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Exploring Local Food Rescue and Distribution Initiatives as a Form of Community Development.

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Applied Psychology (Community Psychology)

at

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2026

Abstract:

This thesis explores how community food rescue initiatives in Kirikiriroa Hamilton respond to food insecurity - while fostering empowerment and community wellbeing. Despite Aotearoa New Zealand being a nation of agricultural abundance, approximately one in five children and one in four households experience food insecurity (DPMC, 2021; Child Poverty Action Group, 2019). This statistic reflects systemic inequalities which are rooted in neoliberal policy reforms rather than mere food availability. This research is informed by community psychology values and uses a Participatory Action Research (PAR) informed approach. This study employed participatory action research–informed qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis to explore experiences of food rescue among facilitators and recipients in Kirikiriroa Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. The study interviewed seven participants, four recipients of food rescue and three facilitators of community food initiatives – all supported by Go Eco, a local food rescue organisation.

The findings from interviews with both recipients and facilitators reveal that food rescue initiatives embody empowerment and provide support that makes a real positive difference in daily life. Yet the research also makes something clear, these initiatives, no matter how well-intentioned or skilfully run cannot fix the systems that create food insecurity in the first place. The food rescue initiatives are not a preventative approach to food security, yet a band-aid problem which provides essential basic needs to community members. This research deepens understanding on how community-driven approaches can protect dignity and foster wellbeing, even amid precarity and food hardship. At the same time, the research makes it clear that this work only exists because structural supports have failed. Meaningful change requires confronting inadequate welfare provisions, living costs that very much outpace incomes and benefits, and the neoliberal framing that positions poverty as personal

failure rather than policy failure. The study offers insights for community organisations, policymakers and community psychologists.

Acknowledgements:

I want to first thank my supervisor, Dr. Rebekah Graham, for your guidance, feedback, and encouragement throughout this research process. Your support over the past two years has made a huge difference in this thesis and my growth as a student. I'm also grateful to the University of Waikato, especially for the Research Masters Scholarship which made this research possible.

A huge thank you to my parents for their support and confidence in me, it has carried me through my studies more than you'll ever know.

Thank you to Go Eco for your time and for connecting me with organisations involved in food provisioning. I am also so grateful to the participants who took part in interviews. To the recipients of food initiatives, thank you so much for sharing your experiences so openly. And to the facilitators of food rescue initiatives, your reflections and commitment to your communities were invaluable.

This research rests on the contributions, lived experiences and trust of many people. I hope it honours that trust and contributes in some small way, to more equitable and community driven approaches to food provisioning.

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1. Introduction

Food insecurity is a pressing social issue in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite New Zealand being a nation of agricultural abundance and capable of feeding millions beyond its borders, approximately one in five children and one in four households experience food insecurity (DPMC, 2021; Child Poverty Action Group, 2019). This stark statistic shows that food insecurity is not simply a matter of food supply but a complex problem which is rooted in wider social and environmental factors. Having the ability to understand how communities can respond to this crisis is important not just for the immediate wellbeing of those who experience hardship, but for those who develop more equitable and sustainable approaches towards food systems. Understanding food insecurity therefore matters because it draws attention to the need for responses and solutions that are beyond individual solutions and engage at community levels.

This thesis examines community food rescue initiatives in Kirikiriroa Hamilton. The data gathered explores how these food initiatives operate, not just as charitable relief, but as sites of community development and empowerment – resisting neoliberal ideals and the individualisation of poverty. The aim of this thesis is to explore how local food rescue initiatives support community empowerment, wellbeing, and food access for people facing material hardship. The research adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach which places individual's lived experiences central. These perspectives are of both recipients and facilitators of food rescue activities supported by Go Eco, which is a food rescue organisation in Kirikiriroa Hamilton.

The study is guided by three objectives:

1. To explore the perspectives and experiences of persons participating in food rescue, gardening, and food provisioning initiatives supported by Go Eco.
2. To document the lived experiences of staff facilitators involved in local food provisioning activities.
3. To describe and document the organisational processes that foster community empowerment within the context of food-related activities.

By answering these research objectives, understanding will be developed on how food rescue meets urgent needs while also promoting community psychology core values such as social connection, mutual aid, empowerment and ecological thinking.

This research is informed by the field of community psychology. Community psychology is a discipline of psychology that focuses on the concepts of social change, community participation and collective wellbeing. Community psychology is driven by a group of values that guide not only the theoretical foundations but also the practice itself. It is different from other individualistic approaches as it places individuals into the larger social, cultural, economic and ecological contexts that shape their lives - this is also called ecological thinking (Trickett & Rowe, 2012). Ecological thinking within community psychology focuses on the interactions between individuals and the environment in which they exist ((Trickett & Rowe, 2012); Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004). Ecological thinking helps us understand food insecurity better because it navigates the many distinct and overlapping factors that make it hard to get food, such income inequality, social policy and cultural marginalisation. Community psychology with its emphasis on ecological thinking would place food insecurity within larger systems, understanding that it is influenced by the

social and environmental variables around them (housing, health, education, policy, community). Another of the central values of community psychology is empowerment - a process of enabling individuals and communities to take control of the decisions and resources that affect their lives. Empowerment is created in communities via inclusive, participatory methods that encourage agency in one's actions (Rappaport, 1987). Another core principle of community psychology is prevention, which attempts to address underlying causes of issues - analogous to the ambulance being at the top of the hill rather than the bottom. Rather than focusing simply on crisis response after an issue has already presented, community psychology advocates for long-term initiatives to minimise vulnerability (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004). Cultural competence is another principle of community psychology. Being culturally sensitive allows practitioners, policy makers, psychologists (etc) to acknowledge the various viewpoints of the individuals they aim to support. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this is distinct from Māori viewpoints and can be shown by employing mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) while also recognising the continual effects of colonialism on food systems. Many community food rescue projects embrace food sovereignty, which is defined as the ability to design and control one's food systems and reconnect with traditional practices (Stein, 2016). Food sovereignty empowers communities to achieve tino rangatiratanga, the Māori right to self-governance and control (Stein, 2016). At the core of all these community psychology values is a dedication to social justice. Community psychology aims to recognise and confront the underlying factors that lead to inequality. Social justice is not just a goal, but an ongoing effort aimed at achieving fairness and empowerment in decision-making (Evans, 2014).

This thesis is organised into six sections. Following the introduction section is a review on existing literature that highlights food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand. The

literature review examines the impact of neoliberal policy changes on food systems and investigates theoretical ideas related to empowerment and food sovereignty. This chapter also discusses the significance of community-driven food projects. The next section describes the methodological framework - showing an examination of how the research is rooted in Participatory Action Research (PAR) informed principles, as well as discussing details on data gathering and thematic analysis. The next chapter showcases the research results, arranged via thematic analysis. In the final chapter, the results are related to current literature, exploring their consequences for both theory and practical applications. The chapter is then concluded by assessing the fulfilment of the research objectives as well as emphasising the consequences for practical implications and what future research could explore.

2. Literature Review

This literature review draws from relevant local and international literature and examines how community food rescue organisations contribute to addressing food insecurity. Responses from organisations can address food insecurity through empowering communities in culturally relevant ways. The review first discusses food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand, including the prevalence of food insecurity and food waste. Following this, it covers the theoretical frameworks utilised and how community psychology values support community food rescue initiatives. The next section discusses the importance of food sovereignty, with particular attention given to Māori and Indigenous communities. The impacts of policy, neoliberal thinking, and cost of living are also noted with regard to food, before concluding with consideration of community-led and participatory methods. These methods also include their potential for transformative effect and the challenges faced.

2.1 Food Insecurity, Food Waste, and Food Rescue in Aotearoa New Zealand

According to a quote from the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) “A person is food insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food.” (FAO, 2023). The FAO definition also discusses key dimensions of food security. This includes the availability of food, access to food, utilisation, and the stability of these conditions over time. These aspects all together are used to assess the nature and severity of food insecurity (FAO, 2023). Food insecurity is strongly correlated with measures of poverty and material deprivation. An Auckland City Mission 2019 survey of 650 food bank users found that more than 40% of respondents experienced chronic food insecurity for at least two years (ACM, 2019). Recent data from United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation shows that food insecurity in New Zealand has worsened from 10% (2014 to 2016) to 16.4% (2020 to 2023) (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2024). This data makes New Zealand one of the few countries globally where food insecurity rates are increasing instead of improving.

Food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand is experienced firstly at the household level. Data about national estimates indicate that around 15 to 20% of the population live in food insecure households. These households report regularly running out of food because they cannot afford more (Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, 2025). Recent income adequacy research further suggests that roughly one in five working age adults does not earn enough to reliably provide nourishing food for their household, even when in paid employment (Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, 2025). These adult and household level patterns sit alongside high and rising demand for food parcels and other forms of charitable food assistance.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, food insecurity affects approximately one in five children (Ministry of Health, 2019), with disabled children experiencing food running out often at almost three times the rate of non-disabled children (11% vs 4%) (Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People, 2023), and 21.3% of households reporting food running out sometimes or often in 2022/23 (Ministry of Health, 2023). Households with children are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. National data from the Department for the Prime Minister and Cabinet found that 20 percent of households with children aged 0-15 ran out of food occasionally or frequently (DPMC, 2021). This is equivalent to roughly 160,000 children (DPMC, 2021). Children living in deprived areas are more likely to experience food insecurity, with 40 percent of children in the most deprived areas, NZDep quintile 5 (New Zealand Deprivation Index), regularly going without sufficient food to eat (DPMC, 2021). Children are also more likely to go without sufficient, nutritious food when they live in low-income households with parents on government benefits, reside in rental properties, and/or share the home with two or more other children (CPAG, 2019).

Food insecurity is not experienced equally across New Zealand. Research shows that Māori, Pasifika and low-income families are impacted the most (Bowers, 2009). The most recent 2023/24 New Zealand Health Survey data indicated that one in three Māori children (34.3%) and more than half of Pacific children (54.8%) live in households where food runs out often or sometimes (Ministry of Health, 2024). As well as this, Māori households are twice as likely to experience food insecurity compared to non-Māori households, with one in four Māori adults living in low-income households (Urlich et al., 2023). Research with families that have infants showed that severe food insecurity was most common among participants of Māori or Pasifika ethnicity, with 27.2% of Pacific and 16.9% of Māori young

people experiencing persistent food insecurity over a four-year period (Growing Up in New Zealand, n.d.). These trends reflect broader systemic inequalities that include variations in income, employment opportunities, housing, and healthcare accessibility

State-funded responses to food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand include the provision of cash grants. These cash grants are given as 'Special Needs Grants', 'Temporary Assistance', and/or loans which are administered by Work and Income (division of Ministry of Social Development, MSD), in which recipients must meet eligibility criteria. For the year ending June 30, 2025, Work and Income provided 304,524 food grants during the June quarter (Ministry of Social Development, 2025). This period only represents one quarter of annual demand. Across the full 2024/2025 financial year, there is an estimate of 1.3 million food grants being distributed to families and individuals who experience food hardship. These food grants represent the largest category of Special Needs Grants and accounts for 70-80% of all hardship assistance which is provided by the Ministry of Social Development (Ministry of Social Development, 2024).

As well as state-provided support, there are many charities and local organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand which provide food relief. This is primarily through food parcels. In the year to June 2021, Auckland City Mission distributed 48,679 food parcels (Child Poverty Action Group, 2019). At a national level, the Aotearoa Food Parcel Measure demonstrates that between 1 July 2024 and 30 June 2025, 912,233 people received some kind of food assistance, and 228,056 food parcels were distributed. These parcels were distributed across 94 reporting sites and is approximately equivalent to 10,946,677 meals, worth \$27.36 million (Kore Hiakai Zero Hunger Collective, 2025). The New Zealand Food Network also reports that almost half a million people a month are supported through its partner food hubs.

This is a 165% increase in the number of people needing food support in comparison with January 2020 (New Zealand Food Network, 2023). These statistics indicate how hundreds of thousands of people are reliant on emergency food support. This data shows how important community food initiatives have become in bridging the gap between government support, also highlighting they are temporary solution that cannot resolve the structural drivers of food insecurity and poverty.

Food insecurity has consequences which affect an individual's physical, mental, and social health throughout their life course. Consequences include both malnutrition and obesity, which are related to a high intake of cheap, calorie-intensive foodstuffs (DPMC, 2021). It has also been proven that children who experience food insecurity also experience greater occurrences of mental health issues, developmental and behavioural difficulties as well as reduced academic achievement (ACM, 2014; DPMC, 2021). Food insecurity is also often linked with unmet needs. This can include primary healthcare, strained family dynamics, and increased emotional pressure on parents who typically feel like they have to hide their financial struggles from their children (CPAG, 2019). Many people have described feelings of shame and social isolation when they struggle to access food (Graham et al., 2018), and food insecurity is often linked with wider health-related social issues, such as substance use (Tanielu, 2021). Across the life course, these experiences can build-up, which links food insecurity to a range of different health and well-being-related outcomes.

In contrast to the above figures on food insecurity, Aotearoa New Zealand is a nation abundant in agricultural resources. Aotearoa New Zealand has a highly productive agricultural and horticultural sector that produces enough food to feed around 35 million

people a year, over five times the country's population (Rush & Obolonkin, 2020). As a global food exporter, New Zealand produces and exports high-quality animal products, wine, honey, fruits and vegetables (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2023). Aotearoa has a historical image as a 'land of plenty' however, this image masks the stark inequalities noted above. Not all individuals in the populace can access the nutritious, high-quality food produced nationally. The growing gap between national production and household access raises important questions regarding who gains from Aotearoa's agricultural prosperity and who is left out. This is because market-driven food systems favour profit and export over fair domestic access to food. This difference between abundance and scarcity highlights the systemic nature of food insecurity.

Also sitting uncomfortably alongside the incidence of food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand is the large amount of discarded food, or food waste. More than 157,000 tonnes of edible food is discarded annually (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment 2020). Recent research has shown that food waste in New Zealand per annum is approximately worth \$3.2 billion (Rabobank and Harvest, 2025). This data represents a serious ethical, environmental and economic problem. Ethically, this amount of food waste is existing alongside food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand. This highlights a foundational inequality in food distribution processes. From an environmental perspective, in New Zealand, food and organic waste contributes to 9% of methane emissions and 4% of greenhouse gas emissions (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). This makes food waste a contributor to climate change. Food waste also represents the waste of all resources that go into production, including water, land, energy and the labour. Economically, households waste an average of \$1364 annually on discarded food (Rabobank and KiwiHarvest, 2025). This money could be spent towards other essential needs during a high

cost of living crisis. Instead of being sent to landfills, this food could be redistributed - addressing food insecurity and also reducing environmental and ethical harm.

The dual existence of food waste and alongside food insecurity is a challenging one. It highlights the problem of inequality within modern food distribution networks. This imbalance does not reflect a lack of food overall, it shows the failures in how food is valued, distributed, and controlled across social and economic contexts. The emergence of community food rescue programs are one mechanism to redirect surplus food from landfills towards people facing food insecurity. Food rescue intervenes at the point where surplus and need intersect. These initiatives are discussed more fully in the section on community-led initiatives.

To conclude this section, food insecurity, food waste, and food rescue are complex issues which are experienced within Aotearoa New Zealand. Food insecurity impacts a wide range of health outcomes and overall wellbeing and is experienced by individuals, but impacted by systemic factors such as economic inequality, poverty, rising living costs, and policies. Both food insecurity and food rescue are not standalone problems for individuals, but rather are ongoing indicators of wider systemic failures of our social, economic and political frameworks – further discussed in the following paragraphs. Addressing food insecurity, food waste, and food rescue requires implementing a range of solutions across each of these levels.

2.2 Impact of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology which emphasises free markets, reduction of government intervention, privatisation, and individual responsibility (Harvey, 2005). This framing of neoliberalism is used throughout this thesis as an analytic lens in order to understand the social and policy contexts shaping food insecurity - rather than as a normative judgement of individual actors or organisations who have to operate within constrained systems. In Aotearoa New Zealand, food insecurity, food waste, and food rescue cannot be separated or understood away from the broader framework of inequality and poverty. These issues have been shaped by decades of neoliberal policy reform (King et al., 2023; Humpage & Craig, 2008; Chapman, 2019). The shift began in the 1980s, when Aotearoa New Zealand had a major transition towards neoliberal restructuring. This involved sweeping economic changes which included privatisation, deregulation, and the introduction of market-oriented approaches across the public sector (Boston et al., 1999; Kelsey, 1993). These changes decreased the state's role, emphasised economic efficiency, and limited the provision of welfare and social protection (Humpage & Craig, 2008). Publicly owned resources were sold to private owners, and user-pays systems were brought into health and education, fundamentally changing the relationship between the government and citizens (Kelsey, 1993). State-owned enterprises, such as the Bank of New Zealand, Telecom New Zealand, New Zealand Rail, Air New Zealand, and the Electricity Corporation were sold as well as large state forestry areas, petroleum assets, and other important industries transferred to private ownership. These changes moved essential services and infrastructure out of public control and applied market rules to areas that had previously been public goods. This impacted on access to and affordability of key service areas for individual households. This restructuring of the public sector ushered in the rise of neoliberalism in Aotearoa New

Zealand, with a concurrent shift from collective responsibility to individual responsibility (Chapman, 2019).

