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"Customer is king": Staging consumer culture in a food aid organization

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Abstract
This paper intervenes in critical debates on the role of charitable food aid in meeting the material, social, emotional, and cultural needs of the people who depend on this aid. It offers a detailed case study of a social grocery in Belgium that attempts to circumvent the power inequalities and negative social and emotional impacts of charitable giving through staging consumer culture, and treating clients as customers. This is accomplished with supporting performances of consumption norms around product choice, the act of paying, and the selection of appropriate foods – which improves the ability of participants to meet their personal needs as well as the broader standards of consumer society that they are otherwise excluded from. These other ways of doing food aid are theorized through the lens of consumer culture, to explain what is at stake in performing the norms of market exchange in a consumer society.

Keywords
Food insecurity, charity, food assistance, food aid receiver, consumer culture, market exchange, ethnography, Belgium, social supermarkets

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Introduction

> "We think that the first step has to do with a mental change in the head of the people and the food aid organisations. So, the food aid receiver becomes a customer and that is mainly a mental step. [. . .] we do not suggest that the intention changes, no, we search for ways that are less violent. Because we think that a one sided, one dimensional way of food aid is not the best way [referring to traditional ways of foodbanking]. We [at the social grocery] deliver a service. And this service in the case of food aid contains the delivery of products. And we offer those products to a person and this person is not only a food insecure person and does not only experience shit. In this case the person is a customer. And customers who have problems are also able to feel good. A customer can be anything. There are several kinds of customers. And when it is a customer. customer is king. That customer may open his mouth, may say something, may suggest something, may offer something, may ask something, may. yes, may use his voice. That is possible, that is appropriate." (Interview, April 24th 2018)

Europe has seen a surge in food aid over the last two decades, with foodbanks, which typically hand out crates of food, representing the most prominent form through which aid is arranged. Food aid is commonly understood as a matter of charity, with food insecure households cast as recipients (Poppendieck, 1998). The quote above complicates this view, and emerges in the context of a growing interest in rethinking approaches to food aid (Booth et al., 2018; Riches, 2011; Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005). The person speaking – an employee at a social grocery in Antwerp called '*Filet Divers*' – emphasizes the importance of serving people as customers, and the different ways in which this role can be inhabited. Adopting this customer logic, the social grocery provides food aid by offering products for a reduced price in a grocery store setting. This brings us to the central objective of this paper, which is to unravel the significance of market exchange for food aid recipients. How is a "mental change" of approaching food insecure people as customers reflected in the interpersonal interactions and institutional practices at social grocery stores? And how do the recipients/customers experience such interactions and practices?

It is well documented that the charitable distribution of food aid at foodbanks can be harmful to the dignity of food aid receivers (Van der Horst et al., 2014; Garthwaite, 2016; Power, 2011; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). This paper will demonstrate the value of understanding the experiences of people who depend on food aid through the lens of consumer society, as a set of integrated socio-material arrangements and practices that help shape experiences and interactions. More specifically, we will outline the importance of staging consumer culture for consumer identities that promote a sense of agency and avoid social stigma. This is of great importance, because this customer logic has emerged in food aid initiatives across Europe, which are pioneering new ways of doing food aid. These initiatives,

as well as the social grocery in Antwerp, are often referred to as the "Social Supermarket Model" (SSM), but are known by different names; e.g. "Community shop" in Britain, "Emporia of Solidarity" in Italy, and "Sozialmarkte" in Germany (Hebinck et al., 2018; Holweg and Lienbacher, 2016; Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018). While these initiatives have common features, such as selling food exclusively to consumers from low-income groups at subsidized prices, they also differ, for example concerning the forms of social support they offer (e.g. a social café, cooking classes, language lessons). The social grocery that is the site of our research is characterized by a huge welcoming room, participatory methods, and social activities and trainings. While these social support aspects are undeniably important for the experiences of food aid receivers, within the scope of this article we focus on interactions and practices in the shop setting and the experiences related to being a customer.

This supermarket model is one among a wide range of models for advancing food security, each with their own rationales and values (Wakefield et al., 2013). Food justice oriented models for example often focus on eliminating structural forms of oppression in the food system, by reorganizing access to food and overcoming inequalities (Sbicca, 2012). As such, community food networks variously act for increasing access to nutritious food, supporting local economies, and sustainability (Gaechter and Porter, 2018). Social and solidarity oriented models more specifically focus on mutual aid and sharing food as commons (Morrow, 2019; Myers, 2013; Parson, 2014). Each of these models has their merits, and their diversity shows the need to address systemic injustices while also keeping people fed in the meantime. Findings from our case, the social grocery, show how changing the setting of food aid within a charitable context affects the dignity of food aid receivers. This offers insight into a potentially dignified way of doing food aid in a charitable context.

