

# **Lining up for charity. A study of the social organization and communal qualities of breadlines in a Finnish city**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Recent decades have witnessed a rise in food charity provided by faith-based and other charitable agencies. Previous research has noted that besides material assistance, these occasions provide a social and communal event for many participants. This article critically examines this notion by exploring how the social organization of breadlines contributes to the social relationships between the food recipients and their experiences of these places as communities, and what qualities these communities eventually develop.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study is based on ethnographic data from four breadlines in one Finnish city. The study approaches the breadlines as queues, that is, social systems that govern waiting, mutual order and access.

**Findings** – The social organization of queue practices mirrors the users' experiences of the breadlines as communities with many concurrent faces: as communities of mutual surveillance and as demanding communities that call for skills and resources from the participants, as well as socially significant communities. The findings show how the practices of organizing charitable assistance influence the complex social relationships between charitable giver and

recipient, and how the food recipients accommodate themselves to the situations and social roles available on a given occasion.

**Originality/value** – Analysing breadlines as queues and using qualitative data from the everyday assistance events gives voice to the experiences of food charity recipients and allows a more nuanced picture to be painted of the breadline communities than studies based merely on surveys or interviews.

**Keywords** Breadlines, Charity, Community, Food assistance, Queue culture

**Article Classification** Research paper

### **Beyond bread? The social dimension of food charity**

In recent years, charitable food assistance provided by faith-based and other non-governmental actors has spread across the affluent world. The proliferation of the phenomenon poses important questions concerning the persistence of poverty, unequal income distribution, the efficiency of welfare policies and the functioning and sustainability of the food system (e.g. Poppendiek, 1998; Riches, 2002; Addy, 2005; Rideout et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2009; Kuivalainen and Niemelä, 2010; Hiilamo, 2012; Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2012; Lorenz, 2012; Hendriks and McIntyre, 2014; Salonen, 2014; Silvasti and Karjalainen, 2014; Silvasti and Riches, 2014; Tang et al., 2014; Tarasuk, Dachner and Loopstra, 2014). Despite the growing research interest in this topic, a deeper understanding

of the experiences of the users of the assistance is needed (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014). One significant, yet understudied issue is the social and communal dimension that breadlines are suggested to provide to their users. This paper critically examines this dimension from the perspective of the food recipients by exploring how the social organization of the breadlines in a Finnish city contributes to the social relationships between the food recipients and their experiences of these places as communities, and what qualities these communities eventually develop.

Breadline is a term often used as a general concept to refer to food charity by its most practical function (Silvasti and Karjalainen, 2014:74). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2013), the word has both literal and figurative meanings. The literal meaning of the word refers to “a queue of poor people waiting to receive bread or other food given as charity”. Breadlines serve to alleviate the immediate food needs of the participants. Figuratively, the word is used to refer to the subsistence level, to “the economic level at which only the bare necessities of life can be provided” (OED, 2013). Standing in a breadline is a token of social exclusion from affluent society (cf. Lorenz, 2015). Breadline use is associated with shame in relation to the concrete assistance content and the interaction with the food providers, as well as to the understanding of one’s position in the social hierarchy (Van der Horst et al., 2014).

Giving food as charity is a hands-on way for many non-governmental organizations to respond to the food needs they observe in their immediate surroundings, but many of them also aim at having a more comprehensive

influence on their clients' situation. In a study of food banks in Toronto, for example, some of the food bank directors considered social support and community building as aims for their work (Salonen, 2016a). Similarly, besides relieving their financial problems, the German food charity organization *Tafel* has been found to provide for its users "an opportunity for participating in a social setting, for not being alone, and for taking part in joint activities" (Lorenz, 2012:390). Noordegraaf (2010:58) writes how the food banks in the Netherlands "function as meeting places where people tell their stories". Furthermore, even the European Union's new Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) for the 2014–2020 period, which replaced the former EU food programme and supports the member countries' activities in providing material assistance to the most deprived, requires its partner organizations to combine material assistance with social inclusion measures (European Commission, 2014). Thus, while breadlines are symbols of inequality and exclusion, they can be also regarded as potential mechanisms for social inclusion and places for building community.