These reforms dramatically changed the political and economic direction of the nation. Since the 1980's, economic inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand has risen faster than in almost any other industrialised country (O'Brien, 2014). One change that has significantly contributed to the rise in economic inequality was to welfare and social protections. In 1991, welfare payments (with the exception of superannuation), were cut by up to 20%, driving recipients under the poverty line overnight (Stephens, 1992, cited in O'Brien, 2014). These cuts caused extensive community distress and directly contributed to concurrent growth in food banks and need for charitable food provision across the country (Wynd, 2005). The impacts of these changes were disproportionately faced by Māori, Pasifika, and single-parent families (Blakely et al., 2004). The economic strain from this period of underfunded welfare remains.

Alongside these financial changes, welfare and social reforms reshaped the relationship between the state and its people. The role of the state shifted away from providing universal social protections to blaming individuals for not engaging in paid employment. Welfare recipients were expected to 'make do' with constrained access to reliable employment, expensive rental housing, and limited financial resources. These changes to welfare policy resulted in a more punitive welfare system, with individuals required to demonstrate their eligibility for support, adhere to strict requirements, and endure state surveillance (Hodgetts et al. 2008). This fostered a sense of distrust and exclusion, making the process of applying for support dehumanising and textured with feelings of shame (Hodgetts, et al, 2008). Charitable provision in the form of foodbanks and food aid has

filled the gaps left by a weakened state, yet this risks perpetuating the status quo, and disregards structural causes of food insecurity, with the focus remaining on the individual rather than systemic solutions.

The associated social narratives also fundamentally changed how people experiencing poverty were perceived by society. Discourse surrounding poverty was reframed as a result of personal failures rather than a symptom of systemic inequality (O'Brien, 2014). This altered societal views and public narratives to suggest that individuals facing challenges lacked motivation and made poor decisions (Graham et al., 2018). Successive governments have reinforced these social narratives by portraying welfare recipients as overly dependent and/or morally deficient (Hodgetts et al., 2014). These narratives are now embedded within social policy and public discussion. For instance, approaches that are made to tackle food insecurity mainly focus on personal spending and budgeting habits which neglect broader systemic issues (Graham et al., 2018). Media articles consistently uphold these stereotypical narratives by emphasising parenting choices and/or financial decisions. They rarely explore policy shortcomings or the systemic factors that influence food insecurity. This strengthens feelings of shame and discourages solidarity, leaving individuals isolated and blaming themselves. Neoliberal discourse around food rescue and welfare often frames people experiencing poverty as “lazy”, “takers”, “uneducated”, which reinforces stigma that they lack motivation and responsibility – instead of acknowledging the structural causes of food insecurity. This neoliberal framing is seen in critical analyses showing how food charity blames individuals for their situation, therefore producing narratives and social discourse of the undeserving poor (Beagan et al., 2017).

Having outlined the difficulties encountered by those who experience food insecurity, I will now focus on potential solutions. Beginning with empowerment theory in community psychology, I use this framework to understand how to shift strategies of addressing food insecurity. I then discuss food sovereignty as a movement that provides an approach outside of neoliberal thought, before finishing with community-led initiatives as one way forward in the current milieu.

2.3 Empowerment

Rappaport defines empowerment as “a mechanism by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their affairs” (Rappaport, 1987, p.122). This process enables individuals and communities to direct and have control over their personal lives. Within the field of community psychology, empowerment is understood as not just an individual change process but as a tool for addressing systemic inequalities, redistributing power, and enabling collective action. This is different to individualised empowerment. Although related, community and organisational empowerment function through different mechanisms and has a unique function within social change processes. In this context, empowerment is co-created through participation, reciprocity, and shared decision-making. Community empowerment can be a complex idea (Tremblay, 2014), as it does not always neatly ‘fit’ into psychological models. Moving away from deficit-focused models towards approaches that enhance current strengths is an important component. A variety of techniques are employed to implement empowerment, including critical consciousness raising, social support to boost people's self-efficacy and self-esteem, and participatory approaches.

Zimmerman (2000) developed empowerment as a concept into a comprehensive theoretical framework: empowerment theory. Empowerment theory is a multi-faceted

framework that includes individual, organisational, and systemic transformation. Zimmerman identified three psychological empowerment domains: intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural. The intrapersonal aspect of empowerment refers to how people see themselves through their sense of competence, control and meaningful life purpose. The ability to understand and navigate power and sociopolitical contexts requires interactional empowerment. Behavioural empowerment is shown by engaging actively in community or organisational events. Within the realm of food insecurity and food rescue, these aspects are closely linked. In the context of food insecurity, intrapersonal empowerment can be demonstrated when individuals can access food in ways that preserve choice and a sense of control. Interactional empowerment can be demonstrated within food insecurity as communities are able to develop critical awareness into the structural and political influences of food insecurity. It can also be demonstrated by gaining skills to navigate support services. Behavioural empowerment regarding food insecurity may encompass participation in food rescue initiatives or advocacy, enabling individuals and communities to transition from recipients of help to catalysts for change within their own community.

Empowerment theory also highlights that empowerment can operate as both a process and an outcome. Empowerment as a process is possessing the skills and knowledge which allows individuals and communities to recognise and address their own challenges, and consequently, empowerment as an outcome manifests through increasing control over choices which impact one's life and community. People's experiences and expressions of empowerment vary among individuals with the specific cultural, economic, and institutional settings of a person's life determining how empowerment manifests. The process of empowerment involves enhancing personal empowerment while simultaneously transforming relationships and strengthening community bonds while promoting collective wellness

(Miroso et al., 2016). Empowerment theory also requires researchers and practitioners to examine power dynamics in their work. Researchers must ask themselves and understand these types of questions surrounding power - Who possesses it? Who makes the decision? Who stands to gain? The success of initiatives that claim empowerment through top-down control enforcement remains uncertain because genuine empowerment demands surrendering power and accepting mutual control and participation.

There are critiques of empowerment theory. These include the risk of co-option and superficial implementation. There is a risk that empowerment discourse becomes co-opted to serve economic interests rather than implementing genuine social transformation (Cornwall, 2014). The concept of empowerment is too easily reduced to tokenistic participation, giving an illusion of agency, while still preserving current power systems. Another critique is that empowerment theory is too narrow, with organisations failing to genuinely address "empowerment or address equality and diversity in their involvement strategies" (Ocloo & Matthews, 2016, p.626). These tokenistic methods appear in consultation processes where communities are informed but lack real decision-making authority. This indicates that many consultation processes do remain tokenistic, meaning that communities may be informed or consulted but lack true decision-making authority. This reflects Arnstein's (1969) cautions regarding the gap between superficial participation and authentic citizen control. Neoliberal perspectives on empowerment appear to emphasise individual responsibility and self-reliance. These perspectives ignore the underlying systemic inequalities and attribute responsibility to communities for their circumstances. This co-option shifts empowerment from a tool for collective liberation to a justification for the current inequalities, implying that individuals simply need to become more empowered within unchanging policy, environments and systems.

In the context of this thesis, empowerment theory can offer a useful perspective to understand how specific food initiatives can enhance community agency. Food rescue initiatives can act as means to develop all three aspects of Zimmerman's psychological empowerment framework - fostering participants' sense of competence and control (intrapersonal), deepening their comprehension of food systems and social justice matters (interactional), and offering tangible chances for community involvement and advocacy (behavioural). When food rescue initiatives are rooted in understanding power relationships and strengthening community empowerment, they are able to transition from charity actions to tackling the underlying causes of food insecurity. This strategy enables organisations to reduce immediate needs while promoting fairer and more self-determining communities. Within this research project, empowerment is understood as a contested and politically situated idea. Empowerment is influenced by larger structural and economic factors rather than just influenced solely by individual agency. Although narratives which surround empowerment are frequently used to highlight personal resilience and agency, this research takes a critical community psychology approach that acknowledges the constraints of individual empowerment without there being structural transformation also. Because of this, empowerment in this thesis is looked at critically and focuses on power dynamics and the structural factors that shape who is able to exercise agency and to what extent.

2.4 Food Sovereignty and Indigenous Knowledges

The ongoing inequalities that are faced by Māori, Pasifika and low-income families underscore that food access is closely linked to structural inequality which is formed by historical/continued colonisation and unequal access to education and job opportunities (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2024). In addressing food insecurity, food rescue and

food waste, the concept of food sovereignty is a radical change from neoliberalism. Food sovereignty means that communities are able to control and determining their own food systems (Patel, 2009) and considers ideas such as power, equity, justice and the preservation of culture/traditions/values. Food sovereignty is also a deeply inter-related process with the politics of food - how and by whom food is produced, and whether the systems in place are consistent with the community's values and identity. Food sovereignty has emerged from Indigenous movements as they work to establish community control over complete food systems, including environmental, cultural, and social components (Patel, 2009). Growing food enables Indigenous communities to maintain cultural connections to their land, family, and ancestors - even after the disruptions caused by colonization and the drift toward urban areas (McKerchar et al., 2015). When communities practice food sovereignty through their own growing and distributing methods, it helps them reconnect with the land, their ancestors, and each other (Wehi et al., 2023). Having access to high-quality foods grown in culturally appropriate ways has also shown to have significant positive affects for physical health, mental wellbeing, social connection, and cultural continuity (McKerchar et al., 2015; Wehi et al., 2023). Despite there being growing recognition of these ideas in scholarly literature, Indigenous perspectives and mātauranga Māori are still not adequately or commonly integrated into mainstream food security initiatives, strategies or policy (Stein et al., 2016).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, food sovereignty is fundamentally connected to Te Ao Māori, which translates to the Māori world. Food sovereignty is influenced by cultural principles which include manaakitanga (hospitality), whanaungatanga (relationships), mana motuhake (self-determination), and kaitiakitanga (guardianship). This connection to Te Ao Māori transforms food sovereignty into more than just a strategy, but a way of being able to resist the persistent impacts of colonisation on whānau and communities (Hokowhitu et al.,

2022; Carlson, 2019). Māra kai (community gardens) provide a concrete example of how food sovereignty functions. These gardens accomplish more than just growing produce, research has shown that they transform into locations for family gatherings, where older generations impart wisdom to youth, and where cultural traditions endure. By engaging in daily activities like planting, harvesting, and preserving food, individuals reintroduce tikanga (cultural protocols) and mātauranga Māori (knowledge systems) into their everyday lives (Hutchings, 2015). Honouring the cultural traditions which surround food production and maintenance helps individuals to reestablish links with their whakapapa (genealogy and familial ties). This results in a greater sense and feeling of cultural identity and promotes positive overall wellbeing (Hutchings, 2015).

Food sovereignty has both political and cultural implications. It contests the top down approaches to food insecurity such as welfare benefits administered through Work and Income - which are critiqued for promoting dependency on the state. Food sovereignty also avoids simplistic solutions such as requiring individuals to run a back-yard garden. Rooted in Indigenous knowledge, food sovereignty frameworks require genuine participation and cultural leadership. It also requires engagement with colonisation and associated systems of marginalisation in terms of actively creating alternatives to current market-based food systems. As a field, community psychology actively fosters culturally integrated and strength-oriented frameworks in response to systemic inequity (Foley, 2013). As such, food sovereignty acts as a collective empowerment process. These empowerment processes lead to successful outcomes as the people involved develop practical abilities, build confidence, and strengthen communal bonds. The collective food-related activities are grounded in mutual aid and collective care, which are more empowering than charity-based food relief.

2.5 Community-Led Food Initiatives

In Aotearoa New Zealand, charitable food assistance such as foodbanks have been essential for providing food to individuals experiencing food insecurity and mitigating the worst of the impacts of neoliberal policy making. Researchers like Dey and Humphries (2015) and Watson (2019) note that charitable food assistance has become highly integrated into our welfare and social support systems. Food assistance in the form of charity has several imitations. Foodbanks are becoming more like social welfare extensions, emphasising state surveillance and depoliticising the underlying drivers of poverty (Riol, 2023). This risks food charity becoming an acceptable substitute for systemic reform. There can also be a gap between the objectives of charities and the impacts of food charity as experienced by communities (Wakefield et al., 2012). This gap refers to the disconnect between what food charities want to achieve (addressing concerns about hunger and preventing food waste), to what recipients can experience (Park, 2017). These experiences can include an inability to adequately address growing hunger needs, differences in what individuals desire and what food banks can actually supply and even costs to human dignity in receiving handouts (Park, 2017). Food charities also often depend on volunteers and unpaid work, which does risk being exploitative. Although charity can be empowering during a crisis, it can also mask power inequalities (Andress et al., 2020). In sum, food charities might unintentionally shift social responsibility onto individuals and communities, obscure systemic inequality, and normalise emergency responses (Riol, 2023)

In comparison to charitable food assistance, initiatives led by the community to combat food insecurity can produce more equitable and sustainable solutions (Williams, 2017; Gibson-Graham, 2008). They use innovative methods such as *māra kai* (introduced above), which can foster dignity, collaboration, and empowerment, and community food

pantries, a grassroots effort rooted in the sharing principle of “take what you need, leave what you can” (Johnston, 2023, p.214). Interventions with ethical engagement should promote shared agency instead of solely depending on volunteerism, distribute aid in respectful manners, and also advocate for fundamental systemic change at the same time. Doing so supports empowerment of individuals and organisation through the process of political education and collective action that challenges oppressive systems. This empowerment can emerge not just from receiving food, but making decisions, learning skills and changing conditions which cause food insecurity. Community-led food rescue initiatives in Aotearoa demonstrate the potential to disrupt systems of waste and inequality. Many efforts from community organisations create environments for empowerment and agency by repurposing otherwise wasted food and using practices of collective care (Miroso et al., 2016; Johnston & Adams-Hutcheson, 2023; Riol & Connelly, 2023).

Community food rescue organisations can exist in many different forms. These organisations intercept surplus food before it reaches landfills and redistributes the food to communities experiencing food hardship. Many initiatives that promote food rescue are run or managed by volunteers or community organisations. These initiatives often have to rely on contributions from the public or government to support their upkeep. As financial struggles have grown over time, public dependence on these types of assistance has also risen. Instead of providing resources directly to individuals or families, government approaches have frequently routed assistance through food charities (Dey & Humphries, 2015). Food rescue can cultivate a sense of competence while promoting greater collective participation and agency within communities (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). When examined from the perspective of food sovereignty, this is amplified as *tino rangatiratanga*, along with indigenous principles such as *manaakitanga*, *whanaungatanga*, and *kaitiakitanga*. This

reinterprets food not merely as a way of nourishment but also as a means of cultural and political defiance – resulting in food being able to be utilised to maintain control while promoting active decolonisation (Patel, 2009).

Organisations like Go Eco, Kaibosh, and KiwiHarvest rescue excess food that would otherwise go to waste and distribute it to community organisations. This addresses policy and logistical gaps while strengthening community control. These efforts show how community leadership and mutual aid can foster fairer food systems. Beyond food distribution, food rescue operations can also function as hubs for social connection and community education. These initiatives enable individuals to experience empowerment through direct involvement in food management, fostering broader agency and autonomy, in turn enhancing wellbeing. However, community-led food initiatives can also bring challenges, with governments normalising withdrawing from their responsibilities from making systemic changes to the food system if community groups can successfully fill the gaps (Riches, 2003). Most food rescue initiatives are evaluated in terms of short-term relief rather than long-term systemic change. Food rescue organisations are often critiqued for being a band-aid solution - feeding people and addressing basic needs but not fixing the underlying problems that cause hunger in the first place.

Taken together, the literature highlights the tension which is inherent in food rescue initiatives - which may simultaneously mitigate immediate material hardship while also operating within systems that individualise responsibility for food insecurity. Food rescue initiatives can unintentionally reproduce neoliberal logic by normalising charitable responses and positioning the issue of food insecurity as a problem which has to be managed at the community level rather than structural reform. For community psychology, this tension is

critical, as it raises questions about how community-based responses can provide dignity and connection without obscuring the structural determinants of poverty.

2.7 Reflexivity, Knowledge, and Power

Positionality “reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 71). Positionality in research shapes not only how the study is conducted but also the interpretation of the results, and the power dynamics within the research process (Holmes, 2020). Recognising positionality is critical within the field of community psychology as the field considers that knowledge production is never neutral and is always embedded within larger sociopolitical settings. Reflexivity requires researchers to examine their own identities, beliefs, and potential biases, as well as know how these characteristics influence connections with participants and the framing of social issues (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity is not just an individual practice of self-awareness, but is also a collective endeavour - closely linked to participatory action research (discussed further in the next chapter), where knowledge is co-developed. Reflexivity highlights that this research is shaped by power and relationships, and that knowledge is created through collaboration.

Decision-making and knowledge generation regarding food in Aotearoa New Zealand are typically controlled by policymakers, government officials, and influence from academics’ research. This structure diminishes the lived experiences of communities who are the ones most affected by food insecurity, leaving their voices unheard in both problem identifying and also solution design. A community psychology perspective draws attention to these power imbalances by asking who holds the authority to define food-related issues - pushing researchers and practitioners to examine whether their work reinforces existing

inequalities or actively challenges them. Prilleltensky's (2003, 2008) idea of psychopolitical validity is a helpful framework in this context, as it shows the functioning of power at personal, relational, and structural dimensions. It also stresses the need for research and practice to avoid complicity in oppression. Psychopolitical validity highlights the importance of both epistemic and transformative validity in research. Epistemic validity describes how well research addresses power in knowledge creation by centring the perspectives of marginalised communities. Transformative validity, in comparison focuses on whether research leads to social change through actions that challenge oppressive structures (Prilleltensky, 2003). Applying a psychopolitical perspective in this way enables the study to identify whose voices are frequently marginalised and left out and how authority can significantly affect common responses to food insecurity.

In addition to acknowledging their individual biases and viewpoints, researchers must assess how these elements impact their engagement with participants which ultimately shapes the interpretations and insights they gather from the interview transcripts. This process goes beyond recognition and includes a continuous process of reflection that shapes how the researcher interacts with participants and understands the results.