We use consumer culture to understand the importance of a shop setting for experiences of autonomy, choice, and control among food aid receivers, but we do not consider consumer choice an indication of consumer sovereignty (Sassatelli, 2015; Schudson, 2007). Shopping at a social grocery does not, for example, allow consumers to address the economic inequality that so evidently impacts their everyday lives. Nor does it address systemic inequalities around food production and consumption. Nevertheless, food charities must reckon with the fact that purchase and choice are central principles in a consumer society and failure to perform such acts excludes people from normal everyday practice (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). The range and freedom of choices should not be overstated. While choice in a social grocery is clearly greater than in a food bank, these choices are also limited by rules, shared norms, and other variables beyond a customer's control - including the process of choice editing. The latter refers to the active process of influencing the choices available to consumers to achieve more 'desirable' consumption (e.g. removing unhealthy products from the shelves or taxing products that have a negative impact on the environment). Such interventions have been discussed as limiting consumers' choice (Hobson, 2004; Mayo and Fielder,

2006). However, others challenge this critique for reproducing a neoliberal logic of individualized choice, in which consumers are entirely responsible for their choices (Gumbert, 2019).

Viewing choice as a culturally sanctioned practice, rather than an expression of sovereignty, this case study contributes to an understanding of the importance of performing a customer role, including all the implications of this subject position, for dignity. Conditions of procurement have been less scrutinized within recent literature on the sociology of consumption, especially since a shift towards practice approaches and the appropriation of goods in everyday practices (Warde, 2005). For people in poverty, conditions of procurement are central to their experiences of consumption (e.g. Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2016). When people are unable to perform these roles, like being a customer and going shopping, they miss out on participation in current-day society. For example, Miller (1998) portrays the importance of shopping to relationships and the expression of care and love. In line with this reflection, this study will demonstrate how a shop setting, as an alternative to a foodbank, impacts the experiences of food aid receivers. Understanding how different ways of doing food aid affect recipients is of critical importance, since the number of people who depend on these services is on the rise.

Theoretical background

Detrimental effects of charitable giving

Several studies have documented that the charitable way in which food aid is performed by foodbanks has detrimental effects on recipients. Van der Horst et al. (2014) point out that feelings of shame appear in relation to the content of a food parcel, the interaction with volunteers, and the understanding of one's positioning in a social hierarchy. Additionally, Power (2011) explains that offering 'wasted' food to people who depend on food aid reminds them that they are 'lesser' citizens who do not have the same opportunities as others. Riches and Silvasti (2014) argue that people dependent on foodbanks lose part of their freedom of choice and inherent human dignity, because they may have to accept food that does not match their actual needs and preferences.

Emotional responses to charitable food aid can be explained through reciprocity norms related to the concept of *gift exchange*. Reciprocity is an important obligation of gift exchange and this sense of moral obligation provokes and maintains social ties and bonds among participants (Mauss,1990[1925]). The social character of the gift is reflected by its various functions, which are economic, social, moral and religious, and generally occur beyond market and monetary exchange (Malinowski, 1972[1922]). Nevertheless, the idea of a 'free' gift implies that the receiver lacks resources and depends on charity, which excludes recipients from upholding reciprocity norms. The gift of charity does not permit the receivers to meet social standards of reciprocity, which violates their dignity (Killmister, 2017), and defines the poor by what they lack (Simmel, 1908).

Furthermore, by enhancing the status of the giver, 'free' gifts reinforce existing social hierarchies and power inequalities. Abundant gift-giving puts the giver in a morally superior position, while it causes the recipient to feel indebted (Komter, 2007). This aligns with the proposition of Schwartz (1967), that gift giving can be explained as an act that socializes and serves as a generator of identity. He states that the acceptance of a gift is an acceptance of the giver's ideas as to what one's desires and needs are. This tension is illustrated in the context of foodbanks by Van der Horst et al. (2014), where receivers explain that by accepting free food from the foodbank, they feel that they have to address the image that they are to blame for their circumstances. Through these associated stereotypes, interactions of charitable giving at foodbanks can engender feelings of shame and guilt (Van der Horst et al., 2014).

