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Forms of autonomy and dependence in food aid: unravelling how they are related and perceived by recipients

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Abstract
Dependence is an inherent aspect of human existence, yet independence and autonomy are powerful ideals, especially where they seem lacking. In the case of food aid, the dependence that it signifies is often experienced as shameful. Food justice scholars and practitioners advocate that people with low incomes should have greater autonomy in exercising their right to food, for example by receiving cash transfers instead of food donations. In this paper, we challenge an understanding of autonomy defined in opposition to dependence. Using a *relational autonomy* lens, we unravel how practices of autonomy are interrelated with forms of dependence in a food aid initiative. By better understanding these interrelations, and how forms of autonomy and dependence are experienced by recipients, it becomes possible to have more informed debates about desirable and undesirable ways of doing food aid. Our analysis is rooted in an ethnographic case study of a pilot program for money-based food aid in the Netherlands. This program gave food-insecure households a weekly budget to buy healthy groceries at regular stores. We unravel how this form of food aid shifted dependencies compared to the parcel-based aid it replaced, and how this reshaped practices of autonomy for recipients. Through the themes 'concealing and revealing charity', 'upholding norms and caring through food choices', and 'budget management with a safety net', we demonstrate how individual competencies, social relations, technologies, and institutional structures shape forms of dependence and autonomy. We show how recipients appreciated these forms as they navigated the demands of consumer society, motherhood, public welfare programs, and living on a low income. We also note that receiving a charitable budget for food heightened a feeling of vulnerability to sanctions from public welfare providers who might mistake it as income. We conclude that providing appropriate food aid includes self-determination in meeting food needs and the ability to uphold the social norms of consumer choice and financial responsibility, while also embedding such practices in relations of care that alleviate stress, protect the grocery budget, and support healthy diets.

Keywords Poverty · Food aid · Relational autonomy · Empirical ethics · The Netherlands

Introduction

> "This [charitable budget for groceries] allows you to feel like a child. You receive weekly pocket money." [Interview, 22 April 2022]

This feeling is expressed by Nadia, a 48-year-old woman who participated in a pilot food aid program in the Netherlands whereby she received a weekly charitable budget to buy healthy food. One interpretation of Nadia's feeling 'like a child' might conclude that this is a negative and even patronising encounter with food aid that restricts her freedom of choice. Such a reading reflects a dominant ideal of autonomy, whereby adults not only lead self-determined

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lives and make decisions about matters of importance to them but also independently meet their needs and execute their life plans without relying on assistance or support from others (Mackenzie 2019). However, for Nadia 'to feel like a child' unmistakably conveyed a positive sense of being lovingly cared for, living a relatively unburdened life devoid of significant responsibilities, and a socially-expected dependence on others. This invites a second interpretation which embraces the existence of pleasant forms of dependence and challenges the conflation of personal self-determination with individual self-sufficiency as expressed in the dominant ideal of autonomy (Christman 2003; Sevenhuijsen 2003). The tension between a critical and reparative reading of food aid takes us to the heart of our paper, namely, to explore forms of dependence and autonomy, and how they are experienced as good or bad. We explore this tension while being critically aware of the ways in which people with low incomes *do* routinely experience negative and patronising encounters with the state and food aid initiatives.

The ideal of individual autonomy contains a problematic focus on individual self-reliance which has been used to justify shifting the burden of solving issues such as food insecurity from the state to individuals, masking social injustice, structural inequality and other disadvantages that people in poverty face (Fineman 2010a; Mackenzie 2014a). The social harms of this ideal are evident in the negative judgements that people with low incomes experience when they must depend on other people and institutions to meet their basic needs (Garthwaite 2016; Wells and Caraher 2014), and in the policies of welfare and food assistance programs that promote individual self-sufficiency but fail to address the wider socio-economic inequalities that create poverty.