Despite the general perception of Finland as an egalitarian Nordic country where the high coverage of social protection and publicly provided services protect people from poverty, since the deep economic recession in the early 1990s, the country has witnessed the proliferation of charitable systems of food assistance (Hiilamo, 2012; Salonen, 2014; Silvasti and Karjalainen, 2014). In 2013, breadlines were estimated to operate in over 220 municipalities throughout the country and to serve over 20 000 people on a weekly basis (Ohisalo et al., 2014a). As in a number of other countries, many of the active food charity providers are

faith-based organizations, churches and parishes, which often provide religious or spiritual support alongside the material aid (Ohisalo et al., 2014:51; Salonen, 2016b; Salonen, 2016c).

Finnish research on and public discussions of food assistance contain a strong perception that for many food recipients, in addition to the material aid, going to a breadline is a social event. For example, Siiki (2008:154) has observed that many food assistance recipients talk about the social dimension of food assistance and of the importance of meeting other people in these settings. Ohisalo et al. (2014a:5) quote a Finnish food bank worker, who describes the benefits of food charity to its users as a social contact and the reassuring notion that others are living in a similar situation.

The question of the importance of the social or communal aspect of food assistance for the participants has been addressed in a recent quantitative study of food charity users in Finland. In that study, 53 percent of the nearly 3500 respondents agreed with the statement that it is important for them to meet other people in the food assistance context (Kainulainen, 2014:69). Thus, while the social aspect was important for many, it was by no means significant for everyone. In comparison, in that same study, 82 percent agreed that food assistance was necessary for them to subsist (Ohisalo and Laihiala, 2014:101). For the food assistance recipients, breadlines are obviously first and foremost concrete spaces and places for last resort material assistance. The social and communal meanings, if they occur, can be regarded as additional to the material significance.

Even though the previous research notes the importance of the social and communal aspect of food assistance, so far references to it have remained rather vague. A review of the previous research suggests that the social aspect of food assistance refers broadly to meeting other people, having social contacts, participating in social activities and experiencing feelings of belonging to a social group or community, issues which are framed in a primarily positive tone. Thus far, no attempts have been made to thoroughly explore how breadlines facilitate and contribute to the experiences of these places as socially meaningful or to describe their resulting social and communal ties. This study takes up this task. The concept of community is used here to refer to social spaces that are associated with a sense of belonging by the participants in a sense that comprises not just communities with a long-term commitment, but also temporary assemblies (cf. DeGroot, 2008:279).

### **The research context, data and method**

The theoretical point of departure in this study is the notion that breadlines are queues. This notion, self-evident at first glance, opens up an interesting avenue for research. Queuing is an intriguing way of doing nothing and at the same time an extremely social activity (Ehn and Löfgren, 2010:53). Previous research on queue culture suggests that queues are social spaces that provide a rich approach to study social life (Mann, 1969; Schwartz, 1975; Ehn and Löfgren, 2010; Lipsky, 2010; Wexler, 2015). Queues are potential sites for social interaction, shared

experiences and collective emotions, which can in turn contribute to feelings of community between the participants of a queue. They stand for social order, rules, norms and cultural ideals that outline and construct the character of the group. By controlling the admission to a good or service, queues define the concrete and symbolic boundaries of the queue community. Social policy practices involve several sites and types of queueing, for example, waiting rooms, waiting lists and telephone queues, in environments such as employment services and social offices (Lipsky, 2010; Wexler, 2015). What they share in common is that they often impose costs on the participants, whose ability to choose the service provider or voice their views on the process is limited (Hirschman, 1970; Lipsky, 2010:95).

Regardless of the spread of food assistance, the Finnish field of food charity is scattered and publicly uncoordinated. Cooperation with the public sector is uncommon, and no comprehensive statistics exist of the usage and volume of the assistance. Apart from the guidelines of the Finnish food safety authority on the preservation and usage of donated food for those food banks that distribute market excess (Evira, 2013) and the instructions of the EU food programmes for the partner organizations of the FEAD, formerly the MDP (Mavi, 2015), no specifications have been set for how to organize food banks in practice.