Poverty and dignity in a consumer society

Within affluent consumer societies, experiences of poverty are shaped not only by an inability to meet basic needs, but also by the broader standards that such a society holds for a good life (Hill and Gaines, 2007). According to Bauman (1997), poverty means being excluded from 'normal ways of life'. This reflects Sen's now classic definition of poverty as the inability to avoid shame through consumption (Sen, 1983). He emphasizes that living in poverty brings non-material attributes such as shame, powerlessness and disrespect because poverty restricts a person's participation in communal activities. This exclusion from normal ways of life extends beyond *what* one can buy, into the *means* by which one acquires basic goods such as food.

Limited access to goods and services furthermore restricts people in their access to cultural experiences, means of self-expression and abilities to establish social relationships related to consumption (Sassatelli, 2012; Warde, 2002). Consumption is integral to identity and the negotiation of status (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984). Lack of cultural or economic capital effects how people are able to participate in the cultural play of identity and status in consumer society. Marginalized people tend to cope with their social exclusion through consumption, by attaching greater importance to branded items in what Bourdieu calls 'tastes of necessity' (Lamont and Molnár, 2001).

Daily acts of consumption embody these psycho-social experiences of poverty (Blocker et al., 2013; Hill, 2005; Martin and Hill, 2012; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). Blocker et al. (2013) introduce two concepts related to the well-being of citizens in consumer societies: *consumption adequacy* and *consumer restrictions*. Consumption adequacy is defined as "the most essential goods and services that must be acquired before citizens within a nation can rise above a short-term focus on continued existence and are able to concentrate on consumption behaviours associated with long-term and higher-order needs" (Hill, 2005: 217). For example, when access to food is threatened, access overrides long-term or higher-order needs, such as nutritional or cultural values of food. However, in many European countries individuals already experience consumption adequacy. In these societies, it is observed that consumer experiences of autonomy, choice, and control can reduce

the negative effects of impoverishment on subjective well-being (Chirkov et al., 2003; Martin and Hill, 2012).

This relates to the second concept introduced by Blocker et al. (2013): *consumer restrictions*. These are the constraints on one's personal exchange opportunities that may arise from lack of income, access to products and services, or mobility (Hill, 2002). Through consumer restrictions individuals can be triggered to see themselves as unable to fulfil the consumption needs of a minimally decent life, reducing experiences of autonomy. Blocker et al. (2013) explain that the beliefs, emotions and experiences attending this self-image can create the experience of deprivation in the satisfaction of human needs.

Context

Social grocery stores in Belgium

The qualitative data upon which this paper is based, is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a social grocery in Antwerp. Belgium is a modern welfare state that has been classified as a high-income country (The World Bank, 2018). In 2016, 20.7 percent of Belgians were at risk of poverty and social exclusion (EU-SILC, 2016). In 2017, the number of citizens at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Antwerp increased compared to other Belgian cities (Ibo, 2017). Moreover, the number of people receiving food assistance from foodbanks in Belgium increased to 157,000 in 2017 – a 9% increase from the previous year (BFVB, 2016, 2017).

Since 2004, social groceries have developed in Flanders, a region in Belgium. In 2010, they organized under the umbrella organization 'Social Grocery Stores Flanders' [*Sociale Kruideniers Vlaanderen*]. Nowadays, this organization represents 39 social grocery stores in Flanders. One of the three focus points in the mission of Social Grocery Stores Flanders is to respect the human dignity of food insecure people by approaching clients as customers, offering quality food and product choice in a grocery store setting (Sociale Kruideniers Vlaanderen, 2019). Within this article we explore how this aspect of their mission appears in interactions and practices at a social grocery in Antwerp, called '*Filet Divers*'.

Filet Divers is coordinated by eight paid employees. One employee manages the grocery, and the rest fulfil other managerial functions. These employees are supported by volunteers, from the target group of people living in poverty as well as other people from the community. In 2018, 42 volunteers participated in the organization of Filet Divers, of whom 25 people were also clients of the social grocery store (Divers, 2018).

Data and methods

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over seven weeks at Filet Divers in Antwerp, in the spring of 2018, in order to understand the explicit and tacit knowledge regarding social hierarchies, consumption experiences, and charitable

giving. Participant observation was conducted during the days the social grocery was open; and at three organized meals for clients, volunteers and employees; three meetings with volunteers; and one gathering with people from the Network Against Poverty [*Netwerk Tegen Armoede*] in Brussels. During the participant observation ethnographic field notes were taken to record the physical setting, conversations, physical interactions, facial expressions, and other behaviours.