Addressing issues of knowledge, positionality, and power is therefore essential to ensure this study is conducted ethically and reflects the lived experiences of participants.

2.8 Conclusion

The issue of food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand has been proven to not just be a challenge of food availability, but a structural contextual problem which are rooted in colonisation, neoliberal policy reforms and power imbalances. While government responses

have mainly relied on emergency relief, this does not address causes, rather it only addresses symptoms. This normalises government's being able to withdraw from their welfare responsibilities, especially as community-driven organisations must try and fill the gap. Empowerment theory offers a structure for comprehending how initiatives led by communities can enhance personal agency. Food sovereignty provides an alternative based on Indigenous knowledge that emphasises self-determination as well as including cultural values which enable communities to manage their food systems. Community food rescue organisations have the potential to address waste and food inequity through collective responsibility, however, they may also become short-term solutions that allow governments to avoid essential structural changes. Significant gaps persist in studies that leave out lived experiences, cultural viewpoints, and participatory methods that regard impacted communities as the centre of knowledge and catalysts for change. Tackling food insecurity therefore requires recognising lived experience and shifting from emergency aid to actions that confront power dynamics and establish truly fair food systems.

This study draws on an integrated framework which is grounded in community psychology values. The integration includes critical understandings of empowerment, food sovereignty perspectives, and participatory action research. All together, these approaches are able to foreground relationality, collective agency, and social justice, while keeping power, inequality, and structural conditions central to the analysis of food insecurity. This type of framing supports an examination of food rescue which is beyond the simple process of food distribution. Instead, this integration of community psychology framework positions food rescue as a space where dignity, participation, and resistance to depoliticised views of poverty are actively negotiated. By doing this, it challenges individual blaming narratives and instead creates space for the tensions and opportunities that arise when communities organise

while experiencing systemic inequality.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aims and Objectives

This chapter will describe the methodological processes that are used to address the research objectives, which are to:

- 1) Explore the perspectives and experiences of persons who are participating in food rescue, gardening, and food provisioning initiatives supported by Go Eco.
- 2) Document the experiences of staff facilitators involved in local food provisioning activities.
- 3) Describe and document the organisational processes that foster community empowerment within the context of food-related activities.

The conversations in interviews were focused on the study's aims:

- 1) Exploring the experiences of participants in food rescue, gardening, and provisioning activities.
- 2) Documenting the experiences of staff facilitators involved in local food provisioning.
- 3) Describing organisational processes that foster community empowerment.

The chapter begins by outlining the methodological framework and provides reasons for adopting a qualitative, PAR-informed approach. Subsequently, the methods for data

collection are elaborated upon, including a discussion about semi-structured interviews. After this, I describe the data analysis method of thematic analysis and conclude the chapter by addressing ethical considerations in the research.

3.2 Positionality Statement

I am a postgraduate student studying a Master of Applied Psychology (Community Psychology) at the University of Waikato. I have conducted this research project from the perspective and values within community psychology. I recognise and understand that the people I interact with and interview come from different backgrounds and all have unique experiences and challenges regarding food insecurity. My educational background shapes my viewpoint as a researcher, which naturally influences my approach in this research. I am driven to uplift marginalised voices since their viewpoints frequently go unnoticed. This research project is influenced by my own personal background and experiences as an educated, middle-class woman. I have no experience of food insecurity that is in a similar manner to the food rescue recipients interviewed in this research and I know that my own perspectives and beliefs influence this research – with my viewpoint and interpretation of experiences shaping my approach and understanding of the data. Due to my inability to completely understand fully the participants' experiences of food insecurity, I will use this gap to remain reflective, and constantly show reflexive practice by examining how my own perspectives and positionality influence what I see and hear.

An example of positionality in practice was during the interview process. My background shaped rapport during interviews. I focused on fostering a collaborative and respectful atmosphere by being open about my role as a researcher and encouraging participants to steer the discussion. This method guaranteed that their viewpoints shaped the

conversation and that the interviews stayed focused on the participants instead of being influenced by my own beliefs

3.3 Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

In this research, I have adopted a relativist ontological stance. This means that I assume that there are multiple realities as opposed to a single and objective reality. A relativist ontological stance assumes that these realities are shaped by contexts, whether they be social, cultural or historical (Erciyes, 2020). In the context of my research, adopting this perspective means that realities can manifest differently for the recipients and facilitators or food rescue. Each of these individuals construct and experience empowerment, food access and well-being in different ways - this can depend on their roles, cultural identity and material circumstances. This pluralism acknowledges there is no singular or objective version of “reality” which exists. Instead, meaning is locally and relationally produced through lived experience (Schwandt, 2001). A relativist ontological stance contrasts with positivist ontology, which assumes that reality is singular, stable and measurable. Therefore, a relativist ontology is a strong foundation for this research. It supports the use of qualitative and participatory methods that recognise multiple perspectives, lived experiences as well as capturing complex realities of community food initiatives.

Epistemologically, this research is grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist perspective. This views knowledge as being co-constructed between the researcher and participants. From this viewpoint, meaning is established through social interactions, dialogue, and reflective engagement in both organisational and community settings (Erciyes,

2020). A constructivist-interpretivist viewpoint recognises that the researcher's values and background inevitably will influence the research process, consequently affecting how the data is perceived and understood. However, these components are not biases to be removed - instead, they are essential to the creation of knowledge. They help the researcher in understanding data within its context and reflect on how their viewpoint engages with the research environment. They also emphasise the significance of recognising the wider social and cultural impacts and contexts on the research. This makes reflexivity and self-reflection essential to the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022) and is consistent with Heron and Reason's (1997) participatory approach, where knowledge is created from collaboration and mutual reflection among participants. Consistent with an interpretivist epistemological stance, this research prioritises participants' meaning-making and lived experience, which informed the choice of reflexive thematic analysis as an approach aligned with the study's ontological and epistemological commitments.

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Participatory Action Research

Based on the literature review findings, this research takes a participatory, community-driven approach, specifically using Participatory Action Research (PAR-informed approach). PAR and community psychology share core values that position communities as experts in their own lives and agents of change. PAR-informed research rests on the understanding that communities hold knowledge about their own lives that other people and communities simply cannot understand. This approach weaves together community psychology principles of empowerment, social justice, and ecological awareness

not as separate principles to be checked off, but as interconnected ways of being in relationship with communities (Trickett, 2009; Thomas & Veno, 1996). In Aotearoa New Zealand this feels familiar. Indigenous ways of knowing have always been understood that wisdom lives in collective spaces and that we're accountable to each other in how knowledge gets created and also shared. When it comes to food rescue work, PAR-informed research helps us ask harder questions like are these initiatives actually building the kinds of community strength and connection that last? Or are we accidentally re-creating the same dependency dynamics we're trying to escape (Kindon et al., 2007)? PAR-informed research challenges conventional hierarchies of knowledge creation by acknowledging Indigenous and local knowledge as valid and essential. This shifts traditional research relationships, and positions participants not just as people to be studied, but collaborators who shape what questions matter (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This way of research reflects community psychology's understanding that you can't truly know someone's true experience by extracting them from the social world that they live in. If research is going to contribute to social justice rather than just document the injustices faced, it needs to engage with the systems that create inequality and not just the individuals which are caught within them.

A PAR-informed approach aligns with empowerment theory as it allows those who are facing food insecurity to become agents of change - as a result contributing to the wider goal of transforming food systems in Aotearoa to guarantee equity and tino rangatiratanga. Values in community psychology offer essential direction for food rescue initiatives focused on enhancing empowerment. Successful initiatives addressing food insecurity would involve communities maintaining control over the program's trajectory. Community psychology values require that communities retain genuine authority over how these initiatives unfold. When food rescue initiatives are shaped and developed by those who use them, they become

direct expressions of local needs and cultural values rather than simply being convenient solutions for surplus food (Rappaport, 1981). Prevention-focused thinking extends past the current existing problems and it questions not just how do we feed people today? but why are people going hungry in the first place? This involves combining immediate assistance with ongoing efforts that tackle root causes. As well, principles of social justice cannot overlook the existing power dynamics, which require that food rescue efforts confront the oppressive structures that create food insecurity. In Aotearoa, this means acknowledging the ongoing and current impact of colonisation on food access and the management of food systems (Prilleltensky, 2001). Ecological viewpoints acknowledge the connections between food insecurity and broader systems of health, education, employment, and housing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

These philosophical foundations inform the selection of a qualitative, Participatory Action Research (PAR) informed design. Because this research has multiple socially constructed realities and co-constructed knowledge, a quantitative or survey approach would be inappropriate to utilise as it would only presume one fixed reality/truth and detached measurement. Unlike PAR and qualitative research, quantitative methods usually treat the participants as data points and numbers rather than real people - whose experiences shape the knowledge which is being generated. To compare, qualitative interviews and thematic analysis allow for engagement with the participant's subjective experiences and the social processes which underpin them (Kabaji & Mukanzi, 2018). Qualitative methods are particularly suited to community psychology and understanding lived experiences, perceptions, and the social dynamics surrounding community-led food provisioning (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Using qualitative methods such as interviews are suitable for experience-focused questions as they are able to generate rich, personal accounts. The format of the interviews allows for the conversation to flow naturally, which enables participants to be able

to guide the discussion towards topics and insights that may not have been anticipated by the researcher (Longhurst, 2016). PAR-informed research emphasises collaboration and reflexivity in partnership with participants, aligning with the idea that knowledge is produced in relational and transformative processes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

This research uses a participatory action research–informed approach, where participants shared rich knowledge of their experiences with food insecurity. Participation extended to shaping which stories were told through choice and how meaning was drawn from their experiences. Participants were also given opportunities to review and respond to their interview transcripts which helps ensure the findings stayed grounded in lived realities instead of having researcher-imposed interpretations. However, aspects of the research did remain researcher-led – including instances such as the initial research design and planning, ethical approval processes, data analysis, and the final writing of the thesis. This level of participation was considered appropriate within the constraints of a Master's thesis and consistent with ethical commitments to respect, reflexivity, and collaboration. By involving participants (facilitators, community members) as contributors in the research - providing them the opportunity to review their transcripts and help shape interpretation - the research project honours the epistemological stance of knowledge as being co-constructed. It also supports the ontological assumption that multiple perspectives matter and that change is possible when participants are active agents. The study seeks to generate results that are truly beneficial and pertinent to participants and their communities. By examining obstacles in community food initiatives through participants' experiences (both facilitators and recipients of food rescue efforts) the research generates findings rooted in real-world contexts that community organisations can implement in practice, enhancing their programs and establishing stronger partnerships.

3.4.2 Research Design Rationale

This research focuses on community organisations which are supported by Go Eco, a community environmental hub based in Hamilton, Waikato. By supported, these community organisations either provide education to organisations and facilitators, or give surplus food for distribution. Go Eco collects surplus food that would otherwise go to waste and redistributes it across the region. As a community organisation, Go Eco sits at the intersection of food waste, food insecurity, and empowerment and their established presence within the Hamilton Kirikiriroa community, along with a willingness to engage in student-led research, made them a suitable partner for a participatory action research–informed study.

The decision to speak with both facilitators and recipients of food rescue was deliberate. This is due to the importance of being able to understand the complete extent of how food rescue initiatives operate and their capacity to create empowerment. Facilitators, including coordinators, volunteers, and organisational leaders, have essential insights into organisational challenges and decision-making processes, with their viewpoints showing how food rescue can function as a system and highlighting the tensions that exist between organisation mission and reality. To gain further perspective, recipients hold essential knowledge about their lived experiences of food insecurity. They are able to express the actual impacts of receiving food on their wellbeing. They can additionally be able to express whether these initiatives truly promote agency and choice, as well as how food rescue relates to other types of support they might have utilised. Their perspectives frequently go unnoticed in food policy and program development, with top-down solutions being developed, yet they possess the genuine expertise on effective practices - what works and what doesn't - and the changes that could be implemented.

By involving both groups as participants, this study seeks to explore if and how food rescue can evolve from mere emergency relief into a transformative practice that encompasses principles of empowerment. This viewpoint enables practical knowledge that can guide more empowering methods for tackling food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research design aims to understand not only what food rescue organisations do, but how they operate, the benefits, the power dynamics, and how these initiatives could be improved to truly empower communities.

3.5 Data Collection

Prior to beginning active data collection, I participated in discussions with Go Eco staff (in person and over email). These discussions solidified the research focus, shaped the research questions, and confirmed that the study covered issues important to Go Eco, rather than being entirely researcher-driven.

Recruitment occurred through convenience sampling and indirect methods, in collaboration with Go Eco. I built a relationship with Go Eco staff, who introduced me to potential participants from external organisations connected with Go Eco. Interviewees were from three separate community organisations who receive rescued food from Go Eco and included both staff (facilitators) who worked at the organisations and community recipients of rescued food. Recruitment via reliable networks supported cultural appropriateness through the facilitation of introduction by someone known and trusted. Additionally, indirect recruitment was an appropriate choice for this study as it motivated participants who were truly interested in the study's purpose and results to volunteer. This meant that the individuals

who chose to participate were genuinely interested in the study – often bringing depth and engagement to their responses that reflect real commitment to the topic (Patton, 2015). As the primary researcher, I worked to create conditions where participants felt genuinely informed about what they were agreeing to (not just signing forms), understanding that they could step back or pause at any point if they needed to. The interviews themselves took place in spaces participants chose which prioritised comfortability and respected. Pseudonyms in the transcript and results protect everyone's identity in what follows, and all data remains secured. By speaking with both those who facilitate food rescue and those who receive it, the research could hold multiple truths at once, which is, the organisational realities, the day-to-day challenges, and what these initiatives actually mean in recipients' lives.

The main approach for data gathering was semi-structured interviews. These were conducted with both facilitators and recipients participating in food rescue, gardening, and food provision efforts in Hamilton (Kirikiriroa) as supported by Go Eco. Interviews took place at locations chosen by participants, which was at their respective community organisations. The interviews lasted between 38 and 65 minutes and the interview schedule (Appendix A) guided the conversation, collecting participant's personal narratives. This method of guided conversation, with flexibility to stray off 'script' into different topics supported the development of trust and rapport and enabled open and meaningful discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Before each interview, the participants received a printed consent form (Appendix B) and an information sheet (Appendix C) which explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and data storage procedures. The participants were then given adequate time to review the sheet and ask any questions before providing their consent. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and the participants then had three

weeks to review their transcripts and request edits, additions, removals or full withdrawal. This approach to gathering qualitative data enables participants to remain engaged in the research process and maintain authority over their own experiences and dialogue. Establishing a space for this feedback loop helped guarantee that the data was grounded in the real experiences of the individuals which aligns with the values of PAR-informed research and emphasises ongoing dialogue between both the researcher and participant.

The participant group for this study was comprised of 7 adults of various genders and backgrounds involved in community food initiatives supported by Go Eco in Kirikiriroa. 3 facilitators from community groups and 4 recipients of food rescue initiatives were interviewed in total with their ages including individuals in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. This combines community members (receiving food) and facilitators who manage these initiatives as either staff or volunteers. The individuals who were receiving food assistance when interviewed dealt with significant daily challenges of financial constraints and material hardships. This meant that having conversations about food access, stigma, and inequality touched on lived vulnerabilities. The facilitators brought different kinds of expertise, one tends a community orchard, sharing knowledge about growing and harvesting that connected people to food production itself. Another is the manager of a community centre who helps deliver a food rescue initiative supported by Go Eco three times per week. The third facilitator organises the provision of free meals seven nights a week. All of the four food rescue recipients come from varied backgrounds, however they all receive food from the same community hub. The small sample size was purposefully chosen to fit with qualitative interpretivist methodology - valuing depth of insight over representativeness. This allowed

me to thoroughly examine the details of participants' experiences and their perspectives.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data was examined through thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013). Thematic analysis refers to a type of pattern recognition that entails discovering central themes through careful reading and rereading of the content. This analytical method was selected for its adaptability and ability to discern implicit and explicit patterns in qualitative data. Thematic analysis supported the study's objectives by offering a formal but adaptable analytical method for understanding the perspectives of both facilitators and recipients of community food provisioning activities. The thematic analysis was conducted from a constructivist perspective. The research acknowledges that the participants' accounts are shaped by their social and organisational contexts. Importantly, as qualitative analysis is interpretive, the findings represent one reading of the data, and other interpretations are possible (Hardcastle et al., 2021). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases:

1 - Familiarisation with the data

The audio recordings of each interview were first transcribed with an automated transcription tool (Turboscribe). I then listened to the full audio recording while simultaneously reading the transcript to correct mistakes and ensure precision of participants' speech, particularly regarding the reo Māori words and colloquialisms, and to ensure each transcript accurately reflected participant accounts. This process was repeated 3 times to support quality assurance and familiarisation with the data. The full transcript was then read an additional 3 times in its entirety without formal coding. During these readings, I made

preliminary notes, recorded my initial impressions, and highlighted possible quotes of interest. This immersive engagement allowed me to ascertain initial patterns from participant experiences.

2 - Generating initial codes

I used a systematic line-by-line coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and worked through each transcript identifying and labelling data segments relevant to the research objectives. Codes were generated to capture both explicit content (references to food access, cost of living, program logistics) and more implicit meanings (expressions of dignity, empowerment, stigma, community belonging, and agency). The codes were manually applied and colour coded. Each data segment was assigned with one or more descriptive codes. The coding process was iterative, in that I returned to earlier sections of the transcript to apply newly identified codes as understanding deepened. Examples of initial codes included “financial strain”, “vegetable affordability” “social isolation”, “non-judgmental atmosphere”.

