studies presented by Knight et al. (2018, p.191), this social exclusion is described by Kwame, aged fifteen, who says that he is 'left out of the fun that happens and stuff. Like it just makes me feel empty'. Although the book by O'Connell et al. (2019) and the paper by Knight et al. (2018) make very clear the pressure that the children and young people are under, neither touch in much detail upon issues pertaining to worry or anxiety. O'Connell and Brannen (2021, pp38-39) identify and recognise the impact of the 'psychosocial or emotional dimension' of food insecurity, but there are very few examples provided of children worrying; instances discussed are mostly adults' experiences. There is therefore an opportunity and an imperative to further explore the range of non-material impacts of food insecurity on British children.

2.5 Conclusion

Food insecurity impacts many aspects of children's lives. It affects their physical and mental health, their behaviour and their academic achievement. It leads to unhealthy weight gain, and can negatively influence their ability to make friends and participate in the normal social life of a child their age. Children living in a household that is food insecure feel ashamed and anxious. They worry about the effect of food insecurity on their parents and siblings, and take an active part in managing and mitigating its impact.

Quantitative studies provide useful population level data, but do not provide rich and vivid understandings of what life is really like for children who are experiencing food insecurity. They often use proxy respondents and as a result I would question the reliability of their findings (other than in telling us what those proxies think about children's experiences). The existing body of qualitative literature, which does delve deeper into children's subjective experiences, is extremely limited, comprising to date (according to my searches) only eight papers and two books. There are only four publications based on research undertaken in UK (and three are outputs from the same study data), only one of which explores the experiences of primary school aged children. The paper in question, by Harvey (2016), is limited in that it does not contain any findings on the non-material aspects of the participants' experiences.

Very little is known about younger children's experiences of food in Britain. The aim of this thesis is to address this gap in the research. The following chapter sets out the methods used to achieve this.

3. Researching children's experiences of food insecurity: Methodology and methods

3.1 Introduction

The length of this chapter is an indication of the importance that I attach to 'interrogat[ing] how we as researchers create our texts' (Fine, 1994, p.14). For me this stems from an approach to research that is centred around a commitment to inclusivity, equality, an acceptance of complexity and messiness, and the avoidance of any possible harm (Davidson, 2017; see Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). A faithful adherence to these values demands transparency in the form of a comprehensive explanation of the research process, and honesty via a rendering visible – through reflexive accounts -- of the 'specificities of identity and power' in the research context (Vardeman-Winter, 2014, p. 95; see also Mortari, 2015). In addition, I hope that being explicit about my methods and sharing my experiences – both positive and negative – might be useful for other early career researchers.

The chapter begins by presenting the aims, objectives and research questions that provide a framework for this study and by outlining my approach to researching with children. A section discussing how research has evolved from being done *on* to *with* children is followed by a description of how the focus of my research and preferred methods evolved from my original proposal looking at the phenomenon of holiday hunger to this final thesis. Next, I review the methods of data collection used: focus groups and one-to-one interviews. I reflect upon any methodological and ethical issues that arose. I close this section of the chapter with a discussion of what reflexivity involves and share some of the challenges I faced. The final section focuses on analysis, and describes my approach and the various processes I used to shape the 'plausible stor[ies]' (Joffe and Yardley, 2004, p.63) that have become this thesis.

3.2 Aim, objectives and research questions

This thesis aims to add to the existing knowledge on children's lived experiences of food insecurity. As shown in Chapter 2, there has been scant research done that hears from children themselves about what it is like for them to live in households that are so financially precarious that obtaining appropriate food is not always possible or involves engaging strategies in order to do so. There has been very little research of this type undertaken here in the UK, and we have limited knowledge in particular about younger children's experiences. The objectives of this study are to better understand the context within which primary school-aged children

experience food insecurity, and to gain a rich understanding of the lived experiences, both material and non-material, of these children in relation to their experiences.

With this in mind, I generated an overarching research question that underpins the whole study: *How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity?* In addition, I generated a number of sub-questions, to provide a structure for exploring the various dimensions that comprise the experience of food insecurity. These are:

a) How do primary school-aged children identify food insecurity? How do they discuss it, think and talk about it?
b) What are the material impacts on primary-school aged children of living in households that are experiencing food insecurity?
c) What are the non-material, i.e. emotional and psychosocial impacts on primary-school aged children of living in households that are experiencing food insecurity?

Lastly, I felt that an important element of the study would be adding to the methodological knowledge in this field and so included the following sub-question:

d) What are the best methods to use to learn about children's experiences of food insecurity?

3.2.1 My approach to researching with children

This PhD study adopts a methodological approach that echoes that of participatory research, in that it foregrounds the principles of respect, transparency, inclusion and equality (Davidson, 2017) at all stages of the research process and during all interactions with the children, and uses the practice of reflexivity to challenge what knowledge is produced and how (Mortari, 2015). The research has been planned and undertaken with an ongoing consideration of and attempts to mitigate issues such as imbalances in power relations, agency and representation.

The position taken in this thesis is that children are agentic, active and competent; I recognise that children are the experts on their own and other children's experiences and that they have 'contemporary, insider knowledge' (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018, p.87). Childhood is not simply a stage towards adulthood, but an entirely different culture (Harden et al., 2000b, in Kirk, 2007) and adults cannot expect to fully understand the world from a child's perspective (Christensen, 2004). In order to gain an understanding of children's lived experiences therefore, we must listen to what they say about them.

Following O'Connell and Brannen, moreover, I do not see it as my role as a researcher to simply provide a space in which the children's voices can be heard; my function is to critically

examine the environment – 'to describe, understand and contextualise … the social conditions and causes that shape their experiences.' (O'Connell and Brannen, 2021, p.45)

3.3 Researching children

Traditionally, research has been conducted *on* rather than *with* children (Christensen and James, 2000b; Kirk, 2007). Their lives and experiences have been examined via the interpretations and perceptions of the adults involved in caring for them (Christensen and James, 2000b) or of adults that research them, and consequently children's voices have been 'muted' (Hardman, 1973, p.85, in Thomas, 2000). Since the early 2000s, however, we have seen a rise in the participation of children in research focussing on children (Kirk, 2007; Hill, 2006). This is ascribed to a change in their status and the role that they play in society (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000), which has been precipitated by the creation of a legal children's rights framework and also a sociological reconceptualisation of childhood (Foley et al., 2003; Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Hill, 2006; Kirk, 2007; Woodhead, 2010).

The civil and political rights of children were recognised in 1989, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Woodhead, 2010). The 1989 UK Children Act also served to support children's increased participation in research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000; Thomas, 2000; Kirk, 2007) by requiring that children 'be consulted and […] have a voice in decisions about their lives' (Thomas, 2000, p.60). Critiques of the children's rights framework include those centred around the issue of the conflict between children's rights and those of their parents (Prout and Hallatt, 2003; Thomas, 2000). A key issue, and one that must be regularly navigated by researchers undertaking fieldwork, is the conflict between the right of children to participate and the responsibilities of adults and professionals to ensure children's welfare (Thomas, 2000; Alderson, 2000).

Until recently, childhood as a research object was primarily 'owned' by the discipline of developmental psychology (Kirk, 2007), which leant heavily on Piaget's theories of children progressing through distinct stages towards adulthood (Thomas, 2000): children were seen as 'unfinished persons' (Thomas, 2000, p.15). In the 1990s James and Prout identified an emergent paradigm (exemplified for them in work such as Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Kirk, 2007; Thomas, 2000), which they described as the new sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1997). This new way of thinking about childhood understands it first and foremost as a social construction (James and Prout, 1997). This paradigm shift regarding the position of children in society (Christensen and James, 2000b; Woodhead, 2010) has seen them being transformed from being adults-in-waiting to social actors in their own right (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Powell

and Smith, 2009; Thomas, 2000), and as such, children have moved from being the *objects* to the *subjects* of research (Christensen and James, 2000b).

3.3.1 Methodological and ethical issues in researching with children

There is an ongoing debate as to whether research with children requires different methodological approaches and ethical considerations to that undertaken with adults. Many researchers have used specific tools and techniques, such as drawing (Kirk, 2007), mapping and story creation (Dona, 2006) with success. These methods are often presented as appropriate techniques when adopting an approach which focuses on 'children's agency within the landscapes of power between child participant and adult researchers' (Davidson, 2017, p.228). It has been argued, however, that the use of these tools is grounded in the assumption that children are less able to communicate using traditional methods than adults (Harden et al., 2000) and that this approach therefore fails to fully acknowledge their agency and role as social actors in their own right (Kirk, 2007). Christensen and James (2000b) maintain that studying children does not demand special techniques (see also Prout, 2000). O'Connell and Brannen (2021, p.65) suggest, however, that conducting interviews with children about issues such as food insecurity demands an 'extra degree of sensitivity and skill'.

Seeing children as a homogenous group would be very useful for sociological research, in that it would meet the 'demand for commonality' (Qvortrup, 2000, p.78). An increasing number of researchers, however, are adopting an approach that acknowledges not only that children's experiences vary widely (Christensen and James, 2000a), but that they are a 'highly differentiated' group (Hill, 1997, p. 171) and, as is the case with adults, macro-social characteristics such as gender, age and race must be taken into account (Hill, 1997). Solberg (1996) adds to this discussion by arguing that a child's age should not, in fact, influence ways of approaching children in social sciences and that each child should be dealt with according to their own individual capabilities. I would argue, however, from my own experience as a parent and someone who played a number of roles in a school that there are certain life stages and experiences that suggest commonalities, such as being of primary school or secondary school age. In the case of this thesis, and as noted above, I recognise that children of primary school age are distinctive in terms of their relationship with accessing food, as older children and teenagers have much more agency around choosing what they will eat during the school day (and at other times) (see also O'Connell and Brannen, 2021).

As noted above, one issue that is particular to research with children is that of the conflict between the rights of the child to agency and participation, and adults'/parents' duty of care

towards them (Thomas, 2000; Alderson, 2000; Munford and Sanders, 2004; Solberg, 2014). This need to balance the rights of children with the responsibilities of adults to ensure their safety and wellbeing means that the ethics of conducting research with children are highly complex and must be managed sensitively (Solberg, 2014).

Kirk (2007) suggests that the three central issues appertaining to ethics when conducting research with children are power, informed consent and confidentiality. As noted earlier, power relations are highly problematic, and there is an understanding that the generational power imbalances that exist between adults and children may be replicated during the research process (Harden et al., 2000) and may reinforce the 'the inherent power relation between researcher and researched' (Christensen, 2004, p. 168). Anderson (2000, p.243) warns of the danger of infantilising children, and, in doing so, 'producing evidence to reinforce notions of their incompetence'.

Gaining informed consent from children is a matter that is raised in a number of papers (e.g. Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000; Roberts, 2000; Clark, 2004; Mishna et al., 2004; Kirk, 2007). This is complicated by the fact that there is no law and therefore ambiguity on the right of children under sixteen to provide or withdraw consent for participation in research that is not a clinical trial[9] (NHS Health Research Authority, 2021). If children are deemed to be 'competent' (Cocks, 2006 p. 253; see Westcott and Lilltleton, 2005 pp. 148–150 for a discussion on competence), parental consent is 'encouraged' but not legally necessary (O'Reilly et al., 2013, p. 64). However, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (n.d.) and the Economic and Social Research Council (2015) both suggest that consent should also be obtained from a parent or guardian. As Sime (2008, p.6) notes, 'when parents do not respond or refuse consent, researchers can do very little in the case of children who wish to participate and give their own consent'.

Maintaining confidentiality can be problematic too, if the child discloses information that the researcher feels implies that they are 'at risk' (Scott, 2000; Mishna et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Kirk, 2007). In clear cases of abuse there is an obligation to report it, but other scenarios are more ambiguous: a dilemma may arise if a child discloses that they are being made miserable by bullies, for example (Mishna et al., 2004, pp. 457–458).

I had to contend with many of these issues of power, consent and confidentiality over the course of planning, undertaking and writing up my research; I share and comment on my

[9] In the case of clinical trials, regulations state that children under sixteen are not allowed to provide consent; consent must be given by parents or legal representatives. (NHS Health Research Authority, 2021)

experiences throughout the rest of the chapter. The following section presents details of the research design and process.

3.4 Getting to this point: the research design journey

Emmel (2013) argues that the process of undertaking research is non-linear; it is an iterative process, and this certainly was the case with this study. The process of undertaking research, often complicated and messy, is for the most part, if not hidden, then certainly tidied away when it is shared in a journal article or other publication. In doing this, however, we obscure the realities of undertaking research and the learning that takes place. Particularly for PhD students and early career researchers, being able to observe the true nature of the process would be extremely helpful. With this in mind, this section makes visible the many iterations of the research aims and objectives, associated questions and the methods that were considered before arriving at my final research design.

3.4.1 My research proposal

The issue that originally inspired me to undertake a PhD was 'holiday hunger' – this describes the struggle that many financially precarious families have over school holidays to cover the cost of food, as they are having to spend more than during term-time when their children receive free school meals. I was very engaged with this as a topic as I had explored school food as part of my MSc in Food Policy (2012-2014), and this had resulted in my sitting on a national Holiday Hunger Taskforce which was part of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food. Holiday hunger was beginning to be recognised as an issue in the UK by civil society organisations (but not yet by the government), but no academic research had been undertaken on it at the time of me starting my PhD.[10] I am a campaigner at heart, and generating research data that would be socially useful was important to me. The proposal with which I was accepted as a PhD candidate and was awarded my scholarship was titled: *Holiday hunger: The role of the state in preventing food poverty.* My research questions at this stage were as follows:

1. To what extent does holiday hunger exist amongst primary school-aged children in Leeds?
2. What strategies do children, schools and families deploy to ameliorate holiday hunger?
3. What level of responsibility should the state have to ensure that children do not experience hunger or food poverty?

[10] A number of papers have now been written on this topic.

My proposed methods were pupil and teacher surveys; interviews with parents; focus groups with children; interviews with teachers; and interviews with key stakeholders. Including a research question on the role of the state (question 3) was related to my understanding that the issue of holiday hunger is one caused by wider structural inequalities and that requires upstream responses. My reflection when I look back at the long list of methods proposed is that I clearly did not have a realistic understanding at that time of what is involved in undertaking research. Regarding my proposed use of focus groups, I had not taken into consideration that group situations are not, in most cases, an appropriate way to talk with children about their personal experiences of potentially sensitive topics.

3.4.2 Starting my PhD

Unlike most of my fellow PhD students around me, who were embedding themselves in the literature on their various topics, the first four months of my PhD were spent planning and carrying out a survey. The survey aimed to investigate whether primary school headteachers in Leeds perceive that there might be children who are going hungry or eating less healthily during school holidays, as a consequence of their parents' financial situation. (The survey is discussed in Section 3.5.1 below.) At times I questioned whether diving straight into some fieldwork was the best thing to do, and in fact I have not ended up using the majority of the data that the survey yielded in my thesis. However, the survey proved to be useful in that the results indicated that children were experiencing food insecurity in the city, and acted as a justification for further inquiry. In addition, answers provided by the school staff to the open questions yielded unexpected data around attitudes to people experiencing food insecurity (see Chapter 4) and, most importantly, led to a realisation that it was important not to limit my focus to hunger experienced during the school holidays; what was needed and would be more useful was a wider exploration of British children's experiences of food insecurity, about which very little was then known.

3.4.3 Expanding my focus

Alongside my PhD studies I volunteered in and later worked for a food poverty campaign coalition (End Hunger UK) and was involved in consulting with people around the country who have received and who were involved in providing food aid. It was regularly reported that reforms to the benefits system, brought in by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government under the Welfare Reform Act 2012, were leading to increased economic hardship and food insecurity for many families. In response to this, six months after starting my PhD, I amended my original aims and objectives to include an examination of how welfare

reform was impacting food security. As well as a survey to ascertain the prevalence of food insecurity amongst children, and focus groups to hear about children's lived experiences, I wanted to undertake a qualitative longitudinal (QL) study, which involved interviewing fifteen parent-and-child pairs three times over one year. The plan was to 'walk alongside' (Corsaro and Molinari, 2000, in Neale and Flowerdew, 2003, p.194) my participants for a year, in order to capture the interactions between their experiences with the benefits system and household food insecurity.

As noted above, the results of the survey undertaken with primary school headteachers in Leeds made it clear that food insecurity was not only experienced by children during the school holidays, so I decided that I would no longer limit myself to a study of holiday hunger as it was important to be able to capture and understand the experiences of children experiencing food insecurity all year round or at different periods.

I had been planning to undertake a survey of children to try to gather some quantitative data on the incidence and severity of child food insecurity in Leeds and had invested a lot of time in thinking about existing survey instruments and how to generate and validate one that would be appropriate for my use. At the beginning of my second year, however, I recognised that a richer understanding of *how* children experience food insecurity was necessary before an instrument could be developed to accurately assess child food insecurity in the UK. How can we decide *how* to measure something, if we don't really know *what* it is that we are measuring?

It is interesting to me, looking back, that I viewed (for a period of time) the generation of an accurate survey instrument as my goal, rather than seeing the learning that would come from children's reports of their own experiences as an end in themselves. It took me a while to resist the urge to produce quantitative data, and to be confident enough to feel that learning and adding to our knowledge about children's lived experiences, messy and complicated as they are, is appropriate (and valuable) research. It was at this point that I decided that the most appropriate method would be to conduct one-to-one interviews with children. I put aside my plan to do a survey to measure the prevalence of food insecurity, but added two new additional objectives, that would involve me interrogating existing conceptualisations of child food insecurity and generating a UK specific conceptualisation.

These objectives were:

- To confirm, refine or modify the 'domains' of child food insecurity as presented in the existing literature[11], and, as such, add to the current understanding of child food insecurity.
- To generate a conceptualisation of food insecurity as experienced by children in the UK.

I still wanted to include an exploration of the impact of welfare reform on household food insecurity, and was still planning to do this via a QL study. At this stage therefore, my proposed methods involved focus groups, one-to-one interviews and a year-long qualitative longitudinal study.

3.4.4 Cancellation of the proposed qualitative longitudinal element of the study

In the July of my second year, I had completed the focus groups and had managed to do many more one-to-one interviews with children in school than I had originally planned (thirty-three rather than fifteen). I had put many hours and much effort over a year and a half into recruiting participants for the QL study, but was only able to find three parent-and-child pairs (out of the proposed eight) who were willing and able to take part, so reluctantly had to put this element of the research aside. I decided however that, if they were happy to, I would conduct one-off interviews with the three parents who had signed up for the QL study, to hear about their experiences of food insecurity. Talking to these parents - who were or who had recently been in a very financially precarious situation -- provided me with useful insights into the context within which children who are experiencing food insecurity live. I did not, however, use the data from these interviews within my thesis.[12]

I was disappointed that I was unable to conduct the QL study as I agree with O'Connell et al. (2019, p.21; see also O'Connell and Brannen, 2021) that there is a 'danger' in terms of gaining an accurate understanding of children's lives if we 'abstract [them] from their families and wider circumstances'. Younger children in particular function within the socio-economic environment of their family household. I was not able to talk to children and their parents, but during the one-to-one interviews I tried to build a picture, via sensitively posed questions, of what resources their families had access to. I did not treat the children as isolated and discrete entities during my analysis – I considered their family, school, neighbourhood and the national context.

[11] These were discussed in the Literature Review.

[12] Although I did not formally analyse the data from the interviews with parents, they did provide a form of triangulation, as the information that they presented was consistent with the accounts offered in the interviews with children.

3.4.5 The final iteration

During the writing-up process I decided that I would not, as part of my thesis, attempt to verify or amend the domains of child food insecurity that have been generated by other researchers, nor attempt to generate a conceptualisation of child food insecurity of my own. It is very tempting to want to tidy up lived experiences and present them in a table as a set of domains, but I recognised that it is important not to obscure the complicated and multi-faceted nature of what it is like for the children to live in households in which access to good food relies on the use of strategies and trade-offs.

As such, this thesis focusses on a central question, *How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity?* The following methods were used to gather the data upon which an exploration of this question and the sub-questions (outlined in Section 3.2) is based:

- A survey of all primary-school headteachers/other senior school staff in Leeds[13]
- Two focus groups with children aged nine to eleven years[14]
- Thirty-three one-to-one semi-structured interviews with children aged nine to eleven years.

The use of each of these methods, including details of sampling and recruitment, and reflections on methodological and ethical issues, is discussed in the following sections.

To summarise, the process of generating and modifying research questions and objectives, and designing methods with which these can be answered and achieved, has been dynamic and iterative, and did not stop once I was in the field; indeed it continued into my writing-up period. Changes to my research design have been made as a result of an ongoing reflection on and analysis of what I have discovered in the literature and also from my participants; ethical issues that have arisen in the field; advice from supervisors and other academics; learning from people who work on the front-line of food insecurity; experiences gained during my work as a campaigner; and practical problems of recruitment and limited time and resources.

3.4.6 Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was provided by the ESSL, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds (reference AREA 16-005). As I was planning to work with children, I also underwent an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, which is a government-run process that checks criminal records and provides a

[13] I only use part of the data gathered using the survey – the responses to the open questions – in this thesis. See Chapter 4 for further explanation.
[14] See Section 3.5.2 for an explanation of why this age range was chosen.

certificate for those wanting to work with or research vulnerable groups. I think ethical review is often seen by researchers as an institutional process that has to be got through, a 'bureaucratic hurdle' (Truman, 2003, np), and even more specifically, paperwork that has to be filled in, submitted and approved. This was also how I initially viewed 'ethics' in regards to my research, but as a result of that issues that arose during the focus groups (see 'Ethical Challenges' in Section 3.5.3, below) I changed my approach to one focused on respect, care, and with an awareness of issues such as power dynamics. I then significantly revised my plan for recruitment and consent for the interviews and submitted a revised ethics application[15]. The following section describes the process of undertaking the fieldwork.

3.5 Data collection: the messiness of real-life research

In this section I discuss the methods used to answer the question, *How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity*?. As noted above, the reality of real-life research is often hidden in written accounts; the rough edges are polished off. Here I will be explicit about decision-making processes and the mistakes that I made. Firstly, I briefly describe the survey on holiday hunger that I undertook at the very beginning of my PhD. This is followed by an overview of my chosen sample frame for the focus groups and interviews and how I gained access to potential participants. The focus groups and interviews are then considered in turn, including sample and recruitment, the rationale behind using these methods and the experience of their employment in the field, reflections on what went wrong, and the methodological and ethical challenges that arose. The section closes with my observations on the role of reflexivity in research.

3.5.1 Survey on holiday hunger

As noted above, in Section 3.4.2, I began my PhD studies with a survey of all primary schools in Leeds (n=225), which aimed to investigate whether primary school headteachers perceived that there were children who were going hungry and eating less healthily during school holidays as a consequence of their parents' financial situation. I chose to investigate this topic as it was conducted at the very beginning of my PhD, when my focus was on holiday hunger. The questionnaire included four closed questions on the quantity and quality of food that headteachers perceived was being eaten by their students during the holidays, and two open questions asking for opinions on why this was happening.

[15] See Section 3.5.4 for a more detailed discussion of my thinking and actions around recruitment and consent processes.

As discussed earlier, the findings from the survey provided evidence of the widespread existence of food insecurity among primary-school children in Leeds and thus provided justification for further research on this topic. The answers to the open questions delivered some unexpected data on attitudes towards people who are struggling to regularly access and provide a healthy diet for their children. These findings are discussed in Chapter 4. However, the results of the survey prompted me to widen my research focus to cover children's experiences of food insecurity more generally, rather than restricting it to holiday hunger. The survey, therefore, was a useful and important part of my PhD process, but the quantitative findings do not apply to my ultimate research question, and as such, I do not discuss them within this thesis. I plan to put them into a paper. The rest of Section 3.5 is concerned with the focus groups and interviews.

3.5.2 Note on sample frame, recruitment and access to participants for the focus groups and interviews

This section provides a background to how the sample frame was chosen and how participants were accessed and recruited for the focus groups and interviews.

The sampling process used for the focus groups and one-to-one interviews was purposeful. Purposeful sampling is utilised extensively within qualitative research (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). It is in essence a strategic approach, and is particularly pertinent for interviews, as it enables the researcher to choose participants who are relevant to, and will therefore be able to help to answer, the research question (Bryman, 2008). For the focus groups and interviews I chose as my sample frame children in Years 5 and 6 (aged nine to eleven years) in primary school in Leeds. To recap, primary school-aged children are the focus of my research as there has been very little research done with younger children on their experiences of food insecurity. As outlined in Chapter 2, and noted above, children in primary school tend to have a different experience regarding food to those in secondary school; the older children have much more choice and agency in regard to what they eat, both in the school setting and outside of it[16]. The principal motivation for choosing children in Years 5 and 6 was that they are the oldest two year groups in primary school and can generally be expected to be able to read and write[17]. I expected to provide a range of material that the children had to read, including information and consent sheets, and I hoped that this would reduce the possibility of putting a child in an awkward position because they could not read.

[16] See O'Connell and Brannen's (2021, p. 53) explanation of why they chose an eleven to fifteen age range for their study.
[17] As I found during the focus groups, however, this was not always the case.

Fram et al.'s (2013) finding that children over eight make accurate reports of their food insecurity status also influenced my decision regarding age range.

I decided to work with schools as I would have relatively easy access to substantial numbers of potential participants, rather than having to recruit each participant individually. I planned to work with schools with cohorts in which over sixty per cent were eligible for free school meals; this is significantly higher than the national average for state funded schools, which at January 2019 was 15.4 per cent (Department for Education, 2019). Free school meal eligibility is dependent upon receipt of certain benefits made available for those families on low incomes (GOV.UK, n.d.(a)) and, as food insecurity is often linked to low income (Habicht et al., 2004; Fram et al., 2015; Gundersen et al., 2011), high levels of free school meal eligibility could therefore indicate that greater than average numbers of pupils within the school are at risk of being food insecure. I did not plan to use a screening process to 'find' children within schools with experience of food insecurity as this could possibly mark out those children who took part in my research as being from very low-income homes and so made participation available to all children in the selected year groups.

I had planned to ascertain levels of free school meal eligibility for individual schools using Leeds City Council data which is freely available online, and then contact the headteachers of schools to invite them to participate in my study. However, a member of staff from Foxglove Primary (pseudonym) contacted me in December 2015. They had participated in my preliminary survey on holiday hunger and were interested in knowing more about my research. The school is situated within one of the most deprived wards in the city, and over sixty per cent of the children were eligible for free school meals. I visited the school on a number of occasions and, over the next year, built a good relationship with the headteacher and the member of staff assigned to be my gatekeeper. I then worked with the school and recruited participants for the focus groups and the interviews from within their cohort.

3.5.3 Focus groups

This section describes sampling, the recruitment and consent process, details of the planning of the focus group sessions and activities undertaken during them, and reflections on the methodological and ethical issues that arose and how I responded to them.

There were two objectives of the focus groups. The first was to enable me to explore the research sub-question, *How do primary school-aged children identify food insecurity? How do they discuss it, think and talk about it?* The second was to solicit practical advice that would enable me to conduct the interviews in the most effective and sensitive way possible. In line

with my approach, outlined in Section 3.2.1, the focus groups provided a way of consulting with children and recognising them as the experts in research with children.

Sample, recruitment and consent

The proposed number of participants for each focus group was six. This number was chosen in order to align with a previous study on child food insecurity (Bernal et al., 2012) which included six children in each focus group. Potential participants were identified and recruited by the gatekeeper in Foxglove Primary School. The gatekeeper was open about the fact that the children he would invite would be from what he described as the "most involved families" in the school, as he felt that they were the ones who would engage with the proposal, and sign and return consent forms within the allotted time frame.

I provided the school with a covering letter, which on their suggestion was sent out on school headed paper, information sheets for both parents and children, and consent forms. Parents returned consent forms directly to the gatekeeper. A number of important issues arose around consent; these are reflected upon in 'Ethical challenges' in Section 3.5.3, below.

The gender and age distribution of the two focus groups is presented in Table 3.1, below.

Planning and undertaking the focus groups

Kennedy et al. (2001) suggest that, in terms of eliciting responses when conducting focus groups with children, using activities which allow participants to communicate their thoughts and feelings in different ways can be much more fruitful than simply asking questions. With this in mind I reviewed both the academic literature and that published by civil society organisations for recommendations and guidance as to how to organise and manage the practicalities of running such a session. Advice was provided as regards age, ways of relating to the children, size of group, general categories of activities, and potential ethical issues, but I could find no guidance on how to structure a session and details of what activities have been successful or not. In the end, I was given permission to use and adapt activities used in focus groups undertaken by a contact at Nourish Scotland, a Scottish NGO that had led a project instigated by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. This project had the aim of 'listen[ing] to what children think about food insecurity' (Kontorravdis et al., 2016, p.3).

In recognition of the lack of in-depth information available in published studies and in the grey literature, I outline below details of how I ran the focus groups, and provide reflections on methodological and ethical issues that arose. Tables outlining the schedule of activities during the day and a session plan/script are available as appendices 1 and 2.

Table 3.1: Details of focus group participants

Focus Group	Number of participants	Age	Gender
Focus Group 1	6	5 x 9 years old (all Year 5) 1 x 10 years old (Year 6)	4 x girls 2 x boys
Focus Group 2	6	5 x 10 years old 1 x 11 years old (all of the group were in Year 6)	6 x girls

Organising the day

The two focus groups took place at the University of Leeds. This involved much more planning and organisation than conducting them on school premises, but I wanted to provide the participants with a 'day out' as a way of recognising their input to my research. The children came in on the school minibus, were given a tour around the campus by a student, and ate lunch in the hustle and bustle of the refectory. In addition, knowing that the way children behave is often context specific (Scott, 2000), I felt it would be a benefit to talk to them outside of the school setting; in school-based studies, children can see researchers as a member of school staff (Hill, 2006), and I didn't want them to be limited to that type of interaction with me.

I worked alongside the Education Engagement Officer within the Faculty of Environment to develop an appropriate schedule for the day, and engaged the services of a third-year undergraduate to lead the campus tour. We split the children into the two groups, and when one set were doing the focus group activities with me, the others were playing games in a different room with the undergraduate.

Focus group activities

The sessions were divided into two: the aim of the first part was to gain an understanding of how children identify and discuss food insecurity, i.e. what language they use and how they think about it; in the second I hoped to get practical advice on how to do the interviews within

the school environment. I did not use the term food insecurity with the participants during the sessions. Instead, I described the topic of the session as:

> *… stuff to do with food; about families perhaps not always getting to eat the food they would like, or as much as they would like, or perhaps worrying about food.*

In this section I provide an overview of how I conducted the sessions.

The first part of the session lasted forty minutes. We began with a game, during which I asked the children to discuss two different families:

1) ***Hamza and Alina***, two siblings whose family could easily afford everything they needed, to the extent that they could have treats whenever they wanted, and,
2) ***Chloe and Sammy***, two siblings whose family were struggling to afford to pay for everything they needed.

As a way of stimulating discussion, the following questions were asked:

- What does the family have for breakfast?
- What is in their fridge and cupboards?
- What do they eat for tea[18]? How do they eat it (i.e. together round a table?) How much do they eat?
- Where do they get their shopping?
- How do they get to the shops?
- How much do they buy?

After both families had been discussed, I then expanded on Chloe and Sammy's story, and explained that their mum had been sanctioned[19] for missing her appointments at the Job Centre and that the family now had no money at all coming in for a month. I asked the children to consider questions about the family's situation now. These were:

- Can you think of any places that they could go for help?
- What other things could they do?
- How do you think Chloe and Sammy feel about that?
- Can you describe what mealtimes are like for them now?

---

[18] 'Tea' is the local term commonly used for the evening meal.

[19] In the UK, certain rules must be followed in order to receive benefits. These include taking part in employment schemes, and applying for all jobs that your work coach tells you about. If these rules are not adhered to, benefits can be reduced or stopped for between seven days and 182 days. This stoppage is known as sanctioning. See https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/universal-credit/sanctions/check-sanction/

The children answered the questions verbally, and also wrote their comments on sticky notes, which they stuck onto the appropriate family's 'house' on the wall. See Figure 3.1 below, for an example.

The second part of the session focussed on getting guidance from the participants as to how best to go about the interviews. I asked the children for advice on where in the school I should conduct the interviews, and whether or not I should prepare an activity for the interviewee and me to do whilst we were talking. The children were interested and engaged and provided lots of suggestions. In the first focus group I then asked the children to take turns picking up a question (that I would potentially use in the interviews) from a pile on the table in front of them, and read it out for the rest of the group to hear and comment on. It was clear from the children's feedback that the questions were, for the most part, just too long, and needed completely rethinking. I decided not to do this activity with the children in the second focus group but just left it out and spent more time on the other activities. The following section provides some reflections on what I learnt in terms of running focus groups with children in this age group.

Reflections on methodological issues

In recognition of the lack of in-depth practical information currently available about running focus groups with children, I have included, below, a number of possible learning points from my experience. Firstly I explore the dynamics of the groups, then I provide some comments on practical issues relating to running the sessions.

The impact of group dynamics

In discussing the focus groups she undertook with eleven to fourteen year olds in the United States, Horner (2000) recognises the influence of the need for peer approval among the participants. She describes peer pressure as potentially having an effect on focus groups with children and young people in that the participants may copy each other's answers. This, she argues, may lead to the data being limited to 'socially desirable responses' (Horner, 2000, p.512). Certainly, the need to conform has been found to be strong at around this age (Constanzo and Shaw, 1966; Strassberg and Wiggen, 1973; Walker and Andrade, 1996).

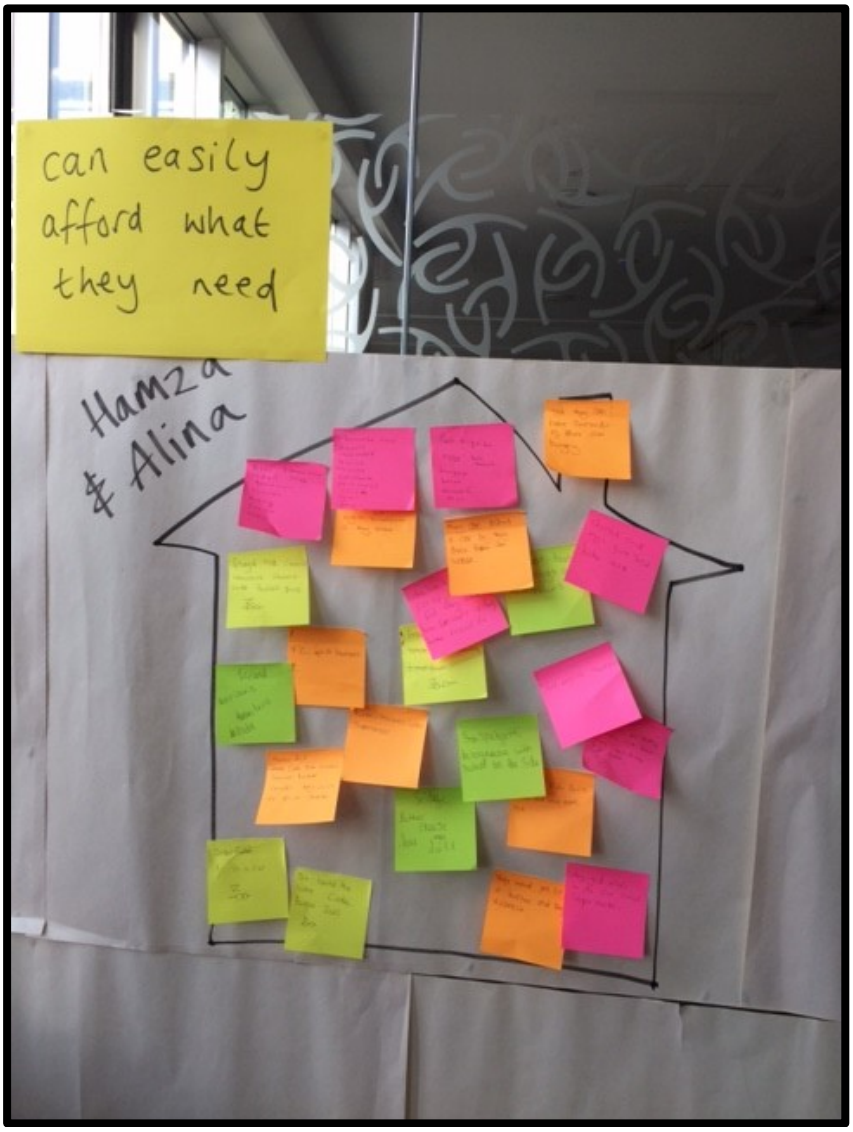

Figure 3.1: Example of one of the focus group activities – Hamza and Alina's 'house'

Kennedy et al. (2001, p.185), however, found that participants' individual differences were not 'muted' during the focus groups they conducted with children aged six to ten years old. This I believe is the case in the focus groups that I undertook. Despite the occurrence of what appeared to be the copying of responses (examples provided below), these did not appear to be as a result of the need to conform. In my field notes (7 November 2016) I write that, 'the kids appeared to 'latch on' (rather than copy) an idea', that it 'felt more like [the particular comments made by one person] struck a chord rather than them just copying'. For example, in focus group 1 (FG1) Keira (pseudonym) used the word *lazy* to describe the imagined Chloe and Sammy's family: '[they] just sit around watching telly. So a lazy family really.' No-one else described the family in this way during the discussion, but three of the comments on sticky notes made by different participants used the word *lazy*:

a) Old rusty broken car; no jobs; not enough money; lazy family; TV
b) Doesn't take Chloe and Sammy anywhere; lazy family
c) Lazy family

In the second focus group (FG2), when discussing what Hamza and Alina (the wealthier family) would have for breakfast, one of the children said 'a full English breakfast'. This appeared to strike a chord with the others as a number of them repeated the phrase out loud and five (out of the six) participants wrote either *full English* or *English breakfast* on sticky notes. Interestingly, no-one in FG1 used the term *English breakfast*, and no-one in FG2 referred to the less wealthy family as *lazy*. This incidence of other children copying what one of the other participants had said did not occur with any other question or topic in the same way and so it could be argued that this did not occur as a result of the need to conform, but rather that they 'latched on' to a suggestion that they had not thought of, but agreed with.

Very different dynamics were evident in the two groups – it was clear that the six participants in FG2 were a friendship group (they mentioned seeing each other at weekends and sleeping over at each other's houses). This was not the case with the participants of FG1 -- two of the participants were related, one of the girls was quite new to the school (she had come from abroad earlier in the year), and two of the girls were friends. During FG2, the children had a group discussion in that they responded to each other's comments and directed comments directly to each other. This did not occur during the first focus group. For the most part, the participants responded only to my questions and did not interact with each other. This meant that much less data emerged from the process. Also, three of the participants in FG1 were reticent to speak; they wrote responses on sticky notes but were not relaxed about responding verbally to my questions and prompts.

Timings of focus groups

Because the headteacher had requested that the focus groups take place on the school's training day[20], and because of the schedule of activities (tour of the campus; lunch in the refectory) that we put in place, the two focus groups had to take place one immediately after the other. This was not an ideal scenario. Practically it was difficult to manage the movement of the two different groups of children between two locations as they swapped from doing the focus group with me to the play activity with the student. I also had to remove all the sticky notes from the 'houses' and set out new refreshments. Ideally, I would have had the chance to

[20] On 'training days', schools are open but pupils are not admitted. These days are often used to provide training to teachers and other school staff members.

reflect and discuss the first focus group with the research assistant immediately after it took place. Having a research assistant in attendance was vital in terms of turning the room around between the two groups.

Use of sticky notes

Using sticky notes proved useful as a way to capture the comments of those participants who were reluctant to speak during FG1. However, I think they hampered discussion in FG2 and I would have got more of a conversation going and more detailed verbal responses without using them with this particular group of participants. The written responses, for the most part, reproduced what the participants had said during the discussion. I did not ask the participants to write their names on the sticky notes, which is something that I would do next time, so that I could quote them (even pseudonymously, so that they could be attributed to the right pseudonym).