The study is based on ethnographic data from four breadlines in the city of Tampere, one of the largest cities in Finland. The term breadline is used here in a broad sense to refer to the places that provide charitable food assistance for people living in weak social and economic situations. It encompasses the methods of providing food assistance, which can include but are not limited to concrete,

physical line-ups. The study focused on those food assistance events in the city which operated regularly, had relatively broad target groups and gave free food to people without any or with only a very slight on-the-spot eligibility assessment. These conditions excluded from the study those organizations and operations that only occasionally provided food assistance or which required a reference from one of their workers or proof of the recipient's income before giving the assistance. The four breadlines under study were located in different parts of the city. They were all run by non-governmental organizations, and all of them were affiliated with Christian parishes, organizations or individuals. They were open from once a month to several times a week, and served from a few dozen up to more than one hundred people at once.

The data consist of participant observation and interviews with food assistance recipients. The participant observation took place between the spring of 2012 and the spring of 2013. The selection of a reasonably large city enabled uncovering the possible variations between the ways of providing food assistance, while concentrating on a regionally defined, comparative setting facilitated reaching a large number of food recipients. Together with overt observation and data triangulation, these strategies helped to reduce the bias involved in qualitative research. The observation focused on the material environment of the assistance, the activities taking place before and during the food deliveries, and the everyday interaction between the participants. The final observational data comprise more than 250 hours of observation from around one hundred food assistance occasions. During the period of observation, 25 open-ended interviews were



conducted with the food assistance recipients. Eight of them were women and 17 men, and their ages varied between 30 and 80 (mean appr. 55, median 60). The interviewees had varying backgrounds: regulars and occasional food assistance users, the homeless, the unemployed and pensioners. All the interviewees were Finns, as were the majority of the food recipients in these places. The interviewees represent the variation in the clientele described in a quantitative survey (N352) of local food assistance recipients (Koivula et al., 2013).