To depart from the ideal of individual autonomy and centre relations of care and (inter)dependence that make life possible, we build on a relational understanding of autonomy. This relational perspective rejects the existence of individual self-sufficiency and views dependence and vulnerability as universal conditions of all human existence. Relational theorists make a strong claim that "an adequate conception of autonomy must be responsive to the facts of human vulnerability and dependency, and must be consistent with social relations of care" (Mackenzie 2019, p. 11). In other words, there is no autonomy without the consistent work of caring in response to inevitable dependencies.

Within this relational understanding of autonomy, we acknowledge the value that autonomy (e.g. control over one's life) certainly has for people when it comes to meeting needs, upholding social norms, and experiencing dignity (Gómez-Vírseda et al. 2019; Killmister 2017; Mackenzie 2019). Taking an empirical approach, we see room for multiple forms of autonomy, just as there are multiple forms of dependence. Here, we recognise independence as one of many *values* people try to uphold in liberal democracies through diverse practices of autonomy. However, inspired by Nadia's reflection, we challenge the focus on realizing individual autonomy via independence and individual self-sufficiency as the end goal of appropriate food assistance.

This paper aims to explore how forms of autonomy and dependence coexist and interrelate in the context of food aid, and how these are experienced by recipients. With this exploration, we contribute to ongoing debates about how to provide appropriate food aid in affluent welfare societies. In addition to urging governments to address the socio-economic and political factors that perpetuate poverty, it is vital to improve how food aid is provided as an immediate response to the needs of households facing food insecurity. Research on food aid in wealthy countries shows that recipients often feel shame and anger due to inappropriate food (e.g., surplus items and a lack of fresh, healthy options), demeaning interactions with volunteers, and other aspects such as neglected neighbourhoods and a public waiting line. All these aspects underscore recipients' marginalized position in a social hierarchy (see scoping review by Andriessen and van der Velde 2024). In response to these critiques, Food Banks are changing their format and new initiatives are emerging intending to provide non-stigmatizing, dignified food aid (Vissing et al. 2017; Wakefield et al. 2013). While autonomy is often mentioned as an objective in this transition, there is a lack of research on desirable forms of autonomy and dependence in the context of food aid.

To advance this goal, we begin by discussing relevant literature on autonomy and dependence. Next, we outline our ethnographic case study of a pilot of a new food aid initiative in the Netherlands. This initiative provides debit cards with a weekly budget for healthy groceries to be spent at regular stores. We then describe our research methods, followed by the outcomes of our reflexive thematic analysis of the material. In this analysis, we unravel how this form of food aid shifted dependencies compared to the parcel-based aid it replaced and created space for certain practices of autonomy. In conclusion, we argue that providing appropriate food aid for households with low income includes: self-determination in meeting food needs and upholding the social norms of consumer choice and financial responsibility, as well as embedding these practices of autonomy in relations of care that alleviate stress, protect the grocery budget and support healthy consumption. With this, we challenge both the practical attainability and desirability of individual autonomy as the goal of appropriate food assistance, while reflecting on more worthy objectives that emerged from the analysis.

Relational autonomy: navigating 'good' and 'bad' dependencies

According to relational theorists, any approach to autonomy must align with an ethics of care (Mackenzie 2019). An ethics of care starts with acknowledging our universal and mutual vulnerability. For instance, we are all vulnerable to humiliation, manipulation, oppression, and political violence. Embracing vulnerability, care ethicists view interdependence as a universal condition of human existence (Butler 2016; Fineman 2010b; Held 1987; Kittay 2019; Nussbaum and Sen 1993). People are constantly in relations of dependence with others and rely on institutions, norms, technologies, and so on to act (Christman 1998; Fineman 2005; Mackenzie 2014b; Moser 2006). On this basis, relational theorists reject the existence of the self-reliant individual as rooted in liberal conceptions of autonomy.