Asking the children to read out the proposed interview questions

As outlined earlier, I designed a sampling frame of children aged nine to eleven years old, upon the advice of the headteacher of the participating school as, being the two oldest year groups, they were more likely to be able to read. As a way of engaging the children I asked them to read out the proposed interview questions, which I had printed off and laminated. In practice, this felt like an exercise that they might have undertaken in the classroom. Some of the children declined to do it (I gave them the choice). One of the children read with the support of the school staff member who was in attendance (because he was unable to do so on his own), and although the other children were very positive and supportive of his effort I was worried that it made him feel uncomfortable. I would not use the same activity in a focus group again.

Research Assistant

I was unsure whether or not a having a research assistant in attendance would be necessary, but after speaking to a number of academics from different disciplines, decided that it would be extremely useful. Due to the short timeframe (the school gave me very short notice of the date that they finally decided upon) and the limits to my funding I asked my mum, who was trained as a teacher, to assist me. I brought her into the University over the weekend before the focus groups took place, to show her the proposed venue, and brief her on the schedule for the focus groups and what I wanted her to do at what point. I provided her with a script. I asked her to not only try to note and be aware of what the children were saying and reacting,

but also what did or didn't work about the way I ran the focus group. Having a research assistant there was extremely useful, not simply because of the practical assistance, but also because of her comments as to the running of the sessions. She was able to sit back and observe as she was not as closely involved as me. The section below outlines some of the ethical issues that I came up against in running the focus groups.

Ethical challenges

Informed consent

I opened the focus group sessions with the question, 'Could any of you tell me why you are here?' The answer, from most the children, was, 'No'. I then asked if their parents had talked to them about what they would be doing that day, and again, most of them said no. One of the girls said that her mum had told her that she was coming for a day out at the University. It was clear from the children's responses that none of them had any understanding that the purpose of their trip to the University was for them to take part in a focus group.

All families had been sent two sets of information sheets; one for the adults and one in child-appropriate language, but the children had seemingly not read the sheets, nor had the parents discussed the contents with them. I felt extremely uncomfortable with this situation as this made the securing of informed consent much more complicated. This was a very difficult situation, but I decided to go ahead with the session. My response was to tell the children who I was, why I had invited them to the University, how a focus group worked, and the topic we were dealing with. I told the children that it was really important to me that they were happy to be there and I gave them a number of options: 1) you don't have to answer any questions at all if you don't want; 2) you can choose not to answer certain questions; 3) if you want to leave you can go and join the other group who are playing games and it is no problem at all. However, I was aware that the children were very unlikely to feel confident enough to say that they did not want to stay and take part; the situation was therefore not ideal in terms of the children being able to provide or remove their consent meaningfully.

Something else that made me question whether the children were really consenting to take part was that in FG1 three participants were very quiet; one girl did not utter a word throughout the hour. She had spoken to me before the focus group began, during the tour around the campus, and afterwards, when we went for lunch at the university refectory, so it would appear that she did not feel comfortable or confident enough to speak during the focus group. She did, however, write comments on sticky notes and stuck them up on the 'houses' (see 'Focus group activities', above). During the session itself I was careful to try and offer her

opportunities to speak without putting any pressure on her at all. I felt very uncomfortable about the situation, both at the time and particularly when reflecting on it afterwards, as I thought that her silence could have been an expression that she had found the experience unpleasant.

The final ethical challenge of the day was more to do with ensuring that the requirements as stipulated by the University's 'ethics process' were followed. It came after the children had departed, when I checked through the consent forms that had been handed to me by the gatekeeper on their arrival at the University. I found that for the twelve children taking part in the sessions, there were only eleven forms; of these only ten of them had parental signatures on them, and only nine had child signatures. I did not attempt to organise the retrospective signing of forms as it would have meant a significant workload on the part of my gatekeeper and I felt that it would have been meaningless in terms of obtaining informed consent. I do not consider that a signature on a piece of paper represents meaningful consent, but it meant that I did not have the proof required by the University's ethical review process. The experiences of the focus groups made me think very hard about what it means for children to truly give their consent to taking part in research. The examples provided above illustrate how easy it is for children to end up in situations that they perhaps are not comfortable in.

Anonymity

When browsing Twitter the day after the focus groups I saw a tweet from the participating school. It included a picture of the children taken during the focus group session with a caption explaining that they had been at the University of Leeds. I was completely unaware that this had been taken as the teacher had been sitting behind me, out of my line of sight. I was horrified, as this compromised the anonymity of my participants, and contacted the school staff member in question, to ask him to either take the photo down, or at the very least remove the reference to Leeds University. He did this without further debate. It had not occurred to me to raise the issue of anonymity with the school. This is an example of an unknown unknown: I could not have foreseen that this might have happened, but have learnt from it that I must be totally explicit with gatekeepers about the standards that must be adhered when involved in academic research.

Identification of people not present

When I went through the guidelines for the session I asked the participants not to use other people's names, as they hadn't given their consent for their information to be discussed. In FG2 in particular, the children repeatedly used one of their friend's names. They did, however,

apologise straight away, and on some occasions they managed to stop themselves in time. When one of them used their friend's name, the others would jokingly tell her off. The children had understood the importance of not using others' names, but this illustrates how difficult it is for children of this age group to be discrete and maintain confidentiality.

Learning from the focus groups

In summary, I had planned the focus groups in order to learn from the children – how they understand the concept of food insecurity and the language they use around it - and also to solicit practical advice. In fact I learnt much more from the process of organising, planning and undertaking the focus groups than I had expected. I was presented with ethical challenges that forced me to think much more carefully about informed consent, participation and power, and I applied this learning to my planning and delivery of the interviews. The following section deals with the one-to-one interviews that were undertaken in school with thirty-three children aged nine to eleven years old.

3.5.4 One-to-one interviews

As noted in Section 3.3.1 above, many academics have used certain techniques when researching with children; others argue that the use of special tools assumes that a child is incapable of using methods employed with adults (Harden et al., 2000). I agree with Davidson (2017, p.228), who argues that what is important is not the use of particular methods but a commitment to 'honesty [and] inclusivity'. As such, one-to-one interviews were chosen as the primary method for data collection for this research project. Interviews enabled me to offer a safe, private space (Ridge, 2002; Leeson, 2014) in which the child could share their experiences, feelings and opinions with me – something that is particularly important when discussing a topic such as food insecurity, which may have been a sensitive one for some of the children with whom I spoke (Ridge, 2011; see Martins et al., 2018).

This section opens with a description of the children who participated in the interviews. Secondly, I provide details of the process of recruitment and gaining consent, which I argue is a critical stage as regards ensuring high ethical standards within a research project. This is followed by a description of my approach to interviewing. I then reflect on some issues relating to my methods. I close with a discussion of the importance of reflexivity when researching with children, using examples of some ethical challenges which arose.

Details of final sample

The sample frame, as described earlier, was purposefully designed and consisted of all children in Years 5 and 6 in Foxglove Primary, a school situated in one of the top ten per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in England[21]. Over sixty per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, as opposed to a national average in state-funded primary schools in 2019 of 15.4 per cent (GOV.UK, 2020). I did not restrict my sample frame, however; participation was open to all children within those year groups. I did this as any attempt to 'target' children living in households experiencing food insecurity would have been very difficult to accomplish without being stigmatizing (Ridge, 2002). The final sample was made up of thirty-three children. Twenty-eight were girls, and five were boys. Twenty-five of the participants were in Year 5, and eight were in Year 6.

Recruitment and consent processes as crucial ethical issues

In this section I look in detail at the recruitment and consent process, from the initial plan that was included in the ethical review, to the actual process as it transpired, and I comment on the role of this process in exploring issues such as power, agency and dignity within my research project.

Planning the recruitment and consent process to ensure that children are the 'critical consent point'

This element of my research mirrors my experience of the research endeavour as a whole; the reality did not resemble the ordered, step-by-step process that I had planned. This was because – as a result of my experiences with the focus groups and after further consideration -- I realised that I had to make multiple alterations in order to ensure that the children were at the 'centre of the decision-making matrix' (Munford and Sanders, 2004, p.480) in terms of taking part in an interview.

The first plan[22] for recruiting participants and obtaining their and their parents' written consent was devised as part of the ethical review process, before I even knew which school I would be working with. This plan involved recruiting participants by sending letters to parents of every child in Years 5 and 6 in whichever school agreed to work with me. I proposed that

[21] This is calculated by the government using Indices of Multiple Deprivation on the level of lower-layer super output areas. See the following webpage for more information: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019-mapping-resources

[22] Depictions of the details of the two plans that were agreed by the ethics committee and the actual process are to be found as appendices 3 and 4.

children taking part in an interview would receive a £5 voucher. A returned form with both a parent's/carer's and the child's signatures would indicate consent to participation. I would also obtain verbal consent by asking the child at the beginning of the interview if they were happy to proceed. According to this plan, I would not meet the children until I interviewed them.

Issues around anonymity and informed consent that had arisen during the focus groups led to a heightened awareness on my part of issues around power dynamics, dignity and potential harm to participants and as a result I completely rethought the process for the interviews. It was of utmost importance to me that that the children participating in the interviews were going to do so having made up their own minds about taking part, without being compelled in any way, and that this decision was based on a real understanding of what we would be talking about and why.

In order to ensure that the participants were able to provide real and properly informed consent I produced a second, amended plan for the recruitment and consent process. I worked closely with the gatekeeper and we looked at all the possible ramifications relating to privacy and autonomy, informed consent, and possible exploitation for each step of setting up and undertaking the interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

The major amendment to my original recruitment and consent plan for the child interviews was that I wanted to approach the children first, rather than the parents (I had previously planned to send a letter home to parents along with information sheets and consent forms for both adults and children). This required some careful thought, as, as discussed in Section 3.3.1, the guidance around obtaining child and youth consent in the UK is unclear. It does seem to be common practice among researchers to ask parents or carers for consent first, but it was very important to me that the children were totally happy and comfortable with taking part, and I wanted to eliminate the possibility that any of them would do so because their parents had signed them up without consulting them or had told them to take part. Talking to them first also indicated to them that I acknowledged their agency and respected their opinions. As such, I planned that I would begin the whole process by going into each of the five classes in Year 5 and Year 6 (containing around 150 children in total) to do interactive sessions to discuss what I was doing, why, how they could be involved, and what the possible consequences and outcomes could be. I asked children to express an interest in taking part by putting their hands up, and those children's names were collected by the teaching assistants. The plan then involved inviting the parents of the interested children to a coffee morning, whereby I could do a short presentation, answer any questions face-to-face and hopefully obtain formal parental consent. The gatekeeper would then check that prospective participants with

parental consent still wanted to be involved by taking them aside separately. It was at this point that the children were to provide written consent. This amended plan was approved by the University ethical review committee.

Flexibility and re-negotiation in the field: recruitment and consent as ongoing processes

The reality of working in a school, being reliant on a very busy gatekeeper, and being responsive to the children's needs, however, meant that the actual process did not follow the plan. In this section I provide examples of how, despite the careful thought, planning, and extra work that I put into the amended plan for the recruitment and consent process for the interviews, once I was in the field and dealing with real people I often came up against issues that I had not anticipated. I also changed my mind, for instance on providing participants with a voucher as an incentive/thank you for giving me their time.

One example is when, having arranged everything long in advance, and prepared paperwork and a short presentation, I turned up at school to run the first information session with parents (we had planned two, on consecutive days) to be unable to find the member of staff acting as my gatekeeper. After a while he was found, and he told me, rather sheepishly, that he hadn't had time to send out the letters to parents letting them know about the session and so they were not going to go ahead. In this case my plans for providing parents with an opportunity to ask questions about the proposed interviews and meet me face-to-face were scuppered by a busy gatekeeper for whom this research was, understandably, not his priority. Instead, I came and helped out at the parents' evening that took place not long after, and tried to talk to the parents whose children had said, when I did the interactive session in their class, that they were interested in doing an interview. I sent information sheets and consent forms home to parents I had not managed to speak to.

Another example was when I was collecting names after I had done an information and recruitment session with a Year 5 class. Two boys at the back had their hands up, which is what I had asked them to do if they wanted to express an interest in doing an interview. When I went over to them they duly gave their names and afterwards asked: 'What is it we are signing up to, Miss?' The purpose of doing these information sessions with the classes was to ensure that all interview participants were able to provide fully informed consent. Once again, my careful planning failed; I could not control how well the boys paid attention to my presentation. They were agreeing to take part, but it certainly wasn't based on a good understanding of what the research entailed. I went through the details of the interviews with them, and they decided not to participate. This made me think critically about my plan and

prompted me to develop and deepen my thinking around consent; rather than it being represented as a signature on a form, or even a verbal agreement, I recognised it as something that should be 'negotiated as an ongoing concern' (Heath et al., 2004, in Sime, 2008, p. 7; see also Mishna et al., 2004). My response hereafter was to ask each participant for explicit consent on more than one occasion and continually look for signs that the child was uncomfortable during our interaction or no longer wanted to be there.

The third example centres on how children expressed their wish to take part in an interview. I had planned that I would get expressions of interest from children at the end of my in-class information sessions, and that those would be the children that I worked with. In fact, in addition to the fifteen children who said they wanted to take part during those sessions, I recruited eighteen more during the period that I was in the school. Children would approach me and ask to do an interview when they saw me in the corridors, at lunchtime in the dinner hall, in the classrooms as I was picking other participants up, or in the playground. Some of the children who expressed an interest in this way had originally put their hands up during the interactive sessions but had lost the information sheets and consent forms that they had been provided with, and some had not put up their hands but had changed their minds having got to know me a little more. In addition, there occurred, without my instigation, an element of unintended snowball sampling (Wright and Stein, 2005) as some children asked to take part in an interview after speaking to their friends who had already done one.

I had anticipated that I would be able to recruit around fifteen participants so more than doubling this to thirty-three was a fantastic result. I seized every opportunity and ensured that every child who showed an interest was provided with an information sheet and consent form. I spent time in the playground at school pick-up time so that I could talk to parents and get their written consent. In some cases I provided multiple consent forms as others had been lost. I was informed by a teaching assistant that one girl from Year 5, who I saw upset and angry on a number of occasions during my visits to the school, cried for thirty minutes one morning as the signed consent form that she had brought in had been ripped up by a classmate. I brought her an extra form (the third that I had given her), went and found her mum after school to obtain written parental consent, and extended my visiting period to the school so that she could do an interview. I ended up being at the school a week longer than expected because I felt that I could not and did not want to turn down interviews with children who were asking to do them.

Other changes that I made to the plan were that I did not offer financial incentives as I came to feel, upon further reflection, that a) it could be a form of coercion, and b) that it was unfair

upon those children who did not feel able or want to do an interview. Instead, as a gesture of my appreciation for their time, I provided a plate of chopped fruit during interviews. This was not completely unproblematic – see 'Incentives' in Section 3.5.4 for further discussion on this topic.

Guidance on recruitment and consent often centres around the use of information sheets and consent forms (Truman, 2003; also see this paper for an interesting debate about the role of the ethical review process). From my experience, the process should begin with a consideration of potential harm or benefits to the participant, possible power inequities, and issues around dignity (see also Graham et al., 2013). Only once those issues are addressed can we draw up a plan for recruiting participants and obtaining consent and think about the most appropriate use of information sheets and consent forms. It is also important to be prepared to make ethical decisions in the moment (Sime, 2008; Patrick, 2012). I was, for the most part, very happy with the final process; I felt that I always carefully considered the needs of the children and thus the decisions I made did not cause harm or distress either to participants, or, importantly, the other children within the school.

Talking to children about their experiences of food insecurity: what approach to take and which questions to ask

In this section I present details of my approach to interviewing, the kinds of questions that I asked, and my use of a questionnaire at the end of the interview. A photograph of the way that the space was set-up for the interviews can be seen as Figure 3.2, below.

The benefits of a semi-structured approach to interviewing

In order to explore children's lived experiences of food insecurity, and as this research sits within an epistemological framework which places an emphasis on the importance of the participants' subjective realities, it was vital to be able to follow participants' 'stories' in a natural way. Accordingly, a semi-structured approach was taken -- I had a list of questions to support me in covering all the topics that I was interested in exploring, but I did not adhere to a strict order in terms of asking them, apart from the opening and closing questions. I followed the children's lead and asked other questions or made comments in response to what the children told me. I tried to make the interviews feel like a conversation, albeit a 'guided' one (Gilbert, 2008, p.250).

Using a semi-structured approach allowed me to be sensitive and responsive in my interviewing technique. I did not, for instance, ask outright whether the participant was in receipt of free school meals, despite it being a useful indicator of low household income, as I

am aware that there is sometimes a stigma attached to receiving free school meals (Farthing, 2012; Holford, 2012). One of the key drivers in my approach to the interviews was that I did not want the child to leave the session feeling negative about themselves or their families. It was clear that many of the children did not perceive themselves as poor (see Fairbrother et al., 2012 for similar findings) and I felt that it was very important not to challenge that narrative. I tried to 'tread gently' (Field notes, 24 March 2017), and did not probe too deeply when participants appeared to be reluctant to discuss particular issues.

Although I always asked the same first question, which acted as a gentle opener to our discussion ('Tell me about food in your family…') and closed with a question that enabled us to finish on positive note ('If you could eat anything you wanted for a whole day, and it didn't have to be healthy, what would you eat?'), I tried to have as natural a conversation as possible, guided by the participant. I had my list of questions to hand, and referred back to it to ensure that we had covered all the topics, but did not ask questions in a particular order.

This semi-structured approach meant that I could let the child control 'the direction of flow' of the conversation (Leeson, 2014, p.211) while I gently guided the conversation. This acts as a way of reducing the power imbalance between adult interviewer and child interviewee (Leeson, 2014).

Interview questions

The list of questions I assembled for the interviews included a number that interrogated the different domains presented by Fram et al. (2011) (see the Literature Review for more details) as being those experienced by children in relation to food insecurity: cognitive awareness, emotional awareness and physical awareness, questions on the themes of social interaction and on the quantity of food. I incorporated a number of questions on coping strategies, and included two questions asking the child's opinion about how the situation for struggling families could be improved, and whether they thought their siblings had the same experience as them. I also prepared a number of questions for those interviewees who did not appear – from the answers they were giving to my early questions -- to be experiencing food insecurity on any level. The full set of questions is available in Appendix 5.

Figure 3.2: The set-up for the one-to-one interviews

Use of Child Food Security Assessment questionnaire

As described above, I used a semi-structured approach to interviewing, in that I took a set of questions on a range of topics into our discussion, and used them to guide our conversation. Shortly before I began doing the interviews I decided that I would close the session with each child by going through the Child Food Security Assessment (CFSA) questionnaire with them. This is an instrument developed by Fram et al. (2013) that aims to measure food insecurity as experienced by individual children (see Chapter 2 for further discussion). My aim was not to try to measure the participant's level of food security, but rather to test the CFSA as a survey instrument, as at that point in my studies I was particularly interested in how the prevalence of child food insecurity is measured. Reflections on its usefulness are found below, in Section 3.5.4.

Reflections on methodological issues

In this section I reflect upon three methods-related issues: interviewing children in schools; use of the questionnaire; and inadvertently adopting an ethnographic approach.

Interviewing children in a school setting

As when undertaking research with adults, it is recognised that children's responses within an interview are 'fundamentally situated' (Westcott and Lilltleton, 2005, p.147), in that the relationship with the researcher, and the location within which the interview takes place, will affect their responses. The setting is important because children's exhibited behaviours are often context specific (Scott, 2000); in the case of school-based research, it has been found that children can overlay their expectations of teachers onto researchers (Hill, 2006; see also Sime, 2008).

As my interviews with the children were taking place within their school, I was aware that I would need to negotiate my identity with the children and disconnect myself from the school and the teachers (see Davidson, 2017 for an honest discussion of the difficulties faced by her in distinguishing herself and her role from that of the youth workers via whom she had access to the young people she was researching). I did not attempt to be 'one of them'– the children would have seen me as inauthentic. Rather, I acted in a way that was slightly outside of normal school staff behaviour: I took in a packed lunch and ate and chatted with the children in the dinner hall; I interacted in a 'friendly' manner with the children in the playground and on the corridors during playtime; I spent time outside the classrooms, talking informally with children. I believe this may have set me apart from the teaching staff (Hill, 2006). My intention was to allow those children who were interested in doing so to get to know me a little, and get used to me being around, and so feel more relaxed with me during the interview. I also just enjoyed their company. As part of differentiating myself from the teachers I also dressed in a slightly less formal way, too.

In terms of the language and tone that I adopted, I was aware, going into the field, of the prevalence of IRF discourse patterns within school settings. This involves the *initiation* (I) of a discussion by a teacher, a *response* (R) by the child, and then *feedback* (F) from the teacher (Greene and Hill, 2005). I tried to be mindful of this, and deliberately chose open-ended questions, allowed the child to pause for as long as they wanted, and did not interrupt (Greene and Hill, 2005; O'Reilly et al., 2013). Nevertheless a number of children called me 'Miss', and I accept that as an unknown adult within a school setting there would always be an asymmetry in terms of power relations between us (O'Reilly et al., 2013). However, I would argue that my

actions, as described above, and the sensitive way in which I conducted the interviews, helped towards rebalancing the power inequities.

Reflections on the use of the questionnaire

As noted above, I decided to go through the CFSA questionnaire with my participants simply as a way to test it as an instrument for measuring child food insecurity. In fact, there were a number of benefits in its use in terms of gathering data. Firstly, because the questionnaire was depersonalised, i.e. they knew that the questions were not being asked of them because of their personal circumstances, I was able to ask questions that would have felt a little too direct during our interview, for instance: 'How many times over the last year have you not been able to get the food you want because there's not enough money?' Sometimes children would respond to the questionnaire in a way that they had not done with earlier questions, and they would tell me about things that they had not mentioned before. Secondly, I was sometimes able to link what they said back to our earlier conversation – this allowed me to verify or further explore comments made by the child in the interview that, at the time, it felt inappropriate or insensitive to ask more about.

In terms of interrogating the CFSA as an instrument, I observed that, as with adults, children can understand questions in different ways. On a number of occasions I had to reword a question as the participant's initial understanding had not aligned with the intended meaning. For example, with the final question: *I try not to eat a lot so that our food will last,* there was some confusion over whether 'last' meant run out or go off. I found that the reading out of statements (which is how it was done for Fram et al.'s study (2013)) was confusing and felt unnatural, and so, after I had a done a small number of interviews I converted the statements into direct questions. In addition, it became clear that the selection of response options was too limiting, and so I offered, verbally, an extra option of 'sometimes', where this felt appropriate. I also observed in my field notes that by the time we went through the CFSA at the end of the interview, I had (in most cases) built a relationship of trust with the child; without this relationship I query whether children would have answered candidly.

To conclude, going through a depersonalised set of questions after undertaking a semi-structured interview on what could be a sensitive topic was a useful process. It provided an opportunity to verify or further explore comments made by the child during our interview that I felt it insensitive to probe at the time. In some cases it encouraged the sharing of information that had not been revealed before. However, I do not feel that it would work as a stand-alone

instrument for measuring levels of food insecurity experienced by a child, as it does not allow for wider discussion or explanation and is too narrow in its focus.

An unanticipated ethnographic approach

My planned methodology did not include participant observation or taking an ethnographic approach. However, in reflecting on the process and my experience, I realised that perhaps I had inadvertently done both[23]. I offer some observations on this here.

First is an extract from my field notes, written two weeks after leaving the field:

> *Looking back now, I don't know why I didn't recognise that my approach – immersing myself in the school for that short period of time, had an ethnographic feel to it. I suppose it was just me doing what came naturally to me; I made no conscious, planned decision to have extra conversations with staff and children and to observe the participants going about their day at school…. I think that a lot of my experiences as a researcher echo those of an ethnographer in terms of relationships, leaving the field etc. (Fieldnotes, 20 April 2017)*

On the grounds that I did not spend long enough in the field, Skeggs (1994), would perhaps contest any suggestion on my part that my research was ethnographic. In many ways, however, my approach to answering my question, *How do British children experience food insecurity?,* aligns with her description of an ethnography, which she recognises as not being a method but a methodology. In keeping with her characterisation of an ethnography, I went into the setting where the children are, I participated and observed, I provide an account of the development of the relationships between me and the children, and I consider participants 'as microcosms of wider structural processes' (Skeggs, 1994, p.76).

Examples of my involvement in the life of the school include: regularly taking in a packed lunch and eating in the dinner hall with Year 5 and 6 children who I was working with; spending dinnertime sitting in the corridor alongside the headteacher, chatting with him and the children who were passing by; going out into the playground at dinnertime and talking to staff and pupils; helping out at Parents' Evening by giving directions to classrooms and handing out times tables sheets and talking to students and parents; having daily conversations with the office staff; and always attending to what was happening around me in terms of interactions, behaviours and activities.

[23] The Families and Food in Hard Times research project also described their approach as being 'close to an 'ethnographic tradition''(see O'Connell et al., 2019, p.21).

I started visiting the school in December 2015, when I had my first meeting with the gatekeeper, and went in on numerous occasions to discuss the upcoming research before the interviews started. In the summer of 2016 I attended an event organised and run by the pupils of the school in a city centre venue and met staff and children there. I put the headteacher into contact with civil society organisations working on food poverty and then subsequently saw him at a meeting in the Houses of Parliament. When the children came to take part in the focus groups at the university, I spent time chatting with them as we did the tour of the campus, and then sat and talked with them over lunch. My relationship with the school, the staff, and the pupils, was therefore clearly one in which I was invested, and was part of an approach that involved participant observation and ethnographic elements.

In terms of an impact on the quality of my research, my engagement with the school and the children meant that in many cases I had already chatted with and got to know many of my participants before we did their interview. I had therefore already built an 'interactive relationship' which will have helped to put them at ease and feel safe and therefore able to share their experiences with me (Kortesluoma et al., 2003, p.438; see also Leeson, 2014).

Being a reflexive researcher: self-awareness and ethical challenges

Reflexivity within research is the practice of not simply describing findings but 'at the same time, question[ing] and explain[ing] how those findings are constructed' (Hertz, 1997, in Mortari, 2015, p.2). In this section I discuss conflicts and issues that I faced during the research process and am explicit about the influences and perspectives that I bring to bear on my work. I begin by exploring the role of reflexivity in research. Secondly, I provide a reflection on a conflict that I recognised in myself regarding the desire for 'good data'. I then discuss the different power inequalities that existed between myself and the participating children and how I tried to mitigate them. Finally, I look at whether my offer of fruit during the interviews acted as an incentive, despite my desire not to use incentives to recruit participants for the interviews.

Reflexivity in research

Pillow (2003, p.176) asks: 'Can we ever truly represent another?' This question is something that I have asked myself all the way through the PhD process. Do I have the right to speak on behalf of the children that I have interviewed? Can I, via a process of careful and thoughtful analysis, accurately take the subjective individual experiences that they have shared with me and turn them into a coherent overarching narrative? The consideration of these issues is part of my reflexive approach to research.

Patai (1994, p.62) questions the value of 'individualistic self-reflexive shenanigans' that she thinks too many qualitative researchers are engaging in. She agrees that we should recognise what we bring to the research that we undertake, but argues that we need to put our anxieties about the problem of representation into perspective. My position is that the process of reflexivity assists researchers in being 'vigilant about our practices' (Spivak, 1984-85, in Pillow, 2003, p.177). Reflexivity does not resolve the issues around representation – we must be willing to be uncomfortable (Lather, 1994), and accept the complexities that arise out of research with real people (Patai, 1994) – but engaging in self-scrutiny throughout the research process (Chiseri-Starter, 1996, in Pillow, 2003) and being transparent about one's influences and identity can improve the quality and validity of research (Lather, 1994; McNair et al., 2008; Mortari, 2015). I would also argue that the process of reflection leads to heightened awareness of one's 'ethical obligations' (Mishna et al., 2004, p.462) and therefore encourages action on issues such as power and consent during research encounters.

Reflexivity is very important when conducting research with children (Kirk, 2007; Sime, 2008; Solberg, 2014). As a researcher working for the first time with children on a potentially painful issue, recognising that I take myself into the field -- that I am the 'instrument of inquiry' (Patton, 2015, xiv) and that my biography and identity informs the research process (Sime, 2008) -- has been crucial. It has meant that I have considered in advance issues relating to power, interactions, and assumptions about my participants, and then reflected upon my motivations, actions and reactions. Being critically reflexive has obliged me to identify where things have gone wrong, or could have been done better, and I believe that this has meant that the experience for the children in taking part in the research was improved as a result.

The conflict between ethical considerations, genuine concern for the participants, and the desire for 'good data'

In this sub-section I offer an honest reflection on the 'ethics' versus 'good data' conflict that I think is probably present for many researchers. In my case, 'good data' was represented by data and quotes that would be useful/interesting in terms of my research question, but also that could be used in my food poverty campaigning work. An example of where I felt this conflict was when a boy who had talked about using a foodbank during one of my classroom recruitment sessions did not then express an interest in doing an interview. I was pleased in one way because it meant that my recruitment and consent process was working – in that he was able to make an informed decision and did not feel pressured to take part -- but I

recognised that I also felt a little disappointed, as it was clear that he was food insecure and I wanted to hear about his experiences; an interview with him would have provided 'good data'.

Another example of this 'conflict between my human sensibilities and my scholarly purpose' (Rowles, 1978, p.179, in Widdowfield, 2000, p.200) came in a conversation I had with my husband after doing some interviews. I responded to the question, 'How did it go today?' with, 'Great, I got one who is really food insecure today.' I recognised straight away that of course I was not pleased that a child was experiencing food insecurity and that I was speaking from the perspective of wanting to get 'good data', but I was very ashamed of myself for saying what I had.

In the following extract from my field notes, I reflect on my technique during the one-to-one interviews. When interviewing, I regularly rephrased questions in order to make sure that the child truly understood what it was I was trying to ask, but in this extract I recognise that there is part of me that was wanting to get an 'interesting' quote as it would be more useful in terms of material to be used in raising awareness of child food poverty issues in my campaigning work:

> *When I ask the same questions in different ways, is it to try and validate a first response, and ensure that the child understands the question? Or am I trying to dig out data that will be useful? I think there is probably a bit of both going on. It is very important to check that you and the child are understanding the question in the same way [but] there is always the element of me that is after juicy soundbites that would work if I stood up in front of activists / policy-makers i.e. they'd have an impact. (Field notes, 18 March 2017)*

I recognised this as a possible conflict after doing just a few interviews, and so was able to challenge my motivations during all the following interviews. Being aware of this desire to obtain interesting and pertinent data meant that I did not allow it to unduly influence the interview process and was able to protect the integrity of the research (Romain, 2015).

Power relations

One of the ways in which researchers can 'democratize the research process' (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009, p.279) is by 'com[ing] clean' in regards to the role of power in research (Lather, 1994, p.50). I recognise that two significant power relationships were at play in the interviews: adult and child, and those created by different class positionings. These dynamics and my responses to them are discussed below.

Power imbalances can be highly problematic in research situations, and this is particularly the case when adults conduct interviews with children (Morgan et al., 2002; Conolly, 2008; Solberg, 2014). Generational power imbalances that exist between adults and children can be replicated during the research process (Harden et al., 2000) and can reinforce the inherently unequal power dynamic (Christensen, 2004). In addition, as noted earlier, when the research encounter occurs in an educational setting, the in-built power dynamic of the teacher-pupil relationship can be transferred onto the researcher (Hill, 2006) and thus complicate the adult researcher-child research subject relationship further.

I was very aware of this imbalance of power between myself and the participants, and made a conscious attempt to shift the balance of power in small ways, where possible. For example, in order to reduce the potential for a replication of the teacher-pupil dynamic, I tried to minimize the 'authority image' that I might convey (Hill, 2005). I did this via my choice of clothes but mostly by spending time chatting with the children in a relaxed way in different contexts (see 'Reflections on methodological issues', above, for examples). My actions to differentiate myself from the school staff had varying results depending on each child – some were confident and appeared comfortable in my company; others were more deferential and clearly still viewed me as being in a position of authority.

The adult-child power imbalance is difficult to diminish but I tried to alleviate it where possible. For example, I asked the child if I could have a piece of 'their' fruit from the plate of chopped fruit that I had provided at the beginning of the interview. Asking their permission to do something brought about a subtle re-tilting in the balance of power. I did this as a natural, unconscious act during the first interview, then, on reflecting on it, realised it generated a positive outcome – some children thought it was funny that I would ask this, but appeared to enjoy it and to relax a little, so I continued to do it with following participants.

I had chosen the children at Foxglove School as my sample frame precisely because, being situated in one of the ten per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, it was likely that their families were living on very low incomes, and therefore would have an increased likelihood of experiencing food insecurity (Nelson et al., 2007; Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2013; Smith et al., 2017). As such, another possible power imbalance that I had been concerned about before entering the field was that created by the difference in our financial situations; I am a financially stable and comfortably-off researcher and potentially the children could be living in very economically precarious households. Some academics have framed this particular power dynamic as being one of the middle-class researcher and the working-class participant, and have suggested that research with working-class subjects should be undertaken by

working-class researchers; this is described as ‘class-matching’ (Mellor et al., 2014, p.136). The arguments presented for this are two-fold: firstly, to guard against the possibility that the potential power differential, if the researcher were middle class, would ‘inhibit (or even harm)’ a working-class research subject, and secondly, that a middle-class researcher may not be able provide an accurate or appropriate representation of the account provided by someone in a less socio-economically privileged position (Mellor et al., 2014, p.136). Wakeling (2016, p.35) however, contests that a ‘working-class academic’ is even possible; he argues that the ‘position and life circumstances’ of an academic renders the term ‘working-class academic’ oxymoronic. I would argue that strict class-matching is not necessary, or even possible. However, in recognising that a researcher brings their own perspective to and understands the interviewee’s account via their own experiences, I can appreciate the potential threat to a credible interpretation of the information provided by the participants if the researcher has absolutely no previous understanding or shared experience. However, I would argue that this can be somewhat mitigated by really good listening skills and empathy.

To describe the potential power inequality I am referring to as one of me being middle class and the participants being working class would be an over-simplification, however. As argued by Mellor et al. (2014, p.138), ‘identities are multiple and fluid’, and this was the case both with my participants and me as the researcher. For example, the situation as regards the class positioning of the participants was far from clear. I was aware that the family of one of my participants moved into the area from a different city in order, in line with their religious beliefs, to be part of supporting a deprived community. I met the parents at the parents’ evening and they were highly educated (one was studying for a PhD) and had set up a national poverty awareness network. Other children who I interviewed were refugees, and it was clear that their family had occupied middle-class positions in their origin country. I had grown up in a deprived area not far from where the school is located, and they knew this as I had shared which part of the city I was from during the information sessions that I had done with all the different classes. Although my role as a researcher marked me as middle class, other aspects of my ‘habitus’ (to use Bourdieu’s concept) might have indicated to my participants that I might not entirely be an ‘other’, for instance my Leeds accent (Mellor et al., 2014) and local knowledge. In fact, I often reflected that being (relatively) local was a great aid in the interviews, but this was less in terms of the power relationship, but more in relation to an authentic understanding of the children’s accounts.

The central difference between me and the participants was that many of the children came from (sometimes extremely) low-income households, and the vast majority of them lived

locally (one girl had moved out into a more affluent area but was still attending this school), in what is one of the most deprived areas of the city. I am not a member of that community, and although not far away, now live in a middle-class neighbourhood and am not having to live on a low income. I would suggest that the inequality between us stemmed from the economic precariousness of their household situation, versus the relative stability of mine. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, this precarity can engender a feeling of vulnerability and disempowerment. My (financial and psychological) security meant that with certain participants from very low-income households the balance of power lay with me, and I felt uncomfortable about it, but I think that, because of my background and my reflexive and sensitive approach, I was able perhaps to mitigate the imbalance somewhat.

Incentives

In this section I discuss the issue of incentivising children to take part in my research. As mentioned earlier, I provided a big plate of different types of fruit including cherries, watermelon and strawberries, for each interview. In my field notes I ask myself:

> *Was the fruit a key motivator for the children? A number said that their friends had talked about all the different fruit that they could taste [during the interview].*
>
> *Elizabeth – when I asked her how she felt about talking about 'these things' she did the 'so-so' gesture with her hand. I hope she didn't feel like she had to tell me this stuff in order to eat the fruit – this would be a form of coercion. I think Jack only came for the fruit because once he had eaten it he asked if he could go back to class. Alfie didn't want any [though], and Katie said she'd still talk to me without it. (Field notes, 31 March 2017)*

I chose not to provide financial incentives for participation in an interview as I did not want to feel that I was coercing the children in any way, and I did not want children who did not want to talk to me to feel left out. This was very important to me; when I left the field I gave a gift to each class as a whole. As noted earlier, participants talked positively about doing an interview to their classmates, and taking part in the interviews became a 'thing'; I suspect the offer of fruit was one of the reasons why. I tried to counteract any influence the fruit might have had by taking any fruit left over at the end of the day for the whole class to eat. Reflecting upon this I think that the fruit did act as an incentive for some children. However, I feel that, as with the case with Jack (mentioned in the field notes above), I was able to gauge the mood of the participant and so if they did not want to talk to me, I ended the interview quickly and took the child back to class. This example demonstrates how difficult it is to weigh up the desire for

some kind of reciprocity within the interview encounter, i.e. that the children get something positive, however small, out of the experience, with the ethical responsibility to avoid any kind of coercion or pressure to take part. The following section looks at my analysis of the data provided by the focus groups and interviews.

3.6 Analysis

Green et al. (2007, p.546) describe the process of data analysis as one of 'sorting and classifying'. Indeed, a number of different sets of steps are offered in the literature for analysing qualitative research (for example, Green et al., 2007; Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). They are often presented as being discrete, universally applicable stages that can be carried out when undertaking analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2015), on the other hand, do not prescribe a particular pathway through the process, but suggest that each researcher will generate their own system for analysis. This was the case regarding the interviews. In this section I deal first with my analysis of the data from the focus groups. I then review my approach and the process I used when analysing the interviews. Finally, I discuss how issues such as representation and respect for the participants should be considered during the process of transcription.

3.6.1 Focus groups

Analysis of the focus group data followed the steps suggested by Hennessy and Heary (2005). Firstly, I did 'intelligent' but not totally verbatim transcriptions[24] of the two focus groups, and all sticky note comments (see Section 3.5.3 for details of the activities undertaken) were typed up and organised thematically in an Excel table. Field notes taken directly after the focus groups finished, and after discussion with the research assistant, were used to identify some preliminary general themes. An inductive content analysis was then undertaken (Moser and Korstjens, 2018), i.e. the transcripts were analysed systematically, comment by comment, and each comment was added to an Excel table under a category heading. Each comment either required the creation of a new category or was allocated to a pre-existing category. All the sticky note comments were then analysed in the same way. Once all (written and oral) comments were categorised, the transcripts and sticky comments were re-read to ensure that the correct tone and meaning had been ascribed to each comment.

[24] *Intelligent* transcription refers to an approach whereby repeated words, 'filler' phrases such as 'you know', and words such as 'um' and 'er' are excluded from the transcript if they are not deemed to add to the meaning. This term is used by transcription companies. See, for example, http://penguin-transcription.co.uk/transcription-type-verbatim-intelligent-verbatim-or-edited/

The categories were then assessed to check that each comment was in the most appropriate category; as a result some comments were re-assigned to different categories, and some categories combined because they were judged to overlap. These final categories were then cross-checked against themes which were originally identified in the field notes directly after the focus groups had been completed. The final step in analysis involved an interpretation of the findings in relation to the research question that was being explored (Green et al., 2007, p.549), which in this case was understanding how children think and talk about food insecurity (sub-question a)). Interestingly, a particular narrative emerged very strongly – that of individual responsibility. This is discussed in Chapter 4.

3.6.2 Interviews with children

In this section I begin by describing my approach to analysis of the interviews, which was inductive and thematic. I then outline the process of analysis.