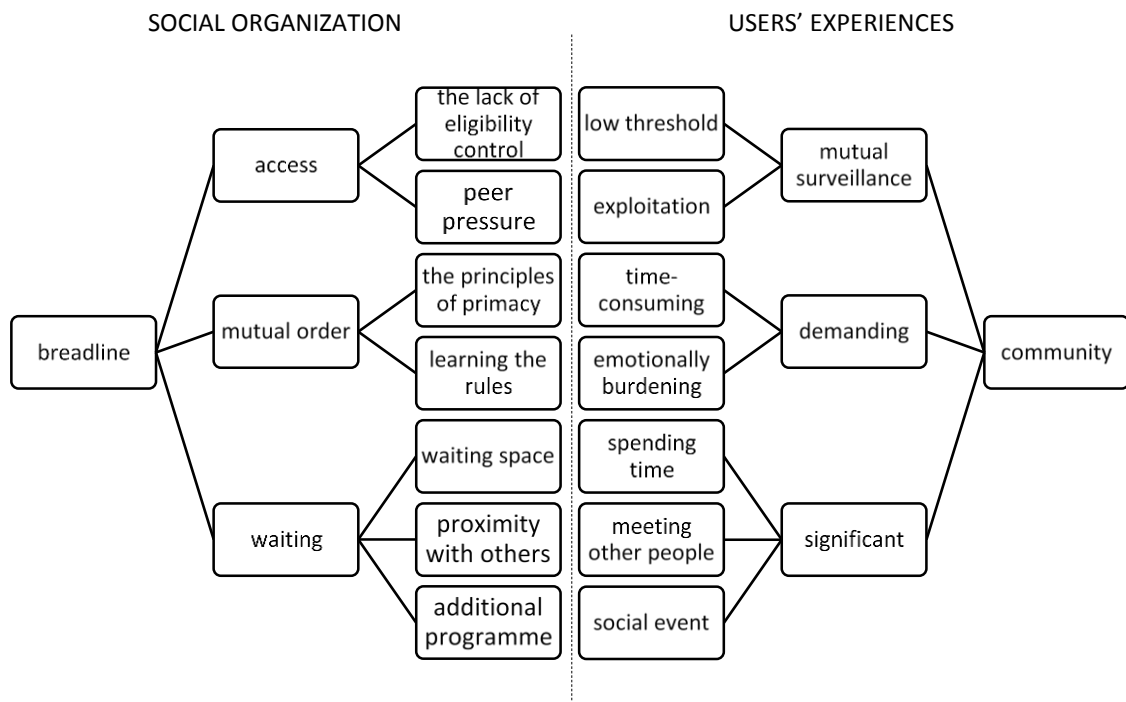
## **Analysis**

The process of analysis was informed by the theories of queue culture. Previous studies on queueing and the general definition of breadlines as queues of poor people waiting for assistance helped to steer the analytic gaze towards the social organization of food assistance and to discern three aspects for scrutiny. The analysis drew from the ideas that, first, a breadline is a queue of poor people, and as a defined target group, its social organization governs the *access* to the assistance (cf. Mann, 1969:353). Second, as a queue, a breadline is a social system that manages *mutual order* between the participants during waiting times (Mann, 1969:52). Further, a breadline is a queue of poor people *waiting*; it refers to time spent in a given place while expecting food assistance (Ehn and Lögren, 2010; Wexler, 2015).

Figure 1 illustrates the key findings of the analysis. Commencing from the notion that queues constitute social systems that govern access, mutual order and

waiting, the analysis concentrated on those situations where access to receiving the assistance was controlled and negotiated, where the mutual order of receiving assistance was produced and managed, and where the breadline participants waited for the assistance. The left side of the figure shows the key issues observed in relation to each of these aspects. Further, the analysis explored the food recipients' subjective experiences of and meanings attached to the breadlines as social spaces and assessed them in relation to the aspects of the social organization (the right side of the figure). The analysis found that certain aspects of the social organization of the breadlines engendered particular experiences, which, in turn, revealed the different qualities of breadline communities.

**Figure 1.** The key findings.



The tripartite division between the different aspects of the breadlines is a heuristic tool, and in practice these aspects do not appear in isolation. Thus, even though the three aspects of the social organization of the breadlines and the communal dimensions are here analytically separated, the figure is intended to be interpreted as a whole. The purpose is not to claim that certain communal qualities of the breadlines straightforwardly derive from certain aspects of their social organization. Rather, the overall social organization of the breadlines mirror the users' experiences of the breadlines as communities with many concurrent faces.

### **Breadlines as communities of mutual surveillance**

Queues govern access to a commodity or service. In commercial queues, access is most often claimed with money. In the context of charity where the assistance is free of charge and reciprocating the received assistance is in principle not required, access is claimed by the status of being part of the target group. Here, the question of eligibility becomes central.

The breadlines under study did not have comprehensive systems of means testing or rigid eligibility criteria for their clients. One of the places, which only delivered food from the EU's MDP programme, asked for a document proving the status or primary income of the person, for example, proof of being a student, unemployed or retired. Another place had an informal interview for those who obtained MDP food, but did not control the eligibility of the assistance users with regards to

donated market excess. The other two breadlines did not apply any formal criteria to assess the eligibility of the food recipients. In one place, all the clients were expected to participate in a religious service before they received the assistance. The religious participation determined the access to the material assistance. However, the participants seldom described their attendance in the services with any reference to the reciprocal relationship between food and religion, but mostly acted as if the two had no connection (see Salonen, 2016c).

Although the absence of strict eligibility criteria is not unusual, it is deeply rooted in the Finnish food charity system. Although the practices vary considerably, many food banks refrain from income assessments and other controlling procedures, which are considered to be burdening and unwelcoming for the food recipients (Ohisalo et al., 2014a:33). The absence of eligibility control is thus motivated by the clients' interests, and the aim is to lower the threshold for obtaining food assistance. However, among the recipients of the assistance, opinions were polarized. Some of the clients maintained that the low level of control was a good thing. One interviewee noted that coming to the breadline was already a sign of neediness, as he described his impression of the other clients: "I guess they have a justified need to visit, huh. Well nobody would come here otherwise, if they did not have the need." In another example, in the early days of observation, a food recipient handed me a note that was addressed to the organizers of that breadline:

You did not ask about my income. Still you allowed me to pick up food from here. I went to the SOCIAL OFFICE. Response: pension is more than €600/month. Denied!

The client showed gratitude to the organizers, who allowed him to obtain food assistance, even though he was not entitled to social assistance due to his income. Another food recipient described that the best thing in that breadline was that “from here you can get food, even without having to justify that you’re poor”.

On the other hand, many participants had observed that some of the food assistance users, in their view, were not really in need of assistance. An interviewee described her observations:

There is quite a bit of exploitation, or those people who would not need to come. I mean those sticky-fingered ones. I call them sticky-fingered. [...] If they ran an income assessment, the crowd would be pruned.