While we all face vulnerabilities, not everyone is equally vulnerable, leading to different care needs. The level of vulnerability and potential for social, economic, and political harm varies greatly (Butler 2016; Fineman 2010b). Those exposed to social and political violence, as well as the harmful effects of poverty, are at a disproportionate risk (Butler 2016). According to Robert Goodin and his welfare consequentialist theory of vulnerability (1985), this inequality creates a moral duty to provide extra care for those suffering the most and address the injustices exacerbating vulnerability.

Debates about forms of autonomy and dependence arise when considering how to care for those who are suffering. Social, political, legal and economic institutions play an inevitable role in caring for the most vulnerable, as they hold the resources and power to enable or constrain individual self-determination (Sen 2009). Feminist scholars (e.g. Butler 2016; Fineman 2010b; Goodin 1985; Held 1987; Kittay 2019; Mackenzie 2014b) have stressed that focusing on vulnerability can help promote such forms of care by recognising and explaining how social oppression can impair or constrain members of socially subordinated groups.

At the same time, scholars have drawn attention to the risk of labelling disadvantaged people and groups as vulnerable, because it could disrespect their agency or license paternalistic interference in their lives (e.g. Dodds 2008; Fineman 2010b; Luna 2009). They underscored how certain forms of dependence may inflict harm due to unequal vulnerability. This has been observed in the context of poverty as well. There is a long history of people with low incomes being subject to paternalistic intervention by social services, medical professionals, and other governmental entities (Seale 2017). For example, Hays' (2004) study of mothers who receive welfare payments demonstrates how programs such as welfare-to-work instruct women in dress, speaking at work, permissible expenditures on clothing, hair and nails, and how to appear as middle-class citizens.

Recognising the role of powerful institutions in enabling practices of autonomy for people in need without resorting to paternalistic interventions that deny their agency is a significant challenge. To address this issue, we believe it is vital to depart from the moralising script of autonomous heroes and dependent victims, as suggested by Fineman (2010b). To capture the complexity and plurality of goods and bads in care practices, we align with the call of some care ethicists for an empirical turn, approaching care as a practice in which goods and bads are emergent (Klaver et al. 2014; Pols 2015). Jeanette Pols (2015) explains that "an empirical ethics' description of a care practice reports on the 'goods' that carers and patients strive for, the values and norms they in- or explicitly shape, and the 'bads' they want to avoid" (page 83).

Grounding ethics of care empirically means understanding the kinds of dependencies and autonomies that are necessary, optional, good, not so good, better or worse than others through the experiences of the people involved in a particular practice of care, their values, and the political, social and material dependencies that shape their lives. This perspective allows us to depart from self-sufficiency as a desirable form of autonomy while acknowledging its normative value, and gain an empirically informed understanding of relational dependencies and autonomies that help individuals meet needs and social norms in a specific context of food aid.

Case

As in other European countries, Food Banks have become the dominant form of food aid in the Netherlands over the past two decades. Although the country strives to prevent reliance on food aid through social welfare programs, the need for such assistance has remained persistent (Van Der Horst et al. 2020). This has many causes, including insufficient social welfare policies, the accumulation of problematic debts by households due to job loss, divorce and bankruptcy and a strict and punitive enforcement regime that inflicts severe financial penalties for minor offenses and administrative errors. Furthermore, the discriminatory ways in which social welfare benefits are administered and enforced have disproportionally hurt people with a migration background. In a recent scandal involving the Dutch tax authority, known as the "toeslagenaffaire", tens of thousands of innocent people were falsely accused of welfare fraud related to childcare benefits. The scandal, which highlighted discrimination based on nationality, sparked widespread outrage. These cases have significantly damaged the

relationship between residents, citizens, and welfare providers. The effects of this scandal are particularly felt among those with a migration background, as they were disproportionately hit by faulty accusations of fraud.