My approach to analysis

Corbin and Strauss (2015, p.85) describe analysis as 'the act of taking data, thinking about it, and denoting concepts to stand for the analyst's interpretation of the meaning intended by the participant'. My approach to 'thinking about it' was one that can be described as thematic; unlike content analysis, which is also used by qualitative researchers, and which focuses on 'frequency outcomes', i.e. how many times a word or phrase appears within a text (Joffe and Yardley, 2004, p.57), thematic analysis takes into account both the manifest and latent content (Boyatzis, 1998; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) and is about looking for patterns of meaning (Joffe and Yardley, 2004; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). My approach to coding – i.e. the dissection and categorisation of the data -- was a hybrid one (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). My analysis was undertaken initially and primarily on an inductive basis (Boyatzis, 1998, p.29), that is, by looking for themes and patterns that were suggested by the raw data. In addition to this, however, I created a coding frame using the elements that make up the conceptualisation of children's experiences of food insecurity that is proposed by Fram et al. (2011), and used this as a way of exploring the data. This is described as a deductive approach (Joffe and Yardley, 2004; Rivas, 2012).

The children that I spoke with, both in the interviews and the focus groups, did not use the same words or language when talking about the topic of food insecurity. Indeed, 'food insecurity' was not even a concept that they recognised, in that their experiences of it were not separate (in terms of their understanding but also their lived experience) to those relating

to economic insecurity. Analysis, therefore, demanded a very subtle reading of the data -- an awareness, understanding and interpretation of what Boyatzis (1998, p.30) describes as the 'intricate (i.e. difficult-to-discern)'. For these reasons, and in line with Corbin and Strauss's (2015, p.205) assessment that 'analysis is about thinking, and thinking is the one thing that computers can't do yet', I decided not to use coding software to assist my analysis, even though I had originally planned to.

The process of analysis

In this section I provide an account of the various stages of the process that I underwent to analyse the interviews.

Analysis begins as soon as I enter the field

Earlier in this chapter I described my approach to data gathering as being, in some ways, ethnographic in nature. The beginning of my process of analysis also echoed an ethnographic one, as it began before I even did any interviews; over the many months that I was in the school meeting the headteacher and the staff member who acted as my gatekeeper, doing information sessions in the children's classes, and recruiting participants, I was observing the behaviours that the children exhibited, their interactions, and the language that they used, and was noting down any perceptible patterns (Moser and Korstjens, 2018).

Immersing myself in the data

Before starting analysis in earnest, the researcher has to submerge themselves fully in the data (Rivas, 2012; Corbin and Strauss, 2015). I began this process of immersion by listening to all the interviews, back-to-back, over a period of two days. I was able to engage deeply with all aspects of the 'dialogical interaction' (Kowal and O'Connell, 2013, p.4 of 24) that had taken place during the interviews; that is, I could hear not only the words that the children used and the way in which they used them, for example, hesitantly or confidently, but as it was only a short time after leaving the field, I was also able to visualise their body language and other non-verbal elements to our conversations (see Kowal and O'Connell, 2013). Immersing myself in the data in this way enabled me to get a 'sense of the whole' (Moser and Korstjens, 2018, p.16), and during this engagement with the data I identified and noted potential categories or codes.

Transcription as a 'crucial step'

The process of transcription also provided me with an opportunity to deeply engage with the data, and was a 'crucial step' in my analysis (Kowal and O'Connell, 2013, p.2). Transcription's

role in the process of analysis is contested – the act of transcribing is viewed by some as a 'fundamental … tool', but for others analysis is done to a completed transcript (Davidson, 2017, p.39). My experience was that the activity of transcribing obliged me to connect deeply with and think about the data and in doing so, I was able to continue the process – that began as soon as I entered the field -- of unearthing thematic categories inductively from the raw information (Boyatzis, 1998, p.30).

Organising the data supports analysis

Thirty-three interviews generate a lot of data and in order to be able to manage and engage with them efficiently it is important to organise them (Tuckett, 2005; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Following transcription, I created a one-page review sheet for each child that I had interviewed, that I printed out and attached to the front of each transcript. The review sheets included family details and key points relating to possible experiences of food insecurity. They acted as aide-memoires, and the process of producing them further enhanced my knowledge of and familiarity with the data.

Coding

The next step in the process of analysis – a systematic exploration and dissection of the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001) -- was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved taking the list of thematic categories or codes – sometimes referred to as a coding frame or framework (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Joffe and Yardley, 2004) -- that I had developed inductively during the interviews, transcription and multiple listenings to the audio recordings, and examining the data systematically, mining it for quotes that were related to each code. I did this by reading through each transcript, and (electronically) cutting and pasting the relevant segments of dialogue into an Excel spreadsheet. I agree with Kowal and O'Connell (2013, p.3 of 24) that the written representation of an interaction should not be 'accepted uncritically as a reliable source of analyses'. As such I listened to the audio files of the interviews at the same time as reading through the transcripts in order to ensure that I was capturing as fully as possible the sense of what the children were saying to me -- both explicitly in the language they used, and any more nuanced meaning that was revealed, for example, by their tone of voice. I also used this opportunity to double-check that the transcriptions were completely accurate.

The second stage involved supplementing the existing coding frame, i.e. the list of possible thematic categories, with Fram et al.'s (2011) suggested components of household food

insecurity experienced by children[25]. Application of a previously existing model can act to reproduce or disprove the findings of earlier research (Boyatzis, 1998). In my case, I did not use this process as a way of testing Fram et al.'s conceptualisation of child food insecurity, rather it was a way to explore and delve into the data via a different lens. Each code was allocated a colour, and the printed-off transcripts were analysed systematically, with units of data highlighted with coloured marker pens. During this process, if new categories emerged, a new colour was allocated, and previously examined transcripts were re-checked. The data related to each code were then put into an Excel spreadsheet, with a row for each code and a column for each interview participant. This spreadsheet was then cross-referenced with the spreadsheet generated during the first stage of the coding process.

Looking for a 'plausible story': interpreting the themes and finding possible meanings

In order to help facilitate the next step in analysis, that of progressing from the categorisation of the data to a deeper, more critical understanding of the themes, the quotes assigned to each code were collated on separate spreadsheets and printed off. This allowed me to experiment with grouping and comparing different categories of data together to find patterns or broad themes that made sense and helped to build up a 'plausible story' from the data (Joffe and Yardley, 2004, p.63).

The experience of extracting different meanings varied greatly – some findings, such as the issue of the experience of the shame and stigma that is attached to food insecurity (see Chapter 7), were more obvious to me (Green et al., 2007). This is because of what the children said and the language that they used, mostly in response to a question that I had asked about whether children talk to each other about their experiences around food. In contrast, abstracting a coherent narrative around the way that the children's experiences of worry, stress and anxiety connect with wider social phenomenon was incredibly difficult. I had to look at the data from different perspectives (Vaismoradi et al., 2016) and test my interpretation against different theories. Throughout this stage of analysis, and in the writing up of my findings into chapters, I worked hard to resist the urge to simplify and tidy up the children's stories and experiences and instead accepted the 'discomfort' (Boyatzis, 1998, p.29) that comes with allowing for complexity. I was very aware of the need to maintain a 'balance between distortion and conceptualization' (Strauss, 1993, p.12, in Corbin and Strauss, 2015, p.x), i.e. the need to ensure that I represented the children in as authentic a way as possible.

[25] These components are discussed in more detail in the Literature Review, section 4.

The following section provides a reflection on some of the issues that I faced when undertaking the transcription.

3.6.3 Transcription: so much more than 'just talk written down'

Transcription is a political act (Roberts, 1997; Bucholtz, 2000; Green and Dixon, 2016) and much more than just 'talk written down' (Lapadat, 2000; Green and Dixon, 2016, p.172). Transcription is a 'constructive and interpretive' process (Green et al. in Lapadat, 2000, p.207) in that decisions made on how and what to transcribe will impact on how the transcription can be understood, analysed and represented. For example, oral speech is often much more disordered than written text and if it is transcribed exactly as spoken the speaker may be judged by a reader as being of a lower intellectual ability (Kvale, 1998, in Poland, 1995). It is also the case that readers can assume – from the transcribed words -- a certain cultural background and socio-economic status (Oliver et al., 2005) that may lead them to judge the person whose speech has been transcribed.

One element of transcription that I had to consider was naming my participants. As part of the recruitment and ethical review process I stated that participants would only be referred to by pseudonym. I considered different approaches to choosing pseudonyms for the participants. Many of those children I interviewed came from non-British backgrounds, which I felt was important in understanding their experiences of food poverty. However, I decided it felt inappropriate to try and 'match' names according to cultural background. Instead, I found the top fifty most popular boys and girl's names from 2007 (the participants were all born in 2006, 2007 or 2008) and assigned the first child I interviewed the first name on the list of the corresponding gender, the second child the second name on the list, and so on.

I was unaware of other issues relating to transcription described above before I began the process of transcribing the interviews. I stopped and re-thought my approach, however, after I had done my first transcription, which was with a girl who had recently learned English as a second language. Without really considering what I was doing, I had represented some of her linguistic mannerisms in the transcription. Once I had completed it, I recognised that I felt uncomfortable about my representation of her dialect, initially because it created a threat to her anonymity (Oliver et al., 2005). At this point, I paused, and did a review of the literature on transcription. I was conflicted as I feel that regional and local dialects are not represented enough in any media, and as such, a certain spoken English -- generally that of middle-class people from the South, sometimes called Received Pronunciation (RP) -- is accepted as the norm. However, after reading some of the literature and reflecting, I decided that what was

important in this case was the content, and that it was essential that the 'accents' of the children do not distract from what they are saying. Therefore, I decided that I would neutralise their dialects and pronunciation.

I recognise that transcriptions are problematic in that they are removed from their context and are only 'partial representations' (Green and Dixon, 2016, p.173), and that neutralising dialect puts a further distance between what was said and what is written down. I would argue, however, that in this case, reliable and accurate analysis of the transcriptions was still possible because I undertook all the transcription myself. This means that I could use my memories of the context – not only of the interview itself but my observations of the child whilst at school, and if I was unsure about the meaning that I ascribed to the written words, I was able to return to the audio recordings (and did so on many occasions). This was also the case with the focus groups.

3.7 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to offer a transparent and honest account of how I conducted the research for my doctoral study and why I made the decisions I did. The chapter began by presenting the question that this research project aims to answer – *How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity?* This is followed by an outline of the evolving landscape of theoretical considerations around researching children. My particular approach to undertaking research with children is introduced, which is one in which children's rights, expertise, and needs are foregrounded. The byzantine process of working out the focus of my thesis is outlined, and this is followed by details of the methods employed to collect data. Reflections on the issues of power, representation and subjectivity are offered throughout the chapter, with examples provided of some of the methodological and ethical challenges that I tackled. The chapter closes with a description of the analytic process.

The end product of a research project is often a published paper or a book, and in most cases, the challenges that arise and have to be overcome are obscured; the messy bits are tidied away. Being open and disclosing the difficulties I faced and the mistakes I made is part of my reflexive approach to research, and has led me be to be more aware of and act upon issues such as consent, power and possible harm. I believe that making visible the complex nature of the research process is important and indeed, improves its quality and validity (Lather, 1994; McNair et al., 2008; Mortari, 2015).

4. Poor choices, personal failings, and the wrong priorities: Exploring teachers' and children's attitudes to people experiencing food insecurity

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers contemporary discursive constructions of food insecurity, as employed by primary school children and school staff. One of the questions this thesis aims to answer is: how do primary school-aged children identify food insecurity? How do they discuss it, think about it and talk about it? This topic was explored via two focus groups, undertaken with children from the school at which I did the one-to-one interviews. When the participating children were discussing families from their school they replicated popular discourses of poverty and unemployment as being an outcome of individual behaviour, as well as engaging in various forms of othering (Lister, 2004). These same discourses were also clearly visible in the responses provided by school staff to the open questions that were included in the survey on holiday hunger (see Chapter 3 for details of the focus groups and the survey). A large number of the teachers[26] recognised issues of material deprivation as the cause of food insecurity, but many of their comments reflect normative understandings of individuals as having 'to be prudent, responsible for their own destinies, … and providing for their own security' (Rose, 2000, p.324).

It was clear that the teachers and children had absorbed current popular discourses around 'the poor' and were engaging in 'social scolding' (Guthman, 2011, p.18). Following Foucault (1969, in Brookes and Baker, 2020, p.364), the engagement in these discourses by the teachers and the children is significant because discourses can generate 'truths' and so 'systematically form the objects of which they speak'.

Chapter 4 is divided into three sections. The first, Section 4.2, explores the 'discursive repertoires' (Jensen, 2014, np) that provide the framework for the opinions expressed by the study participants. In the second section, I offer four food poverty 'truths' that are reproduced by the teachers – these truths provide presentations of people's experiences of food and feeding that use a framing of individual responsibility and behavioural deficiency. Finally, in Section 4.4, I explore the narratives voiced by the children during the focus groups, and discuss

[26] The term 'teacher' is used to represent all the different positions held by survey respondents. These include headteacher, deputy headteacher, child protection officer and other pastoral roles. 'They/them' will be used when describing the respondents.

their use of othering and their awareness of the stigma that is conferred upon those living on low incomes.

4.2 Political and media constructions of poverty and the neoliberalisation of the self

4.2.1 Introduction

The views and judgements as expressed by the teachers (see Section 4.3), and the children's attitudes towards their friends and peers (see Section 4.4), appear to be an expression of an intersection of two 'forms of neoliberal commonsense' (Jensen, 2014, np): 1): that being 'poor' is an outcome of an individual's/family's choices and behaviours; and 2) that individuals are responsible for and in control of their body and therefore their health. According to these narratives, poverty and ill-health are a result of personal failings (Gillies, 2005; Crawshaw, 2012; Volmert, A.; Pineau, M.; Kendall-Taylor, 2016; Pybus et al., 2020). Truth discourses are generated and mediated by 'authorities' including politicians and the media: news outlets, television programmes, social media and celebrities (Goodman et al., 2017; see also Hollows and Jones, 2010). In this section I explore the 'doxa': dominant discourses that are accepted as 'go[ing] without saying' (Bourdieu 1972, p.167 in Jensen, 2014, np) and that may be the roots of attitudes towards people experiencing food insecurity.

4.2.2 'The poor' as deserving or undeserving

Contemporary narratives around poverty are underpinned by the division of people in poverty into the 'immensely powerful binary' (Jensen, 2014, np) of those that deserve help and those that don't (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Pemberton et al., 2015; Pantazis, 2016), which goes, according to Hindle (2004, p.38), as far back as the Bible: 'if a man shall not work, then neither shall he eat'. The categorisation of people into those who were worthy of state support versus those who were not was codified by the Elizabethan poor laws, which attempted to differentiate between the 'slothfull person, that refuseth to work', and the 'poore by impotency and defect' (Dalton, 1618, in Hindle, 2004, p.39). The new Poor Law of 1834 further embedded the classifications of 'the poor' into *deserving* and *undeserving* (Garthwaite, 2013; Macdonald et al., 2014). This distinction has been a particularly prominent one since the post-war creation of the welfare state. Even during that period of 'a deep and broad political and public desire for a new kind of social contract between citizens and state' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015, p.2), the welfare system was, Starkey (2000, in Jensen and Tyler,

2015, p.2), writes, a 'moral and disciplinary project', with the underlying division of the populace into those deserving and those undeserving of welfare.

Public perception of who is a 'striver' and who is a 'skiver' (and therefore deserving or not) (Valentine and Harris, 2014; also Patrick, 2014) fluctuates, and depends upon where public sympathy lies at that moment (Lansley and Mack, 2015; see also Pantazis, 2016). It relates to the extent to which people in poverty are held personally responsible for their situation; who is included within the category of 'the poor'; and prevailing attitudes towards the welfare system (Mckendrick et al., 2008; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Lansley and Mack, 2015). In the 1970s for example, a European Economic Community survey found that 25 per cent of respondents to a survey believed that people 'live in need' as a result of 'laziness and lack of willpower' (EEC 1997, in, Lansley and Mack, 2015, p.206). Also in the late 1970s, Golding and Middleton chronicled what they labelled as 'scroungerphobia' (1982, p59, in Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013, p.295), which was grounded in a hostility towards the welfare system and those receiving benefits. The Breadline Britain survey of 1983, however, found that attitudes had softened, and attributed this to the huge rise in families that were experiencing unemployment over that period (Lansley and Mack, 2015). Existing 'deep-rooted suspicions and resentments' (Morrison, 2019, np) are amplified by politicians from both sides of the political spectrum and by representations (or lack of them) in the media of people in poverty (Chauhan and Foster, 2013; Golding and Middleton in Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013).

Political representations of poverty as a personal failure

The emphasis on self-management and the espousal of the notion of a culture of poverty (Volmert et al., 2016) has not been restricted to the political right (Gillies, 2005; Gillies, 2008; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Morrison (2019, np) suggests that a broad political consensus around a depiction of recipients of social security as 'feckless, workshy and largely responsible for their own poverty' – despite a lack of evidence to support this standpoint (Caraher and Furey, 2017) -- has existed for the last forty years on all sides of the political spectrum (see also Wiggan, 2012). Certainly a 'foreground[ing] [of] individual life choices and conduct' (Gillies, 2005, p.838) was seen under the New Labour government: in his 1997 maiden speech as Prime Minister, Tony Blair suggested that the 'problem' of the so-called 'workless class' would be solved not by tackling deeply embedded structural inequalities but by 'a radical shift in values and attitudes' (Tyler, 2013, p.159). Although Gordon Brown later denounced 'rancid Tory talk of 'skivers' and 'shirkers'' (Brown, 2017, np), his embrace of individualism can be seen in the

workfarist and increasingly conditional welfare policies implemented during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer (Slater, 2012).

The narratives used by the Conservative-led coalition government that won power in 2010 further reinforced the neoliberal 'do-it-yourself biography' (Hitzler, 1988, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2012, np) which became prominent during the Thatcher years (Pantazis, 2016), and embedded the notion of poverty as the result of behavioural deficiencies. David Cameron blamed the supposed broken society on the 'steady erosion of responsibility' (2009, in Slater, 2012, p.954), and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, presented receiving benefits as being a 'lifestyle choice' (Osborne, 2010, in Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013, p.295).

One of the key drivers behind this escalation of the representation of poverty as personal failing was Iain Duncan-Smith, then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the architect of Universal Credit, and his think tank, the Centre for Social Justice (Wiggan, 2012; Pemberton et al., 2015). Duncan-Smith was central to the construction of the concept of an underclass (Pantazis, 2016) and the notion of multi-generational transmission of worklessness (Macdonald et al., 2014) (despite evidence that this does not in fact exist (Macdonald et al., 2014; Shildrick et al., 2016)), and contributed to a hardening of the rhetoric around welfare recipients: 'you do what you are asked; if you don't, then we will make sure you don't get the money' (BBC, 2012). The language used by policy-makers around people on low incomes is important because, as Ridge (2013, p.411) notes, '[s]tigmatising labels lead to stigmatising policies' (see also Cassiman, 2009).

Representations in the media: demonising those in poverty

A number of studies have examined the language and depiction of people on low incomes and benefits claimants in the UK mass media (for example Mckendrick et al., 2008; Baumberg et al., 2012; Chauhan and Foster, 2013; Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016; Morrison, 2019). The common finding is of representations that were in the majority of cases unsympathetic (or absent), apart from where children or the elderly were concerned (Jeppesen 2009, in Chauhan and Foster, 2013). Even before the ramping up of the harmful political rhetoric that we have been exposed to since 2010, McKendrick et al. (2008, p.38) found that the media was engaging in a 'continuing demonising of poverty and those living in it'; and as noted in Section 4.2.2., Golding and Middleton (1982, in Lansley and Mack, 2015) reported the phenomenon of 'scroungerphobia' as far back as the 1970s. Examining press articles published in 2015/16, Morrison (2019, np), found that there was a 'startling imbalance' between much more frequent negative or neutral portrayals of welfare claimants and far rarer sympathetic ones.

The prevalence of negative representations of people experiencing poverty is significant because the way that social issues are framed in the media can have a powerful role in shaping how they are viewed by the general public (Mckendrick et al., 2008; Fox and Smith, 2011; Chauhan and Foster, 2013; Wells and Caraher, 2016; Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016).

It is argued recently that stigmatising and negative narratives found in the news media have been reinforced and magnified by what is sometimes referred to as 'poverty porn'; this refers to reality television programmes that focus on the lives of welfare recipients (Jensen, 2014; Garthwaite, 2016b; Paterson et al., 2016; Morrison, 2019). The best known of these in the UK is Channel 4's *Benefits Street*, but recent examples include Channel 5's *The Mega Council Estate Next Door* and *Can't Pay? We'll Take It Away* (Gilholy, 2020). It is suggested that the negative depiction of the programme participants provides 'permission to denigrate' those in poverty (Pemberton et al., 2015, p.30) and has aided in the construction of 'figure[s] of 'welfare disgust' such as 'benefit brood' parents (Jensen and Tyler, 2015, p.10). These 'revolting subjects', Tyler (2013) argues, , can then be used as a device via which the neoliberal welfare and poverty doxa are reinforced and reduce the space available for counter-narratives (Jensen, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015).

However, as argued by Hall (in Davis, 2004, p.62), audiences can of course, 'embrace or reject the text' offered to them by the media. An extensively covered example of resistance to a negative representation of northern, working-class parents in the press is that of Julie Critchlow and her fellow mums from a school in Rawmarsh, near Sheffield. These parents were not enamoured with the new school dinner offer put in place by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver in his Channel 4 series *Jamie's School Dinners*, and brought take-away food to their children to eat instead. The media response was deeply embedded in negative stereotypes around class, diet, care and parenting, with Jamie Oliver himself calling Critchlow 'a big old scrubber'. The women resisted their portrayal as 'fat stupid mothers' (Hattersley, 2006, in Pike, 2014, p.12), framing their actions as being about choice and affordability (Fox and Smith, 2011), and challenging Oliver's right to judge them and their feeding practices: 'He can feed whatever he wants to his kids but he should realise that other parents think differently' (Walker, in Anon, 2006, np).

In more recent years, counter-discourses to those often presented in the media of people on low incomes, particularly those receiving welfare benefits, have been offered by activists, often using social media (Feltwell et al., 2017; see also, Meese et al., 2020). Examples include a website called *Parasite Street*, contrasting the cost of tax evasion in comparison to welfare fraud, and a campaign by local people – *Positively Stockton-on-Tees* -- to counteract the

negative portrayals of Stockton-on-Tees in the *Benefits Street 2* programme (Feltwell et al., 2017).

The idea that the public accepts without question the messages imparted to them by the media has long been recognised as inaccurate (Tones, 1996), but because of their existing preconceptions, some readers/users of media can be influenced to make 'varying degrees of diverse normative assessments' and their biases may be reinforced and rendered more acceptable (Piper, 2013, p.347; see also Tones, 1996; Borden, 2021). As such, the British media has played a major role in energising and amplifying a neoliberal individualised interpretation of welfare and poverty (Chauhan and Foster, 2013; Jensen, 2014; Wells and Caraher, 2016; Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016).

4.2.3 Neoliberalisation of the body: health and diet as an outcome of individual choice

As stated earlier, the food poverty truths that are reproduced by the teachers and children in my study have as their origins understandings of poverty, health and wellbeing that have been shaped by the expanding neoliberal project of self-governance (Crawshaw, 2012). In this section I look at the origins of neoliberal discourses around health and the body and explore how these extend into the arena of food, and more specifically, feeding one's family.

This 'neoliberalization of the body' (Abbots and Coles, 2013 p. 546) is strikingly evident in contemporary understandings of public health in the UK: these understandings are predicated on the notion of health being controlled by the individual and being an outcome of individual choice-making (Mansfield, 2012). Individual citizens thus become responsible for population-level health, and the influence of other actors such as the state or corporations controlling the food system is not acknowledged (Goode, 2012; Kurtz, 2015). This is reflected in UK public health policy (Crawshaw, 2012) in that citizens are expected to take care of themselves – their bodies -- including making the 'correct' lifestyle choices (Guthman, 2011). This 'biopolitics of responsibility' (Mansfield, 2012, p.588) is not restricted to the political right but has been adopted across the political spectrum (Lemke, 2002, in Glaze and Richardson, 2017) and has been the normative interpretation of public health for well over a decade. In his speech on the nation's future in 2006 the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that

> *Our public health problems are not, strictly speaking, public health questions at all. They are questions of individual lifestyle. (2006, in Crawshaw, 2012, p.200).*

A healthy diet is situated in public health discourse and practice as an important part of maintaining good health and as such making the 'right' (i.e. prescribed) choices around food and eating is an essential part of the neoliberal requirement for self-care (Mansfield, 2012); it is presented as a prerequisite of the rational, responsible citizen. An 'appropriate' lifestyle involves eating and feeding one's family the correct amounts and types of food. Those that don't do this are a 'fair target for moral disapprobation from both their peers and themselves' (Glaze and Richardson, 2017, p.140); health – and consequently, the food one eats -- has become a 'morally laden personal attribute' (Elliott and Hore, 2016, p.179).

Health as an individual's responsibility – the role of the media and the academy

We see the discourses around health and food played out in the media, particularly in television programmes. The many programmes helmed by Jamie Oliver (such as *Jamie's School Dinners, Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution, Jamie's Ministry of Food)* for example, have in different ways problematised and moralised the act of feeding one's family, particularly amongst low-income families. We as viewers are presented with 'the culinary abuses to which children are subjected' (Hollows and Jones, 2010, p.309), while Oliver engages in 'antifat talk and obesity stigmatization [sic]' (Slocum et al., 2011, p.181) and presents a poor diet as being a result of poor choices (Gibson and Dempsey, 2015); this is often correlated with the 'knowledge poverty of the working class' (Hollows and Jones, 2010, p.309). Media presentations of obesity intersect with and reflect those relating to food and health, and for the most part are not only based upon, but also cultivate, understandings of personal responsibility (Brookes and Baker, 2020).

Academia itself plays a role in reinforcing the notion of personal responsibility for public health. Graham et al. (2018, p.1864) suggest that much of the work done by public health researchers on the diets of people on low incomes 'privatises social responsibility' as it does not acknowledge the structural determinants of their experiences and instead assumes participants have a lack of knowledge, and that what they therefore need is education on nutrition. Amongst many examples of studies that follow this pattern, they highlight a project that encouraged 'healthy eating and budgeting skills' even though the people that were taking part made it clear that they had 'more important things to think about than food' (Johnson et al, 2009 p.27, in Graham, Stolte, et al., 2018, p.1864).

In recent years the bar has been raised even higher in terms of what represents a healthy diet, as illustrated by the explosion of cooking programmes, blogs, Instagram accounts and books championing raw food and 'clean eating'. This move towards 'nutritionism', whereby eating

healthily is understood to be about nutrients rather than food (Scrinis, 2008), although regularly contested (Goodman et al., 2017), has acted to further obscure the other factors at play i.e. material deprivation, physical access, the wider food system, and in doing so reinforces an emphasis on the individual as being responsible for their health (Slocum et al., 2011; Abbots and Coles, 2013; Goodman et al., 2017). Graham et al. (2018) observe that there is a class bias in terms of scrutiny of diets – the diets of those on low incomes are examined and judged in terms of their nutritional adequacy much more than those of the middle classes.

Narratives around food insecurity – a focus on food banks

These 'mediated biopolitics of food' (Goodman et al., 2017, p.163) have played a significant role in framing how shopping, cooking and eating should be undertaken and as such, permit and even encourage censure of those people who are viewed as not adhering to the rules as prescribed by current societal norms (Mckendrick et al., 2008). These come together alongside discourses around poverty to form the basis of food poverty truths, which I argue are the lenses through which experiences of food insecurity are viewed.

Much of the recent discussion of food insecurity in the UK – political and media – has centred around food banks (Knight, Brannen, et al., 2018). On the one hand, Wells and Caraher (2016, p.51) and Knight et al. (2018) both find from their studies of press representations of food bank users that there perhaps exists a 'halo effect'; that the experience of hunger is seen more as a societal deficiency rather than an individual one and this protects people who have to use food banks from criticism and behavioural judgements. On the other hand, the approach seen in newspaper articles is shown to reflect the scrounger discourse used around welfare recipients, i.e. that food bank users are 'freeloaders abusing the service the food bank offers' (Wells and Caraher, 2014, p.1436). This is exemplified by then MP Edwina Currie's (2016, np) comment in UK tabloid newspaper *The Sun* that food bank use was increasing because 'if something worth having is being handed out for free there will be many willing takers'. Harkins (2017) found multiple examples of articles in the right-wing British press between 2012 and 2013 that were negative and critical about food bank users. Price et al. (2020) examined 'below the line' readers' comments made about online news articles and found that the undeserving 'scrounger' or 'skiver' rhetoric was being regularly used by members of the public responding to stories. It would appear that although perhaps people experiencing food insecurity may be sometimes viewed 'in a generally more sympathetic light' (Knight et al., 2018, p.216), people who use food banks are still often presented as being undeserving (Wells and Caraher, 2014).

What we have seen in this section is the powerful influence of the discourses that exist around food, health and poverty. In the following section I explore how these narratives apply to understandings of food insecurity and the people who experience it by presenting and discussing four *food poverty truths* that were reproduced by the teachers in their survey responses.

4.3 Food poverty truths – easily digested? Narratives of personal responsibility.

4.3.1 Introduction

As noted in the Chapter 3, before I settled upon the final focus of my PhD on the lived experiences of children in relation to food insecurity I had been exploring the issue of holiday hunger, and had undertaken a survey of headteachers (or another senior staff member) from all primary schools in Leeds. I asked six closed questions:

1. *Do you think that there are any children in your school who go hungry during the school holidays?*
2. *Do you think that there are any children in your school who eat less during the school holidays than they do during term-time?*
3. *Do you think that there are any children in your school who miss meals during the school holidays?*
4. *Do you think that there are any children in your school who eat more unhealthy food (processed, 'junk' food, high in sugar, salt and saturated fat; fewer fruit and vegetables) during school holidays?*
5. *If you have answered YES to any of the above questions, do you think that this is because of financial restraints at home?*
6. *Do you think that there any parents or carers who have ever missed meals, or eaten less food, during school holidays so that their children can eat instead?*

I also wanted to explore *why* the teachers had provided the answers that they did, and did not want to limit their responses, so included an open question on this topic, and also a question asking for any further comments:

7. *If you have answered YES to any of the questions 1-4, please could you explain why you perceive this to be the case.*
8. *Do you have any further comments?*

The primary aim of this survey was to gather quantitative data on holiday hunger, but I included the open questions thinking that I might obtain some interesting insights; I had been

hoping that teachers might offer examples of evidence of children experiencing of food insecurity, and indeed this happened in some cases:

> *When they come to the breakfast club, sometimes children have not eaten since they had their free school meal for lunch the day before.* (School 44)
>
> *I see a number of children who are desperate to eat. When given food at lunch they eat it in record time.* (School 100)
>
> *A lot of children do not have breakfast in the morning, so go a very long time from the evening meal previous day till lunch time. We have a very busy free Breakfast Club, but unsure if our children have any breakfast at all in the holidays.* (School 86)
>
> *You can tell how much more the children eat on a Monday - only after two days at home. We see a difference in children after 6 weeks.* (School 49)

However, many of the teachers understood question 7 -- *If you have answered YES to any of the questions 1-4, please could you explain why you perceive this to be the case* -- in a different way: they thought that I was asking for their opinions on the *causes of* the children's experiences of food insecurity, not *if could they supply any evidence* that the children were going without enough food or eating unhealthy food because of inadequate funds. It was the answers to this interpretation of the question which produced what to me at the time were unexpected results. I was surprised that so many teachers presented the families' experiences of food insecurity to be an outcome of personal failings on the part of the parents, employing the rhetoric of individual responsibility and engaging in what Hollows and Jones (2010, p.308) describe as a 'discourse of class pathologisation [sic]'.

Mediated discourses of the kind the teachers were participating in can generate 'truths' that influence and even govern thinking and behaviour (Foucault, 1977 in Chase and Walker, 2012; see also Jo, 2013; Gibson and Dempsey, 2015; Goodman et al., 2017), and in order to challenge such truths, we must first recognise and name them. To this end I undertook an analysis of the narratives reproduced in the teachers' responses and identified four food poverty truths that bring together narratives around food, feeding, health, poverty and parenting. Below I present these food poverty truths and situate them within these wider narratives.

4.3.2 *Food poverty truth (1)*: It's not hard to eat healthily on a low income – you just need to shop carefully and plan ahead

In the holiday hunger survey, participants were asked about whether children eat less healthy food during the school holidays. This issue of children being fed in what in many cases was referred to as 'junk' food was one that provoked a large number of comments.

The comments made by the teachers about families in constrained economic situations who they perceived as eating junk food reflect the contemporary narratives and understandings of 'good' and 'bad' diets and food practices in contemporary British culture (Goodman et al., 2017). The generally accepted understanding is that we as individuals are responsible, and indeed it is our duty to, eat 'well' (Guthman, 2011).

One truth employed extensively in popular discourse and the media, and apparently absorbed by many of the teachers who completed the survey, is that eating a healthy diet on a low income is simply a matter of careful shopping and planning (Wells and Caraher, 2014; Wells and Caraher, 2016). The following section locates this truth within the wider picture of public, media and government attitudes towards issues relating to health and poverty, and provides examples of how teachers are replicating it in their comments about families experiencing food insecurity.

The UK media contains multiple instances of stories of people who are able to feed their families spending less than £1 per person per day (see, for example Buchan, 2014; NHS Choices, 2016; Blake, 2017; Hartley-Parkinson, 2017; Giggins, 2020). These examples are part of the wider popular cultural narrative of the need for thrift (for the working classes, at least) that arose from the austerity agenda (Jensen, 2012) that was advanced by Cameron and Osborne's government after 2010. The common message is that mothers – the majority of articles feature women – are able to cook good food on a small budget if they use 'a lot of imagination and cooking skill' (Buchan, 2014, np). Budget cook and blogger Jack Monroe, who was held up as 'the poster girl for austerity Britain' (Cadwalladr, 2016, np), is a prominent example. These women are presented as examples to show that 'you can save money and eat healthily, even if you have a busy life' (Buchan, 2014, np). The implication is that anybody can feed a family a healthy diet on a low income if you just care enough.

If it is an accepted truth that eating a healthy diet on a low income is simply a matter of careful shopping and planning, then this implies conversely therefore that people who feed their children unhealthy food do so because they are lazy or don't care enough. I found that this understanding was reproduced extensively by the surveyed teachers. One child protection

officer in my survey presented the frequently held view that families on low incomes could buy cheap ingredients from the market to make nourishing 'soups and stews'.

> *I think some of the time children are fed cheap and non-good food. I think if parents have to count pennies, fruit and veg is cheap in markets, and cheaper meat cuts can be purchased cheaply to make children soups and stews…* (School 65, Child Protection Officer)

The reproduction of this food poverty truth indicates a failure to recognise the possible barriers to this type of shopping and cooking: having the money and time to travel into the city centre to the market[27]; having the time to cook; the cost of electricity or gas for cooking; a lack of confidence in cooking; and children's (and adults') food preferences (Caraher, Dixon and Carr-Hill, 1998; Hayter et al., 2015; Lavelle et al., 2016; Mcgowan et al., 2017). Parents on low incomes also need to minimise food waste to keep down costs and this can affect food purchasing choices because there is less risk of waste if they buy what they know their children will eat (Daniel, 2016). This respondent finished their comment by saying,

> *… take-aways are sometimes an easy choice -- unfortunately, way of life.*

In describing take-ways as an 'easy choice' and a 'way of life' they are reproducing the understanding of those living on low incomes – particularly those families receiving social security payments -- as being lazy. This is part of the notion of a 'residual core of people living in poverty largely of their own making' (Chase and Walker, 2012, p.751); what is sometimes referred to as the 'underclass' (Rose, 2000; Ridge, 2013). This discourse divides society – and more specifically the working class -- into the 'respectable and the abject' (Skeggs, 2005, p.972). As noted earlier, this narrative has been reinforced by a raft of reality television programmes which present the people featured as idle, shameless and grasping (Jensen, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Paterson et al., 2016; Gilholy, 2020). This discourse is replicated by many of the teachers in their responses. For example, whilst recognising other factors at play, two teachers stated explicitly that laziness on the part of the parents is one of the reasons why children are food insecure:

> *Children go hungry in hols because of [parents'] lack of finance, lack of education, being lazy.* (School 66, Learning Mentor)

[27] When people in Leeds refer to 'the market', they are talking about Leeds' Kirkgate Market, which is located in the city centre. Recently a process of gentrification has been undertaken, but the market has always been known as the place to buy cheaper food and other products (see Gonzalez and Waley, 2013).

> *Some reasons financial but also lack of education about food and laziness can affect diet.* (School 61, Headteacher)

A headteacher of a school (School 50) located in a neighbourhood in which 53 per cent of the children live in income-deprived households recognised that *'junk food is cheaper'* but also asserted that *'apathy [and] poor home routines'* are to blame for the children's experiences of food insecurity. In School 88, which is a very small school situated in one of the most deprived areas of the city, every child is in receipt of free school meals. The headteacher did not attribute the children's poor diets to lack of income however, but rather to parental choice based on what is 'easy'.

> *I see what parents hand children [food] at the end of the day or what they have had for breakfast. Usually something pre-packaged and processed foods available in the corner shop. These are not cheap. They're just what's easy. (*School 88, Headteacher)

Other school staff did not explicitly state that parents are lazy, but insinuated this by referring to them taking the 'easy' option of take-aways or junk food:

> *Perception that it's easier to get a take-out.* (School 77, Headteacher)

> *I suspect that junk food is easier to cook, also parents give their children what they prefer*. (School 89, Headteacher)

> *With regards to unhealthy food I don't think it's all down to financial restraints - a lot of it is down to ease.* (School 95, Learning Mentor)

One response is a little more ambiguous – the headteacher acknowledged that preparing healthy food takes *'time and effort'*, and that families have limited resources, but still judged parents to be taking the *'easy option'*:

> *I believe that for some families, the extra meals to provide during the school holidays may put pressure on an already tight financial budget. Also I think that a few think junk food is an easy option due to time and effort of preparing a healthy meal. I also believe that some children eat things such as Super Noodles etc as an easy quick and cheap meal.* (School 51, Headteacher)

This understanding of food choices around children's diets being made because of personal characteristics of the parents, i.e. laziness or apathy, relates to and sits within the wider perception of the individual failings of people on low incomes and the individualisation of responsibility for one's (or one's children's) health (Glaze and Richardson, 2017; Pybus et al.,

2020), as discussed in the previous section. In subscribing to this viewpoint, these teachers are not fully acknowledging the impact of the socio-economic elements of the food system or individual or familial level demands which influence people's food practices.

4.3.3 *Food poverty truth (2)*: Can't cook, won't cook, eat shit[28]

Another popular characterisation of the food practices of the working classes and people on low incomes is that they lack cooking skills, can't be bothered to cook, and do not understand or have knowledge of how to feed their children (or themselves) a healthy diet. This 'epistemology of ignorance' (Tuana, 2006, in Warin, 2011, p.29) is a story that we see reproduced in the media: 'Home cooking in decline as low-income households turn to ready meals' (Butler, 2013), and by politicians: at the 2014 launch of the report of the All-Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty, senior Tory peer Baroness Jenkins said that 'poor people don't know how to cook'. She was later forced to make a public apology, but her statement was covered widely in the press (see, for example BBC, 2014; Holehouse, 2014; Payton, 2014). In the School Food Plan, which was a nationwide investigation into school dinners instigated by David Cameron, it was stated that 'several generations have now been raised in households where no one ever cooked… they, in turn, don't know how to feed their own children, and cannot teach them to feed themselves' (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013, p.35). No evidence is provided for this statement.