According to the interviewee, the eligibility assessment would help to identify those people who were genuinely not in need of food charity. Controlling measures were considered desirable to make sure that those most in need are indeed helped:

I have been thinking that, when the free food comes from the stores, then it should – in my view, this is my opinion – it should be more graded. So that they would take more into consideration income, and stuff. That is, if you don’t have anything to buy stuff with.

As the examples demonstrate, among the recipients the absence of an eligibility assessment provoked questions of the misuse and exploitation of the food charity system and led to perceptions of unequal treatment between the participants. The clients based their views on the experiences, observations and perceptions of the other food recipients. In many everyday incidents and discussions with the clients, it became apparent that the food recipients observed the amounts and frequency of the assistance use of the other participants. A client noted around Christmas how “people are carrying so much food that they almost break their backs”. The observations of the content and amount of others’ assistance use often included the conjecture that for some participants, the amount of food taken exceeded their personal need. “He must be preparing for nuclear war!”, one client laughed at another.

This observation of the behaviour of the other participants was facilitated by the queue practices that allowed people to see other clients’ actions. According to Lipsky (2010:95), social pressure is one of the functions of those systems of waiting where one is in the presence of others. The openness of the assistance spaces provided a source of peer pressure that guided the clients to comply with what they considered to be fair and sufficient.

The question of eligibility was constantly under discussion and negotiation. The contentions around the issue make it evident that the breadlines were places where one is observed and evaluated by the others who are also waiting. From this angle, the breadlines under study appeared as communities of mutual surveillance.

### **Breadlines as demanding communities**

Besides access, queues govern the mutual order in which the participants obtain the commodity or service. In principle, the order can be organized in two ways: the principle of first come, first served (FCFS) or a random order based on a lottery or chance. Both alternatives were used in the breadlines under study.

Two of the breadlines based the order of receiving assistance on the principle of FCFS. In one place, people merely arrived in front of the building where the food delivery was held and formed a line outside accordingly. In another place, a drop-in centre was open to clients for several hours before the food delivery. Since the time between the arrival of the first clients and the food delivery could extend to several hours, it was not feasible to constantly maintain a concrete queue. Instead, the order of FCFS was governed with a pre-queue, organized according to what Ehn and Löngren (2010:47-48) call “the Cuban way”. In this system, a person arriving at the venue asked those present who had arrived immediately previous to him or her. The order of the pre-queue was maintained by each participant remembering the person before him or her, and it was the basis for the actual physical queue that was formed prior to the food delivery. The system helped to manage the FCFS order during the extensive waiting hours in a way that allowed people to spend time freely in the venue.

In the two other places, a more random order of receiving assistance was utilized. In one place, the worker announced the order in which the clients would receive

food according to an ad hoc numerical order of the tables at which the clients were sitting. Another place had no structured queues, and the sequence of assistance was not defined by any organized set of rules. Instead, there was rather a system of non-queueing. The food was placed on the tables of a drop-in centre so that the clients could take what they wanted and needed. One food recipient explained the procedure: “Everybody attacks there, and there’s a terrible bustle. And then it disperses. We’re like a flock of jackdaws!”

In addition to the two alternatives for governing mutual order, in one place the religious services held before the food delivery provided a further organizing principle for priority in the queue. In that breadline, participation in the religious service was voluntary but relevant to the material benefit, as those who attended the service received the food first. In the other two places that also arranged religious services, the relationship between the mutual order and religious participation was not as straightforward.

As the discussion so far demonstrates, in practice the mutual order was governed and managed in the breadlines in many alternative ways. The basic principles of the queues seem rather simple. However, in practice they required both time and the ability to learn the local norms and rules of queueing. Notwithstanding the underlying principle of mutual order, food assistance use was often considered time-consuming. For example, to secure one’s place in the front of the queue, the pre-queue system required spending extensive hours waiting on the spot. The non-queue system had similar problems. An interviewee described how the system



required “being on the watch for when the stuff comes. And if it comes”. In the example, the interviewee also hints that sometimes they waited for nothing.