3 - Searching for themes

Once the entire dataset was coded, I took all coded data extracts and began examining patterns across codes to identify potential themes. Codes were organised into larger significant clusters that represented common patterns of experience among the participants. Visual mapping methods and tables were utilised to analyse connections between codes and organise them into potential themes. During this phase, some codes formed stand-alone themes, while others were combined as subthemes within larger thematic categories. For example, codes relating to “rent increases” “pension inadequacy” “vegetable prices” were grouped under a candidate theme of “Rising Cost of Living and Financial Strain”. Similarly,

codes capturing “talking to people” “friendship” and “social connection” came together into a theme concerning community and belonging.

4 - Reviewing themes

The thematic categories were considered against two levels of analysis. First, the coded extracts within each theme were re-read to ensure there was internal coherence (the theme meaningfully captured the essence of the data it contained). The themes which lacked sufficient data were either refined or broken down into separate themes. Next, the themes were reviewed in relation to the entire dataset. This was to ensure they accurately reflected the meanings across the full transcript. This involved re-reading the complete transcript with the thematic framework in mind, considering whether themes captured important patterns and seeing whether significant data had been overlooked. During this, some themes were renamed, restructured or merged.

5 - Defining and naming themes

Themes were then clearly defined to capture their essence, and subthemes developed where necessary to capture nuanced dimensions of participants’ experiences. The final named themes were “Precarity and Food Insecurity”, “Responses to Food Insecurity”, “Social Connection and Relationship-Building”, “Social Connection and Relationship-Building” and “Tensions and Challenges in Community Food Work”.

6 - Producing the report

The final step was to combine all themes into a cohesive analytical narrative that addressed the three research objectives. Each theme and subtheme was told with selected participant quotations that captured crucial elements. The analysis was situated within

relevant research on food security, community psychology, empowerment, and stigma. Each chapter of the analysis corresponds to one of the three research objectives, ensuring that theme findings are structured in a way that addresses the objectives. The data analysis of recipient perspectives was carried out separately from the data analysis of facilitator interviews.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of Waikato's ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number FS2025-29). Adherence to ethics includes the provision of informed consent, confidentiality, and including the ability to withdraw from the study.

Several strategies were employed in order to address the differences in power dynamics between the researcher and research participants. The participants acted as collaborators in the research by reviewing and editing their transcripts and elaborating on their contributions. This allowed them to maintain control over the representation of their own experiences. The interview questions were deliberately broad and non-directive which also enabled participants to steer discussions towards the topics they found most significant and establishing them as authorities on their own experiences. In addition to these strategies, the researcher adopted a reflexive attitude during the study to manage power dynamics. Reflexivity included continuous critical reflection on the researcher's positionality, beliefs, and social context – ultimately reflecting on how these factors influenced interactions with participants. It also included the formulation of questions and choices made during analysis. By making these influences apparent and open to examination/scrutiny, reflexive practice

aided in avoiding the unexamined application of the researcher's interpretations and promoted a more ethically informed and participant-focused approach to result making. Through this approach, reflexivity served to challenge hierarchies in the research process, fostering a more equitable and clear co-creation of knowledge.

3.8 Limitations

The small sample size (seven participants across four recipients and three facilitators) means findings are not representative of all food rescue facilitators or their recipients - however, this was anticipated given the qualitative focus. Recruitment via Go Eco networks might have biased the study towards individuals and organisations that already have positive association with Go Eco. Given that participants reported their own experiences, their replies may have been influenced by social desirability bias. This may lead the individuals to give more positive accounts of their engagement or outcomes.

While the research adhered to participatory principles, structural and practical constraints inherent to postgraduate research necessarily limited the degree of full PAR implementation. Time restrictions, university deadlines, and participants' own commitments meant that not all stages of the research could be collaboratively co-designed or examined in depth. For example, participants could not jointly determine the theoretical frameworks or select the most significant themes; analytic authority ultimately remained with the researcher. Despite these limitations, the study still remained PAR-informed and preserved the essential participatory principles within achievable boundaries. The participants had input through the interviews which were designed as two-way conversations, they kept control over their own

experiences through the transcript review and could access and reflect on their findings through conversation with the researcher.

These methodological boundaries reflect the practical realities of postgraduate research rather than limitations of participatory approaches more broadly. By explicitly acknowledging these constraints while embedding meaningful engagement wherever possible, the research balanced ideals with feasibility, ensuring that participatory values were respected. This reflexive approach recognises that imperfect participation can still enhance ethical practice and share power more effectively than conventional research that does not actively involve participants.

4. Findings

This chapter highlights the findings from interviews conducted with food rescue recipients and food rescue facilitators in Kirikiriroa Hamilton. The thematic analysis undertaken identified four themes related to the ways in which how food insecurity is experienced, how communities respond, and the tensions that emerge when community grassroots organisations attempt to address structural issues such as poverty. The four identified themes are “Precarity and Food Insecurity” - which documents the lived experience of economic hardship and its impacts, “Responses to Food Insecurity” which examines how food rescue initiatives structure their work to preserve dignity and foster empowerment, “Social Connection and Relationship-Building” which reveals the relational aspects of food provision and practices of mutual aid, and “Tensions and Challenges in Community Food Work”, which considers the pressures, contradictions, and structural barriers of community food provisioning. Taken together, these themes indicate that food rescue involves much more than just providing food,

it includes intricate negotiations of identity and dignity. Food rescue also fosters opportunities for social connections and mutual support. Ultimately, food rescue seems to result in both empowerment and organisational pressure.

The results are based on the interviews with four recipients of food rescue and three facilitators of food rescue projects supported by Go Eco. Recipients consist of Janet Wilson, Brian Richardson, Joy Waitere, and Evan Mitchell (all pseudonyms), who frequently utilise food parcels provided by community organisations. The facilitators comprise Louise Gray, a volunteer at a community centre managing the orchard; Natalie Reed, chair of a local trust that offers meals daily to the community, and Matthew Nolan, who is the coordinator at a community centre (all pseudonyms).

Theme 1 - Precarity and Food Insecurity

This theme examines the lived experience of recipients of rescued food and the intersections with precarity and food insecurity. This theme discusses how increasing housing expenses and insufficient welfare assistance contribute to the circumstances within which working families and retirees find it increasingly difficult to afford food purchases. Recipients consistently mentioned the rising cost of living as the main limitation on their food budgets. Food insecurity therefore, must not be examined in isolation but examined from the interaction of housing markets, income levels, and neoliberalism in social policy. The theme indicates not just material difficulties but also the psychological strain of financial instability.

Recipients of food provisioning described the decrease in savings, the inability to sustain emergency funds due to rising living costs, and the ongoing necessity to manage and

extend basic resources. Food rescue initiatives offered vital financial support, allowing beneficiaries to reallocate money for other necessary expenses. In addition to material assistance, consistent access to food alleviated anxiety and stress, establishing predictability in otherwise unstable situations. Facilitators' insights complement recipients' experiences of food provisioning. Facilitators described the expanding scope of food insecurity beyond common stereotypes regarding who suffers from hunger. Their accounts show that food insecurity is increasingly impacting employed people, households with two incomes, and those displaying signs of stability. This contests conventional narratives that portray food insecurity as an individual issue.

Economic Impacts - Rising Cost of Living and Financial Strain

Recipients consistently pointed to increasing housing expenses as the primary factor that placed constraints on money available for food. Brian articulated this in the following quote: "Well, since the rent's gone up ... and it goes up every year, I find that I can't even save ... it's a struggle just trying to cope." Brian's observation that he could no longer put cash reserves aside for emergencies indicates a shift from modest financial security towards precarity. This means that any unexpected expense creates financial difficulty and is experienced as crisis. Brian elaborated further on the consequences of constrained budgets, noting "my children are in Taupō. If there's an emergency, like my grandson broke his leg, you know, I've got to have the money to go and see him and all that." Here, Brian is referring to his familial obligations during times of sickness and stress. Having cash for petrol and associated travel costs is a core practicality for being able to support his family during difficult times. His comment also reveals the difficult trade-offs people on constrained incomes face. The need to maintain emergency reserves for family obligations directly

competes with the need to buy food. Similarly, Evan emphasised the increasing living costs and flattened incomes inherent in his economic situation:

"The thing is food prices today. You go down here with 100 bucks and take a trolley and see what you get ... Pensions do not keep up with it ... If it's cost of living in New Zealand, it's gone through the roof. And wages and salaries haven't kept up."

These statements reveal Evan's awareness that his difficulty in affording food is not a personal failing but a systemic problem, wherein social safety nets (in his case, the pension payment) fail to keep pace with living costs. Taking an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), precarity and food insecurity cannot be viewed in isolation but are associated with the interplay of increasingly expensive housing and flattened income levels (Macaulay et al., 2022). This wider context means solutions must extend beyond focusing on individual budget management and instead consider impacts of increasing rental costs within the context of flattened incomes.

Similarly, Janet expressed her financial concerns, which stemmed from limited retirement resources:

"I'm not on the bones of my bum. But I'm finding it hard. I've got a nice car. I've got somewhere to live. I have got a bit in the bank. But that's got to last me for the rest of my life. So, if I'm eroding that all the time, then that gets really hard. So, I've got to figure out, oh, I might live another 20 years. How much can I take from that?"

Janet's quote indicates her awareness that outwardly, she shows signs of economic stability. However, even owning a car, having housing security, and/or cash savings are no longer an indication of financial security. This disrupts the commonly held assumptions and stereotypes that food insecurity only affects the visibly poor (Graham et al., 2022; NZ Food Network,

2025). In reality, food insecurity can also impact employed individuals and dual-income households who maintain an outward appearance of stability. Mentioning the eroding of savings over an unknown timespan ("I might live another 20 years") demonstrates her anxiety as a retired adult, living on a fixed income, and in the context of rising costs. This anxiety is not limited to Janet, with older women increasingly experiencing precarity and food insecurity – due to factors such as longer life expectancy and reliance on limited retirement income (Loopstra, 2013).

Janet acknowledged that she can pay basic power bills without fear of “being cut off” and equates this with a “comfortable life”. Her interpretation of a "comfortable life" is one of being free from the concern of utility disconnection. This is a simple living standard, not a luxury. Janet’s framing is indicative of the ways that neoliberalism has made economic insecurity a norm and turned the ability to pay basic bills without ongoing anxiety into an aspiration instead of a basic standard. Another indicator of simple living standards being eroded is the ability to afford fresh produce. Brian commented “I go to PaknSave [local low-cost supermarket], and if I look at the vegetables and I look at the price, I get down. I get down because I can't afford it." This response to the cost of food (“I get down”) is a simple example of how economic pressure translates into psychological distress. Janet further illustrates this in the following quote:

“I used to buy a wide variety of vegetables, but now I just think, oh, well, I'll just get the broccoli and the carrots. I won't get the other stuff. I won't get that nice aubergine or the [fresh] tomatoes, or I'll just go with tin tomatoes.”

This gradual narrowing of dietary variety represents not just nutritional compromise but a loss of food autonomy and enjoyment in food-related activities. Janet is pragmatic in the face of increasing food costs. She summarises the impact saying, "You do sort of cut your recipes

down to suit your budget." Here, Janet is minimising the reduction in her enjoyment of cooking and attempting to 'make the best' of her constrained situation. Brian expresses his distress clearly, in comparison to Janet's language which reflects a quieter response to the same limitations. This suggests that economic strain is felt and expressed through various significant means. Nevertheless, it is clear that not being able to purchase food brings disappointment and sadness to both Brian and Janet.

Brian and Janet also described how the financial scarcity they experience results in rationing of basic food items. Brian commented "You know how you get the sausages and there's six in a pack? I used to eat two to three [sausages] each time with dinner. I now eat one to make it [the pack] last a week ... I never used to do that." The sausages Brian is referring to are cheap and typically made from a blend of lower-cost meats with fillers like cereal and soy protein, along with preservatives (sulphites) and MSG to enhance flavour. They are generally small in size and low in nutritional value. Janet described similar trade-offs while shopping: "You're walking along the aisles and you think, oh, that would be nice. And then you think, oh, no, if I get that [item], I can't have that [basic meal item]." These accounts demonstrate how food insecurity shapes not only what people eat but how they think about food, turning shopping into an exercise in constant calculation and self-denial, and revealing the constant calculations low-income individuals must make to stretch their meagre resources. In the next quote Brian shares his budgeting strategies "they [Work and Income case manager] ask me, how do I survive? I go, well, when I've got the money, I buy in bulk, like tins and things like that, so that if I need to rotate them. But that's the only way to survive." Janet reinforced this approach: "Or buy what's on special ... Instead of just buying one chicken, if it's really cheap, buy two." These strategies reflect a sophisticated understanding of food economics, yet they also emphasised that such approaches were

becoming less viable: “But it's not very often now,” Brian noted, acknowledging that even bulk buying opportunities were diminishing as prices rose across the board.

Food Rescue as a Financial Buffer

The food rescue initiatives that these participants received food from assisted with the financial strain they faced. Brian was very enthusiastic about the way in which the initiative extended his food options: “[Before coming here] I couldn't really afford vegetables [now] I'm getting vegetables, and I'm a lot healthier ... I need it because I'm a cancer survivor, and there's no way I can afford vegetables.” This quote has multiple layers – Brian discusses his own knowledge of the health value in fresh produce, he discusses his own health conditions, as well as the barriers he faces in sourcing the healthy foods he needs. The food rescue initiative that Brian is a part of provides him resources so he is able to meet his nutritional goals, something that is important to him being a cancer survivor. The ability to access fresh produce without financial strain represents more than food security to Brian, it means he feels supported in managing a serious health condition and alleviating his anxieties around facing potentially life-threatening nutritional deficiencies.

Food rescue involvement also supported recipients to use their limited funds to meet other costs, alleviating financial strain. Brian shared how this meant he could put aside money to take his cat to the vet, and buy cat food: “I won't let my cat go without ... I'd rather go without for my cat, to be quite honest.” Pets, such as cats and dogs, provide an important role in alleviating loneliness and providing companionship for people living alone (Li and Wong, 2025). The food rescue initiative enabled Brian to maintain both his own nutrition and that of his companion animal, rather than being forced into difficult choices between competing needs. While focused on pet care, this statement speaks to the broader principle of

how food support creates financial breathing room for responsibilities and relationships that matter deeply to individuals. Janet noted the value of food rescue in supporting her to manage ordinary living-related costs: “[food rescue] does help, because if we've got bills coming up [I can pay them] ... my car insurance has just come up, you know”. This demonstrates how food rescue operates as part of a survival strategy that enables recipients to maintain the types of ordinary living costs that less-constrained others take for granted.

Psychological Relief and Reduced Stress

As noted earlier, participants experienced worry, stress, and anxiety regarding food sourcing and provisioning on limited incomes. Access to food rescue reduced some of this financial pressure with participants describing the initiatives as easing everyday stress and worry. When asked directly if food parcels helped reduce worry or stress about having enough food, participants responded affirmatively. Evan simply stated: “Yep.” Joy said “Yeah, well, you know, to me it is, yeah.” Brian elaborated on the connection between nutrition and mental wellbeing, “Yeah, I feel less stressed now that I'm eating healthier because it's good brain food ... It's nutrition.” Reducing anxieties about food and healthy eating is an important part of overall psychological wellbeing (Firth, 2020). Participants regularly attended food rescue initiatives; Brian utilised the service three times a week, while Janet used to attend every day. The regularity and reliability of food access was particularly important in reducing these anxieties. This regularity meant that participants could plan their meals and reduced worry regarding food provisioning.

The impact of participants' fixed incomes alongside rising living costs was a clear concern and cause for stress. The rising cost of living was consistently mentioned by all recipients as a big factor for their utilisation of food assistance. The financial challenges that

recipients shared highlight the restrictions faced in meeting basic needs and reflect a broader economic trend in which rising living costs, market-driven food pricing and limited welfare support significantly impact those who are on fixed or low incomes. The impact of this plays out in the lives of people like Brian, Janet, and Evan in the form of increased anxiety about food, reduced capacity for unexpected costs, eroding of financial stability and cash reserves, and limited food choices. While both Brian and Janet enact particular strategies such as rationing food and utilising food rescue, it is not clear how sustainable such strategies are long-term in meeting the gap between their fixed income and living costs.

Witnessing and Responding to Need

A strong motivator for becoming involved with food rescue for the facilitators interviewed was their observations of the economic impacts on community members. All three facilitators described witnessing financial hardship, which, in turn, sharpened their sense of purpose to be involved in community work. Natalie reflected on how her understanding deepened through engagement:

"I think I've always had a passion for helping people, but what it has made me really understand is being here since 2014, over the years, seeing how the struggle is real. I mean, from serving, you know, we set up to be [name], but we are feeding migrants, we are feeding families, we are feeding anybody that comes, and these whānau are really struggling. I mean, we know families that come whose parents have both got two jobs, and they still can't even pay their rent."

The latter sentence contrasts with commonly held public beliefs that food insecurity only impacts the unemployed, welfare-dependent households or those lacking resources

(Poppendieck, 1999); working households are struggling to be food secure also, with employment increasingly failing to provide adequate income for basic needs. In Aotearoa New Zealand, studies show that households with employment are overrepresented among food bank users, reflecting structural issues (University of Otago & Ministry of Health, 2011). Natalie mentioned that for a lot of whānau that she meets, "rent is number one, so food is the last thing that they give their money in", highlighting the difficult financial compromises many whānau must manage. New Zealand research in this field emphasises how the combination between rising rental/housing costs and stagnant wages force households who have low-income into making difficult trade-offs and decisions between shelter and nutrition (Cheer et al., 2002). Cheer et al.'s (2002) research with Pacific families in Auckland documented that participants consistently identified housing as their most valued expense, with one stating: "there is nothing more important than a roof over your head. Everything else comes after" (p. 508), and another mentioning that food is "one of the easiest categories of goods on which to reduce expenditure when there is a lack of money" (Cheer et al., 2002, p. 500). The combined impact of inadequate wages and high rents places household under economic strain, with food being one area that people reduce expenditure on in order to make ends meet.