This paper is based on a case study located in one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Rotterdam—the second-largest city in the Netherlands. In February 2022, a pilot called 'Beter Eten' started in this neighbourhood, introducing an alternative form of food aid to the existing parcel-based charities. With Beter Eten, food-insecure households received a debit card with a weekly charitable budget to buy groceries at regular shops. The initiators of the new program—which included two social entrepreneurs, the owner of a local supermarket, and the director of a local charity organisation—designed the pilot program in response to concerns about the adequacy and reliability of food aid through Food Banks depending on surplus food and food donations. By avoiding harmful interactions of charitable giving with volunteers (for debates about this see: Garthwaite 2017; Van der Horst et al. 2014) and enabling recipients to participate in common ways of grocery shopping, the initiators aimed to provide a reliable and non-stigmatizing form of food assistance.

Another aim of the initiators was to support users to eat healthy by only reimbursing the purchase of 'healthy products'. This regulation was applied flexibly, with birthday cake considered beneficial for mental well-being and occasional treats like soda or cookies deemed acceptable. The focus was on limiting excessive unhealthy purchases while rewarding healthier choices. The card came with an accessory mobile application, for users to see the remaining budget and a list of product categories labelled as healthy in this program (like 'vegetables', 'fruits', 'breakfast cereals' and 'milk'), and for the initiators to check purchases by reviewing pictures of receipts.

This program is similar to the SNAP EBT card in the USA, which Gundersen (2020) claims to be the most successful tool against hunger in the United States due to its giving of dignity and autonomy to recipients. As far as we know, comparable forms of monetary food assistance in Europe have only appeared as trials or are still relatively new. One example is a flagship initiative in Madrid known as the "family card". This program was implemented by the city government in 2020. It provides prepaid credit cards with budgets for purchasing food products and other basic needs to households facing financial hardship (Eurocities 2021; Ministers, 2024). While the initiative in the Netherlands is comparable to these programs, it differs in three ways: Beter Eten is restricted to healthy food purchases, administered by the initiators, and lacks structural funding.

The pilot was funded by private foundations and the municipality of Rotterdam. The municipality was able to provide funding because, in the Netherlands, poverty policy is primarily implemented at the municipal level. Municipalities receive a budget from the national government to combat poverty and have the flexibility to allocate it towards social programs as they see fit. Although the municipality of Rotterdam was willing to partially fund the pilot, the initiators of Beter Eten were unable to secure a sustainable funding source to ensure the continued distribution of debit cards as a replacement for Food Banks. Consequently, the initiative remained highly localized, limited to just two neighbourhoods in Rotterdam, and did not expand to other places in the Netherlands. The future of the initiative remains uncertain. The organizers encountered significant barriers, including the deep institutionalisation of Food Banks within the Dutch welfare system and the lack of municipal budgets to provide long-term support for the initiative.

For the pilot, 120 households from two established food charities in the neighbourhood were invited to try this new form of food aid. Their need for food aid was determined by a prior assessment from one of the existing food charities, involving an interview with a volunteer and proof of financial hardship. For the voluntarily participating households, the charitable budget from Beter Eten replaced their access to parcel-based food aid for the duration of the pilot but did not affect their social welfare benefits.

Methods

In March, April and May of 2022, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by author 1 to investigate how this new form of food aid in Rotterdam was experienced by people dealing with food insecurity. The researcher (*initials*) lived in this neighbourhood for three months to experience and observe local shopping activities, map the local forms of food aid, get a sense of the community, and build rapport with participants. Participant observation was conducted at two local food charities and by tagging along with participants during their shopping activities. Field notes were taken to register the physical setting—at the food charities as well as the neighbourhood and the stores—behaviours—including shopping practices and facial expressions—and conversations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people using the debit card to gain insight into the thoughts and feelings behind certain situations and behaviours. These interviews were guided by a topic list (with topics like 'previous food aid experiences', 'doing groceries with the debit card', 'use and perception of the budget', and 'the focus on healthy food products'), but structured by the personal story of participants, with space for them to add topics. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