Food poverty truths are widely utilised in popular narratives, but research shows the reality is much more complex. Managing on a low income, whether in paid employment or on benefits, can be time-consuming and emotionally demanding (Beagan et al., 2018; see also Cappellini et al., 2019). The increased use of meals high in fat, sugar and salt, but taking less time to prepare, is recognised as a coping strategy in households struggling to find enough money to feed their families (Pfeiffer et al., 2015); after putting in all the time and effort needed to cope on a low-income parents may feel that they have 'no personal resources left' to commit to the extensive food work needed to cook regularly from fresh (Devine et al., 2006, p.2592; see also Dowler, 2008; Shtasel-Gottlieb et al., 2015, p.220; Lavelle et al., 2016).

Confidence with cooking and other food skills is associated with having the ability to eat healthily (Mcgowan et al., 2017). However, in relation to the conception of those on low incomes not being able to cook, Caraher et al. (1999) found, using data from a national survey,

[28] This is a reference to the occasion on which the strapline under the Gregg's (the bakers) logo on Google was changed so it read 'Providing shit to scum for over seventy years.' See https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/web-user-lobs-custard-pie-at-greggs-30520300.html

that in terms of socio-economic status, there was no difference as regards *general* cooking skills; confidence in certain cooking techniques (such as poaching and stir-frying) and with certain foods (for example oily fish and pulses) did however increase among higher income groups. Caraher et al. (1999) also make the important additional point that the rich don't always have to cook from scratch in order to eat a balanced diet as they can afford to buy healthy pre-prepared food. Adams et al. (2015, p.12), using a representative survey, also found that there were 'few differences' between socio-economic groups in the UK when it comes to cooking skills. There does not appear to be evidence, therefore, that supports the negative interpretation of food practices of low-income households.

A number of the teachers, however, bought into this construction of low-income families as not being able or willing to cook. One learning mentor, who said that 'a lot' of children are suffering from holiday hunger in their school, described a lack of cooking skills as being a primary determinant of children experiencing food insecurity and that it is a result of ignorance on the part of the parents. They said:

> *I feel it's about parents not having the knowledge about how to cook a meal from scratch or how to spend time preparing a healthy balanced meal. It's far easier to put something in the oven.* (School 29, Learning Mentor)

In the further comments section of the questionnaire, they presumed that parents do not even have 'the basics of cooking':

> *Children need to be taught about how to prepare and cook healthy meals and that actually in the long run in can be cheaper. Parents also need to be shown the basics of cooking.* (School 29, Learning Mentor)

Although it is possible that for some families confidence around cooking is an issue (Hayter et al., 2015), this learning mentor has not recognised any of the other barriers to food security discussed in the previous section, i.e. time constraints, access, and of course money. Other teachers also raised the issue of cooking skills:

> *[Children's experiences of food insecurity are caused by] financial constraints and parents' knowledge and willingness to budget, menu plan, cook and shop in a routine way.* (School 61, Headteacher)

> *Some parents do not have enough money to cater for the holidays. Some do not have the skills to prepare healthy nutritious food - they buy expensive processed foods.* (School 13, Child Protection Officer)

> *More support needed to better educate parents on how to spend their money, how to budget, basic cooking rather than expensive takeaways and ready meals, dietary information.* (School 81, Deputy Headteacher)

These quotes have something else in common – that they present (what they see as) the parents' personal failings responsible (at least in part) for the family's experiences. In describing why they think children are experiencing food insecurity the headteacher from School 61 (first quote, directly above) suggested that parents are not 'willing', i.e. they *choose* not to do what is necessary to prepare healthy food for a family. The subsequent comments offer that being food insecure is a result of lack of skills or education. It has been found that for families on low incomes, where there is a lack of confidence around cooking this is associated with a more unhealthy diet (Mcgowan et al., 2017), but there is no evidence that this is homogenous across the socio-economic group, nor is there evidence that working class families do not care about what they feed their children (Caraher et al., 1999; Wright et al., 2015).

4.3.4 *Food poverty truth (3)*: They don't even know what a healthy diet is

The characterisation of people living on low incomes as not understanding what a healthy diet is, was widespread among the teachers in my survey. One headteacher suggested that what they see as an apparent lack of knowledge regarding healthy food was more of an issue than lack of income:

> *I think that financial restraints are a small part of the problem. Generally, it is a lack of knowledge about healthy eating and a perception that junk/ready meals are cheaper than home prepared.* (School 35, Headteacher)

In their small-scale (n=11) qualitative study, Lovelace and Rabiee-Khan (2015) found that some parents on low incomes do not have a good understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet but it is clear from the wider evidence that poor diets are about financial and practical considerations rather than a lack of knowledge (Puddephatt et al., 2020). For example, Hayter et al. (2015, p.371) found that unhealthy eating habits among pre-school children in economically deprived families might instead be 'the product of a range of coping strategies' on the part of the parents. Herman et al. (2006, p.743) found that when provided with vouchers specifically for fruit and vegetable purchase – i.e. the means to buy them -- their low-income participants, who were mothers with young babies, made 'wise, varied and nutritious choices from available produce'. In a study undertaken by Devine et al. (2006, p.2597) among

low-wage parents in the US, the 'quick meals' that are used as a coping strategy by stressed and time-poor mothers then lead to feelings of guilt because they do not correspond with their 'ideals'; they understand what a healthy diet entails and aspire to it, but are constrained by their economic situation. This emotional impact was echoed by parents from a study based in York who reported that, 'it's not nice to feel you can't buy food that is healthy or better because it's more expensive' (Pybus et al., 2020, p.33). Evans et al. (2015) found their focus group participants, sixty eight per cent of whom reported 'sometimes' or 'almost always' running out of food by the end of the month, were 'very knowledgeable' of what constitutes a healthy diet.

Some teachers were clear that they believed that the children's experiences of food insecurity were related to the parents not knowing about healthy food and nutrition:

> *In part finances could have to be stretched further [over the holidays]. A possible lack of nutritional knowledge.* (School 37, Parent Support Worker)

> *Lack of nutritional knowledge and expertise.* (School 50, Headteacher)

It is possible that this reflects a class bias on the part of the teachers: Harman and Cappellini (2015, p.772) found that the middle-class mothers that they spoke to thought that working-class mothers 'don't understand the nutrition'. This is making an assumption that the teachers are middle class, however. The teacher quoted below appears to associate deprivation, and particularly the receipt of benefits, with a lack of understanding about healthy food. They also presented their perception that the families in question do not know how to handle their finances:

> *This is an area of high deprivation with many families accessing benefits. There is a lack of knowledge re healthy eating/budgeting family finances.* (School 94, Headteacher)

In fact, recent research indicates that in fact people on low incomes are fully cognisant of what constitutes a healthy diet, and employ various strategies to provide as healthy a diet as possible for their families (Power et al., 2021).

This next section explores another widely held food poverty truth about families struggling to cope on low incomes, which many of the teachers have absorbed – that they are not good at managing their money.

4.3.5 *Food poverty truth (4)*: You could eat better/more if you managed your money better

The common characterisation of those on low incomes as being poor at budgeting or prioritising (Mckendrick et al., 2008) extends to and encompasses people experiencing food insecurity (Pybus et al., 2020). We saw in Section 4.2.3.2 that people who are struggling to access sufficient food are perhaps not subjected to the same level of opprobrium as people who are living in poverty but not going hungry (Wells and Caraher, 2016). However, a construction of food bank users as being unable to manage their finances and just taking advantage of the free food, as opposed to having insufficient income to cover their basic needs, has been in evidence for a number of years, particularly (in the UK context) by Conservative politicians. In 2013 the then Education Secretary Michael Gove described people having to resort to visiting food banks as having to do so because of 'some decisions […] which mean that they are not best able to manage their finances' (BBC, 2013, np). The implication being that the situation they found themselves in – not having enough money to buy food – was because they made poor choices. This was echoed by MP Edwina Currie who declared that food insecurity is 'about choices' (in Butler, 2014, np). Dominic Raab, at that time the Justice Minister, reinforced this narrative, stating that a 'typical user' of a food bank is someone 'who has a cash flow problem episodically' (Agerholm, 2017, np). Opinions such as these offered by members of the government serve to create and reinforce the discourse about those people living on very low incomes making poor choices, and not being able to manage their money. These discourses of poverty and food insecurity and the truths that they give rise to are 'essentially regulative' (Chase and Walker, 2012, p.751), in that they shape public attitudes and behaviour towards people experiencing food insecurity. It is certainly the case that the teachers' attitudes towards the families at their schools that are experiencing food insecurity mirrored this narrative.

One deputy headteacher denied the impact of a low income and instead correlated the children's experiences of food insecurity with the parents' lack of education and planning. They told us of:

> *… lots of conversations that reflect 'my mum gave me a pound to spend at the shops because there's no money.' More education and lack of financial planning rather than finances.* (School 81, Deputy Headteacher)

A learning mentor (School 86) in a school in which 'a lot of children do not have breakfast' ascribed the eating of take-aways rather than home-cooked meals to families having trouble budgeting:

> *In my opinion we have some families that have trouble budgeting their money, which could affect how the family eat. i.e. eat takeaways instead of cooking family meals. Children often have money to go to the local shops to buy something to eat, which would usually be junk food.* (School 86, Learning Mentor)

The evidence teachers provided of poor budgetary management is that children can afford to go and purchase junk food; the insinuation is that if they have the money to do that, they should be able to buy sufficient quantities of healthy food. In fact, families on low incomes are often engaging in a complex assessment of the cost of food that involves a number of elements including: will this food be wasted? Does this package contain more food than we need? Will this food be eaten too quickly? Will this food fill us up? (Daniel, 2020)

In response to the question asking *why* they perceive that the children don't get sufficient amounts or the right type of food, the headteacher quoted below was explicit about the families at their school lacking the skills to manage their finances. They did not explain what they meant by having 'different private priorities' but the implication is that the parents choose to spend money on items for themselves rather than food for the children.

> *Some parents are on low incomes. They also have poor money management skills. Some have different private priorities.* (School 12, Headteacher)

The understanding that this is a problem across all low-income families is not backed up by research. Numerous studies have in fact shown that families with meagre resources engage in 'extensive efforts' to manage their finances (Chase and Walker, 2012, p.743; see also Reutter et al., 2009; Power et al., 2021). This is certainly what I have found repeatedly in my conversations with food bank clients in my role as volunteer, and also in my research for this thesis.

A very popular and well-worn account of people on low incomes is that they 'squander' their money on non-essential items such as 'fags and booze' (see, for example, Heffer, 2014, np). A child protection officer replicated this well-used explanation of food insecurity:

> *Some parents prioritise their needs over their children's needs and spend money on alcohol and tobacco instead of food.* (School 13, Child Protection Officer)

Another headteacher stated unambiguously that the issue is that some parents make 'poor choices':

> *This is not just about poverty; it is about some parents making poor choices on what they spend their money and about some parents not giving healthy food a high priority.* (School 74, Headteacher)

In fact, there are multiple studies that provide evidence of parents, particularly mothers, on low incomes undertaking very careful and resourceful budget management (Attree, 2005; Hayter et al., 2015; Beagan et al., 2018; Power et al., 2021).

In the 1970s and up to the 1990s food security was understood and problematised on a societal level. The more recent shift in focus to the individual has happened over the last few decades (Lang et al., 2009); these discourses reflect and fortify wider contemporary narratives that have involved a pathologisation of the working class and welfare recipients (Hollows and Jones, 2010; Abbots and Coles, 2013), and which were discussed earlier in this chapter. Glaze and Richardson (2017, p.141) argue that the disapproval indicated by politicians and commentators of those not fitting into the neoliberal ideal of a citizen as someone who is self-disciplined and accepts personal responsibility for their socio-economic situation (i.e. people experiencing food insecurity), then creates a space for condemnation and censure by the wider public. Being 'poor' means that you have failed; you do not live up to normative societal expectations (Chase and Walker, 2012). People who appear to not be taking responsibility for themselves -- by eating badly or not eating enough -- are therefore open to 'moral disapprobation' (Glaze and Richardson, 2017, p.140). This is borne out by research with people with lived experience of living on very low incomes: participants in a study by Hooper et al. (2007, in Chase and Walker, 2012, p.745) described how they felt judged as being 'profligate or incompetent' when they were only trying to get by and manage normal family life.

The following section explores the attitudes expressed by children participating in the focus groups towards other children at their school and their families.

4.4 'Do you know what they do? They spend the money on the wrong thing.' Children's attitudes towards those living in poverty

4.4.1 Introduction

In order to understand how British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity it is important to explore how children conceptualise and identify food insecurity, and the language they use to discuss it. To do this, I ran two focus groups[29] with children aged nine to eleven years from the same school at which I did my interviews. The children appear to have

[29] These are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

absorbed and be participating in individual and behavioural explanations for poverty and unemployment, and the accompanying division of people into the deserving and undeserving (Patrick and Brown, 2012; Ridge, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Alongside, and perhaps as a result of this, the children engaged in 'horizontal othering' (Briar, 1966; Seccombe et al., 1998; Reutter et al., 2009; Garthwaite, 2014); they constructed an 'us' and them' of people within their own community, and disassociated themselves from 'the poor' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Despite distancing themselves, the children were very aware of their friends' and neighbours' experiences of poverty, including the associated stigma. Poverty as 'a moral failure worthy of blame' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013) is not a new sociological finding, but the extent to which these primary school children had absorbed and were using this narrative has not been covered widely within academic research to date.

The focus groups were mixed gender and had six children aged between nine and eleven in each group. A conversation was stimulated by questions relating to children from two different imaginary families: Hamza and Alina's family was comfortably off and didn't have to worry about money; Chloe and Sammy's family were on a very low income, and their situation worsened after the mum was sanctioned[30] and so had no income. As noted in Chapter 3, I did not use the term food insecurity, but instead described the topic that we would be discussing as,

> *… stuff to do with food; about families perhaps not always getting to eat the food they would like, or as much as they would like, or perhaps worrying about food.*

I begin this part of the chapter by looking at the children's comments on choice making, then explore instances of othering. I then show how the participating children are highly cognisant of the stigma and judgement attached to living on a very low income.

4.4.2 Poor choice-making

As discussed above, individual and behavioural (as opposed to structural) explanations for poverty and unemployment have become hegemonic in recent years (Pemberton et al., 2015). This 'privatisation of responsibility' (Näsström and Kalm, 2015, p.562) has become accepted and established public opinion around poverty (Newman, 2011; Wiggan, 2012; Ridge, 2013; Pemberton et al., 2015; Pantazis, 2016). As illustrated via the food poverty truths replicated by

[30] When a person is sanctioned their benefits are stopped or reduced. This can be from days to many months. You may be sanctioned if, for example, you don't spend the right amount of time searching for jobs, don't attend a meeting with your work coach, or refuse a job offer. See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-and-you/draft-uc-and-you for further details.

the teachers, this discursive space has expanded to include people experiencing food insecurity.

A number of the children in the focus groups reproduced this discourse, particularly around spending money on the 'wrong thing'. Jessica (eleven) understood why their friend, who the participants had described as 'poor' and coming from a big family, might want to have high status items such an iPhone and fashionable trainers, but questioned whether this was the right choice for her family:

> *But sometimes, what I think is that she, when she had them, like the phone and the Huarache [type of Nike trainer] I was like surprised cos, I know you wanna be like, show it to other people, but do you think this is the right thing you should have done? I think you should have least helped your brothers and sisters.*

This presentation of peers as 'lacking entitlement' has also been found by O'Connell et al. (2019, p.123) in their study with children and teenagers aged eleven to fifteen years. When I asked about families in the children's school that are really struggling, Aliya (ten) expressed that she felt these families were in some way to blame for their (economic) situation; that it was perhaps at least in part a result of the choices they made:

> *But I think they can, like some of them, not all of them, they can help themselves, some of them. Because if you think about it they want to be glamorous, they want to have other stuff. And their parents want [to] live life, as in like beer, and everything.*

Keira (nine) expressed the opinion that Chloe and Sammy's mum (the fictional family which was struggling financially) was to blame for getting sanctioned because she missed her appointment at the Job Centre, commenting that, '[the mum] should've gone to that meeting, shouldn't they?', although she did then recognise that, 'it's difficult to get there if you live far away and you don't have nothing to go with [i.e. a car].'

In current UK society the way a parent feeds their family is a marker of respectability, and harsh judgement is meted out upon those who fail to provide enough good food (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). This 'morality of provision and consumption' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013, p.293; see also Gibson and Dempsey, 2015) had clearly been taken on board by the children: when imagining the low-income family, Alfie (ten) described them choosing to buy junk food:

> *They spend some of their money on pizzas so they don't have much money for the rest of the week. If you get a big greasy pizza and some chips and some kebab it's around £15 on just that one thing for one day and you can spend £15 [*Keira (nine) interrupts*: on vegetables], yeah, and bread and butter and a little tin of tomatoes, and stuff like that.*

Keira (nine) agreed:

> *You [should] spend more on good food that you need than on junk food that you really don't need.*

Grace (ten) made a direct comparison between her family, in which there was always enough food because they were willing to go without other items, with families at school who spent their money on items such as smartphones and beer. She judged the families as making the wrong choices:

> *People, who like, they do get a lot of money, but they just spend it on like iPhones and stuff. And like, it doesn't really like, they don't even think about food, they just like, get like beer and stuff. They think about themselves. And like, we always think that they could instead of getting loads of stuff like that, they could at least spend it on food.*

She explained that in her family they 'get loads of food because we don't always spend it on stuff [that the other families do].' She gave the example of a child from a family which was really struggling nagging their parents for a teddy bear and getting it, even though 'they didn't have enough and they needed [the] money'. She contrasted the behaviour of the child with that of her and her sibling: 'we, we won't really mind if we don't get it cos we know that we need the food.'

Evie (ten) felt that a family which struggled to find enough money for food shouldn't have spent money going on a day trip:

> *Like, I'm not being mean or anything to her, but like, they don't spend it on like what they should be when they actually get paid. Like, some days ago she said she went to Scarborough -- that money that she went to Scarborough [with], could've helped towards her food and stuff.*

The children sat in judgement on other families and children who they felt were not making the 'correct' choices; they appear to have absorbed and were using the narrative that those struggling on low incomes are responsible for their situation. The following section discusses

how the children distanced themselves and made themselves distinct from their friends and neighbours.

4.4.3 Othering and disowning poverty

Discussions of othering in the context of poverty have for the most part revolved around how the 'non-poor' have constructed a negative discourse around 'the poor' (Lister, 2004; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010; Chauhan and Foster, 2013; also Cohen et al., 2017), and, in doing so, have characterised 'the poor' as inferior (Bryman, 2012). However, a number of UK-based researchers have also witnessed horizontal, intra-class othering of people in the same socio-economic circumstances (Briar, 1966; Seccombe et al., 1998; Reutter et al., 2009; Garthwaite, 2014; Daly and Kelly, 2015; O'Connell et al., 2019). This phenomenon was witnessed by MacDonald and Marsh in 2005 (in Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013) amongst young adults and by Chase and Walker (2012, p.749) in interviews with adults on how they were coping with living on a low income. They found that their participants distinguished themselves from others that they saw as positioned 'further down' the social hierarchy (see also Pemberton et al., 2015 for another example). In addition, in their research into the language that people experiencing recurrent poverty use to describe themselves and others, Shildrick and MacDonald found that their participants (who were described by the authors as living in poverty) distanced themselves from others, who they presented as 'the undeserving poor' (2013, p.291). Daly and Kelly (2015, p.168), also witnessed this phenomenon during their qualitative work on families and poverty in Northern Ireland; they noticed that the people they spoke with were engaging in othering in that they tried to differentiate themselves both in terms of status and behaviour from others with a similar economic status. They found that this othering was undertaken mostly by people in employment and was directed towards welfare recipients. In terms of research with children, one of the participants in the study undertaken by O'Connell et al. (2019, p.108), Bertie, who was eleven years old and whose mum was reliant on benefits, judged, in his words, 'people who are poor' rather harshly, and said that he thought that 'they are pretending not to have any money.'

Despite their school being situated in a neighbourhood[31] classed as being in the most deprived ten per cent in England in terms of multiple deprivation (GOV.UK, n.d.(b)), the children participating in the focus groups did not appear to identify themselves as poor. The word poor was used only once in one of the focus groups (I deliberately chose not to use the word poor in my descriptions of Chloe and Sammy's family): Alice (ten) mentioned 'some people who are

[31] The area in question is defined as a *Lower-layer Super Output Area (LSOA)*.

poor, like our friend'. The participants clearly saw themselves as different from their friend and her experiences, and saw her as the other.

Some of the children gave examples of how they were not the same as these others; in some cases their friends. Alice (ten) made clear the distinction between her and the others in the focus group and their friend, Rosie, whose family had very little money. She described a visit to Rosie's house:

> *Like when they had jawbreakers [a type of gobstopper sweet], when me and Jessica went to our friend's house, Rosie went, "aw we got jawbreakers", which are 20p, and they was like really like happy, but like us guys, if we got a jawbreaker we wouldn't like [care] cos we can get it any time we want, basically.*

Hannah (ten) in particular was explicit about 'disclaiming poverty' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013, p.288), commenting to the other girls in the focus group: 'cos we don't really need to struggle do we?' At the children's school, surplus food[32] was available for parents to take for free, or to pay whatever they wanted/were able to. Hannah's comment regarding the way children feel as a result of having to accept what is essentially waste food is evidence of how she disconnected herself from them:

> *They think that they should get the same, like equal, yeah, they should but, if we're giving out like free stuff it can't be like brand new, sparking* [sic] *posh.*

The children's exaggerated descriptions of what Hamza and Alina (the imaginary wealthier family) would have for their tea [evening meal], indicated that they did not identify with them: Aliya (ten) described how they would 'go to an expensive buffet that's been reserved for them.' Evie (ten) said that they would 'have a three-course meal.' One of the children wrote on a Post-it that Hamza and Alina's family would have a 'hog roast'. Regarding what Hamza and Alina would have for breakfast, five out of the six participants wrote that they would have a 'full English'. Alfie (ten) described how when they went shopping, Hamza and Alina would go to: 'Tesco's in the car – limo!' However, of the two families that we discussed, the children were more likely to relate to Hamza and Alina. For example, Aliya (ten), when asked to imagine what was in Hamza and Alina's fridge, explained her choices: 'I'm just writing what's in my

[32] Surplus food is 'food which is still good to eat, but for some - usually human produced – reason, has become surplus to the needs of the commercial food sector' (Blake, 2017, np)

fridge.' Hannah (ten) also related to the richer family, explaining that she thought they would sit down to together at teatime, 'round the table. That's what I do.'

Although they were sympathetic about the difficulties Chloe and Sammy might face, the participants did not associate themselves with the poorer family. In the first focus group, one of the ways that the children differentiated themselves from Chloe and Sammy – who to them represented 'the poor' – was by engaging in negative stereotyping. Chloe and Sammy were described as having 'dirty clothes', being 'smelly', living in an 'old house' with 'no beds', and, if they had a car, it was 'old' and 'rusty'.

Glaze and Richardson (2017, p.141) attribute this horizontal othering to the prevalent highly negative narrative of those living in poverty: they describe a 'ripple effect of shame', whereby those on low incomes distinguish and distance themselves from those further down or even on the same level of the social hierarchy; they create an other in order to deflect the shame or stigma that they feel is directed at them. The following section explores in more depth the children's awareness of stigma.

4.4.4 Stigma

The children were very aware of the stigma and judgement attached to being in poverty, and provided descriptions of how they thought they or their friends might feel in certain situations. For example, I asked them how Chloe and Sammy (the children from the fictional family struggling to afford what they needed) might feel after their mum had been sanctioned and had to ask other people for help. Alfie (ten) described how they might feel if they had to go round to a friend's house to ask for something to eat:

> *It would be kind of embarrassing, because the [friend's] mum'd be thinking, well, so you've got no money cos your money's been stopped for a month.*

One of the children in the first focus group, when asked what Chloe and Sammy's family would have to do after they'd been sanctioned, wrote on a Post-it[33] that 'they [would have] to sign on at the job centre. It would be very embarrassing.'

The concept of using surplus supermarket food to provide food aid has flourished in the UK over recent years, and is predominantly presented as a win-win in terms of sustainability and social justice: the hungry get fed and large amounts of edible food is diverted from landfill (see Griffiths, 2015 for an example of how it is presented in the media). As well as supplying many food banks, waste food is used by many 'pay-as-you-feel' cafes, which have proliferated in the

[33] The children did not write their names on the Post-its.

last few years. A leading organiser in this field is The Real Junk Food Project, which originated in Leeds but has expanded at an incredible rate and now works internationally. This concept is now being promoted within schools; as mentioned above, the children's school had a pay-as-you-feel café open on three mornings a week for breakfast and there was also a pay-as-you-feel market stall in the playground, but it is made clear that there was no expectation of any payment. The stigma and shame experienced by many food bank clients is widely known (Riches, 2002; van der Horst et al., 2014; Moffatt et al., 2015; Purdam et al., 2015; Garthwaite, 2016a; Middleton et al., 2018; Strong, 2021), but there is less of an awareness of the emotional and psychological impact of using surplus food in a pay-as-you-feel outlet to provide food for people who are experiencing food insecurity (see Caraher and Furey, 2017 for a rare example). It was interesting therefore to learn that there was a stigma attached to obtaining food from the café and the market stall. The school staff did not express any appreciation of this being the case and presented the café and stall as unproblematically beneficial.

Aliya (ten) explained that it is embarrassing to get food from the café because it signals that you haven't had anything to eat that morning. She described how people who have to use the café in the morning might feel:

> *Because they think that if they go in and then they see their friends, you know their friends had breakfast and they haven't, they would go in and then they wouldn't have [had] anything to eat.*

Hannah (ten) talked about how having to eat surplus or waste food makes the children feel inferior, even though she recognised there is nothing actually wrong with the food:

> *And like, you know, in the coffee shop, they, it's [the food available] not bad, but they're out of date, not out of use by: best before, right. So, and then they [the children] think: 'oh we're not as good as [them], it should be in [date] or whenever'.*

This apparent connection between out-of-date of food and poverty appeared also in two of the participants' descriptions of Chloe and Sammy's (the struggling family's) cupboards: 'out-of-date milk' and 'the bread that they buy might be a bit past their sell-by date'.

One of the recognised indicators of food security is that one can obtain food in a socially acceptable way (Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; Knight et al., 2018). The children attached status to certain places for food shopping; there was clearly some stigma attached to having to shop in the market (as opposed to a supermarket). In both focus groups children described Chloe

and Sammy as having to do their shopping at the market; this was in contrast to Hamza and Alina were imagined as shopping in supermarkets.

The children assigned a value to paid work, and stigmatised those who are unemployed. In the first focus group, some of the children describing Chloe and Sammy's family – the parents in which they had imagined as being unemployed (when I had described the family I had purposely not said whether or not they worked, just that they were struggling financially) -- as 'lazy'. Asked to imagine what Chloe and Sammy's family would do once their mum had been sanctioned, Keira (nine) described them as 'just sit[ting] around watching telly. So a lazy family really.' When I asked why the children thought that Chloe and Sammy's family were lazy but they hadn't said that about Hamza and Alina's family, Dylan (nine) explained that the wealthier family was *not* lazy because:

> *…they go somewhere every day because their mum has got [a] job, and they go to work.*

This attribution of laziness to the struggling family appears to be another example of how the children – despite living in one of the ten per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK themselves -- have absorbed the popular narrative of those living on benefits as being lazy and feckless. They appear to have fully bought into the increasingly hegemonic discourse around individual and behavioural explanations for poverty and the division of society into the *deserving* and *undeserving*, used by politicians and promoted in the media. I was not able to discern where the children had received these narratives from my conversation with them, but Ridge (2013, p.411) suggests that children are 'seasoned media watchers and active and aware social participants'. One can speculate also that their parents and families reproduced this 'language of poverty' (Ridge, 2013, p.411).

4.5 Conclusion

Although poverty and food insecurity are not always synonymous, the bottom line for most of those families experiencing any level of food insecurity is that they have 'insufficient or unpredictable' levels of income (Douglas et al., 2015; King et al., 2015; Denney et al., 2017; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). This impacts every aspect of their lives. Food practices and experiences of those households managing on low incomes are shaped and influenced by many interacting factors: from the political-economy of the food system, to access (living in a food desert, for example, where local shops are expensive and stock very little fresh produce and from where it is difficult and expensive to get to supermarkets on public transport); time

(working long hours outside the home or having unpaid caring responsibilities for children or other family members); mental and physical health issues; to the space for storage; costs of gas/electricity for cooking; appropriate cooking equipment; personal preferences; skills and knowledge; cultural background; and food prices (Caraher, Dixon and Carr-Hill, 1998; Katz et al., 2007; Gillies, 2008; Abbots and Coles, 2013; Hayter et al., 2015; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015a; Lavelle et al., 2016; Mcgowan et al., 2017; Wills and O'Connell, 2018). What we see in many of the teachers' responses around families' experiences of food insecurity is that these factors are not acknowledged, or only acknowledged in part. Instead, despite interacting regularly with children and parents who are experiencing either acute or chronic food insecurity, the teachers locate their experiences in an understanding that is based on poverty and health and diet as being the responsibility of the individual (Gillies, 2008, p.100), with parents held accountable for their children's poverty (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017) and of 'the (food) poor' as being lazy, incompetent and unskilled. As a result, we see that parents are being held morally accountable (Harman and Cappellini, 2015) and 'judged and blamed' (Beagan et al., 2018, p.109) for what and how they feed their children.

The children who took part in the focus groups also engaged in and reproduced popular narratives of poverty and people on low incomes: poor people are lazy, they make the wrong choices, they eat too much junk food and they manage their money badly. The extent to which this occurred was surprising to me; I was aware that othering within the same socio-economic groups has been witnessed, but I did not think that the discourse that instigates this would have filtered down so extensively to such young children (they were aged nine to eleven years). However, they had absorbed and were fully aware of the stigma attached to people living in deprived areas such as theirs (see also Ridge, 2013), so it is understandable that they wanted to distance themselves from it. Both the teachers' and the children's attitudes towards people experiencing food insecurity, and more widely towards those living in poverty, illustrate the reach, dominance and influence of these discourses of individual deficiency.

Note:

This chapter was written before 2020 and though it has been edited and updated in 2022 does not cover the debate around children's experiences of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. These were stimulated, to a large extent, by the footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign to tackle child food poverty. The debates within the political and media spheres illustrate that the food poverty truths outlined in this chapter are very much still in circulation.

Please see the following link for ‘below the line’ comments that illustrate how parents are held up as being wholly responsible for their inability to provide adequate food for their children.

https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8424979/Lineker-backs-Rashford-school-meals.html

Politicians have also been rehashing these tropes: Ben Bradley MP tweeted that ‘Extending FSM [Free School Meals] to school hols passes responsibility for feeding kids away from parents, to the State. It increases dependency’ (Hollows, 2022).

5. Support networks, strategies and secret eating: What it means to live with food insecurity

5.1 Introduction

In the Literature Review I presented the work of Kathy Radimer, who was one of the first researchers to expand the concept of hunger from a purely biological, physical experience. She and her colleagues described a wider experience – that of food insecurity -- for households in which resources are so scarce that covering basic needs is sometimes a struggle (Radimer et al., 1992). Understanding the experience of food insecurity involves thinking about not only insufficient food intake (quantity), but also how the nutritional quality of the diet is affected and potential psychological and social (non-material) impacts.

In this chapter I focus on the *quality* and *quantity* aspects[34] of child food insecurity and provide evidence of children going without food and eating less healthily as an outcome of their family's low income. I begin, in Section 5.2, by presenting four brief case studies; these provide some background information and offer a little insight into the children's lives. Following the case studies, Section 5.3 presents the various strategies used by parents in order to protect their children from the effects of household food insecurity. I then go on in Section 5.4 to show how, despite their efforts, parents are not always successful, as children report going without food on occasion and eating a diet that is not as healthy as they would like. Children are agentic and proactive (Ridge, 2017), however, and this chapter closes with a discussion of the different ways in which children try to alleviate the impact on themselves and their family members of living in a household where the income is not sufficient to provide food security.

5.2 Four children's stories of food insecurity

I begin by presenting thumbnail sketches of the lives of four participants from my study -- Amy, Thomas, Jack and Katie -- through the lens of food provisioning. These case studies provide a picture of the setting within which these children live and their awareness of the household's financial situation, and also illustrate how crucial a support network is to the children's food security. These sketches are based on my interviews with each of the children.

[34] The following two chapters look at the non-material aspects of child food insecurity, that is, the psychological and emotional impacts of living in households that are economically precarious.

It is very important to me that I do not allow my findings to be too far divorced from the fact that what I am exploring is children's *lived experiences*. I am aware that during the research process it is easy to see 'the data' simply as evidence to analyse, and so, in placing these four children's experiences within the context of their families and trying to paint a fuller picture of their lives rather than just using snippets of our conversation to illustrate a point, I am emphasising the fact that the topic of research is real people's daily lives. This approach also allows me to set their experiences more clearly within 'the societal context of social inequality' (O'Connell et al., 2019, p.33). In order to retain the power and impact of what the children told me I have used the present tense when describing the children's lives.

5.2.1 Amy

Amy, who is ten, lives with her father. Her mum died of cancer when Amy was four. Her dad is trying to get work as a fork lift driver but has not been able to get a job and so they live on benefits, 'from the job centre thingy'. Amy's dad struggles to find enough money for food, but her grandad 'pays for our shopping every day'. The range of their diet is restricted – they eat 'a lot of pasta because I have so much pasta in [the cupboards]. But my dad only buys pasta, because if we've got no actual food in we just eat pasta, or tinned soup.'

Amy originally tells me that 'We've got food every day.' She admits later that in fact she does feel hungry 'Once a week, maybe twice'; this appears to be not so much that they have to miss meals completely, but that the food supply is erratic. She knows that without the money her grandad gives them they couldn't afford the '£60-£80' a week that they spend on food. She knows that her dad 'worries about money a lot' and that he finds it 'very difficult' not having a job because she hears him 'on the phone a lot and speaking to people'. Although her dad always makes sure that the gas and electric meter are topped up, it is very obvious to her that they 'don't have a lot of money, so we lose our Sky [television] a lot, our internet a lot, some of our shopping and stuff.' She mentions that other people can afford things that they can't.

This situation manifests itself in a deep anxiety about food. She worries 'a lot of times' about how hard it is for her dad to get enough food for them. She tells me that she worries 'every day' about having enough to eat: 'I come home and look in the fridge, and if there's food in there, I know I'm ok.' Her father cannot provide a stable food supply, and they are propped up by her grandad, who 'comes down once a day', buys their shopping, drives them to the supermarket, and gives them a meal every Saturday at his house. Amy is fully cognisant of the precariousness of their situation and it appears to be this that generates the levels of anxiety that she experiences.

5.2.2 Thomas

Thomas, who is ten, lives with his mum and three sisters and his mum's boyfriend, who moved in about a month ago. The family has recently moved up from the south of England, because 'when we were down in London, everybody was getting stabbed, near my house.' His mum chose Leeds simply because she found a house to rent very cheaply; they had never been to the city before they moved here. They did not know anyone in Leeds before they came. His mum's boyfriend is employed, and Thomas's mum is looking for work – 'she has to go all round town looking for jobs.'

They struggle quite often to make their money last, but they get help from their next-door neighbour: 'sometimes when it runs out, it's the same day my next-door neighbour gets paid, but he gets paid a lot more money, like £400, so he gives my mum another forty to fifty pounds to go and get some more food.' His mum has had to access 'emergency payments'[35], which are provided when families don't have any money left at all, 'when all the food ran out… and we didn't have any money left, and neither did our next-door neighbour'. In order to supplement their diet, his mum grows food on a part of the same neighbour's allotment.

The family get by on very little money, but there have been times when there has been no money left at all. Thomas is one of the few children with whom I spoke who appears to have gone without meals because of a lack of money, but it has not happened very often, just 'one or two times'. This is because his mum uses various strategies to mitigate their severe food insecurity. As well as receiving money from neighbours and growing her own fruit and veg, she will go without food herself. Thomas tells me: 'Once, in my old house down in London, there was only a little bit of food left, and then she didn't eat for three whole days.'

Thomas is very aware of the work that his mum undertakes to manage on a low income and how stressful it is for her. He explains that 'she had to go all the way to the town centre, to go to social services, no not social services… to the offices, Talk Talk [internet and phone supplier] and everything.' He knows that the family income is not enough to cover all their costs, and that this is very challenging for his mum: 'Firstly she has to pay for rent – she only gets £100, £150 Tuesdays or Fridays, and she has to pay rent, she has to pay Talk Talk, she has to get us food, she has to pay for other rent for Talk Talk, the house and everything – she can't take that much.' He worries about how hard it is for his mum, 'Because she only gets a few hundred

[35] Thomas is referring to the Local Welfare Assistance Schemes (previously known as the Discretionary Social Fund) available from some local councils for those in urgent need.

pounds, and every time I come back from school, she's on the phone paying bills and everything. And she's trying to figure out what to do.' This makes him 'really sad'.

Thomas's mum bears the brunt of the physical effects of having a very low household income, in that she is the one who will 'normally' eat less or not at all so that the children can eat. Because of the strategies that she uses, Thomas for the most part eats an adequate amount of food. However, he is aware of the intense pressure that his mum is under to make ends meet and what this involves, and the impact of this on his wellbeing is constant. He expresses his understanding of the relentless cycle of managing poverty when he tells me he feels 'Really sad, because my mum needs to ask the next-door neighbour for money as well, and then she has to pay it back.'

5.2.3 Jack

Jack, who is ten, has two older siblings and they live with their mum, who works. Jack tells me that money is tight at the moment: 'We're getting left with little money. … So we can't… we just have enough money to pay the rent, and get at least some, enough food for, well at least, eating.' He says that 'before that, in my [lunch] bag, it was packed.' However, he still gets 'a packet of crisps, some juice, a chocolate bar and well, either a wrap or a sandwich', so he is getting sufficient food. There is no other indication that the family don't get enough to eat: he tells me that their freezer is 'packed with, like, crispy chicken, pizza, all junk food, and not healthy food like cherries.[36]' Jack recognises that the cost of fruit and veg means that they don't eat as healthily as he would like.

Jack does not worry about having enough to eat, but he does worry about the family's financial situation. He tells me, 'It's kind of hard. … It's just the money and…'. His mum doesn't talk to him about their circumstances -- 'I know she's trying to not let, make me too worried' -- but Jack talks a lot during our interview about how much things cost -- 'We don't have enough money to afford [school dinners]' -- and how you can get food cheaper during things like 'Christmas sales, and even Black Friday'. He is aware that 'bills are going up in Leeds now', and tells me that this is why they are 'getting left with little money.' Although his mum doesn't talk explicitly about the household finances with him, he knows that they are having to be more careful; they are only getting take-aways 'once a month or something', and this is because 'they cost a lot of money' and are unhealthy, he says.

[36] I brought fruit in for the children to eat if they wanted whilst we were doing our interviews and the day I interviewed Jack there were cherries.

Jack knows that it is a struggle for his mum to afford everything they need: 'She actually needs more money', and he worries a lot about how hard things are for her. Although he has not experienced extensive material privation, Jack, as with Amy, keenly feels the precariousness of their situation, and the actuality of managing on a low income has engendered a sense of unsafety[37] in him.

5.2.4 Katie

At eleven years old Katie is the oldest of five siblings. Also living in her house are her mum, her stepdad, her auntie and her cousin; there are six children altogether. Her parents are wholly reliant on benefits for their income at the moment as they are both out of work. Her stepdad is 'devastated' about not being able to get a job. Katie tells me that 'sometimes it's really hard to get food.' In order to manage on a very low income the family budget very carefully. Her auntie works in a supermarket so she helps with food when she gets paid, and they can get 50 per cent off food in the supermarket she is employed by. This helps them out a lot. Katie has a grandma and another auntie nearby, and when the food runs out, 'sometimes I do go there and eat, so that we don't have to eat at home'. Her parents obtain food from the stall at the school that provides surplus foodstuffs from supermarkets free of charge. For her breakfast, Katie regularly has only the toast that is given to all children in the classrooms in the mornings.