Clients, volunteers and employees are included in the research population of this study. In total, 19 individuals were interviewed; 13 were clients, of whom seven also worked as volunteers. Seven of the 13 clients also had experience receiving food aid from a foodbank. Additionally, two of the interviewees were solely volunteers and four were employees at Filet Divers. The interview participants represent a mixed sample of adults of different genders, ages, ethnic backgrounds and residence status (see Table 1). Among the clients, seven different ethnic

Table 1. Overview of interview participants.

Participant number	Role at Filet Divers	Gender	Continent born	Belgian residence status	Client's experience with the Foodbank 0= no experience 1= experience
1	Client & Volunteer	Man	Africa	Undocumented immigrant	0
2	Employee	Woman	Europe	Native	
3	Client	Woman	Europe	Native	1
4	Client & Volunteer	Man	Africa	Legal immigrant	1
5	Employee	Man	Europe	Native	
6	Employee	Woman	Europe	Native	
7	Volunteer	Woman	Africa	Second generation immigrant	
8	Volunteer	Woman	Europe	Native	
9	Client & Volunteer	Woman	Europe	Second generation immigrant	1
10	Client	Woman	Europe	Legal immigrant	1
11	Client	Woman	Europe	Native	1
12	Client	Woman	Africa	Second generation immigrant	0
13	Client	Man	Europe	Native	0
14	Client	Man	Europe	Native	1
15	Employee	Woman	Europe	Native	
16	Client & Volunteer	Man	Africa	Legal immigrant	0
17	Client & Volunteer	Woman	Africa	Legal immigrant	0
18	Client & Volunteer	Woman	Europe	Second generation immigrant	0
19	Client & Volunteer	Woman	Europe	Legal immigrant	1

backgrounds were represented, including five non-European ethnic backgrounds, such as Ghanaian and Somalian. The characteristics of our interview sample are representative of the demographic differences found in Filet Divers as a whole. Interviews were semi-structured, and guided by a topic list. There was ample space for the participants to relate their own story and add topics. All the interviews were transcribed.

Data were compiled and thematically coded to facilitate comparison and analysis. Three major themes regarding experiences in the grocery will be discussed below, namely product choice, the act of paying, and the appropriateness of food. First, we start by describing the grocery of Filet Divers.

Findings

The grocery of filet divers

At the back of a welcoming room of around 60 m2, one finds the entrance to the small grocery store. The store has a size of about 30 m2 and has two skylights that let in some light. Alongside three of the four thick, white walls are open shelves with products. On the wall across from the entrance is a fridge with a piece of paper on the door that says "Deepfreeze, Halal from slaughterhouse EL NOUR". In the middle of the three walls, there are boxes with fruits, vegetables and bread.

Filet Divers is open each Monday and Wednesday from 09:30 till 12:30 and 13:30 till 15:30. Customers can shop once a week, on a prescheduled day. While they are limited by organizational issues, such as funding to purchase more refrigerators, the organisation tries to offer a diverse assortment. The basic assortment is purchased by Filet Divers for a low price at a wholesaler and consists of products including: oil, spread (e.g. peanut butter), cereal, shelf-stable milk, canned food (e.g. tomatoes, corn, beans), care products (e.g. tooth paste, shampoo), and cleaning products (e.g. detergent). Fresh products, such as bread, fruits, and meat are purchased the same day from local shops and farmers. Additionally, businesses donate products.

The assortment is curated to match the needs of the customers. After making an initial selection, employees adapted the basic assortment during the first years by means of a survey in which clients could write down products they missed. An employee explained:

> During the first year we adapted the list of products; we left some products out and some products were added. For example, at first we did not offer paper towels for the kitchen, because we thought these products were bad for the environment. But because we communicated with the customers, because that question arose often and we asked 'why do you need that?', consequently we added those to our shelves. (Interview, May 9th 2018)

This quote shows that meeting the preferences of clients outweighs the desires of employees to promote healthy or sustainable consumption. Currently, this demand-driven approach continues, by for example removing products from the assortment when customers do not buy them. Donations of surplus products are only accepted when they match the needs of customers.