In total, 24 women were interviewed, reflecting diverse cultural backgrounds, ages between 29 and 62 years old, and living in diverse household arrangements (see Table 1). Interviewing only women was not a selection criterion. This outcome occurred because most participants in the pilot, and those who actively used the debit card on behalf of their households, were women. In addition to these semi-structured interviews, the researcher joined nine participants on a grocery run with the Beter Eten debit card (bold in Table 1). Observations during shopping were used as input for the semi-structured interview afterwards, or to reflect on answers and complement the story when the semi-structured interview was held before this activity. Finally, after the researcher constructed several major topics based on the interviews and observations (e.g. product choice, stress about receipts, less shame), a focus group was organized on 10 May 2022 with five participants to check if the analysis corresponded with their experiences, determine the weight of these topics concerning the overall experience, and provide space for these participants to adjust or add issues.

Table 1 Participants of semi-structured interviews and joint grocery shopping

Participant number	Age range	Background	Household
1	**25–34**	**Latvia**	**Mother, 4 children**
2	**25–34**	**Moroccan / Dutch**	**Mother, 1 child**
3	**25–34**	**Dutch**	**Mother, father, 1 child**
4	**35–44**	**Moroccan**	**Mother, 3 children**
5	45–54	Moroccan	Mother, 4 children
6	–	**Mauritania**	**Single**
7	**35–44**	**Moroccan**	**Mother, father, 4 children**
8	**25–34**	**Syrian**	**Mother, father, 3 children**
9	35–44	Antillean	Mother, 2 children
10	35–44	Curacao	Mother, 1 child
11	35–44	Syrian	Mother, father, 2 children
12	35–44	Syrian	Mother, father, 5 children
13	25–34	Syrian	Mother, father, 2 children
14	35–44	Syrian	Mother, father, 3 children
15	45–54	Dutch	Mother, 1 child
16	55–64	Moroccan	Mother, 1 child
17	45–54	Moroccan	Mother, father, 4 children
18	45–54	Moroccan	Wife and husband
19	**45–54**	**Turkish**	**Mother, father, 4 children**
20	35–44	Pakistani	Mother, father, 2 children
21	35–44	Dominic Republic	Mother, 2 children
22	55–64	Cape Verde	Mother, 3 children
23	35–44	Polish	Mother, father, 2 children
24	39–44	Turkish	Mother, father, 2 children
25	–	**Moroccan**	**Mother, father, 3 children**

The researcher went grocery shopping with the participants highlighted in bold, of which one did not have an additional semi-structured interview, which resulted in a total of 25 participants

Data were categorized and thematically coded in *Atlas.ti* to facilitate analysis. The researcher (*initials*) used a reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) to construct meaningful themes by using theoretical lenses as resources. The analysis consisted of six phases (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the first phase, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and field notes. In the second phase, important issues were coded and categorized through a process of inductive coding (resulting in codes like product choice, eating (halal) meat, needs of children, and concerns about receipts). In the third phase, the researcher interpreted the inductive codes through theoretical lenses of relational autonomy and empirical ethics, asking herself: *in relation to whom or what do these experiences appear, and which norms and values do they reflect?* The codes were sorted into themes and subthemes, such as the theme of 'product choice' with the subthemes of 'being a sovereign consumer', 'ability to buy (halal) meat', 'fulfilling needs of children' and 'a desire to eat healthy'. In the fourth phase, the themes were rearranged to cover multiple domains, such as the theme 'acquiring appropriate food' covering the 'ability to buy (halal) meat', 'fulfilling needs of children' and 'a desire to eat healthy'. In the fifth phase, the researcher refined and gave names to the themes to construct the narrative in this paper. The final phase consisted of the process of writing, in which themes were further defined through the chosen quotes and observations. In addition to the examples in this text, Fig. 1 provides a simplified illustration of the coding process of the first theme in the results section: 'concealing and revealing charity'.

