



Dignity in food pantries ~ Lana Gavin

How does shopping at a Food Pantry make you feel?



Dignity is important to everyone!

Within the growing right to food movement, dignity is a vital principle (Alliance for Dignified Food Support, Right to Food UK Commission 2025-6).

Many people rely on food pantries due to unemployment, health issues, low wages and the rising cost of living.

Pantries have different systems designed to distribute food fairly amongst shoppers e.g. using a colour-coding of food types or monitoring food you're buying from each section.

I was interested in finding out how people felt about using the pantries and how it affects their sense of dignity.

REFERENCES:

Alliance for Dignified Food Support
<https://www.alliancefordignifiedfoodsupport.org.uk/>
Right to Food Commission UK
<https://ianbryne.org./rtfcommission>

Thanks to the Volunteers of all three pantries, who took the time to answer my questions and were very helpful.

FINDINGS

All participants said:

- they **use the pantry every week**, suggesting they rely on this service and would struggle to get by without affordable food
- **volunteers were friendly, helpful, welcoming** and went out of their way to have a chat with them
- pantries give a **sense of connection**: a place where people meet, and have a coffee and a chat, with other people.

The **majority were happy** with the choice, quality available, healthy items & could cook a variety of dishes. Suggested changes:

- all the participants wanted to see more fresh fruit and vegetables
- some wanted to see more Meat, Fish, Gluten free products and toiletries (e.g. toothpaste, children's shampoo)
- Some identified more disabled parking

Key observations – see observation note excerpt 1

- **systems vary & food fluctuates** across different pantries
- **people arrive & queue very early** before pantries open

“We want more fresh fruit & veg!”

CONCLUSION:

Tensions between observation & interview data:

- Participants were positive, grateful for, and satisfied with the support
- But the way people are using the pantry indicates a sense of scarcity and anxiety about not getting enough food

A sense of scarcity is an important theme – it is:

- inherent in the food pantry systems
- felt by users and effects the way they use the pantries e.g. queuing hours before it opens
- negatively impacts dignity

METHOD:

- 11 Semi-structured interviews & observations across 3 pantries
- Participants also filled out a demographics questionnaire
- 55% female and 45% male, range of ages (20-74) and the majority were White British (White British 73%; Asian 9% and Mixed other 9%)

Challenges & limitations:

- Pantries are challenging settings to carry out in-depth interviews
- Asking people about their experiences in pantries may have led to more positive & satisfied responses

There is a need for more research:

- existing food bank research discusses dignity and scarcity
- this study indicates the need to better understand these issues in the newer pantry model as well