Since Filet Divers does not aim to make a profit, they can offer products at cut-rate prices. Moreover, the financial support of several organisations and companies allows Filet Divers to further reduce prices, which are often 30 percent lower than retail. Customers pay with their own money, but the amount they can spend is fixed. For example, a single person is allowed to spend twenty euro each week and a family with two to four members is allowed to spend thirty. Once a month every customer receives a ten euro shopping voucher. Up to ten percent of the total budget can be spent on 'special products'. Special products are premium, branded items, such as NIVEA and Ecover. A single person may spend up to two euros a week on these products. Spending restrictions are implemented to control the distribution of the products and to prevent customers from buying products for people who are not eligible to shop at the social grocery.

Customers gain access to the social grocery by means of a client card. A client card is valid for three months, but can be renewed. To qualify for a card an individual should have 250 euro or less to spend each month on food, clothes and other essential goods, after deducting expenses from monthly income, raised by 80 euro per person in a household. Annually, Filet Divers serves around 7000 customers (Filet Divers, 2019).

Product choice

Visitors can choose from products that are arranged on shelves. All client interviewed expressed that they felt free to choose the products they wanted. Some compared this with their experiences at foodbanks. The quote below echoes the experience of several clients:

> Here [at Filet Divers], yes, this is a store and you choose what you want, what you need. You don't take products that you throw away afterwards or something. [. . .] Here they accept you as you are. And yes, you are free. You get your own shopping cart, that is just. when you are in the store you can shop for your own good, but then for lower prices. And there [at the foodbank] not. There they put everything in a food parcel and they say 'take this' or 'leave that'. But [there are] also judgements when you do not take every product and you do not need that, like, 'why not?' (Interview, May 2nd 2018).

The possibility to choose the products she needs gives this client the feeling that "*they accept you as you are*". Through her expression "*you are free*" this client seems to experience more choice when shopping at the social grocery compared to receiving food from a foodbank. And her expression "*when you are in the store you can shop for your own good*" could be interpreted as an experience of autonomy.

Furthermore, she experiences less consumer restrictions at the social grocery, because employees and volunteers do not tell her what to take and what to leave. Based on these responses, this format seems to allow food aid receivers to perform central practices related to dignity in a consumer society (Riches and Silvasti, 2014).

Additionally, experiences related to the 'special products' highlight the importance of acquiring status related items for maintaining personal and social standards. Six of the interviewed clients mentioned they appreciate the 'special products'. Observations showed that almost every customer buys a special product. For some clients these special products create an experience of personal control and relieve them from feeling excluded. One woman emphasised that having expensive branded products (e.g. NIVEA) gave her a satisfying feeling, since it relieved her from being compelled to take the cheapest brand. This feeling resonates with research findings that branded items help people living in poverty to find belonging in a society that marginalizes them (Baumann et al., 2019; Lamont and Molnár, 2001; Miller, 1998). Another client said: "*Like detergent, if there is an ecological option, yes, then I take that more easily than the others*." For this client the special products promote experiences of authority referring to her attempt to take care of the environment. This demonstrates that special products create opportunities to perform consumption practices associated with long-term and higher-order needs (including the needs of the planet), allowing clients to express their identity through consumption.

Moreover, several clients expressed that product choice relieved them from a confrontation with their status as 'poor citizen' which they related to foodbank experiences of feeling obliged to accept preselected products in a food parcel. Returning to the first quote in this section, that client pointed out that the product choice at Filet Divers liberated her from judgements she experienced at a foodbank when she refused donated food. The discomfort that comes from refusing gifted food reveals power relations that are inherent in the gift, giving donors power and status while burdening receivers with social debt (Komter, 2007; Malinowski, 1972 [1922]; Schwartz, 1967). The sense of relief that this client associates with choice, is both a relief from the debt of the gift and from "feeling poor" in a consumer society which is realized by fulfilling her own consumption standards. Such relief is also mentioned by another client:

> Ah, there [at the foodbank] you know you are in poverty. There you feel you are in poverty, because you get a food parcel and you cannot choose, you may not complain, you may not say anything; just take it and go. But here [at Filet Divers] it is totally different: you can choose what you want and what you don't want. [. . .] No, I do not identify myself here [at Filet Divers] as someone living in poverty. I feel myself as someone that just comes to shop, that's everything (Interview, April 24th 2018).

Product choice relieves him from feeling that he is in poverty. At Filet Divers product choice is critical for enabling the maintenance of a more emancipatory economic identity. In fact, across sixteen client interviews not one person recalled experiences of judgement about their food choices at the social grocery.