As is common in many food insecure households, the adults in her home will do whatever is necessary to ensure that the children are fed. (See Section 5.3.2, below, for a discussion of this phenomenon.) This involves missing a meal if there is not enough to feed everyone. As a result of these strategies, they 'always find a way [for the children] to eat'. However, she clearly feels that she, too, is responsible for mitigating the family's food insecurity, and sometime goes without food so that her other family members can eat more. As with other children with whom I spoke, Katie exhibits a detailed level of understanding of the household finances.

In the following section I present details of the ways in which the children's parents cope with their economic vulnerability.

5.3 'We always find a way to eat.' (Katie): Strategies used by parents to mitigate household food insecurity

Of the 33 children with whom I spoke, a small number were from families who were clearly really struggling to afford the basic costs of living, including food; many others had very low

[37] I use *unsafety* to explain a feeling of not being safe, exposed to danger or risk, or insecurity. See Collins English Dictionary (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.)

incomes. Only six of the children in my sample said they had ever had to go hungry due to an inability to access any food. This is because, as observed in other studies with materially deprived families (Kempson et al., 2003; Dodson and Dickert, 2004; London and Scott, 2005; Daly and Kelly, 2015; Pfeiffer et al., 2015; O'Connell, 2018; Cappellini et al., 2019; Cesnuityte and Meil, 2019), their parents utilised a range of strategies to mitigate the financial situation, and in doing so, were able to buffer their children from the physical impacts of household food insecurity.

In this section I present the three key strategies used by adults that emerged from the children's descriptions of their day-to-day experiences: use of support networks; parents sacrificing their own needs; and shopping and cooking in a way that minimises spending on food.

5.3.1 Support networks

In a study with people in poverty from 23 countries across the world, Narayan et al. (2000, p.44) describe how, for people on low incomes, social networks act as a 'well […] that can be drawn from in times of need.' This reliance on family, friends and neighbours to mitigate the hardships that can arise from living in poverty has been widely found in other studies (McIntyre et al., 2000; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Connell et al., 2005; Van der Hoek, 2005; Heflin et al., 2011; Matthews and Besemer, 2015; Defeyter et al., 2015; Daly and Kelly, 2015; Knowles et al., 2016; Power et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2020).

These networks supply social capital, which is defined by Putnam (2000, in Matthews and Besemer, 2015, p.189) as 'ties that bind or bridge between different individuals and groups', and can be both tangible (e.g. money) and intangible (e.g. emotional support) (Gazso et al., 2016, p.444). Within the context of food insecurity these networks of friends, family, or neighbours act as a 'protective factor' (Ghate and Hazel, 2002, p.106; see also Carter et al., 2014), by providing resources in the form of groceries, meals, money or the opportunity to obtain food via alternative means (Tarasuk, 2001; Connell et al., 2005; Bernal et al., 2012).

My study confirms the dependence of families on low incomes on kin and what Gazso et al. (2016) call fictive kin, i.e. friends and members of their community who provide support in mitigating food insecurity. Assistance from family members in particular is a common feature, and appears to be an important part of making the children feel safe. In the case studies above, Amy's grandad and Katie's gran and aunties all regularly provided food or cash. Of the other children that I interviewed, Ellie told me that she didn't worry about getting sufficient food, 'because I know I've got my Nanna there as well, because Nanna will just bring

something down, if we don't have enough food in.' Freya was aware of a reciprocal relationship practised by her family members and of the benefits that brings. When I asked her whether her gran and auntie (who share the care of her and her siblings) ever worried about having enough money to buy food for her and her sister, she told me no, 'because if one of them is short of money then the other one would help'. Daisy's grandma lived nearby, and Daisy would sometimes go there 'to have dinner until my mum and dad go shopping.' She told me that this is why she didn't ever feel hungry. As well as cooking for them, her grandma also gave the family food when they had none at home.

Families also received help from neighbours and others in the local community. Alfie's mum has 'known our next-door neighbour for years', and sometimes 'gets money' from them when the food runs out. Megan's parents were given food by the family living next door, and the owners at the nearby corner shop would sometimes help Jack's family out by giving them 'a little discount … because we're friends and that.' As described in the case study above, Thomas' mum was helped out in a number of ways by her neighbour, including being allowed to use part of his allotment to grow food, and being loaned money when all hers had run out.

Denney et al. (2017, p.1) suggest that one of the reasons that their study was unable to show an association between the deprivation levels of an area and incidence of household food insecurity is because people within low-income communities offer support to one another in the form of information and resources; the mitigation of food insecurity 'may be a communal process'. My research demonstrates that in many cases families are able to ameliorate the impacts of living on a low income with support from social networks and thus reduce the risk of their children going hungry. This is a crucial finding in terms of accurately assessing the prevalence and severity of food insecurity, as commonly-used survey instruments[38] do not take account of the support provided behind the scenes by those outside the immediate family. They are therefore not able to capture the true levels of insecurity of the household's food status.

Historically, 'the family' has been the unit offering protection for its members from 'external forces' (Robila, 2004, in Cesnuityte and Meil, 2019, p.2). Certainly in our economically challenging times, and as the protection offered by the welfare state is being eroded, low-income households increasingly rely on family and friends (for those lucky enough to have them) for help with basic needs (Cesnuityte and Meil, 2019; see also Hill et al., 2020).

[38] Survey questions based on the Household Food Security Survey Module (see USDA Economic Research Service, n.d. for details) are used internationally to ascertain prevalence and level of household food insecurity including, since 2019, in the UK (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021a).

However, those people providing assistance may also be in precarious situations themselves, and so their support may not be reliable (Hill et al., 2020).

In addition, partly in relation to our increasingly individualised society, familial obligations that were taken for granted in the past are no longer always in place (Daly and Kelly, 2015). Many people, by choice or by necessity (see Thomas' case study, above), do not live near their relatives. Many people do not have friends or neighbours that they can rely on. Socially isolated households which do not have access to supportive communities and the assistance they can provide – described by Daly and Kelly's (2015, p.113) participants as a 'lifeline' and their 'safety net' – are therefore at greater risk of experiencing food insecurity (Smith et al., 2017). In a longitudinal study with single mothers in Ohio, who were all initially 'welfare-reliant' and lived in areas with high rates of deprivation, the women who reported that they were food secure all had regular and consistent help from family and friends (London and Scott, 2005). This was in contrast to the women who remained food insecure over the three and a half years of the study; they had a 'notable absence of assistance from network members' (p.39).

What we see with the case studies above (and it is also true for other children in my study) is that the income provided by low-paid work or benefits is not sufficient on its own to ensure that all members of a household are able to eat an adequate and nutritious diet; families are relying on support networks to make up the shortfall in cash, food and other resources (Gazso et al., 2016). In the following section I explore one of the most commonly explored strategies to protect children from food insecurity – that of parents going without so their children can eat more.

5.3.2 Parental sacrifice

One of the first pieces of research that explored the spectrum of experiences that make up individual and household *food insecurity*, as opposed to *hunger*, recognised that one of the tactics used by parents to manage inadequate or erratic food supply is to go without or eat less themselves (Radimer et al., 1992). A mother in an earlier study (Graham, 1985, in Attree, 2005, p.235) explains this in her own words: if there's 'not really a lot for us to eat, I'll sort of give the kids it first and then see what's left, and we'll have what's left.' This practice ensures that children's food intake is not affected unless the financial situation is at a critical level.

The finding that parents, and mothers in particular[39] (Dobson et al., 1995; Walker et al., 1995; Dowler et al., 2001; McIntyre et al., 2003; Attree, 2005; Goode, 2012; Papan and Clow, 2015; Graham et al., 2018) will attempt to shield their children by moderating their own food intake (mothers eat last and less) so their children do not have to has been replicated in many studies since then (McIntyre et al., 2003; Connell et al., 2005; London and Scott, 2005; Attree, 2005; Main and Bradshaw, 2014; Daly and Kelly, 2015; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015a; Harvey, 2016; Knowles et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2019; Zamora-Sarabia et al., 2019). It is summed up by a mother in a Canadian study on the lived experience of household food insecurity: 'you always have a solution for yourself: to do without' (Hamelin et al., 2002, p.123).

In the eleven qualitative studies in Attree's (2005) systematic review on the strategies mothers use to manage their family's nutrition and health on a low income, these acts of 'maternal sacrifice' around food featured strongly. Although parents will go without many different items in order that their children's needs (real and perceived) are met, it is around 'food consumption … where hardship is most keenly felt.' (p.235)

My findings confirm the phenomenon of parental sacrifice. Some of the parents of my participants are forgoing meals, eating smaller portions or eating a more restricted diet so that their children can eat larger amounts or more nutritious food. The parents try to hide the fact that they are going without from their children (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of this), so the fact that a number of my interviewees were aware that it happens signifies that the practice is more widespread than the number of children describing it to me indicates.

As outlined in the case studies above, both Thomas and Katie, who by their reports lived in households where accessing adequate amounts of food was sometimes a struggle, were aware that their parents would skip meals or eat less. Other children in my study were well aware that their parents were doing this for them, too. Sophie had picked up on the fact that her dad had 'started worrying' and was rationing what he ate at that time, 'Because, if he eats a lot, we won't have a lot to eat.' Molly made a direct connection between her dad only having a banana for lunch and the household income being insufficient to cover all the food costs. She said that he was doing this 'because he's using the money for us, for me and my brother's lunches.' Daisy also knows that her parents occasionally had to skip tea[40], and that sometimes 'They don't even have breakfast on a morning.' Ava told me that her mum occasionally –'once every two months or something' – missed out on lunch.

[39] See DeVault (1991) for a discussion of the gendered nature of domestic foodwork.
[40] 'Tea' is the local word for the evening meal.

In another study with food insecure children in the UK, a girl of thirteen talked about how it made her feel when her mum went without in order that she and her brother could eat: 'Even if it's not that much food for me and my brother, it's enough that we've actually had something, whereas Mum hasn't, and it gets a bit to the point where we'll start feeling guilty' (Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018, p.189). My study shows that not only are parents sacrificing their own needs and eating less or not at all for the sake of their children, but that the children are aware of it. Katie told me: 'their main priority is us guys, because we're only kids'. This is a heavy weight of responsibility for the children; although they don't ask for it to happen, it is because of them that their mum or dad miss out on food and they are fully conscious of that fact. This is an important finding as it is a damaging impact of household food insecurity that is not captured in existing surveys, and is therefore not taken into account when policy responses are being generated.

As noted above, a number of studies have found that in cohabiting heterosexual parenting couples, mothers tend to carry more of the burden in terms of sacrificing their own food options and/or intake. My interview questions did not attempt to differentiate between the experiences of parents where children lived with both, and as such I was not able to identify a gender difference in my study; incidences of sacrifices made by both mums and dads were reported, both in dual parent and single parent (male and female) families.

One of the other key strategies used by parents when on a low income is to shop and cook carefully in order to be able to buy as much food as possible and to make it last as long as possible. These types of strategies are discussed in the following section.

5.3.3 Budgeting, buying carefully and bulk cooking

The lower your household income, the harder it is to do the work of providing food for your family (Beagan et al., 2018). This is not widely acknowledged, however. In Chapter 4, I presented a set of widely used narratives – what I call food poverty truths – that centre around the diet and food work of low-income families. These food poverty truths are that people on low incomes choose to eat junk food, are unable to cook, and are poor at budgeting. These narratives are not supported by evidence: back in 1987, the annual report of the National Food Survey Committee, undertaken by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, found that 'low-income families shop more efficiently in money and nutrient terms than higher-income families'. In her systematic review of qualitative studies that focus on diet and health in low-income homes, Attree (2005) presents the finding that mothers use a process of 'strategic adjustment' in order to manage food provision for their families. This involves

making choices and trade-offs around where and when to shop, what to buy, and how to cook. The various strategies outlined by Attree were also found in a large study of US parents who reported that their children were food insecure (Burke et al., 2017); participants described changes in the type and price of food purchased, and how it was prepared, i.e. using up leftovers. O'Connell et al. (2019) noted that, when they were able, parents in their study in England invested large amounts of time and energy in shopping for and cooking food.

My research disrupts existing food poverty truths by providing further evidence of the extensive and time-consuming tactics utilised by families managing on low incomes to stretch out the provisions that they have, to reduce the amount spent on food, or to obtain it with the limited resources that they have. These include what Kempson et al. (1994, in Attree, 2005, p.233) describe as 'minimizing expenditure by resourceful purchasing', i.e. shopping around and buying only what is necessary, only buying lower-priced or reduced-price foodstuffs, and cooking in bulk. Grace recounted the strategies that her mum used in order to save money on food, and explained that she bought little and often and that she cooked most of their food from scratch, in bulk: 'when she buys things, she doesn't buy much, and when she cooks, like, she cooks a big pan, so it stays with us like for three days or four.' Grace recognised that this is time-consuming: 'it takes ages for my mum to cook'. This challenges the food poverty truth that people on low incomes 'can't cook, won't cook, eat shit' (see Chapter 4). Cooking food that reflects their cultural background was clearly important to Grace's mum, but it is necessary to note that she was not able to work or look for work at that time (as she was in the process of claiming asylum), and Grace was her only child, and so she was able to devote time to cooking and shopping whilst Grace was at school.

The characterisation of people running out of money and food as a result of making poor financial decisions (food poverty truth 4 – You could eat better/more if you managed your money better) was challenged by my findings. As with the participants of Buck-McFadyen's study (2015), who described resourcefully 'juggling' all the different bills so that they could cover the cost of their basic needs, my participants' parents were clearly spending their money carefully. Many families shopped in budget supermarkets including Iceland and B&M. Charlie explained that 'we don't like Morrison's because the prices are really high.' His mum also travelled in order to obtain food from the Real Junk Food Project, which, like the stall and café in the school, offers surplus food from supermarkets on a pay-as-you-feel basis. Harry's mum would sometimes buy 'fruit that's expensive' or other higher cost items such as crab for him and his brother as a treat, on the basis that they would then have to save on other food. Millie explained that her parents thought carefully about the cost of food. She tells me, 'Normally if I

go with them to get food, they either say, “That's too much, we'll get cheaper.” Like snacks; we normally get cheaper stuff.’ These examples demonstrate skilful and competent money management and as such refute the negative constructions around people on low incomes managing money badly.

A number of the children were aware that in order to sustain adequate quantities of food when there was a reduced income, their parents would change their shopping habits. Erin, who is nine, did not express any anxiety about food or money, but understood that her mum was very careful with money: ‘She doesn’t spend that much. She only spends on clothes, food and toys that we need.’ When her mum was out of work, she bought ‘cheaper stuff’. Chloe told me that during a ‘short week’ (i.e. when they have less money), her mum ‘just buys what she can afford.’ The children were aware not only that these things were happening, but that their parents were having to do these things because otherwise there wouldn’t be enough food.

As illustrated earlier, using multiple strategies can help to mitigate food insecurity (see also Kempson et al., 2003; London and Scott, 2005; Heflin et al., 2011) but there are of course parents who through physical and/or mental ill health are unable to access support, or don’t have the time or the physical or emotional energy to employ the range of tactics needed. Earlier I noted that commonly-used surveys of household food insecurity do not take account of families’ use of support networks, or recognise the impact of parental sacrifice on their children. Similarly, they do not identify and recognise the time and stress burden of the work needed to provide an adequate and appropriate diet for the family. As a result, truly accurate insights into people’s experiences of food insecurity remains obscured.

Despite their best attempts, parents are not always able to protect their children from experiencing food insecurity. In the following section, I discuss the material impacts of food insecurity on my participants – that of changes in the amount and nutritional quality of the food they consume.

5.4 Material impacts on the children

As noted by O’Connell et al. (2019, p.37), ‘[h]aving enough to eat of adequate quantity and quality has long been a minimal expectation of what it means to live in a western country.’ I suggest that in the UK this is particularly the case as regards children – children going hungry is universally viewed as being unacceptable, as seen in the widespread public support for footballer Marcus Rashford’s campaign around child food poverty during the COVID-19

pandemic (Topping and Butler, 2020). In the following two sub-sections I provide evidence, however, that children in the UK, because of insufficient household income, are not getting enough to eat or are having to eat a less nutritious diet.

5.4.1 Eating less or not at all

As explained in Chapter 2, there are only two academic studies that have been conducted with children and young people in the UK exploring their experiences of food insecurity (Harvey, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2019). Both studies interviewed children from low/very low-income families and found that despite parental sacrifice and use of strategies, some children were going hungry. My research confirms that this is the case and, as the only study undertaken outside London and the south-east of England, adds to our understanding of the extent to which this is happening across the country.

In terms of providing a context for my finding that children are experiencing hunger, we can see from the wider literature on household food insecurity that there is a sequence of food-related outcomes when a family is managing with very little money. The first thing that happens is that parents experience concern and worry about the food supply. As the financial situation worsens, parents eat a less healthy or less varied diet. If necessary, they will reduce their intake, by eating less or missing meals (Main and Bradshaw, 2014). In this way parents will try to absorb the impact of insufficient household income as much as they can. It is usually only if the money is so limited that parents are having to make trade-offs between different household expenses (Bhattacharya et al., 2004; Knowles et al., 2016) that the standard of nutrition for the entire household is affected (Radimer et al., 1992). For example, if rent or energy bills are due and non-payment incurs fines or prosecution then these must be paid before any money is spent on food. It is at this point that the quality of the children's diet may be impacted, as parents essentially run out of money despite making significant sacrifices themselves (Nord and Hopwood, 2007). If the financial situation is critical, i.e. there is simply not enough money to buy sufficient food, only then do the children see a change to their eating patterns in that they are provided with less food (Radimer et al., 1992; Graham (1985), in Attree, 2005; Fram and Frongillo, 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019).

Earlier in this chapter I said that the children with whom I spoke were, for the most part, not going hungry. It is true that as a result of the tactics utilised by their parents the majority of my participants were provided with sufficient amounts of food to ensure that they did not experience hunger other than that which is 'normal', i.e. a rumbling stomach that might arise whilst waiting for dinner to be made, or hunger after a meal because the child didn't eat very

much because they didn't like it. In these cases, there was an understanding that food will be available imminently, or it was a choice to eat less. Despite the different strategies utilised by the adults, however, the inadequacy of income meant that there were children whose parents were not able to supply enough food: Olivia, Jack, Katie, Amy, Thomas and Daisy all said there had been occasions when they had not been able to have enough to eat and they had been impacted physically. Katie told me that she often felt tired because she got insufficient food. Her response was to 'just sleep all the hunger off. And then the next morning I won't really be hungry.' Olivia said that she felt hungry and tired due to lack of food 'many times'. Daisy described the feeling of hunger as 'my belly was like brrr every 5 seconds.' Jack says that when he went to bed after not eating enough he had pain in his tummy, 'like something's cutting me open.'

There were some children who said that they were hungry all the time but it was clear from their descriptions of their household set-up that they were hungry in a 'normal' way, i.e. because they didn't eat their tea as it was something they don't like, or because it can be quite a long time from breakfast until lunch. For example, Sophie told me she was hungry the day before but it was because her mum had made fish for tea and she doesn't like fish so she only ate a bit of it.

Other children didn't miss meals, but they reported that they ate less when money is tight. Chloe's parents relied wholly on benefits for their income. Her dad only got his payments fortnightly: 'my dad gets paid one Wednesday and then next week he doesn't. So it's miss a week for him, so that's why sometimes my mum's got a bit less on Monday.' On these weeks, although 'it doesn't run out completely', they 'don't get to eat as much food'.

The fact that some of the children reported not getting sufficient to eat -- however rarely -- is very worrying. The negative effects of going without food, even on just one occasion, can be physical, psychological, and long-lasting (Kleinman et al., 1998; Murphy et al., 1998; Alaimo et al., 2001; Weinreb et al., 2002; Kirkpatrick et al., 2010; Pickett et al., 2015). In terms of numbers, my participants made up a quarter of all the children in Years 5 and 6 at the school; they were self-selecting and so their experiences of food insecurity cannot be claimed to be representative. It is possible that in fact the more vulnerable children did not want to speak to me; the only child to put their hand up when I asked who knew what foodbanks were (and said his mum had been to one) in my class recruitment talks did not choose to take part in an interview. It could be, therefore, that the proportion of children (6 out of 33) in the full cohort (i.e. all the pupils in Years 5 and 6) experiencing hunger was higher than the proportion I saw within my sample.

Many children are protected from the experience of hunger, but they may be impacted in that their parents can't afford to provide them with a diet that is as healthy as they would like. This element of household food insecurity -- a reduction in the quality of what the children eat -- is discussed next.

5.4.2 A less nutritious diet

It has been found that low-income households may struggle to eat a diet consisting of the amount and range of foodstuffs recommended for optimum health (Caraher, Dixon, Lang, et al., 1998; Tingay et al., 2003; Neill et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2007; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015b). The evidence around the quality of the diet consumed by *children* within a food insecure household, though, is less clear. According to a UK study (Pilgrim et al., 2012, p.5) using data from the Southampton Women's Survey, a child experiencing food insecurity eats a 'notably poorer' diet; one that is higher in calories and lower in nutrients. Other studies have also made a connection between children's and adolescents' food security status and diet quality (Widome et al., 2009; Fram, Ritchie, et al., 2015; Harvey, 2016; Landry et al., 2019a). However, as noted briefly in Chapter 2, a systematic review found that the relationship between food insecurity and poor diet had been indicated for adults in a number of studies (in 50 of 170 studies) but there was 'substantial evidence' that the only difference for children and their food secure counterparts was a lower fruit intake (Hanson and Connor, 2014). Nelson et al. (2007) also suggested that children in food insecure households are possibly being shielded by parents as they found that their diet was no less healthy than that of food secure children (see also Bhattacharya et al., 2004). Indeed, a longitudinal study of 5,670 children in the US found that children in food insecure households ate more portions of fruit and vegetables per week than children in food secure households (Howard, 2013). It is plausible that this might happen in some cases because, as we have seen above, parents will do what they can to ensure continuity in their children's diet.

Counter to the finding from Hanson and Connor's (2014) systematic review referred to above, my study provides evidence that low-income, financially insecure families may not be able to eat a diet that is as nutritious or balanced as they would wish. For example, my participants report that their parents buy cheaper groceries in order to ensure adequate quantities of food, and that this means purchasing products which are low-cost and belly-filling over those which are healthier but more expensive. Ruby told me that she would have liked to eat more healthy food; 'mostly fruit … because it will get you stronger.' She explained that 'we don't have the money because we moved.' (They had moved house earlier that year.) Jack said he'd like to

eat ‘more healthy stuff’ for tea. This was important to him because he’s ‘getting a bit chubby.’ He was very knowledgeable about food, explaining to me that, ‘I’ve heard you don’t need too much protein’, and was conscious that his diet was limited because of the ‘cost’. When I ask him what changes he would make if he were Prime Minister, he told me that he would make healthy food free, ‘so that people can actually get vegetables, fruit, all the stuff’ (for more of Jack’s policy ideas, see Chapter 8).

Amy also mentioned her weight and related it to not being able to afford healthy foodstuffs: ‘I couldn’t afford it [fruit and vegetables], because it was too much money’. She explained that it was because they are reliant on benefits:

> *‘Yeah, because [my dad] doesn't get a lot of money because obviously he doesn't work. We don’t get to buy a lot of vegetables or fruit. That’s why I'm very fat.’*

As well as not being able to eat as nutritious a diet as they would like, some of the children reported that the range of products that they could eat was restricted. Lily told me that if they had lots more money, her mum would ‘start getting all healthy stuff again’, and that she’d ‘try stuff, like I’d try kiwi [fruit]’. Studies have found that some families also report repeatedly eating the same kind of food when money is tight (Roker, 1998; Dowler et al., 2001; Daly and Kelly, 2015), and my research confirms this. For example, in Ruby’s house they ate lots of ‘breakfast’ [cereal] for dinner when there was not any other food in. When the food ran out and there was no money to buy more, Chloe’s family relied on ‘loads of toast’, and as noted above in the case study on Amy, she and her dad tended to eat mostly pasta ‘if we’ve got no actual food in’.

My findings are consistent with many studies done on how families cope with balancing household budgets on a low income (Dobson et al., 1995; Kempson et al., 2003; London and Scott, 2005; Heflin et al., 2011; Pfeiffer et al., 2015; Burke et al., 2017; O’Connell et al., 2019). Healthy foods cost more than less healthy foods (Drewnowski and Specter, 2004; see also Bowyer et al., 2009; Lloyd et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2014; Kern et al., 2017), and this makes the provision of a nutritious diet an economic decision (see also Griffith et al., 2013; Drewnowski and Eichelsdoerfer, 2010, p.728, in Papan and Clow, 2015; Nielsen et al., 2015). My research provides evidence that younger children are fully cognisant that their family’s diet is restricted by their financial situation. They expressed a desire to eat more nutritious food, particularly more fruit, but understood that it is more expensive, and that they couldn’t afford it.

In the final section of this chapter I explore the different ways in which children actively engage with their family's experience of food insecurity.

5.5 'I normally eat a little bit of my dinner and then give some to her as well' (Thomas): Children take an active part in managing the household's food insecurity

In this section, I look at children's agentic responses to their family's experience of food insecurity. My research confirms findings from previous studies that children and young people take responsibility for the food security of the family by initiating strategies of their own (Connell et al., 2005; Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Waxman et al., 2015; Ghattas et al., 2018; Knight, O'Connell, et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019). My participants explained this as being about wanting to alleviate the pressure on their parents, but it is also a way of resisting being 'passive victims of their poverty' (Ridge, 2002, p.141). This phenomenon of children actively 'mediat[ing], negotiat[ing] and seek[ing] to control the experience of deprivation' (Ridge, 2009, p.91) has also been found in research conducted not specifically on food insecurity but looking more widely at children's experiences of living in economically vulnerable families (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005; Redmond, 2009).

In this section of the chapter I will show how, in order to support their parents and to try and relieve and share some of their burden, children chose to eat less food and offered their pocket money to buy groceries. I also discuss the secretive behaviour that was described by two of my participants. Firstly, I respond to Fram et al.*'s* suggestion that one of the ways in which children share the responsibility for household food insecurity is by participating with adult strategies (see their conceptualisation of child food insecurity, 2011).

5.5.1 Going along with their parents' strategies

In Chapter 2 I presented the two principal conceptualisations of child food insecurity, as proposed by Connell et al. in 2005 and Fram et al. in 2011. These two papers have provided a reference point for most academic research on child food insecurity since their publication. They differ in that Connell et al. (2005) suggest that children's experiences of food insecurity follow the same themes as those of adults (quality, quantity, social and psychological, as proposed by Radimer et al. (1992)), and that children's emotional responses 'mirror' those of their parents. Fram et al. (2011, p.1117), on the other hand, suggest that 'child food insecurity differs from adult food insecurity in both its content and context.' As discussed in Chapter 2, Fram et al. (2011) conceptualise children's experiences of household food insecurity as being made up of two main components: 1) awareness of food insecurity and 2) taking responsibility

for managing food resources. They suggest that one of the ways in which children can take responsibility is by participating with the strategies used by their parents for making their limited resources last.

It would appear that my participants are 'going along with' (Fram et al., 2011, p.1116) the strategies used by to mitigate the household's food insecurity in line with the conceptualisation devised by Fram et al. For example, two of the children described how they made use of the free breakfasts at school: Daisy explained that when there wasn't any milk in the house and she couldn't have cereal she ate the free toast at school; Chloe told me that they didn't ever have to go without 'because at the end of the week, on Monday, [if] we didn't get any cereal [for breakfast], we'd get toast at school anyway.' One of the strategies Ava related is how if she was hungry when she was out with her mum and asked for a snack, she went along with what her mum said:

> *... and she's like well if I haven't got enough money then you can't get anything. But if it's only like cheap and if it's like a quid, then you can get it. But I normally get one of those snack pot fruit things for a quid.*

When the gas and electric ran out in Ruby's house, they just ate breakfast cereal for their dinner. (Relying on cereal when there is no other food available was also reported by Knight et al. (2018)) The children gave no indication of resisting or refusing to participate in these ways of coping with shortages of food.

However, I would argue that the behaviours described in the previous paragraph cannot be described as 'taking responsibility for managing food resources'. There is less opportunity for active choice for children in primary school (who generally do not buy their own food other than snacks) – nine to eleven year-olds for the most part don't have control of the family's diet -- and therefore this behaviour does not constitute an example of the children *taking responsibility* because they are not able to choose whether they do it or not.

For older children who have more agency and independence, going along with adults' strategies represents more of an active choice, and this fits into the 'taking responsibility' component. When we are trying to understand what food insecurity means for children it is important to recognise explicitly that younger and older children may have appreciably different experiences; 'children' cannot be treated as a homogenous group[41]. This is particularly important in terms of generating appropriate policy responses. Younger children

[41] This is reinforced by the finding, from a longitudinal study of over nine thousand children and young people, that there is a relationship between being older and increased odds of experiencing hunger (Kirkpatrick et al., 2010).

do, of course, still have agency, and in the section below I present one of the ways in which they utilise it.

5.5.2 'I try to eat a little bit of food so we can save money' (Amelia): Taking an active role in managing the household's food situation

Children experiencing economic hardship want to reciprocate the care and protection offered them by their parents (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005; Bernal et al., 2012; Zamora-Sarabia et al., 2019). As discussed in detail in Chapter 6, children know how stressful it is to manage on a low income and they are aware of the work that the adults need to undertake in order to ensure that adequate and appropriate food is provided for the family. A small number of qualitative studies done with children and their experiences of food insecurity have found that one of the ways that they actively try to reduce their parents' load in relation to having to provide food for the family is by eating less (Fram et al., 2011; Ghattas et al., 2018; O'Connell, 2018).

My study confirms that younger children in the UK are also engaging in this behaviour: my participants described eating less overall so that the food available in the house didn't run out as quickly, and also eating less or not at all during specific times when there wasn't sufficient food to go around, so that their parents and siblings could eat more. They mostly did this without the knowledge of their parents. Amelia told me, 'I try to eat [only] a little bit of food so that we can save money', not because her parents asked her to, but 'I just decided to'. She knew that money was scarce, and tried to help by eating less. Alfie and Jack both said that that they sometimes ate a bit less to make the food in the house last longer. Molly did the same. She told me: 'Like if I look in the fridge and there's not much left, I try and say, oh Mum I'll only have a little bit so we can save it for later'. In order to help his mum out Thomas told me, 'I normally eat a little bit of my dinner and then give some to her as well.'

Sophie's mum previously used to go shopping twice a week. At the time that Sophie and I spoke, her mum was now only going once a week and it was clear from the context that this was about spending less, rather than disliking or having less time to go shopping. Sophie was aware of this and her way of playing her part was to not eat as much food.

> *Sophie: Well, what I do is... Well, I eat a bit, then my mum just puts it in a plastic container.*
>
> *AC: And why do you only eat a bit?*

Sophie: Because I don't want all the food to run out. My mum said she is only going to go shopping once a week.

AC: Ok. So, do you, would you eat more if she went shopping twice a week?

Sophie: Yeah.

In order to deal with the financial situation that they were in and support their parents, the children were shouldering some of the responsibility for ensuring adequate provision of food for the family. The assumption by children of roles that are not usual for their age is sometimes called 'adultification', and is in response to what Burton calls 'precocious knowledge' (2007, p.336). This is where children in financially vulnerable families are exposed to situations and gain knowledge earlier than their more advantaged peers. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, I found that my participants had detailed knowledge of the household budget and the costs of food and other items. This raises the question of whether all children of this age group (nine to eleven years) would be this knowledgeable. They were also very aware of how stressful it was for their parents to manage with few resources. In response to acquiring precocious knowledge, Burton (2007, p.337) suggests that children copy their parents' behaviour or 'worry about what they have witnessed as if they have the resources and skills to solve the problems'. My participants ate less to relieve pressure on their families and thus were using resources that they *did* have - a choice around how much food to eat – to help solve the problem.

Katie's explanation of why she would often eat less so that her siblings could have more provides an example of a child 'assuming adult-like traits and responsibilities' (Schmitz and Tyler, 2016, p.2): 'Like normally I miss dinner or tea or breakfast so those guys can have it.' She believed she should do this because 'I'm the oldest and I should really help those guys'. She didn't tell her mum what she was doing, but just said, when her mum was cooking: '"I don't really want anything" – for them guys to have it'. In the actions she took – going without food so that her younger siblings could eat more, but doing this without her mum's knowledge – Katie was assuming parental responsibilities, which in a household struggling to cover the costs of basic necessities is a heavy weight to bear. Ava described a situation when her mum's friend's children were there for tea, and in which she stepped into the role of being the one to share her food when there wasn't much to go round. She explained that she gave some of her portion to her little brother because she had the most food, even though she got the most because she is bigger and therefore needs the most:

> *My little brother, the middle one, he didn't get much, because there wasn't enough to spread around and we had Ellie and her little sister over for tea that night, and because I had loads, because I'm the one eats most, so I gave some to him.*

This finding of a presumed hierarchy of food needs – from the youngest to the oldest and then the parents – echoes what has been found in other studies, including one in Venezuela (Bernal et al., 2012). Echoing the situation as described by my participants, and suggesting a universality of experience within families with inadequate access to food, an eleven-year-old Venezuelan girl explains that:

> *When there is not enough food, my little brother eats first… if there is food left, I eat, and my parents eat last.*

Waxman et al. (2015, p.3) describe this 'downward shift in the dynamics of family responsibility' as having a detrimental effect on children in that it may mean that they miss out on usual experiences for their age group. Although stepping into adult roles may provide the child with useful skills and competencies (Burton, 2007), and some children may feel proud of themselves (Goode et al., 1998 in Bennett, 2008), feeling responsible for ensuring that your younger family members (of which there are five in Katie's case) are adequately nourished could be a heavy burden for a child and could add to the stress and worry that living in poverty brings (Hooper et al., 2007; Schmitz and Tyler, 2016; Fram and Frongillo, 2018).

Connell et al. (2005) situate their conceptualisation of children's experiences of household food insecurity within an understanding of children modelling and imitating the behaviour of their parents. In reference to examples of elder children going without or looking after the food needs of younger siblings, Connell et al. (2005, p.1688) explain it as an indication that 'as children age, they begin to model their parents' attempts to shield younger children from hunger'. Burton (2007) also suggests that children acquiring precocious knowledge may model adult behaviour. This may be part of what is going on as regards the children's choices to eat less but explaining the actions taken by my participants as simply one of copying what their parents do would be to ignore their agency and their decision to play an active role in managing (and perhaps resisting) their socio-economic situation.

In the following section I describe another way in which children attempt to ease the burden on their parents of food provisioning on a low income – that of offering any money that they have.

5.5.3 Sharing their money with parents

We know from studies with children and young people who are living in economic hardship that they will often try and help out their parents by giving them money, either their pocket money, or, in the case of older children or in contexts where children can take up paid work, wages from a job (Roker, 1998; Van der Hoek, 2005; Bernal et al., 2012; Ridge, 2017; Cairns, 2018; Ghattas et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019). I also found that this was the case.

Unlike in Venezuela, where younger children are able to find a casual job and use their wages as a way of mitigating the household's food insecurity (Bernal et al., 2012), the children in my study (aged nine to eleven years) could not bring money in to the house via paid work. However, a number of them gave back their pocket money to their parents in order that groceries could be bought for the whole family. Katie explained: 'I don't mind [doing this], because like she's my mum, and I know how much, how tight it is on money.' This appeared to be part of her role that she took on as the eldest child; when I asked her if her parents discussed the household budget with her, she told me, 'Yeah, sometimes. Because I'm the oldest.' She was eleven. This fits with Burton's (2007) finding that it is older siblings who take on an adultified role.

Daisy entered into a kind of negotiation with her mum, in order to encourage her to take her proffered pocket money. It sounded as if her mum was reluctant, but Daisy persuaded her by saying that she could accept it from Daisy or take it from Daisy's grandma.

> *AC: So do you do anything else when the food's run out and there isn't any money to buy any more?*
>
> *Daisy nods*
>
> *AC: What do you do?*
>
> *Daisy: I give them my pocket money. If I have £40.*
>
> *AC: £40!*
>
> *Daisy: I'll say, Mum I've been saving up this much, I think you should have it.*
>
> *…*
>
> *AC: What does your mum say when you offer to give her your pocket money?*

> *Daisy: I say "Mum, if you would rather take money off my nanna", because my nanna gives money as well. She said, "well if you want, I can just take your money and use it to buy some things, some ingredients for pizzas, and for stuff".*

If Ava had pocket money left, and there wasn't anything in the house to eat that night, she asked her mum if she could help out:

> *And if I still have a tenner or something and we don't have anything in for tea, I ask my mum "Can I run to the shop to get us some beans or anything for tea?" and she says "yeah, go for it".*

Ava was couching it in a way that made light of or softened in some way the fact that a ten year old was having to spend her pocket money on feeding the family. She was perhaps sensitive to the feelings that her mum might have had about not being able to afford to feed the family.

These three girls exhibited thoughtful and sophisticated behaviour in the way that they offered their own money to their parents to buy food. This is another example of adultified behaviour, that was perhaps in response to the precocious knowledge that they had about their families' financial situation. It is interesting that it was girls who told me that they helped their parents out financially; in a review of what they call family labour in economically vulnerable households, Dodson and Dickert (2004, p.318) explain that this 'critical source of support' is mostly provided by girls.

Fram et al. (2011, p.1118) suggest that children's experiences of food insecurity are about food, rather than finances:

> *[T]heir experiences of food insecurity flow not from the economic context of family life but from the relational and resource contexts that they actually encounter day to day: what they get to eat and how they interact with their parents, relatives, neighbors* [*sic*] *teachers and friends.*

I would agree that these constituents of child food insecurity are very important, but I would also argue that the economic context is in fact the crucial component. The fact that the children offered their own money to their parents to buy food for the household demonstrates their appreciation of the fact that the family's situation was a result of a lack of money.

In this final section I explore another type of behaviour exhibited by some of my participants – that of hiding food and night-time eating.

5.5.4 Secretive behaviour

Three of the children with whom I spoke described secretive behaviour around food. Clearly, this is not a large proportion of my sample, but I thought it worthy of note, because Tester et al. (2016), in a study of children with obesity, witnessed examples of food hiding and night-time eating amongst those participants who lived in food insecure households but not those living in food secure households. Tester et al. suggested that these 'disordered' eating behaviours might be a 'manifestation of the additional pressure of worry about food' (2016, p.551). I suggest that this is the case for my participants.

Ruby told me that she 'always sneak[s] downstairs and get[s] some food'. She communicated this behaviour at first in a light-hearted manner, presenting it as something that was fun: 'I have a midnight feast every day.' However, it was hardly exciting fare - she only ate toast or cereal. She then revealed that she did it because she's 'always hungry'. At the end of this part of our conversation I asked why Ruby didn't just ask for the food:

> *AC: Do you ever ask for more food? No? Why not?*
>
> *Ruby: I sneak it. I'm sneaky. I'm a sly fox.*
>
> *AC: Are you a sly fox? What do you think your mum would say if you asked for more food though? Do you think she'd give you it or not?*
>
> *Ruby: She'd give me it.*

Ruby did not ask for food from her mother, even though she knew she would give it to her. Rather than thinking about her own needs, it is possible that she accessed food in this way in an attempt to protect her mother. It is of note that she only did it after her mum had gone to bed, 'when she's in a deep sleep'. I and others have found that children from economically vulnerable homes modify their demands because they don't want to put added pressure on their parents (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005; Redmond, 2009), and I would posit that that is what happened here; by taking food secretly, Ruby was not adding to her mother's load. As well as just being considerate, this again could be seen as an element of adultification – in trying to protect her mother, Ruby was taking on the role of the parent.

Tester et al. (2016) refer to night-time eating and food hiding, and Ruby does both. She told me that she didn't get hungry because 'There'll always be something, because I always hide food in my bedroom.' It was not clear where she got this food from, but this does seem to fit in with Tester et al.'s (2016, p.551) suggestion that these behaviours represent an 'internalisation of the lived experience of household food insecurity.' Ruby was perhaps unconsciously

stockpiling food to protect herself in case of an occasion in which their food ran out completely.