This finding extends from existing food insecurity research by showing how precarity is lived not only as material shortage, but also a psychological strain. This strain is influenced by larger factors like increasing living expenses, insufficient welfare provisions, and uncertainty. In community psychology, this is important as it emphasises how important it is to view food insecurity as an ecological and structural problem, instead of seeing it as an individual issue. This will consequently strengthen arguments for responses which can

be centred on prevention/system-level approaches.

Theme 2: Empowering Responses To Food Insecurity

Theme two examines how food rescue organisations structure their work to not only address hunger, but also address and eliminate stereotypes which are often in food provision. The facilitators described deliberate efforts to remove gatekeeping mechanisms, which are becoming more prevalent in food-related charity. These gatekeeping mechanisms usually position recipients as undeserving of food assistance until proven otherwise. This theme also explores how organisations can create pathways from recipient to volunteer to leadership roles. This allows individuals to be able to transition from beneficiaries to active contributors. These transitions embody empowerment theory – participation generates skill development and confidence. Facilitators intentionally cultivate positive working relationships with recipients with organisational staff providing support as a core function, rather than controlling access to food. At the core of each organisation was an emphasis on dignity. Facilitators evidenced a keen understanding of shame as an obstacle to obtaining help and employed strategies to lessen stigma. These included actions such as modifying service provision for those in crisis and establishing low-stigma access venues like community orchards where individuals could gather their own food. These dignity preserving practices require continuous reflexivity, with facilitators regularly reflecting judgmental attitudes within their teams.

Background Motivations and Commitment

All three facilitators held strong beliefs in reciprocity, care, and community involvement beyond professional obligations alone. For Louise, engagement with food rescue

began with a personal passion for permaculture and gardening, changing over time into a way to connect with others and support individuals to confidently develop their relationship with growing food. Her aim was to foster an environment where education, involvement, and collective ownership could thrive. This came to encompass reducing food waste, and her participation was enabled by Go Eco's pruning workshop, which she joined to improve her abilities for her own home orchard. While visiting the local community centre (a place she sought out for connection) she noticed the community orchard was neglected and recognised a chance to help by volunteering to care for it: "I came here in February to prune and I've learned so much." For Natalie, food rescue work is culturally embedded:

"Since I was born, I guess, from a marae. But for [community group], I've been here since it opened in 2014... I remember 2014 when they opened and there was a Facebook message put up... They said, oh, we're looking for people to cook a pot and bring it down and help serve the homeless ... So I used to make a pot of boil-up and bring it down and serve it out. And then I just fell in love with just the kaupapa and the community, people that we served."

This quote shows how Natalie's involvement was shaped by Māori principles like manaakitanga and collective responsibility. She expressed that she "fell in love with the kaupapa," highlighting a deeply felt bond with the mission of her organisation. Her engagement with food initiatives is also an expression of relational care and aroha (love). Instead of looking at food rescue as a transactional service, Natalie understands it as an extension of communal care by upholding the wellbeing of others. Lastly, Matthew has spent three decades in community work and positions his decade of food rescue work as a natural extension of community commitment. His organisation's holistic approach integrates food support within a raft of broader community services: "The centre's a hub for the community

to come together to share, to get education, to get health assistance, to have fun, connect."

Matthew also described the satisfaction of being able to respond immediately to need:

"I think it is pretty cool to have the food. Particularly when new people come in here and they're after our help and we can suddenly pull out a box of food. It's pretty awesome to be able to do that."

Rather than referring people to another community group/agency or placing them on a waitlist, facilitators at Matthew's organisation can respond in the moment, which restores dignity and reduces the emotional burden often attached to asking for help.

Reducing Gate-Keeping Mechanisms

The facilitators all discussed the ways in which their respective organisations intentionally removed gatekeeping mechanisms and worked to reduce the sense of shame and stigma which surround accessing charitable food relief. Natalie describes the approach of her organisation:

"One of [our organisational values] is non-judgement, which is huge ... it stops a lot of organisations teaming up with us because they have criteria [to receive support] where we have none. So we don't have a form that says, you have to meet this [criteria] before you can come here."

The absence of eligibility criteria for food support ("we have none") differentiates the organisation from welfare services and those aligned with Work and Income approaches – where recipients must prove their deservingness through documentation and means testing (Hodgetts et al., 2008). By refusing to use these types of eligibility criteria and gatekeeping mechanisms, Natalie's organisation operates with a different set of values to state-funded

support. Matthew shared a similar approach stating that "There's no barriers. We don't ask any questions around that. And there's a whole mix of people who do that." In this context, "around that" refers to the absence of questions about income, employment status, housing situation, or reasons for needing food assistance - typical gatekeeping that characterise traditional charitable and welfare food provision (Poppendieck, 1999). Natalie acknowledged that taking open-handed approach prevented partnerships with some organisations that do require eligibility criteria. This tension reveals an ideological divide in approaches to food assistance between those organisations who require proof of need and are aligned with neoliberal welfare ideas that treat poverty with suspicion and demand surveillance. In comparison, the "no criteria" approach is underpinned by dignity and trust. However, the cost of refusing to align with state surveillance that of strategic disadvantage and reduced partnership opportunities.

This philosophy extended to Natalie's outlook on volunteer recruitment: "We don't do police vetting. We don't do anything like that for our volunteers and stuff, only because we believe that there is no other place that would give them the opportunity like we do." This indicates an acknowledgment that criminal records are a form of stigma, and create lasting obstacles to community involvement. This has the impact of preventing individuals from contributing to civic life even after they have completed their sentences. By not enforcing vetting requirements, the organisation opens doors for individuals who might otherwise be excluded from volunteer roles. This positions these roles as available to everyone instead of privileging those without criminal records. However, this approach does have risk which explains in turn why other organisations do use police vetting (particularly when there is concerns about safety when volunteers work with vulnerable people. Other organisations

typically implement police vetting as a way to safeguard and protect service users, as well as demonstrate diligence to funders. The absence of police vetting could be perceived as exposing service users/volunteers to risk. As well as this, organisations can be left vulnerable to criticism if incidents do occur. Natalie and her organisation, in comparison, embrace a different type of risk. This is risk that weighs up the social harm of ongoing exclusion and shame against the potential for incidents – but ultimately choosing to trust.

Facilitators also worked with team members to address underlying attitudes around poverty, shame, and stigma. Natalie had a very reflexive outlook on this process. She described it using the language of “non-judgement,” which emphasises that it required continuous self-examination rather than being a fixed personal trait:

"That non-judgmental thing is we've had to challenge ourselves so much because, you know, someone will say, no, you can't come here and do that. And then we're, unpacking, okay, so how are we being judgmental in that space? And what does it look like to be absolutely non-judgmental? It's very hard when you've got 200 volunteers. You know, we've all got different personalities and stuff."

The word “unpacking” indicates an effort to undertake deliberate critical reflection rather than unexamined practice. With 200 volunteers, all of whom have diverse personalities and values, maintaining a “non-judgmental” approach requires ongoing conversation, thoughtful attention, and collective responsibility. Rather than assuming that the volunteers naturally share a common understanding of care, the facilitators at Natalie’s workplace actively work to interrogate implicit judgements as they arise. Facilitators also manage intricate ethical conflicts involving safety, fairness, and necessity. Being congruent with their values meant

shifting from punitive or exclusion-based responses to creating adaptive, harm-reduction approaches that emphasised food access while mitigating potential risks. Natalie explains:

"We don't have a policy where no one is allowed to come. But what we try and do is develop a strategy. If we know someone's on P and they're coming here for, this is their last place, and they're coming down and they're going through that horrible stage that they're in... you just give them their meal and you send them off fast, even if you haven't started."

This method overall signifies a transition from enforcing behavioural standards and/or procedural consistency to a dignifying and relational approach. By acknowledging substance withdrawal as a medical and humanitarian concern, facilitators were able to adjust their service delivery to provide food to individuals in severe distress, while also reducing disturbances in the space and potential of harm for others. This process required clear communication with volunteers to ensure that these adaptations were perceived as ethical care instead of favouritism. Natalie also expressed the core of the initiative's fundamental dedication through an absolute principle: "But what we do is that no one will ever be denied a meal, which tells me that we're working really hard in that non-judgmental space. No matter what they do, they will always get a meal." This principle, "no one will ever be denied a meal", reflects the value of *manaakitanga* (hospitality/care), and the phrase "no matter what they do" acknowledges that people in crisis can behave poorly. However, no matter the behaviour, everyone has a right to food to eat. In this way, Natalie's organisation upholds basic human rights and humanitarian ideals. Although Natalie presents this dedication as proof of "non-judgement," it is more accurately interpreted analytically to reduce shame and stigma, and as a form of unconditional openness and generosity in sharing food.

Unconditional food sharing serves as a key value and as a way to maintain recipient dignity,

safety, and care.

Leadership Development and Empowerment

All three of the food rescue organisations created conditions enabling recipients to transition into volunteer and leadership roles. This tended to occur organically rather than through formal programs. This transition pathway embodies empowerment theory's behavioural dimension, which involves moving from passive recipient to active participation. Natalie described how this happens at the initiative she facilitates:

"Oh yeah, there's hundreds of examples... many of the whānau here have started on the other side. They come, got kai, and now that they are in a space to help. They're either volunteering or part of our casual employment group, or they come down and they will cook meals and just drop it off, because they're back on their feet again."

The phrase "started on the other side" and later being "back on their feet" suggests a journey through hardship toward stability. Importantly, it seems as though people returned to contribute even when no longer experiencing crisis themselves, indicating that participation created lasting bonds rather than relationships of dependency. Matthew also confirmed his experiences at the community centre stating:

"Pretty much all the volunteers used to be in the line. And so our staff are just there to support. We have a set of guidelines they kind of work under. But yeah, they came from the line and just offered to help."

Here, "in the line" refers to recipients of rescued food, who 'line up' to receive support. The clarification that "staff are just there to support" indicates the intentional practice of power

redistribution, whereby organisational staff seek to facilitate access rather than determine eligibility. Volunteers, with lived experience, shape the day-to-day operations. Matthew elaborated on what this created saying "it has built a really good community of people. So they will come a couple of hours before and just sit in the line. And I think it's become a bit of a thing they do." The volunteers' choice to "sit in the line" hours before distribution begins suggests they value the social connection and sense of contribution that comes with a formal volunteer role. This has the effect of blurring the boundaries between "helper" and "helped," contributing to a sense of a community of mutual support.

Louise's experience at the community orchard provides another example of how leadership can come from participation. She described gradually stepping into responsibility because she "knew the orchard was there" and recognised it needed care, saying, "At the moment, it's me... hopefully we'll get a team of people." She got her role because of familiarity, she knew the space and had relationships with people there before, not because of a formal volunteer recruitment procedure. Louise's reflections reveal how empowerment involves skill-building and confidence over time. She laughed when asked if she could think of an example where someone became more confident, skilled or independent through their involvement, saying, "Me!" and explaining how she had acquired pruning expertise and horticultural knowledge through practice. She now actively encourages people to be leaders, and is committed to making sure there is a succession plan, "One thing I will do is find a successor before I bow out... somebody will step up." Even early signs of peer participation, such as community members offering suggestions on the orchard Facebook page, indicate the ways in which people begin to shift from bystanders to contributors. Alongside this, Louise mentors of local school students with hands-on involvement and practice. Her encouragement

of active participation (“you’ll be able to say, I did that”) further demonstrates how empowerment is developed and grown by hands-on involvement and encouragement – reflecting empowerment as a process in which individuals build confidence and a sense of ownership over their own skills.

Beyond individual transitions to volunteer roles, the facilitators described how their respective organisations fostered peer-to-peer support. Matthew shared how volunteers used their knowledge of community members' circumstances to provide tailored support saying:

"I guess when the volunteers know that maybe they know a family that's kind of struggling or there might be a tangi. And put some food aside for that group. Or they get to know people, they get to know what they're kind of like. So sometimes they are able to cater to them, whether they're vegetarian or gluten-free. Or put some gluten-free bread aside, particularly for people that can't afford that."

This individualised approach is only possible when volunteers knew the community well and have developed positive relationships with the people in it. The example of setting aside food for a tangi (funeral) reflects Māori cultural practices of collective care during bereavement, with the attention to dietary requirements also showing dignity-centered practice that is changed to meet individual needs.

Dignifying Practice

As noted earlier, accessing food support can come with a sense of shame and stigma. The facilitators demonstrated awareness of this and noted that this was a significant barrier to

accessing food support. They also identified organisational practices that either mitigated or intensified stigma. Natalie recounted an example of how shame manifested at her initiative:

"There's a lady that, you know, she sat in the car because she's like, and they had no food. And she's like, came up and she was just crying her eyes out. She's like, I've left my children in the car. I feel really embarrassed. And I said, look, don't feel embarrassed. Go back into your car. How many children do you have in your car? Eight children. I could see them lying in the car and stuff. So go back and sit in there. Then I got their meals and then went and took it over to her."

Natalie's response by bringing meals to the car honoured the woman's dignity while making sure her family received food. This adaptive practice prioritised the woman's emotional wellbeing and feelings of shame over following institutional procedures. Facilitators also described trialling different types of distribution approaches to reduce stigma and enhance wellbeing and dignity. Natalie contrasted their current outdoor distribution with their previous model:

"it's something that we are not proud of, that having to line up outside in the public, because this isn't our space. I wish we could put the tables here and get them sitting, but it's not our space. It's not, none of us trustees like that. But we're doing what we need to do right now."

The previous sit-down space that they had allowed staff to observe and respond to additional needs, making referrals to other services, noticing health concerns, or simply offering companionship. The current outdoor model limited these possibilities:

"not having our own building is a huge challenge because what we can't do is sit down and have the meal that we're used to, that gave us the opportunity to sit

with each other and see, okay, maybe they need this service, maybe they need that, and make those connections that way."

Their future vision explicitly prioritised dignity as it was previously when they did have a building:

"Once we've got our own building, we will become more like a restaurant. We're thinking that we could do a rolling breakfast, lunch and dinner... Because then, because what we do notice is those that have addictions, if they sleep while we're having dinner time, then they won't get to eat until the next night, maybe. So then if we had a rolling breakfast, lunch and dinner, those with addictions will always have an opportunity to eat."

The "restaurant" concept reframes charitable food provision as a dining experience, while extended hours respond to the reality that people may miss a meal due to the fixed mealtimes.

Louise framed the orchard as a non-stigmatising access point saying, "It's like this is a space for everyone to come and connect ... I think in terms of maybe feeling embarrassed or something, just walking into an orchard and just picking your own food seems a bit less [shameful]." In this quote, Louise is identifying that an orchard environment (food production and horticulture-oriented) can create a non-stigmatising access point and contribute to a sense of empowerment in comparison to other distribution environments. Even though both provide food, the action of being able to pick your own food, in an outdoor space, provides recipients with a sense of being active harvesters, taking what they need and what they want, rather than passive recipients of other people's work. This sense of being

an active contributor is one way that the orchard provisioning contributes to a sense of empowerment for those involved.

While experienced as a non-judgemental environment by many, a sense of internalised shame and stigma around not being able to afford food still does remain. This often made initial participation difficult. For example, Brian said: “I personally had to swallow my pride ... Because I'm one of nine in the family, and we had nothing as children ... it [accessing food support] felt like I was going backwards”. His statement shows how accepting food assistance can trigger difficult childhood memories and represent a perceived ‘failure’ to achieve social mobility. His comment regarding needing to “swallow his pride” is indicative of an active internal struggle regarding strongly held beliefs regarding self-sufficiency and success. Similarly, when mentioning his elderly neighbours who would benefit from the food rescue initiative Evan said: “She's a bit proud .. she's a bit old school ... there are a lot of people like that. I think it is just taking that first step and being a bit uncomfortable maybe at first.” When reflecting on her first experience with food rescue, Joy said “Well, I got such a fright. You know, giving this stuff away, you never ever say no to anything, do you?” Even in a welcoming and non-judgmental setting, accepting help can be hard for individuals not used to assistance. It can be hard as we remain in a social context which is shaped by dominant neoliberal narratives of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility.

The sense of shame and stigma was not only internally generated, but often further reinforced or strengthened through these social narratives. These narratives are a neoliberal way of thinking, framing food assistance as charity rather than entitlement – in turn

positioning food rescue recipients as 'dependent' or 'undeserving' (Hopper, 2022). Brian articulated this clearly, "When you tell people about it [food rescue organisation] who are well-off, they make you feel like it's a charity." He provided a specific example saying "It's like I've got a friend that says, oh, you're on the benefit, it's free money. I'm going, no, I've worked." This exchange reveals how welfare recipients face delegitimation of their contributions and are positioned as dependents rather than citizens with entitlements. Janet creates information packages about low-cost options and relevant initiatives for others in the housing complex she lives in. In sharing about her efforts, she reflected awareness of stigma's practical impacts:

"I've actually recently just got a little package thing together for them. And there's a list of all the places in Hamilton that they can go to ... also their phones and their electricity and all those sort of things ... you know, and just tell people that there's no shame in going and getting that food."

Her explicit message that "there's no shame" indicates her recognition that shame is precisely what prevents access, and that countering stigma requires effort and normalisation of help-seeking.