These experiences confirm the statement by the employee in the beginning of this article, who believes that the identity of a customer "as king" gives them power in the context of the social grocery through delivering a service that must meet their needs. Being able to select the items you need, within budget, is vital, as this interviewee explains:

> When you go to the shop, you see things and get what you need. You can get your cornflakes, bananas, onions, paprika, toilet paper... Here the price is good; even with a little to spend you can get what you want. You can manage. You see the things, you still pick them yourself. On Saturday we go to the Carrefour [a supermarket in Belgium], because my son eats a whole pack of cornflakes with a whole pack of milk, so we have to buy extra in the weekend. And it [the social grocery] is good, it helps a lot (Interview, May 9th 2018).

Purchasing cornflakes for a bargain price allowed her to save money with which she could buy milk and cornflakes during the weekend at a regular supermarket. Meeting the consumption preferences of her son relieves her from a sense of failure as a mother and helps her to care for her son. This underlines the point Daniel Miller (1998) makes, that shopping is an act of taking care of loved ones.

Clients also expressed that product choice at the social grocery impacted their consumption choices outside Filet Divers. Six clients emphasized that the possibility to choose products gave them the feeling that they were in charge of their budgets, which increased their sense of control outside Filet Divers. One customer explained that although the social grocery does not offer all the products she wants, the possibility to decide what and how much she wants creates an opportunity to manage her budget in such a way that she can afford to buy other products in a regular supermarket, such as lettuce from the Aldi. Thus, product choice at Filet Divers decreases experiences of *consumer restrictions* and increases experiences of autonomy and control for clients when they visit regular shops. In this way, product choice reduces the negative effects of poverty on subjective wellbeing for clients in their everyday shopping lives beyond the social grocery (compare Chirkov et al., 2003; Martin and Hill, 2012). Furthermore, while a donation would cost no money at all, the reduced prices allow customers to perform thrift, which Miller (1998) identifies as the most important activity within the shopping practice.

Limitations concerning the product choice

Despite the focus on choice, there are also limitations on product choice through rules, regulations, and social norms created by clients, volunteers and employees in the store. Such limitations were not directed at promoting healthier or more sustainable, or otherwise 'better' choices as in the literature on choice editing. Rather limitations were in place to ensure equitable access to the discounted goods. In

contrast to regular supermarkets, customer purchases are limited by an allocated budget and a maximum number of items.

For example, a woman who wanted to buy 90 eggs was told by a volunteer behind the paying desk that it was not possible, although the eggs did not exceed her maximum budget. The manager explained that the rules are in place to safeguard product choice for every customer, since food storage space is limited. This argument of fair distribution is sometimes also used when a customer is suspected of shopping at the social grocery for people beyond their household. In this line of reasoning, it is not feasible that one person eats 90 eggs in one week. Since it is not possible to formally check if customers shop only for their personal consumption, they use such norms to control the purchase of clients. As described by Schwartz (1967), this situation reflects an act of socializing a gift receiver, since the customers of the social grocery have to accept the giver's ideas of what their needs are. This situation reveals the charitable ground on which the social grocery is still based, consequently limiting choice.

Such limitations could be experienced as consumer restrictions and consequently confront clients with their status as poor citizens, excluded from consumer society (Bauman, 1998). Surprisingly, the clients interviewed did not experience these rules as oppressive, nor did they relate these limitations to a sign of a lower status. They described these rules as necessary for the existence of the social grocery and most of them experienced the rules as something for their own benefit. A customer explained: "*Also about that budget, that is more fair. That not that one person buys too much, because in that case not everybody gets the same chances. Because, like I just said, some are too greedy*." This client experienced the rules as protection against "*greedy*" behaviour of other food aid receivers. Accordingly, it is observed that most clients respect these rules. However, their narrative also suggests a certain self-discipline – where following and accepting the rules also means internalizing and policing the discourse of the "deserving poor", who never take more than they need.

However, when it came to the restricted budget for special products, clients more often expressed their displeasure. For example during the last weeks of fieldwork, a big bottle of FA shower gel was priced 2,20 euro, because it was a family pack. Single individuals may spend up to 20 euro at the grocery store, and up to 2 euro on special products, which put the shower gel out of reach. The choice-editing of offering family packs but not singles, created a negative experience for several customers. The protesting reactions of clients to this seized choice, which the grocery had justified by a somewhat arbitrary calculation and the difference of twenty cents, shows just how important choice is for realizing dignity in a consumer society (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). However, these restrictions did not prevent clients from self-identifying as customers, suggesting that choice alone is not what defines a customer in a consumer society. In the next section we turn to another dimension: the act of paying.