Conducting reflexive thematic analysis involves recognizing that researchers bring their positionality into the analysis. In this light, it's important to note that the author who conducted the fieldwork and took the lead in the five phases of the data analysis has not experienced poverty. Additionally, we all grew up in neoliberal societies where liberal notions of autonomy are highly valued. Consequentially, when participants in the study positively evaluated dependencies that we believed were limiting and expected to be perceived as patronizing, it sparked our interest in the concept of autonomy. Furthermore, we believe that while food aid is not a solution to food poverty, we should still strive to bring about more dignified ways of doing food aid. This perspective has certainly influenced the way in which we constructed the themes.

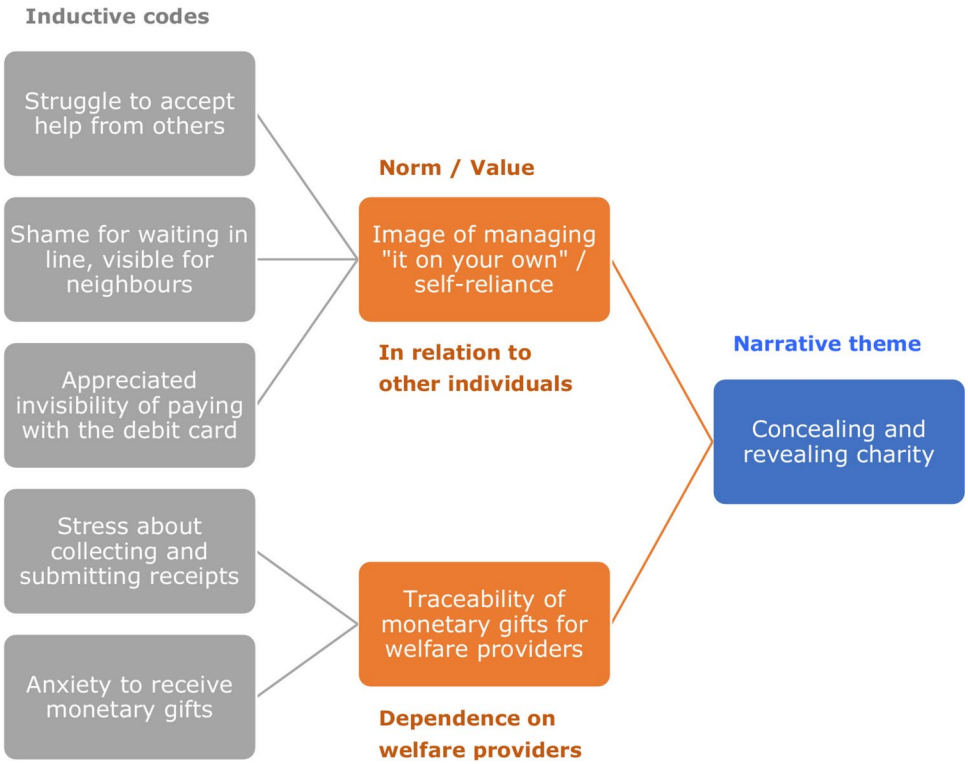

Fig. 1 Coding process theme 1'Concealing and revealing charity'

Results and discussion

Our analysis resulted in three themes that show how practices of autonomy are shaped by interrelated dependencies, stretching beyond the food charity into relations with other providers and receivers of care, such as welfare agencies and children.

Concealing and revealing charity

The first theme responds to the experience of being visibly dependent on charity to receive food aid. We take inspiration from disability scholars who have shown that relying on tools and technologies for care is often perceived as less challenging to liberal notions of autonomy, than depending on other humans (Moser 2006). Our analysis shows how concealed forms of charity are preferred over visible charity.

We highlight two relations in which the visibility of dependence on charity played a role: (1) towards other individuals (e.g. neighbours, friends, family, other consumers), maintaining an image of individual autonomy, and (2) in relation to welfare providers, heightening a sense of vulnerability. Embedded in these social and institutional relations, the visibility of charity impacts recipients' ability to uphold the social norm of self-reliance as well as their choice to receive food aid.