This theme contributes to and extends existing literature by demonstrating how practices within organisations that reduce gatekeeping and centre dignity can foster empowerment in recipients even within structurally constrained conditions. For community psychology, this would mean shifting intentions from measuring individual empowerment outcomes to being able to understand the organisational processes that enable genuine participation and also promote wellbeing.

Theme 3: Social Connection and Relationship-Building

Connection as a Core Value

All three of the facilitators made a point to say that food provision created opportunities for social connection that felt as valuable as the food itself. This demonstrates core community psychology values in practice. That facilitators' emphasis reveals an ecological viewpoint of wellbeing which recognises that people's needs exist within their relational and social context (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). By valuing connection alongside material support, this acknowledges that addressing food insecurity requires attending to the social dimensions of how food is distributed, not just whether it reaches people. This perspective also shows a strength-based approach aligned with community psychology. Instead of seeing food recipients merely as people with needs to be addressed, the facilitators perceived these instances as chances to create routine and cultivate a sense of belonging. The indication that all three facilitators emphasised this relational aspect independently suggests it was not coincidental but core to their perception of the value and impact of their work. Matthew described how the food distribution at the community centre fostered routine and belonging:

"So a lot of people in the line do live by themselves. So that I guess makes them come out. Yeah. You know, they've got somewhere to go that day. They'll go down, sit down there... Routine. They get to know people in the line. They have a laugh and interaction. The staff go out there, we chat with them, you know, that has created a little cool community across."

The "routine" of weekly food distribution created structure and predictability in participants' lives. This almost functioned as a steady anchor in a scenario (food insecurity) that otherwise feels unstable. Matthew also made a point to speak about the diversity of relationships

formed through this routine “And then also across different ethnic groups as well. Like there's a whole range of people that maybe wouldn't have interacted with each other in the past... Like a whole big, awesome mix of people and all ages.” It seems that everyday life is often organised around familiar social circles, people tend to interact within their own networks, age groups, or cultural communities. In contrast, the food line became a space where people encountered others they might not normally, Volunteers themselves also participated in this community-building by arriving early:

“And it has built a really good community of people. So they will come a couple of hours before and just sit in the line. And I think it's become a bit of a thing they do... Particularly with older people, they'll sit and chat for a couple of hours”.

Recipients of food rescue also all shared the value of social connection and reducing isolation related to attending local food sharing initiatives. Joy mentioned “Well, I'm on my own anyway, so I come down here mainly ... to talk to other people”. Brian stated “I love talking to people. It's company. I'm by myself too”. Evan described how the community centre creates opportunities for him beyond simply receiving, mentioning “I come down early in the morning, I pick up the rubbish around here, put it in the bins, and do it to the street going back, and through the cul-de-sac”. The social dimension and connection at food initiatives extends past casual conversation to relationship building. Brian said, “We all talk to each other”. Janet commented “They put their chairs out and chatter away, and it's lovely to see ... You can tell the ones that live by themselves, they just yabba, yabba, yabba.” For many individuals living alone on a fixed income, the food rescue environment is a low-cost opportunity for social engagement and connection. Joy, making a simple statement about coming for the social aspect (“to talk to other people”), suggests that being with others holds

value to her. Brian identified it as “a day out”, and Evan jokingly stated that it provides an alternative to simply watching television at home. These ordinary observations reveal how the social connection experienced addresses the isolation participant’s feel as much as it addresses their hunger. The relational dimension of food rescue may be its primary value.

The sense of connection is assisted by the recipient’s experience of a non-shaming atmosphere, distinguishing it from more stigmatising forms of food relief. The positioning of food rescue within a framework of mutual care and community solidarity results in a sense of a collaborative endeavour, rather than a top-down hierarchy. Janet stated “You get to know people. It’s a friendship. It is a community.” Evan made a point which captured the initiative’s egalitarian ethos “It puts everybody in the same boat”, thus reducing hierarchical dynamics. Participants were able to identify the value of dignity-affirming spaces, which contrasted with those of top-down charitable endeavours. This egalitarian ethos was reflected in the mutually respectful relationships between recipients and facilitators. Janet shared how the staff member “always listens”, Brian said “He’s a good man”, and Joy similarly said “Good man, he is. Good personality with it too ... That’s what I love about this place. It is non-judgmental. It’s great.” This praise, which was directed at a specific staff member by name, shows there is a genuine relationship rather than transactional service provision. Evan commented “I told him, in another couple of years he’ll get a knighthood. He deserves it”. This, although a playful exaggeration, nonetheless shows genuine appreciation for the effort and care demonstrated by staff.

Reciprocity and Mutual Aid

Recipients of rescued food all described redistributing food within their personal networks. Joy explained: "When I do take stuff home, I'm usually giving it out to other

people ... Not for myself, really." Brian described a similar pattern: "I can pick and choose, and what I think I can't eat, I give to my neighbours." Janet's redistribution was particularly extensive and systematic:

"There's 57 people in those little units [where I live]. They're all little one-bedroom units. And they're finding it really hard now over there, for sure. And so sometimes on a Friday when there's things left, I'll take whatever's left and then just knock on doors. You know, just knock on doors."

This door-to-door community distribution transformed Janet into an informal community organiser, extending the food rescue network's reach to individuals who might not access it directly. Similarly, Evan described his support for an elderly neighbour:

"I've got a 91-year-old lady. She's been there, I think, seven and a half years ... the girls know, and they give me a loaf of sliced bread, and I take it, and I put it ... near her front door."

This quiet, consistent support for someone unable to physically attend demonstrates how participants are both recipients of food and donors. Janet articulated the bidirectional nature of support stating "you feel good when you can help somebody." This quote suggests that opportunities for contribution are themselves a form of support, transforming participants from passive beneficiaries into active agents that facilitate community support. This idea challenges common stereotypes that recipients of food rescue are solely people with needs to be met. Instead, it shows how the act of contributing/sharing affirms food rescue recipients' social value – also suggesting that vulnerability and capability coexist rather than exist in opposition. This aligns with modern food charity structure of participation and contribution, which gives individuals opportunities to exercise agency (Clarke and Parsell, 2021).

Recipients reported a greater sense of control and autonomy regarding food as a result of their involvement in food rescue, which provided opportunities for decision-making and adaptability. Recipients received standardised packages - a decision by the food rescue facilitators to encourage fairness. However, once home, the recipients would decide what to keep and what to share. This ability to reallocate items to neighbours and family members signified choice and autonomy, and is in itself an empowering action. Brian described this regarding citrus saying "They put lemons and oranges in there, and I can't have citrus ... Those are the things I hand to my neighbours." This ability to redistribute items that reimagined possible waste into an opportunity for connection and mutual aid. Recipients did not hoard available food resources but shared them, creating horizontal networks of care that operated alongside more formal food rescue practices. These forms of collective care challenge neoliberal narratives that frame food rescue recipients as 'lazy, uneducated, takers' (Beagan et al., 2017). Instead, recipients are resourceful community members with capacity to support others.

Facilitators described how their organisation's fostered an environment where receiving and giving were intertwined. This positioned recipients as having control in being active contributors as well. Matthew stated how empowerment manifested through sharing:

"when we get apples, when we get the bigger lots, people are able to take a bit extra and then give it away to other people. And I think that empowers them and gives them a bit of a, they feel good that they've helped out their neighbour. And there are a lot of people that do come and they do share, you know, they do say, I'll grab that for my neighbour. And there's a bit of that, that just sends out positive ripples."

Louise also described how she herself modelled sharing with neighbours:

"I went over to this other business and asked them whether they'd mind me pruning the grapevine that was through the fence. It took me three hours. They said, yeah, no problem, go there, we'll put some cones around your car and around you and everything else. And they were quite happy for me too. So I said to them, I said, well, you know, if you ever see any fruit there, go and get some."

This invitation extended the orchard's abundance beyond its formal community while building neighbourly relationships that might facilitate future support.

Similarly, the sharing of information regarding how to prepare and cook food rescue items indicates resourcefulness and capacity building within the community. Exchanging knowledge fosters shared understanding between group members, builds capacity regarding the skills needed for low-income living, and is more dignifying than charity alone. As Janet notes: "They [food rescue initiative] give out little recipes every now and then for things that people don't know how to do. You know, if they get some leeks or something, they go, oh, I know how to do this." This practical support around ways to utilise food increases the value of rescued food and builds cooking skills, addressing food security through both provision and capability building. Janet herself has also developed plans herself to offer capacity-building workshops for community members. This shows how food rescue can also be places for capacity building and the recognition of knowledge which is undervalued. For older woman in particular, whose traditional domestic skills may be undervalued/not conventional in today's society, these spaces offer opportunities to share expertise. "I'm looking at that too, apart from the bottling. I'd like to do pasta. Pasta is so easy to cook. And also just basic, like how to make a white sauce or how to do a roast". This recognition that skill gaps exist and

can exacerbate issues around food insecurity reflects an understanding of empowerment as capability development rather than just resource provision. Janet explained her approach to developing understanding and building skills, rather than just providing ready-to-eat meals. Janet also has knowledge of food preservation techniques and would like to share her knowledge and skills more widely as well:

“I still preserve, and I'm going to hopefully do some lessons here at some stage on how to preserve. Because that way, you can preserve your food and sit it in the cupboard. You don't have to waste power with it in the freezer”

This knowledge sharing around traditional food preservation techniques also acknowledges the costs of power and the economic pressure around electricity. Janet is aware that "people used to run their excess in the freezers when power was cheap. But now, power is expensive...freezers have got sort of less and less junk, you know, because it costs too much for the power." Subsequently, she is considering how her traditional knowledge might prove useful for storage excess food without creating additional power costs (running a freezer).

This finding extends existing research by illustrating how food rescue operates not only as a mechanism for meeting material need, but also as a relational environment where individuals also navigate dignity, belonging, and agency alongside constrained structural conditions. This is significant for community psychology because it underscores the role of collective connection and belonging as central mechanisms of wellbeing.

Theme 4: Tensions and Challenges in Community Food Work

The last theme explores the pressures and contradictions present in community-driven approaches to food insecurity. Facilitators experienced significant satisfaction in their roles, but they also faced volunteer exhaustion and limitations in capacity. The theme shows how

neoliberal governance influences organisational responses in subtle ways. Most importantly, the theme highlights how community organisations undergo mission drift as they take on roles traditionally managed by the state. Facilitators noted that food rescue efforts were surpassing their ability for wider community development, highlighting the transfer of welfare duties onto underfunded non-profit organisations. These organisations are without adequate increases in financial support or resources. The structural obstacles they faced demonstrate that food rescue - although it offers essential immediate support for needs - cannot address the underlying systemic issues that generate food insecurity initially.

Despite facing challenges in everyday practice, the facilitators all consistently were able to identify sources of meaning and personal satisfaction in their work. For many, this fulfilment came about from both practical and relational aspects of their roles. Louise, for example, described enjoyment in multiple dimensions of orchard work, highlighting not only the benefits of rescuing food but also the physical and emotional rewards of being outdoors: "Oh, just rescuing food, so that food is going to be available for human consumption, and it's the exercise out in the sunshine." Aside from these practical benefits, Louise also mentioned the importance of mentoring young volunteers. Through the engagement of local high school students in orchard activities, she fostered chances for hands-on learning and connection with environmental processes.

"And I even said to the kids before, you know, next time you come, these buds are probably going to be bursting. I said, you did that... And I said, you come and watch these trees grow. And you see the buds, and then you watch the bees in there, and you see the fruit grow, and you'll be able to say, I did that."

This pedagogical approach allowed young people to cultivate a sense of ownership and pride in environmental stewardship. Louise's interview also showcases her own development and skill enhancement over time after attending a pruning workshop herself – this demonstrates the reciprocal nature of knowledge sharing in community settings: "I mean, I sort of knew the concepts of pruning, but I'm much, much, much better at it now." Her experience suggests that facilitators themselves gain valuable skills and knowledge through the process of supporting others. This creates mutually beneficial learning relationships rather than unidirectional teaching.

Alongside rewards, facilitators also mentioned the significant pressures and challenges that they have found when maintaining food rescue initiatives. Natalie explicitly explained volunteer burnout risks:

"Well, this is what I've learnt. People come and they go 'I want to cook once a week', and I'm like, try once a month. And I'm like, no, no, no, try once a month because before you know it, it's going to come around and then you'll be cooking."

She then elaborated on the organisational challenges of coordinating individual volunteers versus partnering with businesses:

"So what we do is we love all the individuals, but we love the businesses because then we only have to deal with one person and they cook all the meals. Whereas on nights where we've got five or six individuals, they might ring on that night and say, I can't cook. And then we're 50 meals down."

This preference towards business collaborations rather than individual volunteers shows how neoliberal principles can also show in grassroots community organisations. Natalie's strategy

emphasises reliability and efficiency through corporate collaborations. This approach fits with neoliberal perspectives that view social issues as most effectively tackled through corporate participation instead of community engagement (Hall & O'Shea, 2013). This is what Hall and O'Shea refer to as "common-sense neoliberalism," where market-driven solutions are normalised as the best choice. This can also limit the perceived options accessible to community organisers (Hall & O'Shea, 2013). Although it is sensible due to the logistical weaknesses of relying on individual volunteers, this shift towards corporate support reinforces the models of corporate social responsibility rather than addressing the systemic issues that initially require food rescue.

Matthew also acknowledged organisational strain across the community work sector:

"But I guess the challenge is the capacity of the team. So the staff, we kind of are like most organisations in Hamilton are at capacity where they have a couple of people always sick and then they're really, really stretched."

He also identified a fundamental concern about mission drift, where food rescue work, though it is essential, displaced other community development activities. Similar to the above ideas/quotes, neoliberalism narrows the available solutions for alternatives. Matthew articulated the central tension clearly:

"We're kind of trying to plug quite a few [gaps]. So you do, you do worry about that kind of thing. Whereas yeah, there is a lot of added pressure. We're a community centre. We should be doing a little bit of food, but not the level we're doing."

This quote reflects how neoliberal policy changes have progressively shifted responsibilities historically handled by the state onto not for profit community

organisations. What Matthew describes is not simply an organisational challenge but a structural issue. As welfare responsibility from the state has minimised, non-profit organisations have been expected to fill widening gaps in social services without the corresponding increases in funding or support (Green et al., 1996). These organisations having to meet the needs of the community can sometimes increase stress and undermine long-term goals. This process of 'welfare state devolution' (Trudeau, 2008), puts community centres in a difficult to manage position where meeting immediate basic needs – such as food – overwhelms their capacity for longer-term community development work. Additionally, this situation leads to ongoing organisational stress as well as employee burnout, which ultimately restricts these community organisations' full capacity to act as venues for social change (Midgley, 2010). The capacity challenges faced by numerous organisations in Kirikiriroa Hamilton indicate that this is not a singular organisational 'failure', but a reflection of consistent underfunding in the community sector combined with rising demand which come from economic instability.

Facilitators commented on a core challenge of food rescue work, which was a near-constant variability in supply and demand. Recently, donations of food items have declined, as described by Natalie below:

"We used to get so much donations, we don't get much now... So people might drop off a whole lot of oranges and stuff like that, but we don't have that consistency. I mean, we make it work, but a lot of volunteers can't come because we don't have the food donated like we used to."

This decrease in donations that Natalie talks about directly impacts the operational management of the program. It also reflects the broader economic pressures which affect

both organisations and recipients. The decline in food donations also has occurred alongside rising demand for food assistance and rising living costs – creating a compounding issue for food rescue organisations. As living costs continue to rise and more households face financial strain (as documented in the literature review), reliance on charitable food provision increases and highlights a limitation – food rescue depends on surplus food availability rather than guaranteed provision. This makes it a very precarious system that changes with economic conditions (Clare et al., 2022). The irregular nature of donated food has direct impacts on organisations trying to address food insecurity and forces facilitators to improvise – while recipients face uncertainty about whether their needs can be met. Matthew further elaborated on the day-to-day pressures of managing supply and demand, discussing the practical pressures which are involved in ensuring that community members needs are met:

"If the families are really struggling and that's what they were expecting for dinner tonight, yeah, it can be a bit of a struggle. So I guess that consistency as well as the sign of the times where people are really struggling ... we can have too many people in the line and not enough food. So we've got to really run around the building and find extra things."

This statement shows how during times of precarity, as mentioned previously, facilitators need to continuously adapt and innovate to meet demand, which requires flexibility. It also demonstrates their commitment to help and a sense of responsibility to the community. The pressure of possibly not fulfilling immediate food needs generates ongoing emotional work for facilitators tasked with providing "dinner tonight" for families in need. Matthew elaborated on the methods implemented to manage these logistical challenges: "When we have a big excess of food, we can, we can, you know, put something in the freezer and then put it out when we need it." However, these coping strategies only somewhat alleviate the

core issue: food rescue functions as an emergency response rather than a systematic approach to food security. Although food rescue offers crucial immediate assistance, it cannot resolve the systemic factors that contribute, including lack of welfare support, increasing housing expenses, and low income, that cause families to rely on food charity in the first place (Hodgetts et al., 2014; DPMC, 2021).

The primary structural barrier recognised by facilitators was the social stigma towards people experiencing food insecurity. This has created consequences in finding suitable spaces to operate. However, this resistance reflects more than individual prejudice, it emerges from neoliberal governance that prioritises commercial interests and aesthetic order in public spaces. It also highlights the absence of adequate social service infrastructure. Natalie explains the challenge of securing premises:

"Well, stigma. No one wants us around them, so we can't find a building because no one wants our type of people around them. It's a shame. Especially for the businesses. So there's a business network that the council funds, Hamilton Business, whatever, it's in Garden Place now. They have a constituency of businesses that do not want to serve anywhere in the CBD."