It is interesting that in one of the few other studies done directly with children in the UK, one of the participants, aged ten, describes covert behaviour around food, using the same word as Ruby: *sneak* (Harvey, 2016, p.239). The child in question explains that she sneaks crisps because her mum wouldn't give her them otherwise; 'sometimes we ask for too much stuff 'cos we're hungry'. This is not night-time eating or food-hiding as such, but it could also be an example of not wanting to nag for food and thus put pressure on her mum.

Sophie also engaged in secretive behaviour. She told me she had had 'late night food' the day before; she had 'sneaked downstairs and had an apple.' She also waited until late at night, and then, 'when everyone's asleep I go sneak downstairs. Really quietly. Because I have a bunk bed, and if I go down steps loudly, my brother will just hear me'. It is interesting that she used the word sneak twice, and that she waited not only until her parents but also her brother were asleep. It is clear that she had done this on multiple occasions as she told me that sometimes she didn't eat any breakfast because she wasn't 'hungry because I have a late night snack.' Although Sophie got enough to eat, she displayed a level of anxiety about food, telling me that she worried about it running out. She told me that there was a time when she was young when her mum was on her own and there wasn't enough money for food. At the time we spoke, the family was having to be careful about the money they spent on food; she had noticed that her stepdad was eating less lunch because 'if he eats a lot, we won't have a lot to eat'. I suggest that Sophie's covert night-time eating was related to her feelings of insecurity and, as suggested by Tester et al. (2016), she had internalised this and was carrying a sense of unsafety from difficult experiences in childhood when they struggled to have enough money for food.

Ava described how her brothers engaged in night-time eating: 'Because normally we wake up in the middle of the night, that's what my brothers do, and they just go downstairs. Because my mum's asleep, they just grab anything and bring it up to my room, and then they go back into their room and it looks like I've done it!' Their behaviour is clearly not that sneaky – they woke up their sister and left evidence of their misdemeanours, and it is possible that the boys were just having a cheeky midnight feast. On the other hand, it is perhaps significant because it seems like this had happened on a number of occasions, and it could be another example of a response to a feeling of insecurity in relation to the family's food or financial situation.

5.6 Conclusion

In order to provide context, and in recognition that when we discuss the phenomenon of child food insecurity we are talking about real people's lived experiences, this chapter opened with four short case studies of children from households experiencing various levels of food insecurity. I then showed that parents employ wide-ranging strategies to try and ensure that their children's diet is not affected by their low household income. These include relying on support networks, spending time shopping, budgeting and cooking, and going without food themselves. These are important findings as the extensive work that parents must do to mitigate living in poverty is not currently recognised in the way household food insecurity is understood, defined or measured. The UK government defines a household experiencing 'marginal food security' (six per cent of households in the UK in 2019/20) as having 'problems at times, or anxiety about, accessing adequate food but the quality, variety and quantity of their food intake [is] not substantially reduced' and classifies this as being food secure (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021b, section 10). The time, effort and stress that is involved in maintaining the quality, variety and quantity of food intake is not taken into account in this formulation. This is a problem because it does not recognise that the families are in a very precarious situation; if they are not able to use their normal strategies, for example if they rely on a family member to support them with money and food and this person for whatever reason can no longer do so, they may not be able to afford to eat properly or at all. It also does not acknowledge the mental load involved and potential impact on mental health. My research indicates that people in this situation are not food secure, but are in fact in a very insecure position.

Despite their parents' attempts, some children do go hungry on occasion and the quality of their diet is reduced. Children are aware that they are not eating as healthily as they should be and would like to be. The finding that there are families in the UK who are experiencing poverty to the extent that children's diets are being negatively impacted is gravely concerning.

Despite their young age (nine to eleven years), the children I spoke with chose to play a part in mitigating the family's experiences of food insecurity. They did this because they were aware of the household situation and worried about and wanted to support their parents and younger siblings. By taking an active role they were asserting their agency in the face of their socio-economically disadvantaged position -- by choosing to eat less and by offering their pocket money to help pay for food, and in some cases adopting secretive eating behaviours, they were actively taking some control of their situation.

There is an increasing acknowledgement that experiences relating to poverty comprise much more than material deprivation, and that having to get by with very little money can have lasting damaging social and emotional impacts (Chase and Walker, 2012; Jo, 2013; Walker et al., 2013). In this chapter I have shown that children can be impacted by household food insecurity, even when their diets are unaffected. In terms of undertaking research, if we do not identify and understand the psychosocial consequences of having to cope with extremely restricted resources not only will we not be able to understand people's lived experiences in any meaningful way but we will not be able to recognise, and therefore steer policy-makers in the right direction to act upon, the determinants of poverty (Jo, 2013). In line with this thinking, in the following two chapters I will explore the impact of food insecurity on children's psycho-emotional and social health. In Chapter 6, I discuss how the children's awareness of the economic vulnerability or precarity of their family leads to feelings of worry and anxiety. In Chapter 7, I discuss children's encounters with the particularly harmful experiences of stigma and shame within the context of food insecurity.

6. Precarity as a way of understanding children's experiences of food insecurity

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I describe the material impacts on children of living in a household that is experiencing food insecurity, that is, issues relating to the quantity and quality of food available to the child. In this chapter I focus on one of the psychosocial dimensions of children's experiences of food insecurity. I will be exploring the impact of food insecurity on children's emotional and mental health of living in families that are financially insecure and for whom obtaining adequate and appropriate food is an issue (Fram and Frongillo, 2018). I present my understanding of children's experiences using the concept of precarity.

I begin in Section 6.2 by introducing precarity conceptually and then in Section 6.3 explore some of the key literature on the relationship between child food insecurity and psychological and behavioural issues. In Section 6.4 I describe my experience in the school in which I undertook my fieldwork and explain how this influenced my analysis, and then show why I think that precarity is an appropriate framework for understanding children's experiences of food insecurity. In Section 6.5 I offer evidence from my research of how children are acutely aware of their family's finances; how they have insight into how stressful is for their parents managing on a low income; how this leads to anxiety and worry on the part of the children; and how they worry about food and money. Finally, I discuss the impact that stress and anxiety can have on children.

6.2 The concept of precarity

Precarity is a contested concept; it is interpreted, understood, and used in a number of ways (Waite, 2009; see also Motakef, 2019). Neilson and Rossiter (2008, p.63) write that precarity cannot be 'grounded' or 'contained', and, certainly, the literature provides a rich array of diverse understandings of it. In this section I will discuss three different characterisations of precarity: (i) as an existential, universally experienced feeling of vulnerability; (ii) as a politically and structurally induced lived experience, often seen as being underpinned by and related to a globalised and contingent labour market; and (iii) as seen increasingly in more recent years, an inter-twining of the two.

Firstly, precarity can be used to describe a 'generalized societal malaise' (Lewis et al., 2014, p.592), that is produced by an existential sense of what Butler depicts as 'unbearable vulnerability' (2004, xi). This ontological condition is the outcome of the 'uncertainty and

contingency [that] are at the heart of the human condition' (Barbier 2002, in Waite, 2009, p.415), and all humans are subject to it simply by virtue of being living beings (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2012; Millar, 2017). To distinguish it from other forms of precarity, this condition is often referred to as 'precariousness' (Lorey, 2011; Worth, 2016; see Butler, 2010 in Petrova, 2018; Harris et al., 2019). Jornonen and Rose (2020, p.3) argue that precariousness should be recognised as distinct from precarity, in that it is not related to or a result of political relations but is the outcome of 'the utter fragility' of life. Within the concept of precariousness however, is an acknowledgement that it is not equally distributed throughout society; it is 'variably distributed or allocated, accidentally or purposefully' (Butler, 2004; Han, 2018; see also Philo et al., 2019, p.151).

The second and arguably most common conceptualisation of precarity is that of a 'social, political and structurally produced condition of long-term unpredictability, marginality and confusion' (Muñoz, 2018, p.412). The cause of this condition has often been attributed to a globalised and contingent post-Fordist labour market (among others, Standing, 2011; Theodore and Peck, 2013; Standing, 2014; Lewis et al., 2015; Waite, 2009; Schierup et al., 2015), in which work has become increasingly unstable and casualised (Lewis et al., 2014), involving, for example, zero hours and temporary contracts and 'reluctant part-time work and self-employment' (Morris, 2016, p.106). Standing (2011) extended this understanding to define those engaged in insecure work as a new and emerging class -- the 'Precariat'-- a term that has entered the public lexicon but has also been widely critiqued (see for example Millar, 2017, p.3). The term precariat is also used in discussions of precarity to describe more generally those members of society who are experiencing uncertainty and insecurity (for example Waite, 2009; Arnold and Bongiovi, 2012; Banki, 2013; Frase, 2013; Greer, 2016).

Precarity as a novel experience of working has been challenged, however: Choonara (2020) suggests that precarious labour conditions have been the norm throughout history, and that to speak of a new or renewed experience of precarity is 'laughable' (p.428) as it ignores the conditions of the majority of workers in the Global South who never got to experience Fordism or social security. A (Western) feminist critique of the concept of precarity is that women have always worked and lived in insecure situations, and it is only when men began to be impacted that flexible, precarious, unstable work become an issue (Fantone, 2007). The concept of precarity as a lived experience has been used to describe a range of other socio-spatial experiences beyond neoliberal employment conditions such as, amongst others, welfare reform (Greer, 2016), housing (Muñoz, 2018; Harris et al., 2019; Joronen and Griffiths, 2019);

old age (Craciun and Flick, 2014; Grenier et al., 2017) fuel poverty (Petrova, 2018), and migrant experiences (Lewis et al., 2014; Castles, 2015).

The third and final characterisation of precarity is of it as encompassing both notions, i.e. as an 'intrinsic sense of instability and insecurity' *produced by* a socio-economic condition (Portacolone, 2013 p. 166). This psychological affect is different to that of precariousness as discussed above in that it is seen as arising directly from the 'politically induced' condition (Petrova, 2018, p.16; see also Neilson and Rossiter, 2005) of living without financial security or protection (Schierup et al., 2015). Virno (2004, in Joronen and Rose, 2020, p.1) vividly describes this experience as 'the specific dreads and fears of material insecurity [that] have become constantly experienced … against a pervasive backdrop of undefinable anguish of capitalist vulnerability'. It is this understanding of precarity, which makes the link between the precarity of people's financial situation and their subjective, affective experience of precariousness (Millar, 2017), that I think provides a way to better comprehend children's lived experiences of food insecurity.

As a final point, the concept of precarity often contains within in it an element of challenge and resistance. Philo et al. (2019) recognise this feature, describing 'precarious urbanisms' (Harris et al. 2016, in Philo et al., 2019, p.150) i.e. experiences relating to contemporary life in cities of the Global North, as being 'lived, felt and *maybe contested*' (Philo et al., 2019, p.150; my emphasis). Those living with the relentless menace of demolition orders on their homes in Palestine are not 'defined by debilitating embodiments alone' but also carry out 'practices of resisting' (Joronen and Griffiths, 2019, p.571). In the previous chapter I described how the children took an active part in the work that the family had to undertake to mitigate and manage on a low income. Precarity is therefore an appropriate concept when trying to understand the children's life worlds because, unlike for instance *insecurity*, it recognises their resistance to being 'passive victims' (Ridge, 2002, p.141) of their socio-economic situation.

6.3 What is known about food insecurity and its impact on children's psychological and emotional health?

I began writing this chapter with a focus on the non-material, psychological impacts of food insecurity upon children. As explained in more detail below, my analysis evolved to the point of using the concept of precarity because I was attempting to accurately describe and communicate what I felt was a shared experience for many of my participants despite their different situations, and it fitted with what the children were expressing. The key issue here is that children are negatively affected psychologically by living in a household in which the

income is such that strategies have to be used to maintain or obtain sufficient appropriate food – this is the case whether their diet is impacted or not. In this section, I offer a short review of literature that provides evidence from other studies of harmful psychosocial impacts of household food insecurity on children.

The literature clearly indicates the negative impact on children's emotional and mental health of the experience of food insecurity. Kimbro and Denney (2015, p.1954) describe the experience of becoming food insecure as a 'stressful and frightening experience that can change the way children engage with the world'. Numerous quantitative studies, many of them undertaken in the US, have shown a link between children living in a household wherein food is not always easily available and both externalising problems (those associated with negative behaviours) and internalising problems (such as anxiety and depression) (Kleinman et al., 1998; Alaimo et al., 2001; Weinreb et al., 2002; Slack and Yoo, 2004; Belsky et al., 2010; Melchior et al., 2012; Nalty et al., 2013a; Kimbro and Denney, 2015; Pickett et al., 2015; Burke et al., 2016). Findings include: an increased likelihood (more than food secure children) of seeing a psychologist (Alaimo et al., 2001); children who are experiencing hunger being reported by parents to be twice as likely to have anxiety (Weinreb et al., 2002); and being seven to twelve times more likely to have behavioural problems (Kleinman et al., 1998). Controlling for the financial status of the household and for parenting techniques, food insecurity is correlated with 'lasting emotional distress' (Belsky et al., 2010, p.813) – this indicates the particularly affective nature of issues concerning food. A study by Burke et al.(2016) found that the probability of a child suffering from a 'mental disorder'[42] increases the more food insecure they are. In a survey conducted with over eight thousand Irish school children aged ten to seventeen (Molcho et al., 2007, p.367), boys and girls reporting food insecurity were more likely to feel low, nervous, and afraid than their fellow students who didn't describe themselves as experiencing food insecurity. In the same study, 20.8 per cent of boys reporting food insecurity had low life satisfaction, versus 10.2 per cent of boys who didn't report food insecurity. Levels were higher among girls: 28.8 per cent versus fifteen per cent (Molcho et al., 2007, pp.367, Table 3).

The qualitative research that has been done both with parents and children provides us with a more nuanced insight into children's emotional experiences of food insecurity beyond these statistics. In one of the first studies in which children were interviewed about other children's

[42] Burke et al. (2016, p.2020) use the US Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau definition of mental disorders as 'serious deviations from expected cognitive, social, and emotional development'.

experiences of hardship around food (Connell et al., 2005, p.1687), the researchers expressed their surprise at the 'magnitude' of emotional and psychological distress described. Subsequent studies focussing on child food insecurity have depicted that children in food insecure households feel worried -- about their parents and siblings, about getting adequate food, and about having limited resources. They also feel sadness, anguish and anger (Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012; Harvey, 2016; Cairns, 2018; Ghattas et al., 2018).

In the following section I present the process of analysis and reflection that led to my use of precarity as a concept to frame children's non-material experiences relating to household food insecurity.

6.4 Precarity as a way of understanding children's experiences of food insecurity

The children I interviewed were from a range of backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status, culture and support networks, and had varied experiences in terms of access to food. Many of them however expressed, to greater or lesser extents, feelings of insecurity or unsafety.

In order to make sense of what underlies the children's experiences -- to ascertain what is shared by them all despite their many differences -- I had to take a *gestalt* view[43] (Polanyi, 1967). It was necessary to put aside the neat conceptualisations that previous studies have generated, and try to step back from the many papers written by researchers who are (understandably) trying to capture and simplify this 'phenomenon' so that it can be measured and quantified (and responded to). I had to disengage myself from the words and details of the transcriptions to be able to see the bigger picture. I went back to the most powerful feeling that I encountered during the month I spent in the school, interviewing my participants, but also interacting with other children: it was an almost tangible feeling of what I named at that time, stress.

In the following sections I first set the scene, and provide a picture of how I experienced the school in which I conducted my interviews. I then discuss how the concept of precarity fits with in with an exploration of children's experiences of food insecurity.

6.4.1 'An almost palpable sense of stress' – the school environment

Not long after I finished my interviews with the children I wrote in my field notes:

[43] This refers to what Polyani calls tacit knowing. In the 'pursuit of discovery', I needed to look for the 'hidden reality towards which [my] clues are pointing' (Polanyi, 1967, p.24).

> *The obvious distress of many of the children in the school was something that struck me. I think that my emotional exhaustion after each visit was as much to do with that as with the interviews.* (Field notes, 20 April 2017)

I am referring in my notes to the behaviour and lack of wellbeing of the children that I witnessed during lunch hours and break times and when I interacted with other children in the playground after school, eating with them in the dinner hall at lunch time, hanging out in the playground and on the corridors during break time, chatting to them on parents' evening or when walking through the school to collect a child for an interview. There was, as I wrote in my field notes after a day in the school, an 'almost palpable sense of stress'. During lesson time there were children milling about unsupervised near the toilets, children storming out of classes and slamming doors, children crying outside classrooms and being soothed by teaching assistants. One boy who I got to know was always wandering about on his own. He said he just couldn't handle being in class as it was too noisy. One of the girls that I interviewed appeared to be very vulnerable, and was often perched up high on a windowsill or striding from one area of the school to another during lesson time; she was always accompanied by a member of staff as she had previously left the school premises by climbing over a wall and so was classed as an abscondment risk.

A supply teacher that I met at the school told me that he had taught in seventy-five different schools and this one was the most chaotic. I was told that teaching assistants were assaulted every day, and I witnessed children needing to be restrained (held down on the floor by three adults) on two occasions because they were violently out of control. I was impressed by the cool-headedness and warmth which the staff displayed in dealing with the children.

This intense feeling of stress and anxiety amongst many of the children was very striking to me, and I spent a lot of time thinking about its source. When I discussed the behaviour that I had witnessed in the school with my gatekeeper, his explanation – delivered in a way that made it clear that the answer is obvious -- was that it is caused by the anxiety that the children suffer as a result of their household situations. He did not explain what he meant by 'household situations' but we had previously often discussed the economic hardship facing the families attending the school, and the chaotic lives that it often produced.

I did not go through a process of structured analysis about each interaction with or observation of the children that led me to this conclusion of a widespread shared experience of stress and unsafety; and perhaps in doing so I would have obscured the 'true conception' of what was going on (Polanyi, 1967, p.19). The 'obvious distress' (field notes, 20 April 2017, see

above) that I picked up on is an example of knowledge acquired tacitly: we can 'sense the presence of a hidden reality' (Polanyi, 1967, p.24). In stepping back from the *particulars,* as Polyani puts it, I was able to use my 'personal knowledge', based on my 'skills, experience, insight, intuition and judgement' (Casonato and Harris, 1999, in Dampney et al., 2002, p.3), and was able to absorb and then make sense of what was going on around me. In this case the feeling of unsafety and upset felt so obvious to me that I described it in my field notes as 'almost palpable'.

It has been by combining my perception of a commonly-held experience among many of the students at the school, gained through interactions with children, parents and staff and observations of behaviour, with my understanding of what the children shared with me in the one-to-one interviews, that I came to the conclusion that we can usefully understand children's lived experiences of food insecurity by deploying the concept of precarity. What I want to do here is examine and bring to light what is 'hidden'(Polanyi, 1967, p.24); to dig down into *why* -- why do they worry so much, and feel sad and scared? We saw in Chapter 5 that parents having to run their households on insufficient incomes use multiple strategies to protect their children from being impacted materially. As a result of all the work that their parents do in shielding them, many of the children I spoke to don't ever go without food, do get to eat nutritionally balanced diets, and don't ever worry about food. Yet despite this, food insecurity is a 'salient feature of [their] social ecology' (Mott et al., 2018, p.208). That is to say, even those who would be classed as food secure on an individual basis inhabit an environment which is shaped by economic vulnerability. This is the key to understanding how children experience food insecurity – it springs from the sense of unsafety that is engendered by the precarity of the space that the children occupy, at home and at school – and leads to feelings of worry, anxiety and stress.

6.4.2 'Life worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity': *Precarity* as a way of understanding children's experiences of food insecurity

Food insecurity is a situation of precarity that is particularly affecting. To state the obvious, food is a basic human need; it is key to our survival, 'something to which our bodies are wholly and unremittingly beholden' (Joronen and Rose, 2020, p.9). Our health (and life) depends on nutritious food. More than this, it provides a glue for social interactions, it is an indicator of social status (O'Connell et al., 2019), and not being able to provide it brings a particularly powerful sense of shame (see Chapter 7). So the work of ensuring that there is always enough food carries a particular weight. As shown in Chapter 5, the precarity of their financial status means that parents in low-income households have to engage strategies – at varying cost to

themselves -- to try and ensure their children are fed. This situation produces a psychological and emotional state of anxiety and insecurity, for all members of the household.

Fram et al. (2011) and Bernal et al. (2012) found that children experience food insecurity in a different way to adults, and this makes sense; ensuring sufficient food for the household is not children's responsibility. And it is clear that they often have an experience that is distinct to that of their parents, and other family members including their siblings; not just subjectively but in terms of material aspects of food and eating (Hadley et al., 2008; Kuku et al., 2011; Main and Bradshaw, 2016). However, children's (particularly those still in primary school, who tend not to be buying their own food, unlike teenagers) experiences of food insecurity occur within the context of the household, and are linked to the family's economic security or insecurity (Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018a; O'Connell et al., 2019).

What I found is that it is not only adults -- who are responsible for family income and thus are the primary providers of food -- who live in this state, both material and psychological, of 'heightened risk, jeopardy and threat' (Philo et al., 2019, p.151), but children too. I could therefore explain children's experiences of food insecurity as being one of uncertainty, unsafety and vulnerability. What this does not fully acknowledge, however, is how grounded these experiences are in their family's financial situation.

Other researchers have witnessed similar emotions in children experiencing food insecurity; as seen in Section 6.3 above, the finding that children living within food insecure households are anxious is not a new one. But within the literature, the analysis for the most part[44] stops at the children's lived and affective experiences, and does not sufficiently make reference to, and therefore create a space for challenging, the socio-economic context which produces it. It is here that the concept of precarity is valuable, in that it encapsulates an understanding of -- and demands a response to -- the wider political and social framework (Waite, 2009; Chinnery, 2015). Utilising a framework of precarity thus provides an understanding of child food insecurity that extends beyond its current conceptualisation. Yet there is very little research that explores the issue of food insecurity through the lens of precarity, and even less which engages and asks the views of children about their experiences.

In the following section, I show how children in my study have an awareness of the financial vulnerability of their family, and of the impact that managing this has on their parents. As a result, the children worry, not only about food, but also about money, and about their parents.

[44] Exceptions include O'Connell et al. (2018), Knight et al. (2018) (these two papers are both based on data from the Families and Food In Hard Times study) and Lambie-Mumford and Sims (2018a).

They are cognisant of the precarity of their household's situation, economically and emotionally, and this makes them worry and feel unsafe.

6.5 Children describe their lived experiences

As discussed in Chapter 5, a number of the children with whom I spoke described what can be referred to as the physical or material effects of food insecurity. They had to miss meals, or eat less; they felt hunger and tiredness, and pain in their stomachs. These were the extreme cases. Other children did not have these experiences, often because their parents were able to use the multiple strategies discussed to make sure they were fed, including going without food themselves, and getting help from family and friends.

As I outlined in Section 6.4.1, what stood out as a shared experience for many of the children whom I interviewed but also interacted with in the school, was a sense of unsafety and insecurity. This included those currently having regular access to food and those for whom getting sufficient and nutritious food did not seem to have ever been an issue. What is apparent is that the children felt this way because of the precarity of their life worlds (Waite, 2009).

This sense of precarity arises because the children with whom I spoke were from low-income families, and were very well aware that without the various strategies employed by their parents to mitigate the household's food insecurity the family would not have sufficient food; they were also aware that the employment of these strategies had a negative impact on their parents. They were cognisant of the pressure that their parents were under, trying to budget and manage bills and debts. Some of the children also knew that it was in order to feed *them* that their parents would sometimes go without or eat less. They understood that these experiences stemmed from a lack of adequate income. This situation made the children feel unsafe and insecure – precarious -- and generated a great deal of stress and worry.

The Family Stress Model (Eamon, 2001; Conger et al., 2002; Neppl et al., 2016; Masarik and Conger, 2017) supposes that the upset and worry felt by children in low income households is a result of their parents' emotional state that arises from the stress and distress of contending with low or inadequate income, and the parents' consequent behaviour. I would agree that children are indeed affected by the mental state of their parents that is caused by the day-to-day struggle of living on a low income – in a study by Knowles et al. (2016, p.31), parents themselves 'described a direct connection between the trade-offs they are forced to make, their own emotional state, and that of their children.' Also, the experience of food insecurity

may impact on how adults parent their children and this then impacts on their children (see, for example Gee and Asim, 2019) I would argue however that this is not the only mechanism by which the children get stressed and anxious; the precarity of their financial situation directly correlates with their emotional wellbeing.

6.5.1 Children are aware of the family's financial situation

In one of the few other studies that have explored child food insecurity by conducting interviews with children about their own personal experience, Fram et al. (2011) suggest that children's experiences of food insecurity differ from that of adults as, unlike their parents, they do not worry about not having sufficient money to buy food. They sum up their findings regarding the differences in the ways that adults and children experience household food insecurity as follows:

> *Where adult experiences of food insecurity are conditioned on inadequate money for food, child experiences were grounded in the immediate household social and food environment: quality of child-parent interactions, parent affect and behaviour, and types and quantities of foods made available for children to eat. (*Fram et al., 2011, p.1114)

Harvey (2016), who conducted interviews with British children from very low-income families, wrote that her findings aligned with those of Fram et al. (2011) and that her participants also focussed on the availability and accessibility of food. Ghattas et al. (2018, p.29), who interviewed children in Lebanon about their experiences of food, also suggest that their participants 'did not necessarily equate running out of food with lack of money' -- that their experience is situated within interactions with people, rather than recognising the issue as being financial. My own findings, however, do not fully reflect this understanding of children's experiences. In foregrounding the interactions between parent and child (in a reproduction of the Family Stress Model), Fram et al.'s conceptualisation does not acknowledge the children's high levels of awareness of the family's financial status, and the anxiety that arises as a direct result of that. Other studies *not* focussing on food insecurity have meanwhile found that children in economically insecure households[45] are aware of the struggles that their parents have around money (Van der Hoek, 2005; Hooper et al., 2007; Fairbrother et al., 2012; Ridge, 2017). During our discussion about the way that food was managed in their household, the

[45] It is not only the case for children in economically insecure households; Fairbrother et al. (2012) conducted a study on children's opinions on family finances in relation to healthy eating and found that children in both what they called 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' schools had a good understanding of the costs of food shopping and were aware of their family's financial status.

pictures that the children painted were of very careful budgeting, difficulty keeping on top of bills, and money running out. They demonstrated detailed knowledge of when the money came in and how much, and how much was spent on different bills or food items.

For example, Ruby was aware that it was difficult for her mum to provide the money that her little sister's nursery asked for to cover the cost of juice and snacks. It didn't sound like the nursery was asking very much – '40p and 20ps', but Ruby recognised that that fact that it was not '1ps' made it difficult for her mum to afford it.

> *Ruby: [My mum] also struggles because my little sister goes to this nursery, not too far from here, the new nursery near [name of local landmark].*
>
> *AC: I don't know that one.*
>
> *Ruby: It's the new nursery.*
>
> *AC: Oh right. And she struggles what, to get her there?*
>
> *Ruby: They also give you stuff, you just need to put some money in a box and they give you juice and all health food and that.*
>
> *AC: So that's more about costs -- is that what you mean?*
>
> *Ruby: Yeah, you pay for 40p and 20ps and all that. Not 1ps.*

Other children exhibited a keen grasp of the family's incomings and outgoings. Katie, whose family was wholly reliant on benefits for their income, knew how much her parents received, and could list all the things she had to spend it on:

> *So like my mum normally gets £250 for like food, clothes and to pay the rent. But the rent's really really, really high. But my mum does pay it. And internet, electricity, gas and then there's £50 for the food, or a bit lower than that.*

She understood that because they were on a low income they had to be careful:

> *Ok so yeah, we're on benefits, and we have to keep the budget, inside of the budget. But we are saving money up.*

She did not just have an awareness of how much things cost, but knew that money was an issue for them and they had to be careful. This is quite a burden for an eleven-year-old.

Ava, who was ten and lived with her mum and two little brothers, knew exactly how much her dad paid her mum in child support and on what date: 'my dad gives her, every month, [on the]

the 22nd, £250 for all three of us.' Jack was explicit in saying that they didn't have enough, and knew that their low income meant things were difficult for his mum:

> *AC: Do you think your mum worries about being able to afford enough food?*
>
> *Jack: Yeah. She actually needs more money.*
>
> *AC: Does she?*
>
> *Jack: Yeah. So then we can get more food in, so, then she doesn't hear me nag for food all the time!*

Chloe described how her mum got her benefits paid on Mondays, her brother got his DLA [Disability Living Allowance], and her dad got his money every second Wednesday. She described the weeks when they didn't have their dad's benefits as 'a short week', and that's when they 'don't get to eat as much food.' The food didn't run out completely, but the type of food was different as her mum 'just buys what she can afford'. She had lots of family living nearby, and so if there was nothing in the house she could go to her auntie's to eat. Chloe did not appear to have ever had to go without, and did not express any anxiety about not getting enough food, but she was clearly aware that there was a relationship between her family's income and what they were able to eat. There was an appreciation that it was difficult for her parents as she sometimes worried about how hard it was for them to get enough food.

What we can see is that the children were highly cognisant of the precarity of their family's financial situation, although of course they did not express it as such. This could make them feel unsafe and insecure, as illustrated by Lucy's story. Lucy told me that 'probably every night I worry, but I don't show it.' Although her family appeared to be in a stable place financially at that time, and there appeared to be no problem affording food – for example, if the food ran out, she told me that, '[m]y mum gets my brother to text my dad and my dad usually goes shopping after work' -- her state of heightened anxiety arose from a time when her parents 'didn't have enough money to pay the bills'.

A longitudinal study by The Children's Society (2019) of British children found that compared to those who had never experienced income poverty, fourteen-year-olds that had experienced it on at least one occasion since they were babies were significantly more likely to have low life satisfaction and to suffer from higher levels of depression. One study with women on low incomes in the US found a relationship between being deprived of food as a child and adult eating behaviours that included binge-eating when food is available (Olson et al., 2007). Lucy's

case provides some insight into why this might be the case. Despite currently having adequate income to cover their needs, Lucy continued to carry the sense of unsafety that arose when they had a financial crisis and she feared it would happen again; this illustrates that acute (as opposed to chronic) experiences of poverty and inadequate income can also have lasting effects on children's wellbeing.

Below is a long excerpt from my interview with Chloe, age ten, some of which has already been discussed. Neither of Chloe's parents were currently employed. I chose to include this as it provides insight – using a child's own words -- into how children do not exist in a separate bubble in terms of family finances, but that they are fully involved with and comprehend how money works in their household, the impact of their lack of resources on what they eat, and the strategies that they rely on.

> *AC: So, do you think there are kids in this school, do you know kids from any families that are struggling with food; to have enough food, do you think? Because there are lots of people nowadays that... do you remember me talking about prices going up, and rent going up and stuff?*
>
> *Chloe: I don't know. Sometimes, my mum doesn't get paid and it's a short week, she doesn't get very much food, but…*
>
> *… She doesn't work. She just gets paid every Monday.*
>
> *AC: So was it through her benefits? So why do they pay her less? She should get the same amount every week, shouldn't she?*
>
> *Chloe: Because sometimes, I don't know. But she never has... Last week, because my dad gets paid as well, on Wednesday, and sometimes my brother gets his DLA [Disability Living Allowance].*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *AC: Oh, so they get separate money through, on a Monday and a Wednesday?*
>
> *Chloe: But my dad gets paid one Wednesday and then next week he doesn't. So it's miss a week for him, so that's why sometimes my mum's got a bit less on Monday.*
>
> *AC: And the weeks when she's got a bit less?*
>
> *Chloe: We don't get to eat as much food.*

AC: Ok. So do you do a smaller shop? How does she do it then? How does she stretch her money out?

Chloe: She just buys stuff from the shops.

AC: Is it different stuff then? What does she do?

Chloe: She just buys what she can afford.

AC: Can you tell the difference in those weeks and the other weeks when she's got all her money?

Chloe: Yeah. Because sometimes she doesn't get Coco Pops. So then I can tell.

AC: Is that how you tell? And the weeks when it's a bit harder, and there's not as much money, does sometimes the food run out, on those weeks?

Chloe: Yeah.

AC: But do you sometimes have to skip food? Is there something in, or does sometimes the food run out completely?

Chloe: No, it doesn't run out completely. Even if it did run out, because at the end of the week, on Monday, we didn't get any cereal, we'd get toast at school anyway.

In this excerpt we saw that Chloe had an acute awareness of when money came into the house, and via what means, i.e. she knew that household income was made up of separate benefits for her mum, dad and brother. She explained that they didn't get to eat quite as much on the weeks when her dad didn't get paid, and that in order to deal with less money her mum just bought less food, and bought different types of food, i.e. not Coco Pops as breakfast cereal. She was also aware that the breakfast that the school provided for free to all pupils was a safety net for them. It is important that we understand and recognise that primary school-aged children can and do have a grasp of their household's finances, because when the household is experiencing economic hardship, as we saw in the previous chapter, the child may carry part of the burden of worrying that there will be enough money coming in to cover the family's needs.

The children were aware not only of how economically insecure they were, but also of how stressful this was for their parents. In the following section I will show how the children were fully cognisant of the impact on their parents of managing on a low income.

6.5.2 Children know how stressful it is to manage on a low income

Children have reported in previous studies that they are aware that their parents are struggling to manage the family's financial situation (Ghattas et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2019), and as shown above, many of the children with whom I spoke were fully aware of the family's financial vulnerability. They were also attentive to the (often time-consuming and stressful) effort required of their parents to manage on a low income, and, as a result, they worried about how hard this was for them.

Ava recounted to me that things were 'kind of hard for my mum and [her friend Ellie's] mum [Imogen] because my mum's got to feed three kids and Imogen's got to feed three kids'. She knew it was a struggle to find the money and that this was amplified because of the number of children, and she worried about her mum 'many times' because of this. Katie also made the link between a large family and increased stress. When I asked her if the grown-ups worried about getting enough food to feed all the kids, she answered, 'Yeah, sometimes, because there's so many of us.'

Thomas worried 'quite a lot' about his mum, because it was hard for her to pay for everything. He told me that he worried about this:

> *… because she only gets a few hundred pounds, and every time I come back from school, she's on the phone paying bills and everything. And she's trying to figure out what to do.*

Millie, who out of all the children in my study was from a family which was on a steady and sufficient income and never worried about getting enough to eat, provided an interesting insight. She told me that she worried about her parents and when I asked her why she worried about them she replied: 'Just, I guess, looking after us as well, like having the money, just worry; it's just something that you do.' She presented worrying as the normal condition.

The children were not only aware that their parents were struggling with the situation -- Ruby told me her mum was 'always worrying about it' -- but that it was a direct result of being on a low income. Though we were discussing food, the children knew that their difficulties stemmed from a lack of money. Amelia explained that her parents 'worry because of the money', and that she worried about her parents, because 'they won't be able afford things.'

Alfie's mum worried, he said, because 'she doesn't get that much money'. Daisy said her parents 'sometimes worry because we run out of money.' These findings echo those in other qualitative studies done with children about their experiences, that have also found that they are aware of the link between a 'lack of economic resources' and the availability of food (see also Connell et al., 2005; Bernal et al., 2012, p.1346).

Some children made reference to poorly paid work as a source of anxiety. Mia explained that she worried about her parents, '[b]ecause sometimes, people don't really get paid properly in their jobs.' When I asked Jack, who said that he worried a lot, 'Do you worry about how hard it is for your mum to get enough food?', he responded, 'Yeah, because I'm worrying if she might not get paid enough … '. All the children quoted above made the link between level of income and stress and hardship for their parents.

It is certainly true that there is a relationship between economic hardship and poor mental health for adults. A systematic review of the research exploring the impact of food insecurity on mental health in developing countries found that the studies were connected by an understanding of the adults' experience of food insecurity being one of 'acute psychological suffering'(Weaver and Hadley, 2009, p.269), and of anxiety and stress. Research done with parents in the Global North shows that the experience is a shared one for parents everywhere. A study of over 700 women in receipt of benefits showed that poverty has a strong relationship with anxiety, and the experience of food insecurity is an 'important determinant' of mental health (Siefert et al., 2008, p.170). Other studies have found a robust association between depression and food insecurity for women (London and Scott, 2005; see also Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007) and participants in a Canadian study described how stressful the experience of food insecurity is; responses ranged from worry to self-harm (Buck-McFadyen, 2015). This is the lived experience of precarity; as expressed by Philo et al. (2019, p.152), living 'on the edge' in terms of financial security causes people to be 'on edge' psychologically.

The children with whom I spoke were aware, therefore, of how hard things were for their parents, and in many cases they were very worried about them. In the following section I discuss how this makes the children feel.

6.5.3 Knowing how hard it is for parents is very stressful for children

In a study by Knowles et al. (2016, p.31), parents express that they are fully aware of the 'toxic stress' (see also Graham, Stolte, et al., 2018) that is generated by having to cope with household food insecurity, and recognise that it can be difficult to shield their children completely from this. Although they may be able in some cases to protect them from the

material impacts, parents acknowledge that they cannot always buffer their children from the stress of the situation and from witnessing their own emotional struggles (Zamora-Sarabia et al., 2019). Children even younger than those I spoke with have been found to be acutely aware of the emotional impact of living in poverty; in research undertaken with children in the UK aged five to sixteen years, Crowley and Vulliamy (2007) report that children as young as seven describe their parents as being very sad and embarrassed because of issues around money, and that family relationships are put under stress. In interviews with children from low-income families in the UK, Ridge (2002, p.105) found that children worried about their parents' 'wellbeing and happiness'. A study of seventy English families undertaken by Hooper et al. (2007, p.59), also heard from children who expressed that they found it stressful that their parents were stressed and understood that the pressure on their parents was 'the result of poverty'.

Previous studies on food insecurity have illustrated that witnessing their parents' suffering is very difficult for children, including one undertaken with children in Greenland (Niclasen et al., 2013). In a study with children in Venezuela, Bernal et al. (2012, p.1345) noted that feelings of 'concern, anguish and sadness' are experienced by children who are food insecure. These feelings are precipitated not only by a lack of food but also because the children 'notice the worry in their own parents'. One of their participants, a girl of ten years old, explains that her dad 'is desperate and later when he comes in the evening he does a little shopping there…I feel bad' (Bernal et al., 2012, p.1345). During ethnographic research undertaken in the US, Cairns (2018) spoke with teenagers about their experiences of food insecurity. She describes how one of the girls, Sheylinn, 'speaks not about her own hunger, but about the emotional experience of her mother's strained foodwork' (Cairns, 2018, p.181). At seventeen, Sheylinn was able to articulate her feelings in a way that is perhaps more difficult for the younger children in my study (nine to eleven years), and perhaps, as a young adult, she had a different relationship with her mother. However, that she experienced food insecurity 'most viscerally though her mother's emotional strain' (2018, p.181) speaks true for my participants. In the simplest terms, Amelia told me that she worried about her parents, 'because I care for them.' Daisy told me that she worried about her parents finding things difficult, 'all the time really', Katie has worried 'many times', and Olivia thought about it 'a lot'. Thomas recognised that it is 'really hard' for his mum to get enough food for them, and as a result he worried 'quite a lot'.

Molly worried about how hard things were for her mum and dad and recognised that paying for food for her could mean less money for food for them.

Like they have to pay for my dinners as well, and stuff like that. And sometimes then I just worry that they won't be able to have their lunch sometimes.

Amy clearly felt bad that her dad, whom she lived with on her own, was struggling to find work and that he 'worries about money a lot'. She told me that he found it 'very difficult, coping with me as well.' When I asked her what she meant she explained that she was an extra burden for her father:

He's trying to find a job, and I'm just going round doing whatever I want. Try spending a day at my house for once.

Amy and Molly felt partly responsible for how difficult things are for their parents. This must be a heavy weight to bear for primary school children. Jack also expressed a desire not to add too much to his mum's load, telling me, 'I don't want to worry my mum too much'. Lucy also didn't want to worry her parents by sharing with them her anxieties about having enough money.

AC: So because you heard that do you worry about it? Yeah? So do you worry many times then?