Maintaining an image of managing "it on your own"

The participants, who were recruited from two existing food charities, had grappled their need for food assistance long before joining the pilot. When talking about their experiences with food aid so far, some of the participants expressed the struggle they went through to recognise their need for food aid and ask for help. One woman shared:

> "Accepting help from others is something I was struggling with in the beginning. To wait outside in a line is something I don't have a problem with. But I did struggle in the beginning to accept help from others. It confronted me with the fact that you—kind of—can't manage it on your own, to put it that way. And I think for everyone else it is never easy if you have to accept help from others." [Interview 4 March 2022]

The barrier of asking for help expressed by this woman reflects the ideal of being an independent individual in neoliberal societies, not depending on help from others for basic needs like food. The struggle to accept help as well as the confrontation she experiences with not being able to "manage it" on her "own" indicates the low social status attached to interpersonal dependency in neoliberal societies. Accordingly, several other participants expressed emotions like shame and humiliation in accepting help in the form of charitable food aid. For many recipients, these feelings were

reinforced when they had to wait in line on the sidewalks in their neighbourhood to receive food, making their dependency on food charity visible to others.

These prior experiences demonstrate the value of material self-sufficiency, with the consequence that dependence on a food charity is framed as 'bad'. While for the pilot, participants didn't have to go through a process of asking for help again, the weekly grocery budget is a charitable donation. However, because this gift takes the form of a debit card recipients' reliance on charity is less visible to other people—as it is hidden within their regular grocery shopping routine. Our analysis indicates that this made a major difference for recipients' experiences with, and willingness to receive, food aid.

In contrast to receiving food aid in previous settings, participants emphasized the invisibility of their reliance on charity in this pilot. To access food with their debit card participants do not need to wait in line at a particular location or interact with volunteers who represent the 'givers' of charity. They can buy groceries at regular stores where the employees are not aware of the charitable gifts and the card looks like a normal debit card. As explicated by the following participants:

> "It's very nice because you can't actually see that it comes from a project, the card. And I think it would also be very nice if the card just stays that way, you know? That you won't suddenly be walking around with a Beter Eten card, orange with all kinds of fruit and vegetable things on it. Saying 'Hello, look, I have a different card', then you automatically attract attention. I think that many people also want to get rid of that attention." [Interview 4 March 2022]

> "I also believe no one pays attention to that [in the regular stores]. […] It [the charitable gift] is not really visible or something." [Interview 13 April 2022].

> "It is just like paying with your own debit card. That's the feeling I have" [interview 21 April 2022].

These expressions reflect how the invisibility of their reliance on charity is an important characteristic for them to experience this new form of food aid as pleasant. The difference between visible and concealed reliance on food charity for neighbours, friends, family members, and other people can also explain the observation by volunteers that some neighbours, who they knew were in need but were reluctant to receive food aid due to feelings of shame and humiliation, began to express interest in signing up during the debit card pilot. Based on these results, we argue that receiving food aid through a debit card reduces the feeling of failing to uphold the social norm of individual independence by concealing recipients' reliance on charity within regular grocery shopping routines.

The traceability of monetary gifts for welfare providers

While the invisibility of a grocery budget on a debit card was experienced by recipients as pleasant in the sense of not losing status in front of others (such as neighbours, friends, and family), at the same time recipients worried that the grocery budget could be interpreted as income, resulting in a reduction of their welfare assistance or leading to sanctions if not disclosed.

Recipients' dependence on social welfare arrangements shaped their autonomy to accept the food aid debit card instead of food donations. A noteworthy observation is the pronounced feelings of anxiety and stress expressed by participants in response to receiving money for healthy food, based on the fear that it might be more traceable and problematic for welfare providers than parcels of food. Next to a widespread anxiety caused by the childcare benefits scandal, several participants recalled a case in the Netherlands where a woman had to repay thousands of euros to the municipality after receiving groceries from her parents during financial hardship.