The term "our type of people" emphasises the social exclusion faced by individuals seeking services, illustrating how views of disadvantage or difference can impact the organisations that assist them. Hamilton's CBD has implemented policies aimed at visibly excluding poverty, including anti-begging and anti-homeless initiatives that portray marginalised groups as inconsistent with commercial success (Community Law, n.d.). This neoliberal method of urban management places businesses as key stakeholders in determining appropriate public space usage. This also shifts the weight of addressing intricate social challenges such as homelessness, substance abuse and mental health onto community

organisations and staff without offering proper support. In turn, community organisations have to confront social issues with no accessible pathways to better support. The resistance Natalie faces functions on several levels: individual stigma, systemic/institutional exclusion, and a wider political economy that views poverty as an obstacle to economic strength rather than a social concern needing collective action. Natalie demonstrated this dynamic via her personal encounters with landlords:

"Yeah, because we've been to real estate agents too, and they've been honest to me. They're like, look, sorry, I found you a building, and as soon as the landlord knew you were [name], they've said no. Don't want them in there."

This results in a structural contradiction that is reflected in the principles of neoliberal urban governance. Community food services aim to address the visibility of poverty that worries CBD stakeholders, but encounter systemic obstacles in creating the infrastructure necessary to offer alternatives to survival on the streets. As Natalie notes: "And so that's a real huge misconception because for me, it's like if we can take them all off the streets, there'll be less of what's happening... Rubbish lying around, fights, all those sorts of things." This conflict highlights how the lack of unified public support frameworks, such as available facilities for social services, can sustain the very challenges that all stakeholders want to solve. The structural barriers which are encountered by community food organisations highlight not just local resistance but wider trends of urban neoliberalism that exclude poverty from public view while cutting funding from the social infrastructure capable of tackling its underlying issues.

Alongside stigma-related obstacles, facilitators noted difficulties within the welfare system itself. Matthew emphasised challenges clients encountered while trying to navigate social support services:

"People's access to, I guess, work and income grants... Like we definitely hear people on the phone here for an hour, you know, trying to get that kind of support. Or they might be refused a food parcel because they've had too many. So they kind of get sent to our centre ... with their letter."

These systemic barriers heighten the pressures on community food initiatives, which need to compensate for the gaps in government assistance. This situation also demonstrates how the neoliberal welfare changes addressed in Section 2.2 have established a punitive framework in which individuals are refused help after obtaining "too many" food parcels (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Instead of tackling the persistent structural poverty that requires continual support, the welfare system establishes limits that steer recipients towards charitable organisations. This effectively shifts the obligation of guaranteeing food security from the state to underfunded community organisations (Riol & Connelly, 2023). The fact that individuals dedicate "an hour on the phone" attempting to obtain Work and Income support highlights the bureaucratic obstacles present in supposedly "targeted" welfare support, obstacles that drain recipients' time and emotional resources, while organisations like Matthew's are forced to intervene to fill the gaps.

Matthew also observed changing demographics among individuals facing food insecurity: "And particularly with people who are working. So that's lots of noticed males coming in who would not normally necessarily come in. And youth as well, like taking food home to their families after school". This quote from Matthew is very different to the usual

stereotypes about food insecurity. These common narratives suggest that those experiencing food struggles are also unemployed. This also shows that solutions to addressing food insecurity cannot employ a standard uniformed approach because the structural, social, and economic elements are all linked and create difficulties for both individuals and the organisations seeking to help them.

This theme extends beyond existing food rescue research by showing how community food initiatives resist and also reproduce neoliberal dynamics. This is because they are relied upon to meet the essential basic needs in the absence of state support. This is important for community psychology as it surfaces the ethical and political tensions of community-based practice. It reinforces the importance of reflexivity and advocacy alongside service provision.

Summary of Findings:

Recipient experiences of food rescue extended far beyond transactional food access. While economic necessity brought people to food rescue, participation encompassed complex negotiations of identity and dignity, extensive peer support networks, sophisticated structural critique, and active community contribution. The recipients demonstrated agency even within constrained circumstances. This challenges the deficit narratives common in food charity discourse. Their accounts highlight both the material impacts of food rescue and its role in fostering social connection and mutual aid.

All of the facilitators brought diverse motivations to their work. Their accounts of experience revealed the rewards of witnessing community transformation alongside the significant emotional labour, capacity constraints, and ethical complexities of sustaining food

rescue initiatives within a neoliberal context – a space that increasingly shifts state responsibilities onto under-resourced community organisations.

5. Discussion

This section discusses how the findings from interviews show the ways in which community food rescue initiatives in Kirikiriroa Hamilton respond to food insecurity, empowerment and structural conditions. Through interviews with both recipients and facilitators of food rescue (supported by Go Eco), this research examines food insecurity via lived experience, examining organisational processes promoting dignity and agency, as well as the structural problems which are seen in community-led responses to systemic problems. This discussion chapter places the findings within the theoretical literature/frameworks which are outlined in the literature review. This chapter explores how food rescue initiatives operate in the presence of neoliberalism, community psychology values and grassroots resistance. The discussion is structured around several key themes drawn from the introduction section (food insecurity, precarity, neoliberalism, empowerment, food sovereignty, community-led food initiatives, participatory action research), and is then concluded by assessing the fulfilment of the research objectives as well as emphasising the consequences for practical implications and what future research could explore.

This research contributes to the field of community psychology by showing how food rescue initiatives can improve simultaneously both individual and communal wellbeing while still being rooted in larger systems of inequality. The results emphasise the significance of critically analysing community-based approaches/initiatives to poverty in relation to their social, political, and economic environments. Community psychology provide a valuable lens to this research as it examines both individual experiences and the broader structures that

shape them. This focus allowed the recognition of genuine immediate support these initiatives provide – fostering community connection and dignity – while also questioning why such community-led responses are necessary in a prosperous country.

Rather than treating theory as a fixed lens, this discussion engages with existing frameworks and literature by examining how they are supported, complicated, or limited by the participants' lived experiences.

Food Insecurity, Precarity, and Neoliberalism

The lived experiences of those interviewed for this research confirm and extend existing literature on food insecurity in Aotearoa New Zealand. The impacts of increasing living costs and stagnant incomes have been well documented elsewhere (Child Poverty Action Group, 2019; DPMC, 2021). Research interviews with the recipients of rescued food indicate that their experiences align with existing research on the topic. Recipients shared their strategies for coping with precarity, including rationing food, buying in bulk, and making difficult choices. As discussed by Graham et al., (2018) these are the everyday choices and calculations that low-income individuals must make to have sufficient food to eat. Recipients shared how rising living costs meant that, while they had some resources (such as Janet who lived in her own home), food insecurity was increasingly an issue. This aligns with Auckland City Mission's (2019) report, which found that working families and retirees were increasingly seeking food relief.

What this research adds to existing knowledge from literature is the true lived/embodied experience of economic erosion. Recipients experienced a gradual shift from 'modest security' to precarity with cost of living and food affordability. Brian's statement that he can't even save anymore shows not a sudden crisis but a slow process of diminishing

financial stability. This deterioration is less seen in policy discussion and literature that is about poverty, however, it represents a very real reality for many New Zealanders. This finding is different to common poverty narratives that frame hardship as crisis-based. Precarity can also be accumulative and a process that unfolds over time. Also highlighted is the emotional dimension of this diminishing stability, leaving recipients feeling down when they see food prices and are making calculations in supermarket aisles – which shows how economic precarity can translate to psychological distress. These findings reveal that current measurements of food insecurity and poverty miss the lived reality of some individuals who experience it. Policy frameworks would also typically categorise households as either food secure or food insecurity and measure them on binary indicators. However, participant experiences in the interviews show food insecurity as a changing scale of diminished security. This calls for more nuanced ways of measurement which are able to capture different gradations of food security.

Building on the literature review's discussion of neoliberal narratives that individualise poverty (O'Brien, 2014; Hodgetts et al., 2014), the findings reveal an important counter-narrative. Proffered solutions to food insecurity within a neoliberal framework include budgeting advice, food charity, and punitive welfare. However, recipients of rescued food in this study indicated a sophisticated understanding of food economics, mentioning buying goods in bulk, rotating tinned goods, rationing sausages, and only purchasing items on sale. In contrast to the idea that those who experience hardship make 'poor choices', (a neoliberal narrative that is imposed on people experiencing poverty (Hodgetts et al., 2014)), recipients demonstrated resourcefulness and capability. While existing literature documents budgeting strategies as coping mechanisms (Graham et al., 2018), this research shows a critical gap, which is the strategies participants described exceed basic budgeting and

represent advanced financial literacy. Their resourcefulness (making detailed budgeting plans, rotating tinned goods, bulk-buying) demonstrates financial literacy that exceeds what is often expected of them by public discourse. This shows that these recipients of food rescue are not people who lack knowledge about managing money - they are people managing mathematics where income simply cannot meet basic needs, regardless of how skilfully they budget.

Facilitators shared their observations of the difficulties people faced when navigating the welfare system. Matthew's descriptions of seeing people spending hours on the phone trying to access work and income grants or arriving at the community centre after being refused food parcels from other food charities, show us that punitive welfare is an inadequate solution to hardship. Natalie's descriptions of difficulty in securing a permanent premise, statements such as "no one wants us around them", and reports of exclusion demonstrates how stigma towards impoverished persons continues to operate. The positioning of people who are experiencing poverty and homelessness as undesirable (Earnshaw & Karpyn, 2020) leads to ongoing difficulty for people and organisations seeking to offer food relief. This spatial exclusion also reveals how neoliberal ideas produces "landscapes of despair" (Dear et.al., 1988). This is where poverty is 'removed' from public view. The resistance to hosting food services in the CBD reflects what Wacquant (2009) also describes as the "punitive regulation of poverty", which are policies that criminalise visible poverty (anti-begging laws etc) while refusing to fund the infrastructure needed to address the root causes of it. The irony in this, which Natalie identifies is that providing indoor spaces would reduce the very street presence that concerns businesses. This highlights how poverty exclusion perpetuates the problems that it claims to solve.

Neoliberal ideals have reframed poverty as an individual failure - instead of structural and environmental disadvantage (O'Brien, 2014; Graham et al., 2018). The shame which is associated with food insecurity often discourages help-seeking. This reinforces the idea of social isolation, and limits people with similar experiences from connecting (Garthwaite, 2016). We see this in the stories from participants regarding navigating barriers related to stigma and shame, and most clearly in Brian's accounts of his initial reluctance to seek help, and in Natalie's descriptions of the mother reluctant to exit her car to take food. Existing stigma literature looks at shame as an internalised and individual experience (Garthwaite, 2016). This research contributes to the understanding of the relational nature of shame. Brian discussed how his well-off friends make him feel like support is charity, this shows how stigma is not internalised but also produced through interactions with those who are not experiencing food insecurity.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory emphasises that social issues such as food insecurity cannot be understood in isolation but should be examined alongside wider structural elements such as social policy, labour markets, and welfare provision. Successful responses to food insecurity must address structural as well as relational factors (McKerchar et al., 2015). Facilitators described a holistic approach, with their descriptions of food rescue work showing an understanding of the connections between precarity, increasing costs, and the need for social connection and support. Rather than treating food insecurity as an individual problem, facilitator's responses indicated an understanding that food is part of a larger context and ecological complexity that shapes people's lives. An example of this is Matthew's description of the community centre as a 'hub' which integrates food with health, education and community connection – a practical application of ecological thinking which is

a core community psychology value. This contrasts with individualised solutions mentioned in the literature review, that address food insecurity in isolation.

Empowerment

The literature review presented empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000) as a framework for understanding how food initiatives can generate agency across intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural dimensions. The findings both support and extend this framework. Based on the findings, empowerment appeared to be fostered through three interrelated situations which were the removal of conditional access to food, the creation of opportunities for contribution rather than passive receipt, and the cultivation of relational community. These mechanisms align closely with Zimmerman's (2000) intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural dimensions of psychological empowerment, yet they also extend this framework by demonstrating how empowerment is collectively produced through organisational culture. Rather than positioning empowerment as an individual psychological shift, the findings illustrate empowerment as relational, situated, and contingent on how power is distributed within everyday practice.

Recipients of rescued food described redistributing food within their personal networks and connections. Joy gives food to others, Brian shares with his neighbours, Janet redistributes within her housing complex, and Evan supports an elderly neighbour. Redistribution transforms the recipients from passive beneficiaries into active agents of community support. In doing so, they embody empowerment through community engagement and reciprocal action (Zimmerman, 2000). These horizontal networks of mutual aid create collective resilience. This is also reflected in the sharing of information and resources with peers. For instance, Janet created comprehensive resource documents for her

housing complex, an example of critical consciousness and that countering stigma requires education and normalisation (Freire, 1970). The act of informal information exchange - sharing knowledge about services, recipes, and low-income living – also fosters collective resilience. This shared understanding exceeds what any individual or formal service could provide alone. Janet’s plans to offer skill building workshops is another example of how empowerment involves capability enhancement, aligning with Tremblay's (2014) idea of empowerment as both process and outcome. These findings challenge linear service-delivery which assume that help only flows in one direction. In comparison, recipients sharing food and knowledge supports the understanding that empowerment is relational and reciprocal (Rappaport, 1987).

Another process which fosters empowerment is the creation of pathways enabling recipients to move into leadership roles. The normalisation of volunteers having previously been recipients, combined with staff taking supportive rather than controlling and dominating roles, reflects the process of empowerment and shared decision-making (Rappaport, 1987). The shift from being a passive recipient to active participating as a volunteer shows the behavioural aspect of empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000). Individuals who have faced food insecurity possess invaluable insights that can be used to improve the effectiveness and awareness of food rescue efforts. Matthew's observation that "pretty much all the volunteers used to be in the line" represents a redistribution of epistemic authority which recognises lived experience as expertise. This approach contrasts with other organisational approaches, which require clear boundaries between helpers and those being helped, and where roles are determined by social position rather than capacity or interest. Those boundaries of keep power hierarchies in places by making sure that people experiencing poverty remain the objects of intervention rather than agents for their own change (Freire, 1970). That volunteers

arrive hours early to socialise blurs the lines between contribution and belonging in ways that challenge neoliberal views of volunteering as simply providing labour.

Empowerment develops through inclusive, participatory approaches and relationship-building (Rappaport, 1987; Trickett & Rowe, 2012). We can see this type of approach in the descriptions of food rescue environments that intentionally create opportunities for social interactions with others and foster a sense of belonging. Recipients of food described relationships with volunteers and other recipients as being characterised by mutual care rather than a hierarchical charity. We see this in the practice of setting aside food for bereaved whānau during tangi and volunteers' attention to dietary requirements. This emphasis on meeting individual needs is made possible because facilitators and recipients spent time together, talking and developing connections (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The food rescue spaces became sites where people encountered others they would not otherwise have connected with, generating peer-to-peer support networks. By bringing together people the food rescue organisations create inclusive systems and become sites where empowerment is formed (Trickett & Rowe, 2012). When support is accessible and non-stigmatised, participation becomes more diverse and communities' bond and strengthen (Goffman, 1963).

The removal of administrative barriers to accessing rescued food for recipients aligns with empowerment's emphasis on reducing structural obstacles to participation. This ensures that support is accessible without judgment or stigma (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). By eliminating administrative barriers to receiving food support, organisations in this study enact horizontal relationships (Freire). This means they create partnerships which are characterised by mutual respect rather than domination. However, this requires continuous work rather than simply stating a value. Natalie's accounts of staff consistently needing to

unpack situations and collaboratively determine what “non-judgment” looks like in practice shows the intentionality that is needed to purposefully create inclusion through education and reflection. Establishing empowering settings requires addressing these power dynamics, recognising personal biases, and fostering a mutual understanding of values among every participant (Zimmerman, 2000; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004). Organisations are not neutral containers for activities. They are cultural systems that either reproduce or challenge dominant societal values regarding poverty, deservingness, and social hierarchy (Schein, 2010).

Empowerment can develop across multiple levels. At the interpersonal level, interactions that are non-judgmental, warm, and adaptable are able to build trust and preserve dignity – this is essential for individual empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000). The relationships that developed between staff, volunteers, and recipients fostered a feeling of security that promoted authentic engagement. At the organisational level, reducing gatekeeping, engaging in ongoing reflection, and applying culturally relevant practices transformed the power dynamics from facilitators to peers and created meaningful participation amongst participants. These structural changes shifted the organisations from hierarchical service providers into collaborative community spaces. At the community level the connections among peers, mutual aid and cultural understanding enhanced collective efficacy. This method embodies the community psychology value of emphasising collective welfare rather than individual benefit (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004)

As a result of this research and as the findings suggest, community psychologists in practice should do more than simply evaluating empowerment outcomes to examining how organisational practices redistribute power in daily interactions. Rather than assessing

whether people 'feel empowered' community psychologists in future research and practice needs to analyse the structural mechanisms that enable or limit genuine participation.

Food Sovereignty

The literature review positioned food sovereignty as a way to escape from neoliberalism, grounded in indigenous values and gaining control over food systems (Patel, 2009). This section examines how the findings reflect and complicate food sovereignty principles. Natalie's involvement was explicitly grounded in Maori cultural values, describing how manaakitanga and collective responsibility shaped her approach from the beginning. She "fell in love with the kaupapa," indicating that her participation represented not just voluntary work but an expression of her relational obligation and aroha. Her culturally embedded motivation aligns with literature on Māori food sovereignty. This puts food provision within the framework of whanaungatanga (relationships) and collective care rather than charity (Hutchings, 2015; Wehi et al., 2023).