Lucy: Probably like every night I worry, but I don't show it. So my brother, my dad and my mum don't know.

AC: And why have you decided not to show it?

Lucy: Because they'll be asking -- why are you worrying? And I don't want to tell them why.

The children knew that their parents were stressed and worried, and in order to protect them from more worry, they were concealing and holding in their own feelings of anxiety. This must have been difficult for them and will have added to their feelings of unsafety.

Parents tried to hide their stress, but the children were often able to tell that their mum and dad were struggling. Amelia's parents didn't discuss their problems with her but she was nevertheless able to 'work it out'. The children could tell by a change in the adults' behaviour: 'they're like really silent' (Daisy), or because of their expressions. Children in a Venezuelan study (Bernal et al., 2012, p.1345) explained that, 'I see them sad, you can see it on their faces', and this was the case with some of my participants:

AC: And do they... does your mum talk to you about that, or do you know she worries..?

Katie: I just know, because like...

AC: How do you know?

Katie: Just her face. The facial expressions that she uses.

Katie also reported overhearing her parents talking about the family finances:

> *Normally, when I'm in the living room, my mum's right upstairs, I go to the toilet, and then I hear my mum and my step-dad talking about it. Because they're on a really tight budget.*

Lucy also related how she overheard her parents' conversation about money, and was explicit about the effect that this had on her.

AC: And how did you know? [that her parents were worried]

Lucy: Because I was sitting watching telly, and my mum and dad were talking; they were kind of whispering and talking at the same time. Probably thinking because she's doing this, she won't know what they're talking about. And, they were talking about it, and literally, like, about four times, I heard them talk about it, and then when I went to bed I was always scared, and I said 'Mummy, are we going to not have enough money to pay the bills and we have to move out and be on the street?' And Mum was just like, 'how did you know?' She didn't actually say that, she was just like 'don't worry about it' and stuff.

AC: Yeah. And do you think they worry about food? Do you think they worry about having enough money for food?

Lucy: I'm not exactly sure. But they do worry about money and stuff.

She described being 'always scared'; despite not experiencing food insecurity at that time she clearly felt very unsafe. This reinforces the finding by Main and Bradshaw (2014, np) that even children that they describe as being in 'incongruous protected situations', i.e. those who are not going without anything because their parents are utilising strategies of the kind outlined in the previous chapter, will experience 'some of the disadvantages and stress associated with living on a low income' (Main and Bradshaw, 2014, np).

What I have depicted in this section is the ripple effect of precarity: the household has a low income and it is hard for the parents to manage; consequently they are anxious and stressed. In turn, the children are aware of the family's situation and the impact that it is having on the

parents, and they worry about their parents, which this makes them feel unsafe and insecure. This illustrates the importance, when looking at policy responses to child food insecurity or poverty, of focusing on adequate household income (see also Lambie-Mumford and Sims, 2018a); providing food to children does not address the fundamental cause of the child's experience, which is the precarity of the family's economic situation.

As described in Chapter 3, I finished each of the thirty-three interviews with the children with a short questionnaire. One of the questions asked how often the child worried about how hard it is for their parents to get enough food for them. In the answering of this question a number of my participants who had not expressed any worries about their parents during the interview answered that they had worried 'many times' or 'sometimes' over the last year. Ava, Hannah, Grace, Ruby, Katie and Amelia all said that had worried many times, and Chloe, Summer, Emily and Holly all said they sometimes worried. Altogether, over half of the children said they worried sometimes or many times about how hard it is for their parents to get enough food for them.[46] To set this in context, as detailed in the previous chapter, only six of the thirty-three children reported ever having had to eat less or miss meals. What we learn from this is that focusing simply on the material aspects of household food insecurity means that a significant impact – the psychological effect -- on children is not recognised.

6.5.4 Worrying about food and having enough money for food

As discussed above, the children were often very aware of their family's restricted resources and the impact that this had on their parents, and they found this upsetting. They also worried about food and whether they would have enough money for food. There were a number of children who reported that they had had to go without food in the past or that accessing adequate quantities of food is still an issue. It was not surprising therefore that they shared with me that they worried about getting enough food: Amy worried 'every day' and Amelia worried 'a lot', as does Thomas.

Other children shared that they worried about getting enough food, or having enough money for food, even though after further questions it was clear that they always had enough. Alfie, for instance, told me that he worried 'nearly all the time' that there wouldn't be enough money for food. It was clear however, that he never went without – he had never had to skip a meal, and if the big shop from Aldi had run out, his mum popped to Iceland. Holly also worried about having enough food,

[46] Nine children said that they had worried about how hard it is for their parents to get enough food for them 'one or two times' over the last year; only nine children said they had 'never' worried.

> *… because sometimes we come home with a little bit of food, not a lot. And I just think that we don't have enough money, but they normally say we do. We just don't need that much.*

She had never gone hungry, or missed a meal, and if the food ran out, 'we go and buy some more'. Her parents reassured her that they had enough money, but Holly still felt anxious about it. Daisy also always got enough to eat. She 'never' felt hungry because there was not enough food to eat, but she said that she occasionally worried about having enough to eat.

The children felt, to differing extents, unsafe and anxious about food and money. For some of them this was based on their experiences of going hungry; eating enough food is our most basic need, and it makes sense that the children felt unmoored and uncertain (Philo et al., 2019, p.153) if they had not had that need met. Others always got enough food but lived in an emotionally and economically precarious setting, and this made them feel distressed and insecure. Although there were only six children who had ever not had enough to eat, ten of my participants told me that they had worried about not having enough to eat over the last year when responding to the survey questions at the end of our time together. Seven of these had worried sometimes or many times.

In her own words Molly described her own experience of the condition of 'teetering on the edge' (Standing, 2011, p.20); when I asked her about what made her worry about having enough to eat she told me that she was:

> *Molly: Sometimes nervous.*
>
> *AC: You feel nervous? Why do you feel nervous? Do you know?*
>
> *Molly: Because I don't know what's going to happen.*

Molly was expressing a deep-seated feeling of instability that was produced by her family's socio-economic position (Portacolone, 2013). This is why I think that the concept of precarity is useful here. When exploring the associations that they found between child food insecurity and issues related to mental health, Slopen et al. (2010, p.450) tell us that:

> *Food and nutrition are important aspects of daily life; psychologically, routines involving food are important for the child's comfort and feelings of security.*

In terms of findings, it would be easy just to describe how food insecure children worry and that they feel sad and anxious, but this does not fully express the complexity of the phenomenon. Children's lives and emotions are not neatly siloed into separate and distinct

units, i.e. food, parents, money, friends, but they are intertwined and interrelated. The experience of food insecurity for British children is one that arises from the socio-economic status of the household in which they live. My finding is that a great deal of uncertainty and insecurity exists for children in low-income households around food, and that this connects with what is going on for their parents, and essentially, the financial resources of the family. In conceptualising child food insecurity we must recognise that it is complex and multi-dimensional and fundamentally not about food, but the context within which they live, which is one of precarity.

6.6 The impact of stress and worry on children

Stress and worry caused by living in a state of precarity can be very damaging for children. This psycho-emotional burden is an invisible and difficult to measure outcome of living in poverty, and one which can have a negative impact both as they experience it and also into the future.

Feeling stressed can have multiple negative impacts (Fisher and Baum, 2010). Physiological responses to stress of increased cortisol levels and elevated blood pressure can affect concentration, memory and focus, and reduce immune system functionality (Thompson, 2014). Children who are stressed can find it harder to regulate their emotions; they may not be able to cope as well, become upset more quickly and feel that they need to be more vigilant against threats (Thompson, 2014).

Evans and Kim (2013, p.44) talk about the 'wide array of stressors' that children from low income homes must deal with (see also Eamon, 2001; Willis and Fitzpatrick, 2016); this is borne out by the fact that there is a significant link between lower household income and lower levels of children's subjective wellbeing (Rees et al., 2011). More weight to this association is added by the results of a study by Costello et al. (2003, in McCurdy et al., 2010b), which compared families that had been provided with sufficient income to lift them out of poverty to those who had not, and found that the mental health of children in the former group significantly improved. Indeed, externalising behaviours displayed by children in this group fell to the levels of children who had never experienced poverty (Costello, 2003, in Slopen et al., 2010).

Evans and Kim (2013) suggest that one of the key elements of living in poverty that may be damaging for children's health, both mental and physical, is the long-term high levels of physiological stress. The experience of food insecurity is particularly stress-inducing (Slopen et al., 2010). My research supports an understanding of chronic stress as caused by the day-to-

day realities of living in a household which is managing on a low income. Acute, short-term episodes of difficulty in the past may also leave children feeling chronically stressed and anxious. This is precarity as both a lived and felt experience.

This has implications for approaches to tackling child food insecurity. Providing nutritious and filling school lunches[47] for example may mean that a child is not hungry that day, and may alleviate some of the family's financial pressure, but whilst the household is struggling on a low income that demands the utilisation of various strategies in order to ensure all needs are met, they may still experience stress and anxiety.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how many of the children participating in my study were very aware of the financial status of their household, and often had a very detailed knowledge of what money was coming in, and how much things cost. They were conscious of how stressful the situation was for their parents, despite in many cases, their parents trying to hide this, and felt worried for them. As a result these children felt unsafe and anxious.

In their analysis of interviews done with children about food insecurity, Connell et al. (2005) say the following in response to the literature:

> *Bandura's work in social learning and, later, social cognitive theory, suggests that children not only are affected by their parents' stressors, but in fact mirror and replicate their parents' stressors. Thus, children capable of cognition can understand issues such as inadequate food supplies within their households even if the gravity of the situation was not directly explained to them.* (2005, p.1688)

They describe the 'anxiety and frustration of the parents/caregivers [being] mirrored in the children' (Connell et al., 2005, p.1688). I found that children are not just mirroring and replicating their parents' stress, but have an acute understanding of the family's economic vulnerability and factors associated with it, such as food insecurity, that is based on their own personal experiences and interactions in everyday life.

As noted by Fram et al. (2015, p.15), 'children's sense of safety depends on the reliability of parents' ability to meet child needs', and so, as I found with my participants, the appreciation of their financial insecurity and the perception that the family might not always be able to

[47] There are many other issues that need addressing regarding school lunches as a solution for child food insecurity, including stigma, take-up, provision during school holidays, and improving the quality of the food.

access food makes many of them feel fundamentally insecure and vulnerable. In this way, the psychological and emotional impact of food insecurity for children is complex and has many inter-related factors, and is rooted in an experience of precarity. Lucy sums it up, when I ask her if she worries about 'the money, the bills, or do you worry about not having enough money for food?' and she replies:

I worry about not having enough money for everything.

This element of the experience of food insecurity – the psychological impact directly arising from living in poverty – has not, up to this point, been foregrounded in discussions about children's food insecurity. Weinreb et al. (2002, p.7) for example, provide the following explanation:

> *Children may also experience anxiety as a result of unpredictable and intermittent meals. Not knowing whether food needs will be met day to day can result in substantial stress. Others have reported that failure to meet basic material needs, such as housing, results in higher levels of anxiety among children. Furthermore, mothers who are unable to provide sufficient food for their children may feel distressed and unsettled, which can, in turn, affect children's level of emotional wellbeing.*

In this explanation the researchers recognise that it is a lack of security around the fulfilment of their basic needs of food and housing that may precipitate feelings of anxiety. However, as is typical of many explorations of children's experiences of food insecurity, they do not make a direct link with the economic hardship of the household that the children live in.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, precarity as a concept can be understood in various ways. One of the things that unites the different understandings is that they all 'incorporate[…] the political and institutional context in which the *production* of precarity occurs' (Waite, 2009, p.421) and incorporate a recognition (or explicit call) for change (Grenier et al., 2017). By framing the children's experiences of food insecurity as being related to precarity, I am indicating that they are structurally produced and are located within the wider issue of poverty. Responses and solutions must therefore focus on ensuring families have sufficient household income.

7. ‘Because they’re like secrets’: Understanding stigma and shame in the context of children’s experiences of food insecurity

7.1 Introduction

In line with O’Connell and Brannen (2021), I understand children to experience food insecurity via different dimensions, i.e. materially, emotionally and socially. In Chapter 5 I described how children can be impacted materially, that is, they have to go without food, eat lower quality food or have a diet that lacks variety. In Chapter 6 I discussed how children’s mental and emotional health is affected by living in households that are so financially insecure that obtaining an adequate and appropriate diet is not always possible. In this chapter I will explore children’s encounters with the particularly harmful psychosocial experiences of stigma and shame with relation to food insecurity.

I start, in Section 7.2, with a discussion of the concepts of shame and stigma, firstly in the context of the experience of poverty, and then with regard to food insecurity. I then briefly explore how encounters with shame may be gendered. In Section 7.3 I look at how children experience stigma and shame in relation to food insecurity. After introducing the limited literature on this subject I present my findings, namely that the stigma of not being able to afford to achieve social norms around food (O’Connell et al., 2019) generates great shame, and that children will do whatever they can to conceal their situations. They are not always successful however, as the financial status of a family is often revealed by other indicators. Finally, in Section 7.4 I explain how children resist and distance themselves from the stigmatised identity of being food insecure by talking about people who are in situations of more extreme deprivation.

7.2 Background

7.2.1 Shame and stigma

Shame is one of a group of emotions that also includes humiliation and embarrassment (Scheff, 2000), and is both ‘externally imposed’ and ‘internally felt’ (Jo, 2013; see also Baumberg, 2016; O’Connell et al., 2019). People often feel ashamed because they possess a characteristic which is seen as deviating from cultural or societal standards – they occupy what Strong (2021, p.74) describes as a ‘position of belowness’, and this belowness is consequently stigmatised (Goffman, 1963; Lewis, 1998). The external pressure comes from society negatively judging them via real or symbolic actions. The internal pressure arises from a negative appraisal of one’s own inability to conform to societal (or personal) standards (Chase

and Walker, 2012; O'Connell et al., 2019). Shame is corrosive and extremely damaging to self-esteem and one's identity (Lister, 2004).

Shame is a somewhat taboo topic (Scheff, 2004) and consequently is a difficult issue for researchers to explore (Chase and Walker, 2012). As such, it often remains unnamed (Scheff, 2000) both by those experiencing it and by scholars, despite being one of the most potent and deeply felt of emotions.[48] In some ways this is no surprise as shame involves 'exposure of peculiarly sensitive, intimate, vulnerable aspects of self' (Merrell Lynd, 1958, p.27).

A number of qualitative studies have recognised that stigma and shame are widely experienced by people living in poverty (see for example Narayan et al., 2000; Ridge, 2002; Lister, 2004; Reutter et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2013; Ali et al., 2018). Some scholars go so far as to argue that there exists a 'poverty-shame nexus' (Chase and Walker, 2012), that shame is an almost inevitable consequence of living in poverty. While some people may resist this discredited identity (Beresford et al., 1999; Lister, 2004), shame is keenly felt by many living on low incomes (Jo, 2013) and is a 'common denominator' of the experience of poverty for people in many different situations and locations around the world (Walker et al., 2013, p.216). Mills et al. (2014) suggest that there is an insufficient focus in academia on stigma and shame in relation to people's experiences of poverty, which they describe as a 'missing dimension' of research on this topic.

Shame has been described as one of the 'most pernicious of emotions' (Walker et al., 2013, p.216). It leaves the person experiencing it with a sense that they are inferior to others (Leeming and Boyle, 2013), indeed, that their 'entire self is no good' (Lewis, 1998). In the worst case, it can make the person who is feeling shame want to 'disappear, or even die' (Monroe, 2009, p.59). It has been found that shame can lead to mental illnesses such as chronic depression (Jo, 2013), and is linked with self-harm and suicide attempts (Chase and Walker, 2012; Walker et al., 2013; Sheehy et al., 2019).

Adults have been found to reduce and avoid social interactions in order to prevent their financial situations being exposed and so avoid the associated stigma and shame (Chase and Walker, 2012), and it would make sense if children, who we know try to conceal their experiences of food insecurity, responded in the same way.

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[48] It would be interesting to explore whether researchers find it easier to explore the experience of shame in the many countries in which the languages – unlike English - contain two words for shame: shame that arises from disgrace, and everyday shame, which is a normal and important emotion. In French, for example, *la honte* is disgrace-related shame and *la pudeur* is everyday shame. As Scheff explains, because the English word shame carries both meanings, 'we cannot discuss [it] without risking offense.' See Scheff, 2004, p.241 for further elaboration on this topic.

7.2.2 Shame and food insecurity

Families in poverty might not always be food insecure, but those households experiencing food insecurity are very likely to be living in poverty (Gundersen et al., 2011) and thus will be exposed to the stigma and potential shame associated therewith. In addition to the shame that may relate to the experience of poverty, we saw in Chapter 4 that those families struggling to obtain sufficient or appropriate food are subject to a set of food poverty truths that reflect normative understandings of individual responsibility for poverty. This negative characterisation of people experiencing food insecurity assigns them with a tainted identity (Goffman, 1963), i.e. stigma. These truths intersect with popular narratives of poverty but bestow upon those who are food insecure a particular and distinct stigmata, which I outline below, and with it the accompanying shame.

In his paper on shame experienced by people using food banks, Strong (2021) suggests that it is not the act of receiving free food in itself that produces shame – for example, if a person was offered a free tasting sample of a food item being sold in a shop they would not feel ashamed when accepting it – but it is the *lack of choice* in accepting or refusing it. People who have to use food banks are unable to access food as per societal norms, i.e. buying groceries from a shop, and because in our current society success is often measured by our position as consumers (Chase and Walker, 2012) they may feel themselves to be 'abject, failed subject[s]' (Strong, 2021, p.77). We saw in Chapter 5 that households that are struggling financially have to employ multiple strategies to mitigate their food insecurity. Although they may not have to rely on food banks, they may also experience the shame attached to the 'inability to self-provision food' (Strong, 2021, p.77) as they are having to manage their family's diet from outside and 'beyond the market' (*ibid.*).

The existence of food insecurity-related shame -- particularly for those responsible for foodwork within the household -- has been shown in numerous studies (Loopstra, 2014; van der Horst et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2014; Pfeiffer et al., 2015; Purdam et al., 2015; Garthwaite, 2016; Zepeda, 2017; Husz, 2018; O'Connell and Brannen, 2021). The stigma arises for parents, and with it a particularly profound sense of shame, at not being able to fulfil the normative role of feeding their children an adequate, appropriate and socially acceptable diet. This sense of disgrace and failure is tied up with not being able to fulfil their responsibilities as caregivers and providers. The role of parent is socially constructed, and not being able to conform to societal and personal expectations can lead to intense feelings of failure that are internalised as shame (Connell et al., 2005; Perry et al., 2014; Purdam et al., 2015; Ali et al., 2018).

Feeding one's family is highly symbolic as it is not only the provision of nutrition and calories but also represents love, nurture, and the reproduction of or aspiration to social positioning (DeVault, 1991; Narayan et al., 2000; J. Maher et al., 2010; Martin and Lippert, 2012; Cairns, 2018). As such, there is 'no more telling symbol of failure' than not being able to feed your family (Walker et al., 2013, p.222). Canadian parents experiencing food insecurity interviewed by Hamelin et al. (2002, p.124) described how shame is 'omnipresent' for them; not being able to provide appropriate food for their families leaves them feeling that they '[do] not have a fit place in society'.

7.2.3 Gendered experiences of shame

Child care and foodwork are heavily gendered (DeVault, 1991; Martin and Lippert, 2012) and mothers, in particular, often feel and are held responsible for children's diets and health (DeVault, 1991; Blackburn, 1991; Maher et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2015; O'Connell et al., 2019). As such, women tend to carry the burden of managing and mitigating food insecurity (Blackburn, 1991; Dobson et al., 1995; Maher et al., 2010; Martin and Lippert, 2012). This means that they have an increased risk of feeling ashamed when they are unable to fulfil this role (Walker et al., 2013). This is tied in with how women are measured up against the ideal of a 'good mother' (O'Connell et al., 2019, p.24). One mother in a study by Ali et al. (2018, p.2799) expressed the pain of not being able to feed her son, and how this made her feel 'less of a mom'.

Men, on the other hand, may feel very keenly the weight of constructions of maleness and fatherhood around providing for their families. For example, a participant in a study by Chase and Walker (2012, p.244) talked about how not being able to provide the food for his family made him feel 'like shit.' He said, 'I am meant to be the man […] to take care of the missus and my kids. And I don't, and I hate feeling like I do with myself because of it.' A father in Guinea-Bissau echoed his sentiments. He told World Bank researchers, 'I feel ashamed standing before my children when I have nothing to help feed the family' (Narayan et al., 2000).

In the following section I explore children's experiences of stigma and shame relating to food insecurity, as expressed by the children with whom I did one-to-one interviews.

7.3 'I get embarrassed; other people get embarrassed': Children's experiences of stigma and shame within the context of food insecurity and how they manage them

Children do not experience food insecurity in quite the same way as adults, as previously discussed (see also Fram et al., 2011; Bernal et al., 2012). This makes sense, as in order to buy food for their family parents must first acquire money, either through work or by negotiating the benefits system, and in rich economies at least, children for the most part do not have to (and cannot) do this.[49] As discussed above, an adult's sense of shame can be tied in with their role as caregiver. A child's role is not, customarily, that of a caregiver. (Although, as seen in Chapter 5, children do assume some of the burden of responsibility and initiate strategies in order to mitigate the effects of food insecurity on their parents and siblings.) However, while children might not be feeling the shame of failing to care or provide for their families (to the same extent, anyway), the negative (as judged by society) attribute that is their parents' inability to provide nourishment for their family acts to also render the children the object of stigma: they are contaminated by their parents' 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963), and by the tainted public reputation of the household (O'Connell et al., 2019).

In this section of the chapter I introduce the existing literature on children's experience of stigma and shame in relation to food insecurity. I then explain why I did not use the word shame with my participants. Next, I discuss what I learnt from the children that I interviewed about the stigma attached to being part of a family that is experiencing food insecurity and the shame that arises from this: firstly, that they do what they can to conceal their experiences; secondly, that one of the reasons that they do this is the fear of being bullied or ridiculed; and thirdly, that the children work so hard at hiding their experiences that there is not an accurate awareness of how prevalent food insecurity is among their cohort. Finally, I show some of the other ways that children ascertain that their classmates are struggling financially, despite all the hard work they do to conceal their identities.

7.3.1 Current literature on children's experience of stigma and shame within the context of food insecurity

There has been scant research done with children on their experiences of shame within the particular context of food insecurity (Bernal et al., 2016). It would appear from the limited literature on this topic that this is an especially painful and shameful experience for children. For example, in their 2005 study with eleven to sixteen-year-old low-income children in the

[49] Bernal et al. (2012) found that children in food insecure households in Venezuela found paid work on some occasions in order to supplement the household income.

US, Connell et al. (2005, p.1687) were surprised by the extent of the 'psychological responses, emotional strain, and social ramifications' experienced and reported by children in families struggling to access appropriate and desirable food. Participants described feelings appertaining to or used the actual word 'shame' fourteen times in seven interviews. In another study with eleven to eighteen-year-olds in the US, young people were aware of the stigma attached to not having enough to eat, and talked about how their embarrassment might stop them asking their friends for help (Shtasel-Gottlieb et al., 2015). Children in England, Portugal and Norway, also aged eleven to sixteen years old, interviewed as part of the Families and Food in Hard Times project[50], expressed their shame at not being able to participate fully in normal social activities with their friends. These included getting something to eat from a take-away, or inviting friends round for a meal (O'Connell et al., 2019; O'Connell and Brannen, 2021).

Shame also emerged as a theme in interviews conducted with children and young people on their experiences of food insecurity in Venezuela (Bernal et al., 2012). Bernal et al. (2016) later conducted a survey, also in Venezuela, where they found that food insecure children are more likely to feel shame than their food secure peers, and that children with shame attempt to mitigate their families' experiences with various strategies such as not eating so others can eat and eating at other people's houses.

7.3.2 Talking about stigma and shame

As in Beresford et al.'s (1999) participatory research project which gathered the opinions of people with lived experience of poverty, during the interviews I did not explicitly ask the children who appeared to be experiencing food insecurity whether they felt or had felt shame or embarrassment; I felt that posing these questions could in itself potentially make them feel ashamed because it could imply that I thought they had something *to be ashamed of*. However, I did ask all the participants whether children at the school talked about issues around struggling to get enough of the kind of food that they wanted. I used this question in order to try and understand if there is stigma and shame around this topic, without focussing on their own personal experiences. Some children spoke, unbidden, of their feelings and behaviours relating to shame. As found in research with adults (Scheff, 2000), the word shame was not used by the children; they talked of being embarrassed, or used words such as *private*, and *secrets.*

[50] See https://foodinhardtimes.org/ for further details.

7.3.3 'It's like secrets': concealing their experiences of food insecurity

Hamelin et al (2002) found that, in response to the fear of being judged or labelled, a core characteristic of adults' experience of food insecurity is that they attempt to conceal their situation (see also Zepeda, 2017). This is a strategy used to try and manage a stigmatised identity and the associated shame (Patrick, 2016). I found that this strategy was also employed by the children with whom I spoke in that, as much as possible, they kept hidden from others the reality of their difficulties vis-à-vis food. Amy experienced severe food insecurity in that she sometimes went hungry because there was not always enough food for her to eat. She lived on her own with her dad, who was unemployed at the time. The first time I asked Amy about missing meals or not getting enough food during the interview, she answered no. It was whilst we were going through the questionnaire at the end of the session that she felt able to reveal the truth to me. Even then, she checked that I would keep what she said private before she shared it with me.

AC: Do you ever go hungry because there is not enough food to eat?

Amy: Yeah. And I'm going to say the truth.

AC: That's great.

Amy: Normally I would say no, but yeah.

AC: And how often do you feel hungry?

Amy: Is it private?

AC: It is private; it's totally private Amy. It's your business, yeah? Thank you for sharing it with me but I won't tell anyone that you said it.[51]

Amy: I know you won't.

AC: And how often do you think you feel hungry?

Amy: Once a week, maybe twice.

Her experiences of hunger and reduced food choices were clearly something that she saw as deeply shameful and that she kept hidden.

Katie was also experiencing severe food insecurity, and lived with her mum and dad, four siblings, her auntie and cousin. Her auntie was the only one working, in a discount

[51] At the beginning of each interview I explained that I would like to use the words that the children used but that I would never use their names or say that they had taken part in the research. I asked them for permission to do this.

supermarket, as her mum was looking after her baby brother and her dad was looking for work, but had not been successful. He was 'devastated' that he wasn't able to find a job.

> *AC: Have you had to like, has the shopping run out, and there's no money left, and you…*
>
> *Katie: Yeah, we've done that before because of our... but… [Whispers] I don't think I'm allowed to say this...*
>
> *AC: Well it's private[52] so don't worry.*
>
> *Katie: Ok so yeah, we're on benefits, and we have to keep the budget, inside of the budget. But we are saving money up.*
>
> *AC: Did you not want to tell me that you were on benefits?*
>
> *Katie: No, not really.*
>
> *AC: Why?*
>
> *Katie: Because I really get embarrassed. Because all of these other people work, and are not on benefits, so I get really embarrassed.*

Katie had clearly internalised the dominant narrative about welfare claimants being irresponsible and workshy; she lowered her voice when telling me, and then tried to save face (Goffman, 2003) and manage the stigma by insisting that they were trying to save, i.e. they were careful with their money. This was evidently a source of real shame for her as she repeated that she got 'really embarrassed.'

The topic of not having enough food is laden with such stigma and shame that it is almost taboo. Katie could not even share her experiences with those children who were in the same situation as her:

> *AC: Do you think people talk to each other about when their families are having to have a tight budget [around food] or anything?*
>
> *Katie: No, not really. But I don't normally talk about things like this.*
>
> *AC: Is it ok talking to me?*
>
> *Katie: Yeah.*

[52] See footnote 51, above.

AC: Good. And why don't you think people talk to each other about it? Because lots of people are in the same situation…

Katie: I feel like they're in the same situation as me and they don't really want to talk, to speak to people about it. Because they get really, really embarrassed about it. I get embarrassed; other people get embarrassed.

In a review of qualitative research exploring the lives of low-income children in the UK, Ridge (2011, p.82) highlights the acute fear of children of 'being identified or isolated for being different'. The stigma attached to those families struggling to cover all their needs on restricted incomes – whether they are in work or not – means that having to eat less, or to worry about getting enough food, or not eating the same kind of food as their peers, marked the children out (O'Connell and Brannen, 2021). In an attempt to avoid the possible disgrace and alienation their response was to keep their experiences hidden away. This is illustrated in the following extract. Amy's struggles around food set her apart from the others who 'can afford it' and her response was to keep her experiences to herself. We see that hers is a common response as no-one else talks about these issues either.

AC: So in this school, do people talk to each about if they're struggling with money and food and stuff?

Amy: No. You never get anything out of people here.

AC: Why do you think that's the case Amy?

Amy: I don't know. Because they don't like speaking about it.

AC: Do you and your friends tell each other if you're worrying about anything to do with money or…

Amy: No. Because I keep that to myself, that's important stuff.

AC: And why would you not tell your friends about it?

Amy: Because I think that they wouldn't really care.

AC: Do you not?

Amy: No. Because they can afford it but I can't.

AC: Do you think they can?

Amy: Uh huh.

AC: What about friends that can't.

Amy: They're the same as me.

AC: But if nobody tells each other about it, then nobody knows do they?

Amy: Exactly -- you don't really get anything out of them.

AC: I see. Does everybody keep it all private?

Amy: Uh huh.

Amy explained that she kept her own experiences around money to herself, because it was 'important stuff'. As with Katie, she did not even discuss what she was going through with other children who also had very little money. Whether or not she felt it internally (though it is likely that she did), we can see in the interview above how Amy had absorbed the stigma and shame imposed upon the experience of food insecurity, and tried to protect herself (and possibly her family) from it by never disclosing what was happening for her. The picture is of children fearful of being exposed.

Daisy sometimes had to go to her grandma's for tea as there was nothing in at her own home and no money to get any food. Her family managed on a very low income as her dad had just lost his job. Unlike all the other interviewees, she said that she did talk to her friends when it was a bit hard at home to get all the food they wanted, 'sometimes, […] but not really all the time.' She went on however, to confirm that children at the school didn't share their experiences with each other:

AC: And why don't people talk to each other when they are having a hard time at home, or if it's a bit difficult or they're worrying. Why do you think kids don't talk to each other about it? Any particular reason?

Daisy: No.

AC: Kids in this school don't talk to each other about that stuff?

Daisy: No. Because they're like secrets.

The underlying meaning is that this information was not to be disclosed; these were not fun secrets, to be whispered excitedly from one friend to another, but shameful secrets to be warily guarded and held close to one's chest.

Further evidence that the experience of food insecurity is highly stigmatised and viewed as being shameful comes from children from households which were *not* experiencing problems

obtaining sufficient or appropriate food. Summer, whose family did not appear to have any problems accessing food, but whose parents worked unsociable hours to bring in sufficient income for their large family, acknowledged the stigma and shame attached to experiences of food insecurity. She noted that 'some people, they might be embarrassed a bit, to say [that they are experiencing it].' And Millie, who came from a relatively well-off family, also appreciated that certain information should not be disclosed. She said that her classmates kept their experiences around food 'quite private', because 'they might be embarrassed to say if there's anything going on.'

7.3.4 Fear of public humiliation

As noted earlier, shame is nearly always co-constructed (Chase and Walker, 2012); it is a self-conscious emotion that involves a negative appraisal of the self (Engel, 2017; Ali et al., 2018) but it is more often than not externally imposed (Chase and Walker, 2012; Jo, 2013; Patrick, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2019). The external judgement that inflicts shame can be symbolic, imaginary or real (Lewis, 1971, in Jo, 2013). For instance, and as shown earlier in the excerpt from Katie's interview, the current narrative of personal responsibility around work, welfare and poverty acts as an outside force for shame. In terms of understanding the context of my participants' experiences, O'Connell et al. (2019) argue that the policies instigated after 2010 as part of the Conservative government's austerity agenda have deepened the stigma associated with living in poverty.

We saw in Chapter 4, via the teachers' responses to the holiday hunger survey and the focus groups with children, that this destructive narrative of individual responsibility and therefore failure is also used to frame families' experiences of food insecurity. Summer reproduced this discourse and provided an example of this framing. She told me that toast was provided for free every morning in her school in order to help out children from homes where they 'don't really save enough money to buy their food'. She was subscribing to interpretations of food insecurity as a *behavioural* issue; not of having too low an income to cover basic needs but rather of an inability to manage money well. This is in line with one of the food poverty truths (Number 4: You could eat better/more if you managed your money better) that I discussed in Chapter 4. The imputation is of food insecurity being the parents' fault -- that they are not able to feed their children properly because they are lazy/stupid/uncaring or, in this case, unable to save money. This narrative represents an incessant negative judgement of families experiencing household food insecurity that clearly has a deleterious effect. On top of this,

however, the children I spoke to reported the very real threat of the imposition of shame and public humiliation by others in the form of bullying or teasing.

Thomas, who regularly ate less in order that his mum could have some food, and who had on occasion gone without eating for a whole day, also did not share his experiences with his friends, and explained that he was fearful of being laughed at.

AC: Do you talk to your friends about stuff at home?

Thomas: Nuh uh.

AC: Why not?

Thomas: Because they might start laughing at me.

AC: Do you think they might?

Thomas: Yeah.

AC: Do you think everybody feels like that?

Thomas: I don't know. Maybe.

Ava also reported that people didn't talk about the issue of food insecurity because they might be teased: 'they might have less than some other people, and the other people who have more might say, "Ha ha you haven't got that much money".' As does Emma: 'they feel like they'll get laughed at and stuff like that'. Holly said that 'they just feel sad and they don't want people to know that they don't have enough money. Because then they'll tease them and everything.'

Charlie was very clear that letting others know that you don't have enough food was not a good idea because you would be bullied:

AC: Do you think there are kids that are really struggling and don't get enough to eat in this school?

Charlie: I don't know actually.

AC: Do people talk about it?

Charlie: No. Because no-one's actually talked about that they don't get any food because, if you talked about that, you know you're going to get bullied. Because in school if you say something wrong, you get bullied instantly.

It is interesting that he described talking about not having enough food as *saying something wrong*. It is almost as if it is a transgression. This is an indicator of food insecurity's status as shameful.

During my interview with Harry, who had recently moved to the UK from Eastern Europe, we discussed whether his mum would make use of the stall outside of the school, on which are out-of-date foodstuffs that can be taken for free or on a pay-as-you-feel (PAYF) basis. Harry explained that he has in fact instructed her never to do so if she came to pick him up, as he was afraid he would be teased if she did.

> *AC: And when she came did she used to take the food?*
>
> *Harry: When she came I actually said to my mum, ''don't" because I don't know. Because here the school is not that good people. Some children do not have really good manners. So I told her because after they might say, "oh you don't have money" or something, so I told my mum no.*

Living in fear of being ridiculed or bullied, it is no surprise that the children worked hard to keep their situation concealed from their peers.

7.3.5 Reduced awareness of food insecurity amongst their peers

The children were so proficient at keeping their experiences hidden that some of those with whom I spoke said that they did not know if there were any children at their school struggling to get the food that they want. Having heard first-hand and being told by the teachers of the levels of food insecurity within families at the school, I was surprised by this response; I had made an assumption that because the school was situated in such a deprived area and so many of the children came from very low-income households, that all the children would be aware of each other's struggles. Charlotte and Amelia were the only ones who said that they thought that there are other children in that situation within the school. Evie said 'I think they've all got enough food, but I don't know.' When I asked Lily if any of her friends worried about food, she said, 'I don't think so, but people probably in other years but I don't think so in my class.' (In fact, I know from interviewing them that at least two of her classmates went hungry on occasion, and two others worried about getting enough food.) Megan also said she didn't know if her friends all got enough to eat or not. Emily only knew of '[o]nly one person' who was struggling '[b]ut it's not a friend'. Lucy said that she had 'no clue' if there were any children in school finding it difficult to get enough money for all the food they wanted. Oliver recognised that there were probably some children struggling with food, but none of his

friends were, as far as he knew. The relative invisibility of food insecurity within the cohort indicates how good the children are at concealing their experiences, and signifies to what extent this is a taboo topic.

7.3.6 Other indicators of food insecurity and poverty

The effort to manage the stigma and shame by keeping their discredited identities (Goffman, 1963) hidden does not work in all cases, however. One of the first studies on children's experiences of food insecurity (Connell et al. 2005) found that children do not discuss their experiences with one another but they ascertain whether one of their peers is struggling to get enough or appropriate food via certain behaviours. This was also the case with the participants of my study. These indicators, discussed below, included what children ate and how they behaved during school dinnertime; their school uniform; and particular behaviours.

Dinnertime at school

Children with less money for food were identified as such by the fact that they had school dinners rather than a packed lunch, or by their behaviour in the dinner hall. My participants were in Key Stage 2, the latter years of primary school, which means that free school meals were not universally available[53], but could only be accessed by those children from families on very low incomes. The general consensus among the children was that school dinners were pretty horrible, and so a packed lunch was held up as the ideal lunch option. Those children on school dinners therefore stood out, and as shown in the following comments from my participants, their behaviours revealed the identities that they worked so hard to obscure. Emma said of a friend of hers that she knew that her family was struggling with money for food, 'because when we're eating and we've all got packed lunches, she just looks, and she looks very sad while she's looking at us eating.' Sometimes Emma brought in food for her friend. Charlotte said that she recognised the children who perhaps weren't getting much food at home because they 'just don't get really picky about what they're eating for lunch and things.' These children's restricted circumstances removed the luxury of choice from them and this set them apart from others. Freya described a situation wherein some children asked others with desirable packed lunches for some of their food, thus exposing themselves as being food insecure.

[53] All pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 (Key Stage 1) in England are entitled to a free school lunch, as part of the Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) policy that was introduced in 2014. See Chapter 10 of O'Connell and Brannen (2021) for a comparative discussion of children's experiences of school meals in the UK, Portugal and Norway.

AC: So do you think that there are people in the school who are really struggling?

Freya: Uh huh.

AC: And how can you tell?

Freya: If you're on packed lunches, they would ask for food. That kind of tells.

AC: What do you mean if you're on packed lunches they'd ask for food?

Freya: You know I'm on packed lunches, and people say, please can I have some of your food?

AC: Oh, they'd ask you for food? So it's people on school dinners, and they ask for some of yours?

Freya: Uh huh.

O'Connell and Brannen (2021) found that the arrangements around food provision in UK schools can in fact highlight differences in children's socio-economic positions, and my research corresponds with their finding by showing that school lunchtimes are potentially a time of potential exposure and alienation for those children experiencing food insecurity[54].

School uniform

In a review of the literature on children's experiences of poverty, Ridge (2009, p.2) found that one of the key issues highlighted by children was 'visible signs of poverty and difference'. One way that children are identified as being different is by the clothes and shoes or (especially) trainers that they wear (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007; Hooper et al., 2007; Main, 2014; Main and Bradshaw, 2014; Hill et al., 2016). As well as wanting to fit in (Main, 2014), wearing the 'right' kind of clothes can also offer some protection from bullying (Elliot and Leonard, 2004 in Ridge, 2011). As found in previous studies (Ridge, 2002; Crowley and Vulliamy, 2007), wearing a school uniform – as they do in this school -- does not shield children from being judged by their clothing.

Millie, for instance, said she could tell if people were struggling at home because 'sometimes they come to school not as smartly dressed.' Amelia and Ellie both remarked that they could identify those people who were in poverty because they didn't wear uniform to school.

[54] See Hamelin et al., 2002 for a discussion of feelings of alienation among food insecure adults in Quebec.

Charlotte assessed whether her classmates were having money difficulties at home by whether or not they had a PE kit and if they wore the same items of uniform all the time. This issue of only having one set of uniform was also picked up by Holly. She talked very movingly about how this restricted a girl in her class's ability to have fun because she couldn't get her uniform dirty. Holly also said that it was possible to tell when someone was struggling at home because of their demeanour; they appeared sad.