For the food assistance recipients, socialization into the local queue culture by learning the norms and rules of each place was essential. For example, the maintenance of the pre-queue required cooperation and negotiation between the participants. The regulars of the place taught the system to the newcomers and oversaw the realization of the queue order. In a similar vein, even though the “flock of jackdaws” or the non-queue system in one of the places was only a hastily formed group that dissolved soon after the event, it was a recurrent assembly, and in order to participate in it efficiently, the clients were required to be on the alert and to learn to read the tacit signs of when to expect the food to come. A further example can be drawn from the religious services. In one place, the word “amen” at the end of the closing prayer of the service immediately altered the atmosphere, and the group of people who looked so devout a moment ago would jump up and start forming a queue. A close observation of these momentary but recurrent gatherings revealed that some of the clients who were familiar with the religious services anticipated the end of the service by discreetly gathering their outwear and bags, and were ready to leave the pew as soon as they heard the final amen.

Further, besides learning the rules, for the food charity users it could be instructive to learn how to circumvent the rules. From time to time I witnessed how people, more or less discreetly, took more food than was instructed or

disregarded the order in which they were announced to receive the food. Queue jumping was not uncommon.

The crowding provoked negative experiences in those who ended up as underdogs. “They even walk over you!”, one interviewee described the impudence of some of the participants. The non-queue system provides an illustrative example. The experiences of the food recipients reveal that the non-queue system evolved in practice into a dog-eat-dog system, where one had to use a considerable amount of time, be constantly on the alert and watch for the possible arrival of the assistance and compete for it rather than building bonds with the other participants. In this system, the shy and timid were at risk of being trampled upon or left without. One interviewee described his experience:

I have sometimes even left without taking anything. I have somehow got irritated by it. Let’s put it that way. [...] And I don’t comment on it in any way. I have just moved off.

The non-queue system led to struggles and power differentials between the participants of the breadline. Over the course of the observation period, the problems of this system become apparent, and practices were being developed towards more structured procedures and coordinated food distribution. The non-queue was being guided toward a conventional breadline.

The practices governing mutual order were constantly managed and negotiated, and this ongoing negotiation of the rules of the breadlines made the participation in these communities feel exacting. An interviewee described how obtaining food

charity requires “being very like-minded, and in the mainstream of how things work in each place”. The results of failing to do so may be heavy to bear, and breadline use can become an emotionally and socially burdening activity. The same interviewee describes the emotional burden:

For the past two years I have been coming regularly, almost. Like not every day, but I mean, to eat. At the moment it feels like I have to. Since I don't have anything. [...] On the other hand, more, I guess I would willingly be at work, rather than this. You see, this is emotionally terribly burdensome. [...] I feel that it would be easier not to come. But how do I cope then? Where do I get [food] then? I don't know where I would then get [food], and I don't know what I should do. But it is like, it is already, it is already quite depressing.

The breadlines under study were socially demanding communities that require time and where the practices of managing mutual order call for skills and resources from the participants.

### **Breadlines as significant communities**

In addition to access and mutual order, queues govern the ways people spend their time as they wait for a commodity or service. In one place, people waited for the assistance by standing outside in a conventional, physical queue. In such settings, the possibilities for interaction between the participants are rather limited, and the face-to-back relations that characterize queues may impede sociability and

encourage inattention (Schwartz 1975:180). However, physical closeness in a queue can facilitate interaction locally with the people in one's immediate surroundings. In particular, the potential to form a momentary community arises when physical closeness is combined with a shared experience. For example, in one incident in a breadline, the workers were quite busy handing over the food bags to the clients. One of the workers lamented that she was too busy to stay and talk to one woman, a regular client and an acquaintance of hers who had come to obtain a food bag. The woman did not mind, but replied to the worker's complaint: "Last time the queue was even longer, all the way to the street. So we started to chat in the queue. And made new friends!" The exceptionally long queue had provided a place and time for sociability, and the common experience of waiting promoted interaction and created new social bonds.

Instead of lining up outside, two places provided spaces where the clients could spend the waiting time indoors. Two of the food banks under study ran drop-in centres that were open several hours a day, several days a week, and where clients could come to spend time, for example, reading, listening to music, talking with each other or with the workers, and consuming free or affordable beverages.

These places commonly were given names, such as the neighbourhood reading room, handicrafts club, debating society and even the adult nursery, which denote the many pastime activities that took place among those waiting for food. These places allowed the waiting time to be spent in a more flexible manner than by standing in a physical queue and thus provided open spaces for interaction and community formation between the participants.