The observation made by Louise that orchard environments offered less stigmatising access aligns with literature on food sovereignty and māra kai - discussing how food production spaces foster great empowerment through enabling people to pick their own food and reconnecting people with growing processes. The process of traditional practice, cycles of planting as well as tending and harvesting to plants creates a feeling of ownership and agency (McKerchar et al., 2015; Hutchings, 2015).

The findings show a complex relationship between food rescue initiatives and food sovereignty principles. Ultimately, food rescue operates within, rather than transforming, existing market driven food systems. Food sovereignty requires community control over their

own food systems – from production through to distribution. It also is the ability to determine one's food systems in culturally appropriate ways (Stein et al., 2016; Patel, 2009). Most food rescue initiatives intercept surplus rather than addressing who controls its production, what gets grown and who benefits from the resources. For these food initiatives to genuinely achieve and advance food sovereignty in Aotearoa, they would need to extend beyond rescue. They would include land access, Māori-led food policy development and restoration of Indigenous food systems disrupted by colonisation. This limitation matters as it reveals how food rescue, even though it embodies empowerment principles, risks becoming what Riches (2003) warned against - a band-aid solution that enables governments to avoid addressing systemic causes. However, dismissing food rescue on this reason risks overlooking its immediate importance. The facilitators' commitment to dignity and cultural values demonstrate what is possible within current challenges while pointing toward the deeper transformation's food sovereignty demands. This critique must be balanced with the recognition that food rescue occupies an essential space at present, meeting immediate needs and building community connection while systemic change is still not realised. Food rescue fills the gap that government has abdicated, and until structural reforms address root causes of food insecurity, these initiatives are so important for communities facing hardship.

Successes and Challenges of Community Food Initiatives

Despite facing many challenges, the facilitators consistently identified sources of meaning and fulfilment in their work. Louise described her enjoyment through rescuing food, outdoor activity, and particularly mentoring young volunteers. This finding is consistent with literature on community gardens and māra kai, which shows how food growing spaces such as community orchards can become spaces for skills development and connection to environmental processes (Stein et al., 2016). Louise's approach with teaching young

volunteers fostered empowerment and pride, as she creates opportunities for skill building. This approach is in line with ‘problem posing education’ - learners become the co-creators of knowledge through engagement with meaningful work instead of recipients of information told by experts (Freire, 1970). The students were not observing but actively pruning and shaping the orchards future.

Nonetheless, facilitators navigated pressures and challenges in order to maintain food rescue initiatives. Natalie mentioned volunteer burnout risks, recommending her volunteers commit to monthly rather than weekly to prevent overextension. She also described how coordinating individual volunteers created more vulnerability and expressed that partnerships with businesses provided greater reliability. This finding highlights the precarity of volunteer reliant services, which rely on unpaid labour and generosity rather than stable funding (Watson, 2019). Matthew identified capacity constraints and explained how staff shortages and illnesses created ongoing stress. He also articulated concern about mission drift, sharing that food rescue is becoming all-consuming. These challenges reflect neoliberal policy shifts. Neoliberal reforms have transferred responsibilities historically held by the state onto under-resourced community organisations (Hodgetts et al., 2014; Riol & Connelly, 2023). When governments withdraw from welfare provision, community organisations fill the gap but often at the expense of preventative community development work. These dynamics risks normalising inadequate government support while overburdening community groups. This precarity creates ongoing stress for volunteers and staff, as facilitators bear the responsibility for meeting needs, despite lacking control over how much food they receive weekly. Facilitators sharing instances of the regular need for improvisation reflects the unstable nature of food rescue models and that such models are dependent on surplus rather than guaranteed provision (Clare et al., 2022).

Facilitators developed practices to prioritise dignity over rigid procedures. Examples of this include bringing meals to recipients experiencing shame rather than requiring public queuing, providing food quickly to individuals in substance withdrawal rather than enforcing behavioural requirements to receive food, and accommodating diverse circumstances through flexible responses tailored to individual needs. These actions reflect what Prilleltensky (2003) calls psychopolitical validity. Psychopolitical validity requires that those who have power consider and reflect on how their actions affect the autonomy of those that they serve. It also demands responsiveness to human complexity rather than a rigid application that treats all situations identically (Prilleltensky, 2008). The adaptive practices described by facilitators highlight approaches that are person centred. When a facilitator brought meals to a woman crying in her car, they acknowledged that procedures should serve people rather than people serving procedures. This example shows ethical decision making that existing frameworks do not seem to highlight. What is interesting is that facilitators must make these complex ethical decisions constantly, without proper training or supervision. Existing literature on psychopolitical validity addresses whether power is used appropriately, but it does not address how to make decisions under resource scarcity (Prilleltensky, 2008). This gap is important because it leaves frontline community workers navigating complex problems alone. The finding suggests community psychology needs frameworks and practical tools for addressing ethical practice and complex decisions under constraint. Community psychology frameworks must address the reality of working under resource scarcity, not just ideal conditions.

Participatory Action Research

The use of participatory action research principles, including participant review of transcripts, communication with Go Eco, and honouring community experiences, makes sure that the findings are reflective of lived experiences rather than solely researcher interpretation. The inclusion of both recipients and facilitators in this research provided two complementary perspectives. The relativist ontological stance and constructivist-interpretivist epistemology enabled recognition of multiple realities and co-constructed knowledge, which is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena like food insecurity and empowerment.

The actions of facilitators correspond with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), especially the redistribution of power and the recognition of lived experience as valid expertise (Kindon et al., 2007). Facilitators essentially implemented PAR-informed values by authentically distributing decision-making authority, establishing avenues for recipients to participate as co-creators of programs, and valuing practical knowledge. This contrasts with tokenistic engagement that creates an illusion of control while maintaining current power structures (Ocloo & Matthews, 2016). Instead, facilitators exhibited what Arnstein (1969) referred to as authentic "citizen power through partnership, delegated power, and citizen control" rather than "tokenism of informing, consulting, and placating."

5.1 Answering the Research Objectives

Objective 1 - Recipients' Experiences

The aim of this objective was to explore the perspectives and experiences of those participating in food rescue, gardening and food provisioning initiatives. Interviews with participants showed that, although the need for food was the reason for initial involvement in these programs, feelings of connection, belonging, and support led to a sense of empowerment and increased well-being. Recipients engage in mutual aid (knowledge sharing and food gifting) are seen as resourceful community members with capacity for leadership and contribution. The findings show that recipients' experiences of food access are not just transactional. The recipients experienced financial strain from rising rent, inadequate incomes and cost of living which created ongoing anxiety. However, their involvement with food rescue provided more than food relief but reduced stress and greater sense of community connection. These social connections formed through food rescue created spaces where judgement was minimised and bonds were formed. The findings challenge stereotypical narratives which place food insecure individuals as lacking capacity. Instead, the findings reveal the recipients as resourceful individuals who manage complex problems while actively caring and looking after one another and their communities.

Objective 2 - Facilitators' Experiences

The second research objective aimed to document the lived experiences of facilitators which are involved in local food provisioning activities. This research found that food rescue work is sustained by deep personal commitment and values. However, facilitators operate under conditions of precarity and inconsistent support. Facilitators experience fulfilment

through meaningful relationships and tangible outcomes while simultaneously managing stress from staff coordination, resource unpredictability, and organisational capacity limits.

The facilitators accounts showed both the highlights and demands of community food work. Experiences reflected manaakitanga and a genuine care for community wellbeing. The rewards of these community positions also coexisted with significant pressures. Facilitators navigated burnout and an unpredictable food supply, with the constant need for improvisation. Their experiences revealed the structural contradiction facing community organisations: success at meeting immediate needs draws them deeper into service provision and does not address the structural causes of food insecurity.

Objective 3 - Organisational Processes and Community Empowerment

The third research objective was to outline and record the organisational processes that promote community empowerment through food-related initiatives. This research suggests that empowerment arises not from one intervention, but from interrelated organisational practices. These practices function at various ecological levels, ranging from individual relationships to organisational cultures. Community food rescue organisations can act as vital centres for empowerment by emphasising dignity, reciprocity, relationship cultivation. Community organisations can also foster empowerment by adopting shared ownership in their approaches. Empowerment arises from interconnected actions at different ecological levels, including the quality of personal interactions, organisational culture, and community networks. The findings show that these processes work in an intertwined process - removing barriers enables participation, participation builds relationships, relationships create opportunities for contribution, and contribution fosters empowerment at individual, organisational, and community levels.

5.2 Implications for Practice

This research demonstrates that food rescue initiatives are necessary responses to immediate hardship, however, they are insufficient as solutions to structurally produced food insecurity. The following sections explain how community psychologists, organisations, and policymakers can support community-led action while also challenging systemic conditions.

Practice Implications for Community Psychologists

For community psychologists, these findings underscore the importance of being able to engage with food insecurity in ways that centre dignity, relationality, and collective wellbeing - while at the same time, remaining attentive to the structural forces that shape both need and response. These findings show how community psychologists can apply their practice. For example, applying an ecological lens that connects individual experiences of food insecurity with the broader systems that produce them and working alongside food rescue organisations not as external evaluators but as partners in reflective practice. Overall, community psychologists must navigate the existing tension between providing immediate support and advocacy for systemic change – both are necessary but neither alone are sufficient.

Organisational Implications

For community food rescue organisations, it would be useful to develop a set of best practice guidelines. Based on this research, this would include prioritising eliminating gatekeeping mechanisms, creating non-stigmatising cultures through ongoing education with volunteers or staff, and create ways in which recipients are able to transition into leadership roles.

Policy and Advocacy Implications

At a policy level, the findings suggest that while food rescue plays a significant role and is necessary in mitigating immediate hardship and meeting a basic need, it cannot substitute for structural interventions which address poverty. Community psychologists may therefore have a role in advocating for policy settings that reduce reliance on charitable food provision.

For policy makers, priorities include increasing benefit levels to meet liveable standards, regulating rent increases, and indexing pensions to inflation.

5.3 Directions for Future Research

There is a need for research over extended periods of time that examines sustained involvement with food rescue and whether participants who transition from recipient to volunteer to leader experience lasting changes in confidence, skills and community connection. This research would help to clarify the longer-term empowerment outcomes of community food initiatives. There is also space for politically engaged research that examines the connection between food rescue participation and political awareness and/or support for systemic change. Finally, further research on stigma and help-seeking is needed to explore what enables organisations to reduce stigma, the broader cultural shifts needed to challenge narratives that individualise poverty, and how a sense of shame and stigma from media, policy, and community attitudes contribute to individuals' willingness to seek help.

In conclusion, this research finds that food rescue initiatives can provide important spaces of care, respect, and community. However, the research also emphasises their shortcomings in addressing food insecurity which is created by systemic issues. From a community psychology viewpoint, these results emphasise the importance of promoting community-driven initiatives while persistently addressing the depoliticisation of poverty and

the systemic factors that continue to sustain it. It is true that food rescue is undeniably needed. Food rescue provides essential support that makes a genuine difference in people's lives while embodying very important values of care and community solidarity. However, this need itself is a symptom of systemic failure. We must continue to support these food rescue initiatives, however, we must equally commit to breaking down the systemic conditions that create the need for them in the first place.

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Appendix A. Interview Schedules

Interview Schedule for Participants (Users of Go Eco's Food, Gardening, and Food Provisioning Initiatives)

1. Introduction

- Welcome and introduce myself.
- Explain the purpose of the study: to explore how Go Eco's initiatives support food access, empowerment, and community wellbeing.
- Assure confidentiality and anonymity. Explain voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time.
- Ask if they have any questions.

2. Present and collect informed consent.

Go through the information sheet and consent form

Ask if they have any questions, if so answer them

- #### 3. Pathways into Involvement
- Which Go Eco initiative(s) are you involved in (e.g., Crop Drop, Harvest Helpers)?
 - How long have you been involved in the initiative(s)?
 - How did you first find out about the initiative(s)?
 - What motivated you to get involved?
 - Was there anything happening in your life or community at the time that made these initiatives feel especially relevant or needed?

4. Impacts on Food Access and Empowerment

- Has being involved changed the way you access food? In what ways?
- Has it influenced your sense of food security or reduced worry about food?
- Do you feel more independent or in control of how you get or grow food now? Why or why not?
- Have you gained any new knowledge, skills, or confidence from participating?

5. Community and Relationships

- Have these initiatives changed the way you feel about your community or neighbourhood?

- Have you formed any new relationships or strengthened existing ones through your involvement?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging or contribution through your participation?

6. Voice, Agency, and Participation

- Have you had opportunities to share ideas, make suggestions, or help shape how the initiative works?
- Do you feel like your voice is heard and valued by the people running the initiative?
- What would you change or improve if you had the chance?

7. Barriers and Challenges

- Have you faced any challenges, difficulties, or barriers while being involved?
- How were these challenges dealt with - by you, the organisation, or others?
- Is there anything that would make it easier or more beneficial for you to be involved?

8. Reflections and Future Aspirations

- What has been the most meaningful or valuable part of your involvement so far?
- Has this experience changed the way you think about food, waste, or community?
- What are your hopes for the future in terms of your own food situation or community involvement?

9. Wrap-up

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience that I haven't asked?

Interview Schedule for Facilitators (Go Eco Staff or Volunteers)

1. Introduction

- Greet and introduce myself
- Explain the purpose of the research and the focus on empowerment and food provisioning.
- Go through the consent form and information sheet

- Emphasise confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to skip questions or stop at any time.
- Answer any questions and obtain signed consent.

2. Background and Role

- Can you tell me about your current role at Go Eco?
- How long have you been involved with the organisation?
- What specific involvement have you had with food-related initiatives (e.g., Crop Drop, Harvest Helpers)?
- How would you describe the main goals of these initiatives?

3. Organisational Approach and Philosophy

- How would you describe Go Eco's philosophy or approach to food provisioning and community engagement?
- What does "empowerment" mean to you or the organisation in this context?
- In what ways does Go Eco promote self-determination or autonomy for community members using these services?
- How do you see your role contributing to this broader mission?

4. Community Relationships and Participation

- How are community members involved in shaping or guiding these initiatives?
- Are there formal or informal ways participants contribute ideas or leadership?
- How does Go Eco build and maintain trust with the community?
- Have you seen changes in participants' confidence, participation, or sense of agency over time?

5. Challenges and Structural Barriers

- What challenges do you or the organisation face in delivering these initiatives?
- Are there broader structural issues (e.g., funding, policy, stigma) that impact your work or the communities you serve?
- How does Go Eco navigate these challenges?

6. Impacts and Outcomes

- What kinds of impacts have you seen in the lives of people involved in these initiatives?
- Are there specific examples of individuals or groups becoming more empowered or self-sufficient?
- How do you think these initiatives influence community wellbeing or resilience?

7. Reflection and Development

- What parts of the initiative have worked particularly well in fostering empowerment?
- Are there things that could be improved or done differently?
- How do you see these initiatives evolving in the future?
- Are there specific practices or routines Go Eco uses to support leadership or empowerment?

8. Final Thoughts

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience or Go Eco's work in this space?

Appendix B. Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
DIVISION of ARTS, LAW, PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIAL SCIENCES

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: *Empowering Communities through Food Rescue Organisations in Aotearoa*

Researcher: Lucy Thomas
Supervisor: Dr. Rebekah Graham

Name of person interviewed: _____

I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation, and that I can withdraw my participation at any time up to three weeks after the interview.

During the interview, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interview at any time, and I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my interview, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interview for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet. I understand that my identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the research findings and in any publications from the research material.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
I wish to view the transcript of the interview.		
I wish to receive a copy of the research findings.		
I give permission to be audio recorded.		

Participant :

Signature :

Date :

Contact Details :

Researcher :

Signature :

Date :

Contact Details :

Appendix C. Information Sheet

Empowering Communities through Food Rescue Organisations in Aotearoa

Researcher: Lucy Thomas

Supervisor: Dr. Rebekah Graham

Who I Am

My name is Lucy Thomas. I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Music, and I'm currently completing a Master of Applied Psychology (Community) at the University of Waikato. This research is part of my thesis, focused on community-led responses to food insecurity.

What This Project Is About

This research explores how food rescue organisations like Go Eco in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton contribute to community empowerment. We are particularly interested in the experiences of people who have participated in or helped deliver Go Eco's food initiatives, including how these initiatives affect wellbeing, food access, and community connections. Your perspective will help us understand what's working and where improvements might be made.

What We Need You to Do

If you choose to take part, we will ask you to participate in an interview, lasting about 60 minutes, at a time and place that works for you (including Go Eco's offices or another quiet location). You'll be asked about your experiences with food rescue initiatives, the impacts they've had, and your thoughts on how they could grow or change. The interview will be audio recorded with your permission.

After the interview, you may choose to review a written version of the conversation and suggest changes. You'll have up to 3 weeks to withdraw from the project or request changes to what you've said.

Your Rights

- **Participation is voluntary** – you can say no or withdraw at any time before or up to 3 weeks after the interview.
- **Skip questions** – you do not have to answer any questions you're uncomfortable with.
- **Stop the interview** – you can pause or end the interview at any time.
- **Confidentiality** – your name and any identifying details will be removed from the research. You will not be named in any reports or publications.

Contact Details

Researcher: Lucy Thomas

Email: lucythomas0033@gmail.com

What Happens Next

To Join: If you're interested in taking part, please contact Lucy to arrange an interview or ask any questions.

To Decline: If you decide not to participate, you don't need to do anything—we respect your choice.

Approval Statement

"This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email alpss-ethics@waikato.ac.nz