The act of paying

The act of paying at Filet Divers is quite similar to regular supermarkets. The products are scanned and appear on a computer screen and at the end customers get a receipt. The act of paying was expressed by clients as an act that protects their status.

Clients who compared shopping at Filet Divers with receiving food from foodbanks described paying as a practice that made a difference for their sense of dignity. Payment offers a means of countering the debt of charitable giving, and neutralizing the power of the gift. In a market transaction the social debt of exchange is immediately paid, thus cancelling the obligation between the receiver and the giver. We can see the sense of relief and the ease it brings to exchanges at the social grocery. A client said "*It is like 'alright I do not profit', because you still pay something*." Her belief that she does not profit shows that the reciprocity norms of this exchange have been met. The act of paying immediately reciprocates social obligations of gift exchanges (Mauss, 1990[1925]) and effectively cancels the debt that is attached to the gift of food aid, thus protecting the status and dignity of the receiver. Protecting dignity through the act of paying was experienced by other clients as well, who emphasized that paying made them feel better than getting food for free.

The act of paying also conceals other interactions of charitable giving for clients of Filet Divers. Although multiple acts of charity and donation make food aid at Filet Diver possible, these gifts are concealed by market transactions and consumer performances and largely overlooked by clients and volunteers. For example, the low price of the food sold here is the result of donations, but the food itself is not seen as a gift. The only exchange recognized as a gift is the 10 euro shopping voucher, which clients receive once a month. However, this gift does not seem to carry the same obligations and shame as charity. It is observed that customers and volunteers even search together for products to fully spend these 10 euros. This gives the impression that the donated shopping budget is an unexpected surplus, rather than an absolute necessity. Overall clients expressed welcoming emotions regarding this gift. This is because they receive the gift as appreciated customers, rather than clients in need of charity. Since clients of Filet Divers experience relief from the charitable interactions typical of foodbanks, it could be argued that they feel less subject to the image a "giver" ascribes to them, as explained by Schwartz (1967). In this way, the act of paying emphasises their identity as consumers and possibly relieves clients of Filet Divers from the expectation to perform and embody the status of the "deserving" food aid receiver.

A limited budget at the cash desk

The cash desk is where the act of paying is realized, gifts become commodities, and clients perform their identity as customers – successfully concealing their status as food aid receivers. However, financial transactions at the cash desk are still far from neutral or straight forward. Calculating totals, exchanging money, and not having enough

money make visible that customers are negotiating the material constraints of poverty. For example, many customers pay attention to the sum at the cash desk and remove products when the total price exceeds what they can afford. The observed ease with which people remove products from the check out and openly negotiate the food budget, suggests that consumers here do not try to hide their situation of poverty. This can partly be explained by the fact that all customers have to deal with poverty, since this is a condition for gaining entry to the social grocery in the first place. However, since clients are approached as customers in the store, their situation of poverty is not the only aspect that shapes their identity or status there. In this way, their lack of money does not jeopardize their status. The multifarious identification creates space for clients to navigate the reality of having a limited amount of money to spend, without experiencing a threat to their status.

Recognizing the need for appropriate food

A third dimension, important for the subjective well-being of clients, is the aim to offer appropriate food. This stems from a recognition by the organization that food insecure people, like all consumers, have individual preferences. Filet Divers aims to offer products that meet the needs, tastes, and preferences of their customers, by only offering products that sell, removing the rest from rotation, and refusing donations that do not meet consumer demand. Moreover, they hold a certain quality standard, which in practice means maintaining a basic assortment that does not contain food that is nearing its expiration date.

This effort to offer appropriate food protects food insecure people from the stigma of "being a lesser citizen" associated with receiving surplus food at foodbanks (Power, 2011). This was noticed in two ways. First, clients were not worried about food quality, especially when compared to the Dutch foodbank participants researched by Van der Horst et al. (2014). In their research, Van der Horst et al. (2014) find that the inferior quality of the food on offer made the recipients of this food feel inferior as well. Clients of Filet Divers on the other hand did not show any sign that they related the quality of the food to their social status. To discuss the topic of food quality, the researcher had to directly ask about it. When asked about the quality of the food, all the customers interviewed were satisfied. The fact that clients were not worried about the quality of the food was also observed in their shopping behaviour. Many customers selected products that were nearing their expiration date, from a separate refrigerator apart from the basic assortment, without expressing shame or anger. Secondly, regarding the limited assortment, clients felt that the employees and volunteers of Filet Divers tried to meet their needs, and they were aware that offering food for such low prices had its limitations, which they seemed to accept.