Further, the breadlines integrated additional services into the food assistance programmes. The most prominent organized programmes were religious services. Two of the places under study organized religious services for the food recipients for every food delivery, one less frequently. With the shared social event and mutual focus of attention, these events transformed the breadlines momentarily into devotional communities. For some of the clients, these events were meaningful ways of spending time while waiting for food assistance. “It is like a celebration for me!”, one interviewee stated, referring to a place that provided their clients a shared meal and a religious service in addition to the food bags. On the other side, the religious programmes can provoke negative emotions in those who dislike the religious contents (Sager and Stephens, 2005; Salonen, 2016c). However, even for those who did not consider the religious programmes important, or to some extent even found them irritating or felt forced into them, the religious services were potential sources for feelings of togetherness and community. The dissenting opinions towards these services were at times expressed using humour or silent protests. Sharing feelings tacitly with like-minded people may contribute to experiencing feelings of togetherness with those people, vis-à-vis the organizers of the services.

At times, the shared experiences were less elevated. Once, on a damp and dark February day, the opening of one food assistance place was delayed. The line of people stood freezing in front of the place, and many started to grow impatient with waiting. “What if they don’t open at all. Stand there, gotcha!”, one lightened

the atmosphere with a joke. Other people participated in the laughter, and for a while laughing at their shared suffering eased the distress of standing in the cold.

The interviews with the food recipients confirm that for many, the breadlines indeed were socially significant places. The social organization of the waiting time contributed to these experiences by providing social encounters, spaces for pastimes and social events. The majority of the 25 interviewees expressed social reasons for coming to the breadline in addition to material need. “It has been of help, and I’ve made new friends”, one interviewee summarized, emphasising that the breadline use is both materially important and significant in terms of meeting people. Another interviewee described how he first had suspicions and prejudices about the breadlines and their users. Over the course of time, these thoughts faded and were replaced with positive experiences:

The threshold to come here was somewhat high. Since I thought that there are only those boozers. But then one day I thought that hell’s bells. I have to go. [...] Nowadays there is no threshold. Nowadays it feels – I wonder if it is a good or a bad thing – like a living room. It’s nice to come here. It’s nice to hang around here.

For this interviewee, it was the social space of the breadline that enabled him to spend time that held significance. Another mentioned that the additional programme and the people that he had met in the breadline were important to him. This interviewee had first started to use food assistance after he had lost his job due to an accident and had exhausted his disability allowance. For a while, he was

receiving no income, which led him to turn to food charity. At the time of the interview, after a considerable waiting period, the interviewee had finally received a positive decision on his pension, which was going to improve his financial situation in the near future. However, he planned to continue going to the breadline:

I guess I'll still go, like I said, it is kind of a social event, so I will still go. [...] And since there are some so-called acquaintances, so that we find talking points. And all that.

The breadlines under study provided spatial and temporal practices and additional social programmes that facilitated interaction and provoked collective emotions, which over time contributed to considering these places to be socially meaningful and important communities. These social meanings of breadlines were sticky; they were likely to remain even if the material hardship eased. For many of their users, repetition, the passage of time and regular food assistance use promoted interaction and led to shared time and experiences, which enabled the breadlines to evolve into personally significant communities.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Breadlines are intended, observed, experienced and even expected to provide, beyond bread, social contacts and feelings of togetherness and community (Siiki, 2008; Lorenz, 2012; Kainulainen, 2014; Salonen, 2016a). The findings of this study support the notion that breadlines are indeed social spaces. Even though, as

individual occasions and events, breadlines appear as momentary gatherings of people bound together by time, space and a common goal of receiving charitable assistance, they have the conceivable ability to transform into communities.

The different ways of governing waiting time provide diverging avenues for interaction, sociability and collective experiences and emotions between the people waiting, which can in turn contribute to considering queues as communities (Ehn and Löngren, 2010:53). The communal qualities of the breadlines under study were, however, more varied than the notions of the social dimension of food assistance in previous research suggest. The findings of this study add to previous knowledge by diversifying the social dimension of food assistance. The findings portray breadlines as social gatherings which can be regarded as socially significant but demanding communities and communities of mutual surveillance. The lack of eligibility control regarding access to the assistance, which follows the charitable ethos that shuns strict means tests and bureaucratic procedures and instead emphasizes anonymity, adaptable practices and trust, fed tensions between the participants when misuse or mistreatment were observed or perceived. Further, learning the local rules and norms governing the mutual order and, at times, methods of evading them required time, skills and resources from the participants and made the breadlines socially demanding communities. All in all, for their users, the breadlines under study provided settings for not only feelings of belonging, but also for experiences of being left without, trampled upon and being monitored by others.