> *AC: And do you think that there are kids who are poor in this school? Really struggling? And if they don't talk to you about it, how do you know that they are?*
>
> *Holly: You can just see from where they are, and what they're wearing.*
>
> *AC: From what they're wearing? And what do you mean when you say 'where they are?'*
>
> *Holly: Like, sometimes they feel sad, and just come in really…*
>
> *AC: Oh, the way that they are? Can you? And what do you mean by what they're wearing?*
>
> *Holly: Like sometimes they don't wear uniform, and somebody in my class only has one pair of uniform. And she wears it every day.*
>
> *AC: How do you think that makes her feel?*
>
> *Holly: She's always trying to not get stuff messy. We just have money to buy some more so we can just get stuff messy and be fun.*
>
> *AC: So do you think she's restricted by that then? [Holly nods] And how do you think she feels about that?*
>
> *Holly: She feels like 'why can't I just get it mucky?*
>
> *AC: So she's trying to be careful?*
>
> *Holly: Yeah.*

By not being able to afford multiple sets of school uniform, Holly's classmate was excluded from normal activities and her difference was readily apparent to those around her. These judgements based on clothing did not necessarily function to characterise the child in question as being food insecure, but illustrate perhaps, that for the children in the school, all symbols of deprivation came under the same banner of coming from a home where there was not enough

money. Though they lived in or near[55] one of the ten per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, for the children in my study poverty is the ultimate tainted attribute (Goffman, 1963). Summer demonstrated this when she qualified her comments about why children needed to eat the free toast provided in a morning. She said, 'I'm not trying to say that people are, you know poor, but…'

7.4 The construction of the other as a protection mechanism

In Chapter 4, I discussed the focus group participants' tendency to present as other their friends and school-mates who were struggling financially; in some cases this included the use of negative stereotypes. I argued that this is a response to the stigma and judgement attached to poverty (Sections 4.3 and 4.4). Othering can be a reaction to shame (Walker et al., 2013) and so it is of no surprise that the children I interviewed demonstrated a desire to distance themselves from the highly stigmatised experience of food insecurity. In fact, the children did not participate in negative characterisations (unlike their peers who took part in the focus groups), but instead deflected the shame attached to this discredited identity by presenting me with extreme versions of people who are food insecure (see also Sutton, 2009).

When I asked Ruby, who was experiencing food insecurity, whether she knew of people who were having a hard time getting all the food they wanted, she did not talk about classmates, or people in her community, but suggested instead the example of 'people in Africa'. In offering experiences of poverty and food insecurity that were much more extreme than her own, Ruby was establishing a hierarchy, with someone else, an other, at the bottom. This allowed her to distance herself from the unwanted identity and retain her dignity.

> *AC: Do you know families that really struggle with food, here at this school? Or…*
>
> *Ruby: I know! In different countries.*
>
> *AC: In different countries? Do you know people here in England? Have you got friends …?*
>
> *Ruby: People in Africa struggle.*

When I asked whether they knew people who were struggling with food, six different children mentioned homeless people, 'poor people in town' or 'people on the streets'. Charlie told me

[55] One family had moved out of the neighbourhood to a more affluent area of the city, in order that the children could go to a particular high school which their mum viewed as being 'better' than the ones local to their school. They were commuting to this school until it was time to go to high school. All the other participants lived nearby.

that ‘people on the street don’t have any money – all they’ve got is like a blanket and a cup of coffee’. Amy described how people in town had to ‘live on the streets and die. Very sad.’ As with Ruby, these children were constructing an ‘us’ and ‘them’, with the ‘them’, in this case homeless people, being positioned further down the social scale (Chase and Walker, 2012).

Daisy lived in a household with very little income – neither of her parents were working at that time and she described occasions when there was very little or sometimes no food available. She also engaged in othering by talking about ‘the poor people’. In doing this she was positioning herself as *not* poor.

> *AC: So if you've got some food, do you ever not eat it all even though you want to, so you can share it with other people?*
>
> *Daisy: I say, “Mum I don’t want this bit because I'm full. So you don’t have to waste it, can you please just put it like in a tin, and send it to the poor people”.*

It is interesting that of the children engaging in othering, some were experiencing food insecurity, and some were not. The stigma and shame attributed to food insecurity is so potent that all the children, including those who are food secure, endeavoured to distance themselves from it.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that the children were fully cognisant of the stigma assigned to the experience of food insecurity, and felt keenly the deep shame that arises from being burdened with this disgraced identity. The stigmatisation of food insecurity derives from contemporary understandings that those families with very little money find themselves in this situation as a result of personal failings, rather than structural ones.

In order to protect themselves from the corrosive emotion of shame, which can have enduring consequences, the children attempted to conceal their situation, primarily by not speaking about it to anyone. As well as the symbolic shame imposed upon them via the negative rhetoric about those struggling on low incomes used by politicians, the media (Pantazis, 2016), and even their teachers, they feared the very real public exposure and emotional injury in the form of bullying by other children in their school.

The subject of food insecurity has become taboo to such an extent it is hidden from view, so that many children were not aware that their classmates were going hungry or were anxious

about getting enough food. However, there were other indicators that a child might be from a home that is struggling with money: behaviours during dinnertime, and school uniform (or a lack of one). In an attempt to disclaim and protect themselves from this shameful identity, children created an other by offering extreme examples of people experiencing food insecurity - homeless people or 'Africans'.

Research into child food insecurity has, for the large part, focussed on collecting data on the material aspects of the experience, i.e. how much and what kind of food people are eating. There has been less emphasis on providing insight into the non-material impacts, although the Families and Food in Hard Times study (O'Connell and Brannen, 2021) is a noteworthy exception. The findings presented in this chapter confirm that there are significant psychological and emotional consequences for children of this element of the wider experience of poverty. In terms of policy and responses to the current food insecurity crisis in the UK, it is very important to take into account the feelings of shame that can be experienced by children living in a household which is not able to access appropriate food or who are anxious about doing so. Proposed responses should take into consideration the possible negative emotional consequences of food-based 'solutions' that mark the child out as being from a household that is struggling financially, for example Pay-As-You-Feel food stalls or identifiable free school meals. The focus on improving access to appropriate food should be on upstream solutions, i.e. providing a household income from work and/or welfare that enables families to buy and cook food in a way that respects their cultural, social and emotional needs (Bernal et al., 2016), as well as nutritional requirements.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I start by providing a summary of the thesis. I then address and answer directly the research questions one by one. A section on the contribution that this thesis makes to the literature is followed by a discussion of the limitations of my research. Finally I present suggestions for future areas of research and close with the possible implications for policy of my findings.

8.2 General overview of the thesis

This PhD study has explored primary school-aged children's lived experiences of food insecurity and has shown that these are embedded within and cannot be separated from the broader experience of living in poverty. Food is crucial for physical health, and is also a central element of our social interactions and culture (O'Connell et al., 2019). Because of its status there are powerful societal expectations relating to how and what we eat (Townsend, 1979) and how we access food, and so the experience of food insecurity can be particularly damaging. However, as shown in this thesis, the fundamental problem is not one of a lack of food, but of a lack of money.

This thesis shines a light on the harmful effects of the experience of food insecurity on children's mental health. Parents do all they can to shield their children from its effects but living in a household which is not able to access all the food needed or wanted without the use of strategies (or with them) leaves children feeling anxious and insecure. The children are very aware of the family's economic status, and shoulder the emotional burden of worrying about food alongside their parents. Their state can be understood as one of precarity – their food-related experiences are structurally produced and are located within and are caused by the wider issues of poverty, precarious labour conditions and a punitive and inadequate welfare system. This precarious condition leads to the children feeling persistently worried and unsafe even when their diets are not affected. This is a crucial finding with implications for policy.

Despite their young age, children are conscious of the discredited identity that is conferred upon those experiencing poverty and of the particular stigma attached to food insecurity. They feel deep shame as a result. They are aware of and replicate the powerful, pervasive and corrosive narrative that lays the responsibility for poverty at the door of those people experiencing it. The stigma and the shame that results from it are so powerful that the experience of food insecurity is almost taboo amongst the children.

Children retain and assert their agency within the constraints and barriers of living on low incomes by using strategies of their own to mitigate the household's experiences of food insecurity, taking part in othering and disowning poverty.

The following section returns to and addresses the research questions.

8.3 Revisiting the research questions

This thesis is built around a core research question:

How do British primary school-aged children experience food insecurity?

This question acted as the scaffolding for the study, and a number of sub-questions provided a frame that supported the investigation of the different dimensions of children's experiences of food insecurity. In this section I shall respond to each question in turn.

How do primary school-aged children identify food insecurity? How do they discuss it, think and talk about it?

The children with whom I spoke -- in the focus groups, the interviews, and around the school - did not identify food insecurity as a distinct and discrete experience. They talked about food when I asked them about it, but did not separate it from other experiences that arise out of not having much or enough money. This makes sense – as discussed in the Introduction, food insecurity is an artificial construct, and is a description of a range of experiences relating to food that are one dimension of what it means to live on a low income.

The question of how children discuss, think and talk about food insecurity was addressed directly in Chapter 4, and was answered using the data collected in the two focus groups that I undertook with children aged nine to eleven. The children were from a school situated in one of the ten per cent most deprived areas in the country and were all from homes on low or very low incomes. When I talked to them about families at school that were struggling to obtain enough food, the influence of narratives of poverty being a result of individual failings was very clear. The children replicated discourses of people being deserving and undeserving, and being individually responsible for their economic situation. For example, they criticised the choices of other families at the school and described them wasting money on 'the wrong thing' rather than food; in the case of the fictional family that we discussed they described them as *lazy.*

The children distanced themselves from the stigmatised identity assigned to people living on low incomes by engaging in othering and rejecting the label of poverty. For example, when

discussing people in their school or community the word ‘poor’ was only used once in both focus groups. In the one-to-one interviews the children also created an other in order to protect themselves: when I asked about people who were struggling with food lots of the children mentioned ‘poor people’, ‘people in Africa’ or homeless people. In talking about people experiencing extreme poverty and hardship the children were creating a hierarchy, with them above, and the others, below.

What are the material impacts on primary-school aged children of living in households that are experiencing food insecurity?

This question asks how the children’s diets are affected by living in a household that is experiencing food insecurity. In Chapter 5 I presented examples of children having to go without food, but this, amongst my participants, was thankfully relatively rare. Children described the pain of hunger, and how not getting enough to eat made them feel tired. More children reported having to eat a bit less, or eating a less varied diet. The children described not being able to afford as much fruit and vegetables as they would have liked. The reason more children weren’t impacted materially was the huge amount of work their parents put in and the wide range of strategies they used. Children described eating at their grandparents’ houses or receiving support from friends and neighbours. They talked about careful budgeting, shopping and bulk cooking, and were also aware that their parents ate less or went without food so that they and their siblings could eat more. Children showed in-depth knowledge of the household income and outgoings, and were very aware of the stress that their parents felt, having to manage on limited resources. To support their parents, and as a way of asserting their agency, the children take an active role, adopting strategies of their own, including eating less and offering their pocket money to buy food (see also Lister, 2015 on forms of agency exercised by people in poverty).

The tactics used by parents and children to mitigate the food insecurity of the household conceal the reality of their situation; their condition is one of precarity. This precarious existence, and the impact of this on children’s mental health, is not sufficiently acknowledged in definitions or measures of food insecurity. This means that the full impact of household food insecurity on children is hidden.

What are the non-material, i.e. emotional and psychosocial impacts on primary-school aged children of living in households that are experiencing food insecurity?

Living in a household that is experiencing food insecurity on any level can have significant and harmful effects on children’s emotional and mental health. The ‘deep unpredictability’ (Parker

and Pharoah, 2008, in Lister, 2015, p.147) of living in poverty led to my participants feeling fundamentally insecure and this caused ongoing stress and anxiety. Not knowing whether there would be enough or any food to eat was particularly damaging for the children and made them feel deeply unsafe. The effects of this could be long-lasting, and some children continued to feel a level of anxiety around food even when the family had a steady and adequate level of income. Even those children whose diets were unaffected felt anxious and insecure as they witnessed the work and strategies that were required of their parents to maintain the standard of living that they had, and they were aware of how precarious their situation is.

The stigma that is conferred upon those experiencing food insecurity is such that the topic was almost taboo – the extent to which it was not discussed meant that children were not aware of its existence amongst their school friends. The children felt the profound shame that is associated with it. As has been found with adults experiencing poverty, in order to detach themselves from the stigmatised and shameful condition they passed it on to others (Chase and Walker, 2012; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). They did this by judging children and families within their community and by presenting real hardship as existing elsewhere (see also Lister, 2015).

Recognising the impact on children's mental health of the anxiety, stigma and shame that are associated with the lived experience of food insecurity is key to understanding how they are affected. It is not currently sufficiently considered when policy-makers are devising 'solutions' to child food insecurity.

What are the best methods to use to learn about children's experiences of food insecurity?

Rather than presenting a defined set of methods to use when researching children's experiences of food insecurity, what I have learnt from conducting this study is that it is the *approach* that is important. From an ethical standpoint, and in line with legislation that requires that children are consulted about matters pertaining to them (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3 for details), any research design should place children's agency front and centre. Issues around power, possible harm (however slight) and meaningful consent (and more specifically, being able to withdraw consent at any time) should be primary considerations.

Children within the age group that I worked with (nine to eleven years) are fully capable of expressing themselves and describing their lives and feelings. They may use different language to that used by adult researchers however, or understand concepts differently, and this is why to truly capture children's subjective experiences it is necessary to create a (physical and

psychological) space in which a researcher can explain questions fully, clarify meaning, and confirm that the child has understood. For this reason surveys and other quantitative methods are not appropriate ways to gather data on children's experiences. Building a relationship will enable the child to trust and feel comfortable with the researcher; this will then lead not only to better data, but also to a more positive experience for the child. This relationship need not be a long-term or very close one, but if the researcher can spend time in the same environment and become someone trusted by the community within which the research is taking place, this will help to break down barriers and allow the child to feel safe in the encounter and safe to share their story.

8.4 Contribution to research

This thesis addresses a gap in the literature and provides an important and timely contribution to the literature in the field of children's experiences of food insecurity. It also adds to existing knowledge on the impact on children of living in poverty.

The study is the first in the UK to explore the emotional and psychosocial impacts of food insecurity with primary school-aged children, and indeed, adds to the international literature in this area by highlighting the ongoing anxiety, worry and stigma that children feel living in financially vulnerable households, even when their diets remain unaffected. This is an important finding as this outcome of household food insecurity is not captured by government surveys in the UK and so remains hidden.

My presentation of the emotional burden of dealing with food insecurity and the resultant anxiety as precarity is theoretically novel, in the way that it correlates the children's psycho-emotional condition with the family's economic status and places it firmly within a politically produced structural context i.e. the UK's labour market environment and welfare system.

A significant contribution to the wider sociological literature around contemporary dominant narratives is made in the original finding that children as young as nine to eleven years old have absorbed and engage with discourses of individual responsibility for food insecurity and poverty. That these narratives have filtered down to children of this age demonstrates the reach and degree to which this narrative has been embedded and normalised within UK society. The food poverty truths deployed by the teachers (Chapter 4) provide further empirical evidence of the power of this discourse and as such extend and advance the knowledge in this field.

A small number of studies have found evidence of adults (Lister, 2015 pp.143/4 for examples of adult studies) and adolescents (O'Connell et al., 2019) in poverty othering others in similar economic circumstances as a way of distancing themselves from the tainted identity that accompanies being in poverty. This study provides the first empirical evidence of this phenomenon extending to children of primary school age, and illustrates the extent to which the experience of food insecurity is deeply stigmatised.

In terms of methodological contributions, in foregrounding issues such as power dynamics and meaningful consent, this thesis builds on Ridge's seminal work (2002) done with children on child poverty. My research illustrates the importance of talking directly to children as opposed to proxies, and of recognising children as the experts on children, and provides evidence for a child-centred approach to researching child food insecurity and poverty. It is only by using the approach outlined in Chapter 3 that I was able to hear children's stories and experiences in all their richness, and without these I would have produced a very different thesis.

8.5 Limitations of the research

As explained in Chapter 3, the research was undertaken in a school chosen because of its location within one of the ten percent most deprived communities in the UK. Although this did not mean that all my participants were definitely experiencing food insecurity, it did mean that there was an increased likelihood of them living in a low-income household, and that many of the people residing in their community were living in poverty. This meant that the children with whom I spoke had a particular perspective. My research is limited, therefore, in that it does not include the experiences of children who might be from a very low-income household but go to a school in which their peers come from much wealthier households. These children may or may not have different experiences to those of my participants.

Although I did not limit my discussions with the children in terms of their experiences over a certain time period, and in some cases talked about what had happened when they were younger, it is possible that an even richer picture of their lived experiences would be gained via a longitudinal study. I was unable to do the longitudinal research with parent and child pairs that I had planned due to difficulty recruiting participants, as recounted in Chapter 3, so am not able to see what if any differences in the data there would have been.

8.6 Future areas for research

Following on from the previous section, in order to further expand our understanding of children's lived experiences of food insecurity research, it would be useful to talk to children who are at risk of food insecurity, but who live in higher income communities. Much care would have to be taken during recruitment, however, to ensure that participants are not marked out as being in poverty by their involvement in the research.

Additionally, a qualitative longitudinal study, that walks alongside children and their families over an extended period of time, may provide an opportunity to more fully understand the dynamic nature of food insecurity, and capture in more detail its origins.

Finally, exploring the issue of food insecurity with children using a participatory action research approach would truly place the children at the heart of the research process and may yield some ideas for powerful ways of achieving change in the areas that they feel are the priority.

8.7 Implications for policy

Children experience food insecurity as a result of inadequate or precarious household income; the problem will not be solved with food-based interventions. I close this thesis with three policy recommendations:

1. The government must ensure that families have sufficient and predictable income based on Minimum Income Standards (MIS) (https://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/crsp/minimum-income-standard/) so that they can always access a nutritious, tasty and varied diet in a way that is socially appropriate. This can be achieved by people being paid the real living wage with decent and protected working conditions, alongside a benefits system that enables people to achieve the standard of living set out in the MIS at all times.

2. The current survey used for measuring food insecurity in the UK is far too blunt an instrument to accurately capture the real situation regarding food insecurity either on a household, child or individual level. It does not recognise the work that must be put in by the different family members to mitigate the impact of low income on a household's food security. It does not measure the significant psychosocial effects of the experience for children. Children and young people should be surveyed directly, and the existing survey should be amended to try to capture all the different experiences and dimensions outlined in this thesis. I would note that a survey is a compromise in that it is possible to gain a larger data set, but would not capture the richness of data that is possible using the methods I have outlined in this thesis.

3. Lister (2015, p.157) challenges policy-makers to generate anti-poverty policies that are 'dignity-promoting'. This is about recognising that systems supposedly of support can in themselves generate or heighten feelings of shame in those accessing them. This issue should be taken in to account at the beginning of any process of generating policies to tackle child food insecurity, and the question asked: how would this make children (and their parents) feel?

I leave the last word to Jack, aged ten, who has some great policy recommendations:

> *AC: So tell me, if you were like the Prime Minister or something, what would you do to help people in your mum's situation, where money's a bit hard, and you are struggling a bit. What do you think needs to happen?*
>
> *Jack: No rent; you just get houses for free!*
>
> *AC: Houses for free! That'd be good.*
>
> *Jack: And then, no wait, I've got it - everything for free but junk food and that is a bit, it costs, but not that much. It costs about five quid or something. But however for, well, healthy stuff, it can be free, so that people can actually get vegetables, fruit, all the stuff, and then they can actually help their children, family, friends..*
>
> *AC: That's a good idea. And any other ideas to help people who are struggling with money?*
>
> *Jack: Have infinite money.*
>
> *AC: Infinite money! I like that!*
>
> *Jack: Everyone can get a cash machine! Oh, I would like [funny voice] infinite money please! Oh yeah, and when you come in your house, it's like... money!!*

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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1: Schedule of activities for children attending focus groups

Schedule for school visit on 7.11.16		
Time	**Activity**	**Location / further details**
9.00	Meet at school	Mr X (Gatekeeper), Mrs Y (Teaching Assistant), 12 children
9.30	Arrive at university	Meet Annie at entrance to Uni – she will indicate the way to the parking space
9.30 – 10.30	Tour of university	Student trained to do tours to lead us around
10.30 – 11.30	Focus Group 1	Room 7.41 School of Geography Foyer Garstang Building 6 participants + Mr X + AC + research assistant
10.30 – 11.30	Group 2 – bridge building competition	Activities led by student, accompanied by Mrs Y

Schedule for school visit 7.11.16 (Continued)

11.30 – 12.30	Focus Group 2	Room 7.41 School of Geography Foyer Garstang Building 6 participants + Mrs Y + AC
11.30 – 12.30	Group 1 – bridge building competition	Activities led by student, accompanied by Mr X + research assistant
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch	Packed lunches in the Refectory
13.30	Leave university	

10.2 Appendix 2: Session plan for focus groups conducted 7 November 2016

Session Plan for Focus Groups

BEFORE STARTING:

Make sure everyone has been to the toilet.

Room preparation

Two outlines of houses stuck to walls. One is labelled Hamza & Alina, the other Chloe & Sammy.

All questions printed off and laminated.

Table in middle of room: different coloured post-its, pens, pencils, water jug and glasses, plates of fruit.

Part 1 – INTRODUCTION

(a) Welcome and name game

Name activity: say your name and think of a food that begins with the same letter as your name.

Annie and Pam to go first.

e.g. I am Annie and I am an apple!

I am Pam and I am a potato!

(b) Why we/they are here

Script:

I've invited you all here because I need your help! I am going to be doing some interviews with kids the same age as you – does everyone know what interviews are? (ask one child to explain)

During the interviews I'm going to be talking to the children and asking questions about stuff to do with food; about perhaps not always getting to eat the food they would like, or as much as they would like, or perhaps worrying about food.

I think you kids are the experts when it comes to kids! And today I would like to hear what you think about people not always be able to afford the food they would really like to eat, or maybe as much as they would like.

I'm also going to ask your advice on how to do the interviews with kids – to find out what you think are good questions to ask, and stuff like that.

Is that OK?

There are a few things I want to explain before we start.

GUIDELINES

- This focus group will take a bit under an hour.
- First of all, it's really important to know that you are all happy to be here, and want to be here. I want you to know that you can stop at any time. It's totally up to you if you want to talk or join in or not.
- So you might want to tell me about your friends or people you know at school. If you can. Please just say 'a child in my school' or 'someone I know'
- Everything that is said in this room is private – might use what you say but no-one will ever know that it is you that said it.

Part 2 – CHILDREN'S VIEWS OF FOOD INSECURITY

Objective: to gain an understanding of how children aged 9 – 11 understand food insecurity and what language they use when discussing it.

In this section of the focus group, the children will be asked to describe the different experiences of two different families:

1) Hamza and Alina's family can easily afford what they need
2) Chloe and Sammy's family are having a tough time with money

Hamza and Alina's family will be discussed first, then Chloe and Sammy's.

Activity: Houses and mapping

Script 1

Hamza and Alina live with their parents in this house. Their family doesn't have loads and loads of money , but they can easily buy everything they need. They have a car, and often have enough money to buy treats.

Script 2

Chloe and Sammy live in this house with their parents. Sometimes their family has trouble affording everything that they need. Especially in the past year, it's been difficult to find enough money for anything special.

Questions for identifying food patterns

I'd like you to tell me about what you think the family does about food

- What do you think the kids have for breakfast?
- What food is in the cupboards and the fridge?
- When they eat their tea, what is it like? Do they all get the same amount?

Where and how does the family get its food?

Aim

To create a map illustrating the different ways and places in which the family obtains food.

Explanation

A piece of paper is stuck on the wall with the words 'where do they get their food?' written in the middle. The children write ideas down on post-its and stick them onto the map

Prompts

Where do they get their food?

How do they get there?

Is it far?

Do they get a lot at a time or a little?

When both families have been done….

Script 3

Chloe and Sammy's mum gets benefits because she is looking for a job but hasn't been able to find one. She's just told them that her benefits have been stopped for a month

and this means there will be some changes around the house. Their mum said that until the money starts again, they will have a hard time buying all the things they used to.

Questions about coping mechanisms

What do you think Chloe and Sammy's parents could do if there isn't enough money to buy much food?

- Can you think of any places that they could go for help?
- What other things could they do?
- How do you think Chloe and Sammy feel about that?
- Can you describe what mealtimes are like for them now?

Part 3 – CHILDREN'S ADVICE RE INTERVIEWS ON EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Objective: to gather children's opinions on how best to conduct one-to-one interviews on a sensitive topic with children

Activity

Questions face time on table.

Children to pick one question up at a time and read it out.

Prompts

- Is the question easy to understand?
- Could the question be asked in a different way?
- Is it ok to ask a child that question?

Can you think of any other questions?

Can you think of ways to make kids feel relaxed and comfortable in an interview?

Are there other ways to encourage them to share their experiences with me that don't involve asking questions?

- Could they do some drawing? How would that work?
- Are there any games that we could play?
- What would be a good room or space to do interviews in?
    - Would kids feel relaxed in the nurture room?

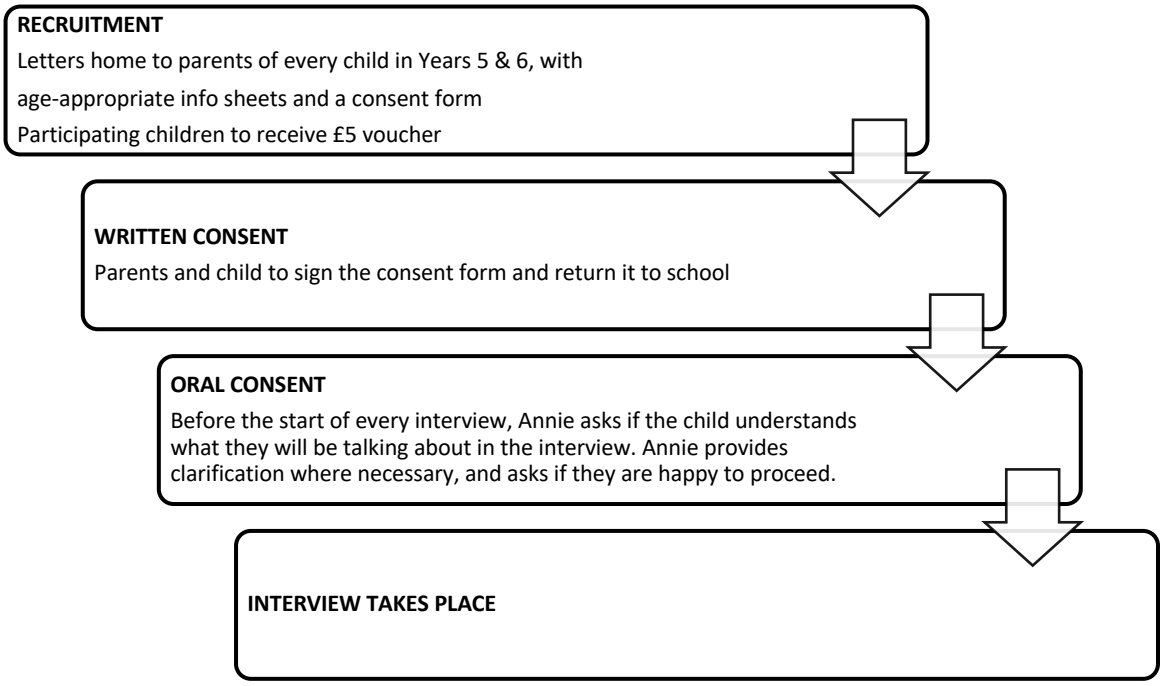
- What about doing something side-by-side, e.g. making food, doing a painting or a puzzle?

IN BETWEEN SESSIONS:

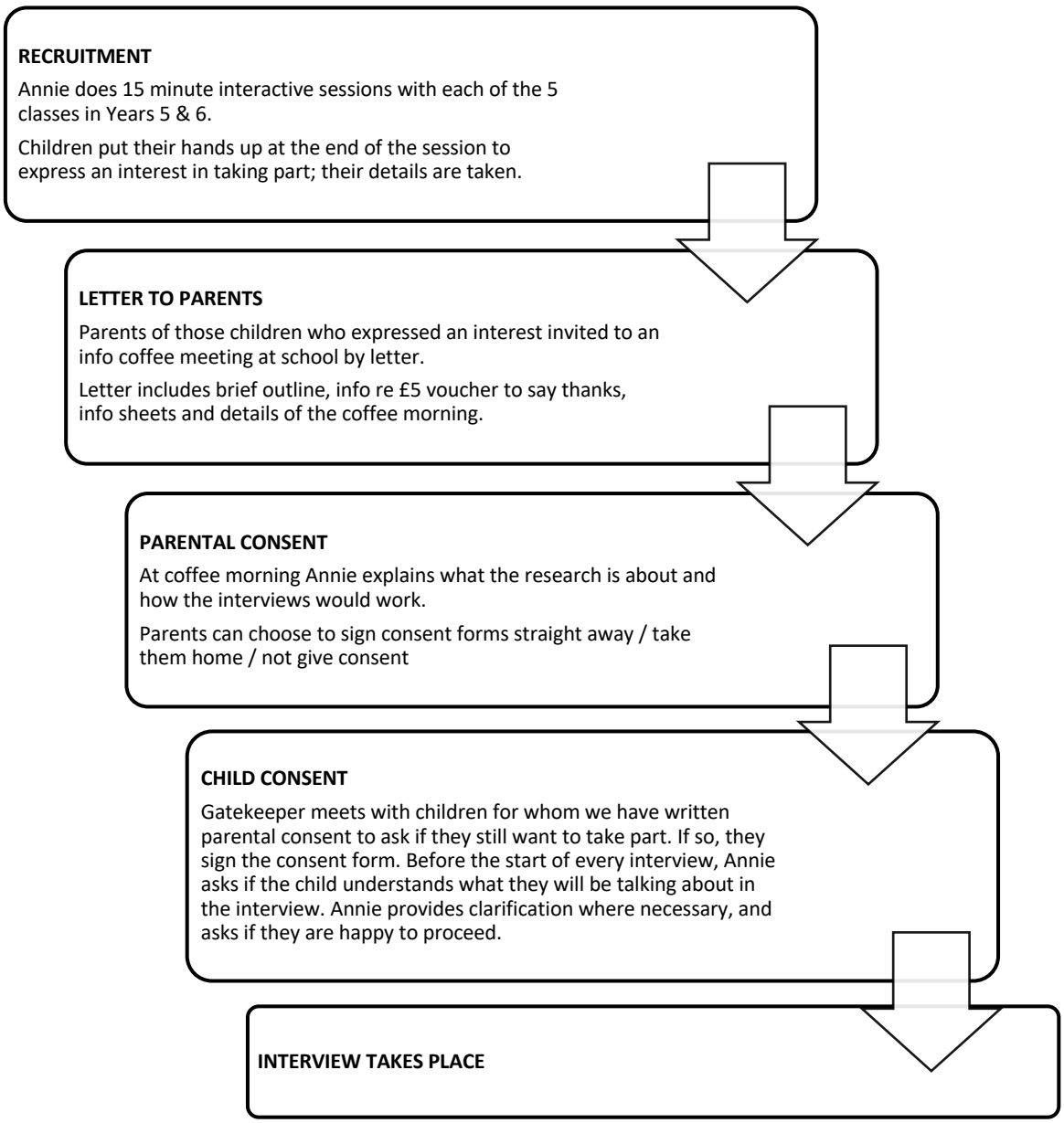
Pam (Research Assistant) to take note of all the questions that the children think will work / take a photo on her phone.

10.3 Appendix 3: Recruitment and consent plans for interviews

A) First recruitment and consent plan for interviews at Foxglove Primary, at October 2016

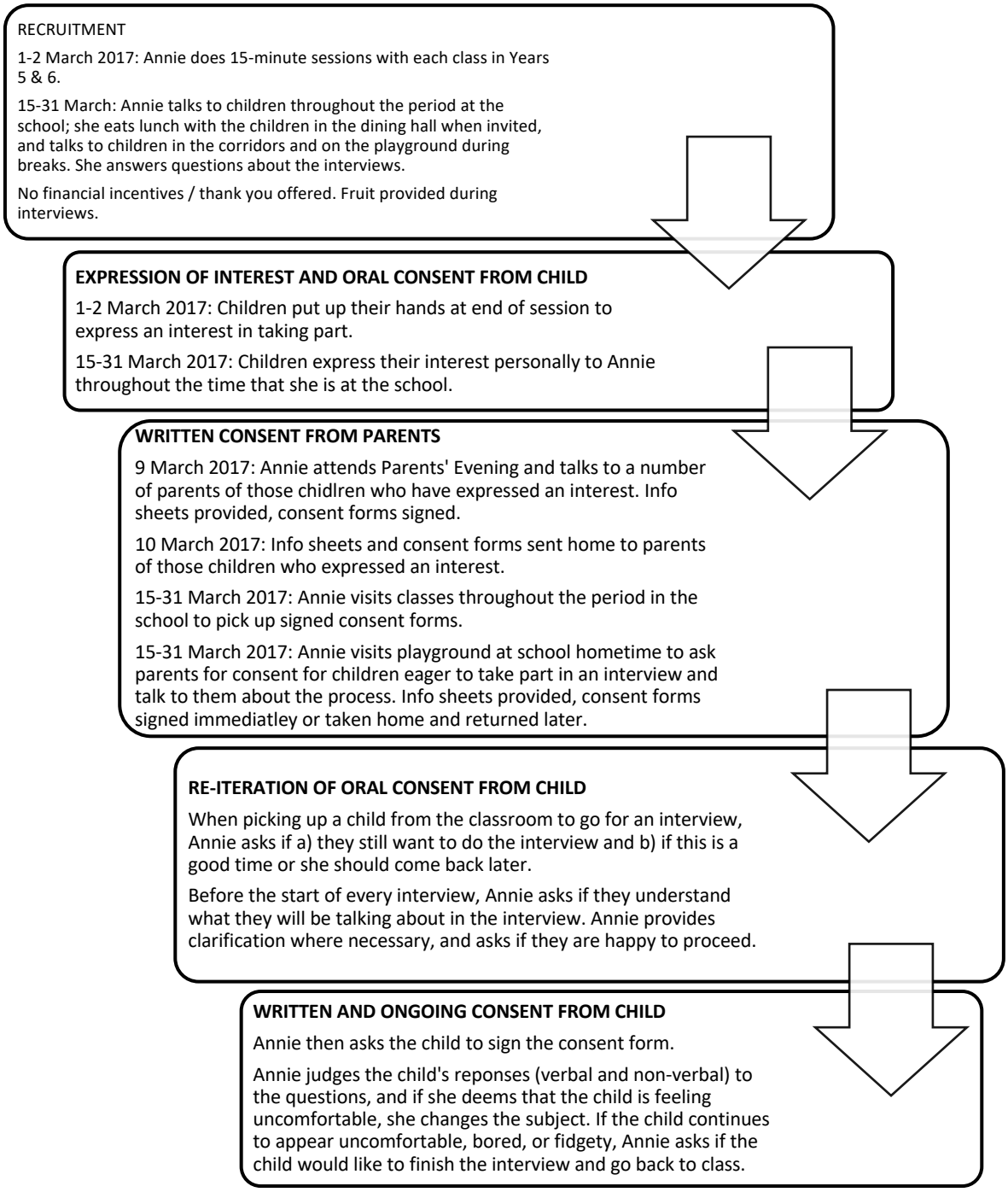


B) Second recruitment and consent plan for interviews at Foxglove Primary, at January/February 2017


RECRUITMENT
Annie does 15 minute interactive sessions with each of the 5 classes in Years 5 & 6.
Children put their hands up at the end of the session to express an interest in taking part; their details are taken.
LETTER TO PARENTS
Parents of those children who expressed an interest invited to an info coffee meeting at school by letter.
Letter includes brief outline, info re £5 voucher to say thanks, info sheets and details of the coffee morning.
PARENTAL CONSENT
At coffee morning Annie explains what the research is about and how the interviews would work.
Parents can choose to sign consent forms straight away / take them home / not give consent
CHILD CONSENT
Gatekeeper meets with children for whom we have written parental consent to ask if they still want to take part. If so, they sign the consent form. Before the start of every interview, Annie asks if the child understands what they will be talking about in the interview. Annie provides clarification where necessary, and asks if they are happy to proceed.
INTERVIEW TAKES PLACE

10.4 Appendix 4: Actual process for recruitment and gaining consent for interviews

Foxglove Primary, during March/April 2017



10.5 Appendix 5: List of questions for one-to-one interviews with children

Opener:

Tell me about food in your family…

Cognitive awareness – children's knowledge that food is scarce and their knowledge of the ways that their family manages food problems

- At home, is the food that is bought always enough to feed everyone in the family? Why not?
- Is there always enough food for everyone to eat?

Emotional awareness

- How does it make you feel if there isn't enough money to get all the food that you want or need?
- Have you ever been worried that there won't be enough money to buy food?
- Have you ever been worried that it is hard for your parents to get enough food for you to eat?

Physical awareness

- Have you ever felt hungry? (Prompt - What did you feel?) Why did it happen?
- Have you ever felt tired because you've not eaten enough because there's no food left in the house?
- Has your tummy ever hurt because you've not had enough food?

Social

- Would you like to invite a friend for tea but can't because there isn't enough money to buy the extra food?
- Is there enough money to pay for special food at Christmas and for birthday parties?

Quantity

- Have you ever had to miss a meal (breakfast, lunch, tea?) because there's not enough money to buy food?
- Have you gone to school without eating breakfast because there isn't any food in the house?
- Have you spent a day without eating because there isn't any food?
- Have you gone to sleep hungry because there is no food in the house?

Coping strategies

- If there isn't enough money to buy more food what do your parents do to get something for you all to eat?
- Do you visit anyone (grandparents, uncles or aunts, neighbours) so they can give you food when it runs out at home and there isn't enough money to buy more?
- When there's not much food in the house, do your parents or carers ever eat less so that you can have more food?
- Have you ever not eaten, or eaten less, so that you parents or brothers and sisters can have more food?
- Do you do anything to help your parents when the food has run out and there isn't enough money to buy more?

Other

(If the child is from a food insecure family)

- What do you think would make the situation better for your family? Why do you think there isn't/wasn't quite enough money coming in? Has anything changed that has made things more difficult?

(If the child is from a food secure family)

- What do you think would make the situation better for families that are struggling?

Both

- Do you think that you and your brothers and sisters have the same experience? (THIS QUESTION IS ABOUT WHETHER THE EXPERIENCE OF HHFI IS UNIFORM)

Diffusion question

- If you could eat anything you wanted for a whole day – and it didn't have to be healthy - what would you eat?

Food Secure questions (i.e. children who appear to be from food secure homes)

THINK Emotional, Physical, Social. Coping Strategies

- Do you know any kids who sometimes don't get to eat the food they want? Or maybe don't get to eat enough food?
- How do you think they feel? Why do you think they haven't got enough to eat?

Food insecurity questions

- Have you ever known kids from a family that almost ran out of food before the end of the month? (Probes: What made that happen? What did the grown-ups say that let the kids know there wasn't enough money to get more food? What did the grown-ups do that let the kids know there wasn't enough money to get more food?) (May probe for: changes in type of foods eaten, meals got smaller, frequency of meals changed.)

- Food insecurity question: Have you ever known kids from a family that worried that their food would run out and they wouldn't have enough money to get more? (Probe: How did the kids in the family know they were worried? What did grown-ups say that let the kids know they were worried? What did the grown-ups do that let the kids know they were worried?) (May probe for: Did the kind of meals the family ate change when they were worried? How did they change? Did the amount of food the family ate change when they were worried about having enough? How did it change?)

- (clarification): If child answers yes to question 4, but no to question 5, ask: You said earlier that you knew families that sometimes didn't have enough money to eat right. Could you help me understand a little better? Did they not worry about running out of food before it happened