The fact that clients of Filet Divers were not concerned about quality and that the limited assortment was not experienced as a threat to their status, could indicate that they experienced dignity through product choice, the act of paying, and having their individual needs and preferences for appropriate food recognized.

These results demonstrate that the feelings clients have about charitable food is not just about *what* food is offered, but *how* and through what kinds of social and economic relations it is accessed. So, although the food offered by Filet Divers results from charity, staging a market interaction through product choice and paying, makes the experience more positive. This way of doing food aid relieves food insecure people from the detrimental effects of charity.

Discussion

Social groceries such as Filet Divers provide food aid in a market setting where it is possible for food insecure people to perform common practices associated with consumer societies. However, this market setting must also meet the charitable mission of the organization. Since charitable giving is often understood as a non-market transaction and "gift" exchange, the social grocery is a fascinating case for understanding food assistance in the context of consumer society and the ways in which "markets" are socialized and moralized, and "gifts" are commercialized.

To improve food aid and the lives of people who depend on such aid, this case study indicates that approaching food aid receivers as customers in a grocery setting provides a potential model for maintaining the dignity of food aid receivers. Analysing the relationship between food aid design and dignity among food aid receivers at a social grocery, we found that supporting performances that reflect the norms and values of a consumer society can protect and promote the dignity of food aid receivers.

Three dimensions turned out to support dignity related to consumption experiences: product choice, the act of paying, and recognition of the need for appropriate food. In three ways these dimensions prevent experiences of inferiority and promote a sense of agency. First, positive consumption experiences are possible because food aid receivers self-identify as customers. This identification protects the dignity of clients, because it moves away from a singular and often stigmatized identification of food aid receivers as people in need. According to theories about charitable giving, this consumption experience relieves the recipient from the social debt of charitable giving, and the inferior status this reproduces (Malinowski, 1972 [1922]; Schwartz, 1967; e.g. Van der Horst et al., 2014). Secondly, clients were able to realize dignified consumer performances in which product choice, consumption adequacy, and thrift were possible and consumer restrictions decreased. These concepts are recognized as important for the well-being and human dignity of a citizen in a consumer society (Blocker et al., 2013; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). Thirdly, these consumption experiences were found to shape the social dynamics at the social grocery, where food quality was no longer a source of anxiety and customers did not relate food quality to their social status, especially since they could always refuse items that did not meet their standards or preferences.

While this research shows that staging consumer culture supports a sense of autonomy and belonging among food aid receivers and relieves them from social stigma, this is not to say that a market logic dominates. In fact, a great deal of

caring goes into creating a customer experience at Filet Divers. Employees play an important role in managing the enactment of food aid at Filet Divers in such a way that the dignity of food aid receivers is preserved: they cater to the needs and preferences of the food aid receivers, pay attention to the distribution of products, tackle tensions in the grocery, and encourage volunteers to be understanding towards the situations of food aid receivers. Care for the dignity of food aid receivers is the objective and market exchange is a means.

As indicated in the introduction, this is just one model for realizing dignity in food aid, there are also non-market models based around an ethic of solidarity, such as food not bombs (Myers, 2013; Parson, 2014) and food sharing (Morrow, 2019), which may be equally effective in preserving dignity. Some of these non-market models are in fact highly critical of consumer culture, and view it as a source of oppression for people with low incomes, as such they resist reproducing market and consumer logics in their food redistribution practices. While we are sympathetic to such critiques, our case shows that a market setting offers a stage for performing a variety of ethics, identities, and exchanges that are critical to preserving dignity in a consumer society. Different models of food aid meet different needs for different populations, but they all must grapple with the problem of dignity if they are to be effective. It is to these questions that we turn in future research on alternative models of food aid.

The aim of this paper has been to represent the perspectives of food aid receivers and respond to the growing trend of social supermarkets in Europe. In conclusion, we argue that the dignity of food aid receivers at Filet Divers is protected and promoted through three consumption experiences: product choice, the act of paying, and care for appropriate food. These consumption experiences create dynamics that destabilize the identification of people solely as food aid receivers, conceal interactions of charitable giving, and counteract social hierarchy. Moreover, a sensitivity to the social, emotional, and material situation of poverty is an essential precondition for supporting these dynamics.

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