As in all ethnographic studies, the findings have limited generalizability outside the given context. The findings are constrained to the local food charity contexts and assistance practices which, as this study reveals, can vary significantly. As mentioned, this study focused on low-threshold breadlines open to a wide variety of people and operated without any or only a minor eligibility assessment. Still different insights could be revealed by the kind of food assistance that requires a more detailed income assessment, such as an assessment combined with a more comprehensive evaluation of the person's life situation or one that takes place in one-on-one situations in, for example, diaconal offices.

Despite the limitations, the study provides food for thought for a deeper understanding of charitable food assistance by examining its social dimension and by exploring the issue from the perspective of the recipients of the assistance. Analysing the ways access, mutual order and waiting were governed in four breadlines in a Finnish city provided a rich approach to explore the social and communal dimension that breadlines are suggested to yield for their users. The findings highlight the importance of understanding the social context in which everyday activities and interaction take place as well as the spatial and temporal dimensions of social settings and the ways in which space and time are managed by those who organize the situation. Theories of queue culture, which emphasize the role of the internal organization of queue systems (Mann, 1969; Ehn and Löngren, 2010), but also point out the importance of the organizers of the queues and their ways of managing time and space (Wexler, 2015), provided an instructive tool to explore the social organization in which the food recipients act.

Considering the breadlines as queues has enabled examining how the organization of food assistance facilitates and contributes to the experiences of these places as communities as well as critically exploring the qualities of these communities; hence, a more nuanced picture can be painted of the breadline communities than studies that are merely based on surveys or interviews.

Queues depict societal parting lines. Not all social classes wait in lines, but privileged groups have the ability to refrain from queuing altogether (Mann, 1969:353). Breadlines are particularly strong manifestations of those queues that are not equally occupied by all factions of society. The systems of charitable food assistance, with breadlines as their practical manifestations, have in recent decades become widespread tools in trying to alleviate the immediate food needs of the poor of the affluent world (Lorenz, 2012:286; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). They can be seen as indications of social distance between the poor and the majority population (Ohisalo et al., 2014b:81-82). On the other side, breadlines are sites where the excluded gather together with others sharing the same experience, and as such settings, they can have integrative functions against social exclusion and loneliness (cf. Siiki, 2008). In contrast to queues in commercial contexts, people standing in a breadline rarely have the opportunity to withdraw from the queue or to voice open criticism in the face of deteriorating services or experiences of unequal treatment (cf. Hirschman, 1970). Instead, the findings show how they accommodated themselves to the situations and social roles available to them on a given occasion, which shows their ability to demonstrate agency from a constrained social position (cf. Salonen, 2016c).

The findings of this study provide practical implications and recommendations for future research. First, they reveal how charitable assistance is organized in practice. Given the notion of the important role of the managers, designers and owners of waiting time (Wexler, 2015), the findings can be utilized in planning hands-on services and support for people living in weak social and economic situations. Further, the general policy question posed by Wexler (2015:175) of who should oversee the proprietors and organizers of waiting time “with reference to fairness, confidentiality, privacy and grievance handling” is significant also in the particular context of faith-based charitable assistance.

Finally, the findings show how the practical organization of the breadlines influence the complex social relationships between charitable giver and recipient, and how this may have unintended negative consequences. The findings emphasize the need to critically examine the limits and the ability of food charity to provide value-added service in terms of social inclusion. While this study has concentrated in the interpersonal and grassroots-level of the social relationships and communal traits of the breadlines, more research is needed to explore the ability of the food charity system to enhance the societal-level inclusion of the food recipients, as required by, for example, the new assistance fund of the EU (European Commission, 2014). Further research needs to be done to establish whether breadlines provide mechanisms to help people better their situation so that they no longer need to rely on last resort charitable assistance programmes, or whether food assistance systems contain inherent processes that maintain food

recipients' dependence on charity and institutionalize food assistance at the individual level.

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