The anxiety and stress associated with receiving monetary gifts can be illustrated by the following fieldnote and quote from a woman who participated in the pilot both as a recipient and as a volunteer—at one of the existing food charities as well as for Beter Eten—being responsible for helping people enrol in the pilot:

> Two participants enter the inviting space at *Yess* [a local food charity]. One of them, acting as a spokesperson for the other who doesn't speak Dutch, shares with me that the latter had a sleepless night. The previous day, she had a phone conversation with someone working at the municipality who warned her about potential repercussions for accepting the charitable grocery budget. Similar concerns were echoed by other women in the neighbourhood, leading her to feel apprehensive about using the card. The woman sharing this on behalf of her friend expresses that she, too, is now grappling with anxiety and worry herself. [Fieldnotes 9 May 2022]

> Participant: "What I also have with some people when you do the intake, like… [they respond] "yes, but won't I get into trouble?". Just like that one woman, you know? I say "no, no one will find out", I say that emphatically, "no one will find out, not the municipality, not UWV [a public service providing temporary

unemployment benefits], no one". I really say that emphatically; no one."

Interviewer: "Yes, because did you find that nerve-racking too?"

Participant: "Well, actually yes, because my husband gets a Wajong benefit [for those who did fall ill or become disabled at a young age and will never be able to work]. And all the income that is visible - they [welfare providers] of course notice– [has the consequence that] you are being cut… But fortunately, that is not the case." [Interview 17 March 2022]

Like these women, most participants harboured concerns that accepting money for food could negatively impact their social welfare arrangements. This apprehension was so intense that it prompted some participants to decline the debit card altogether. This highlights the significant constraints of welfare bureaucracies that have created such a climate of fear. Aiming to avoid conflicts with welfare providers, many participants were scared to receive a charitable gift in the valuable, and consequently more visible and traceable, form of money. The stress and anxiety participants experience when receiving a food budget instead of donated food underscores how negative encounters with public welfare programs leave a heavy mark on their willingness to use and receive monetary gifts.

Upholding norms and caring through food choices

The second theme highlights being able to make food choices as a form of autonomy related to social norms and embedded in relations of care. Our analysis demonstrates how the self-determination to make food choices is situated in a constellation of interdependencies with food aid, consumer society, good mothering, and the financial pressures of living with a low income. A relational autonomy lens on food choice shows how self-determination is always exercised in (and may even be supported by) a web of constraints and dependencies.

"The freedom to buy your own food"

"[The weekly charitable budget for groceries is] better than a Food Bank, in any case. It is a freedom where you can give your own opinion. You can decide for yourself which groceries you want to buy. You don't get the feeling like... then I receive a food parcel and that's it. But here you have your own choice. You can put your own culture on the table and you can buy your own groceries. You don't need to receive leftover vegetables, surplus fruit, or meat that is maybe two or three weeks beyond the expiration date. No, with this card you actually have the freedom to buy your own food" [Interview 8 April 2022]

This is a quote from one of the participants, expressing her feelings about Beter Eten as a new form of food aid. She expresses the value of product choice in her evaluation of Beter Eten as "better than a Food Bank" by emphasizing it as "a freedom where you can give your own opinion". This indicates the ideal of 'being a sovereign, choosing consumer' in a consumer society, where consumption is essential to self-expression (Sassatelli 2012; Warde et al. 2002). Accordingly, all participants highlighted their self-determination to decide where, when and which goods to buy as an improvement compared to previous forms of food aid. In contrast to the uncertainties experienced through relying on the type, quantity and quality of food donations, they prefer depending on the more consistent offerings and operating hours of regular shops for food assistance. During the focus group, participants emphasized this as the most prominent in their evaluation of this new form of food aid.

As articulated in the opening quote of this section, part of consumer choice is the ability to acquire culturally appropriate food. The woman explains that presenting her "own culture on the table" is crucial to assess Beter Eten as "better than the Food Bank". The significance of consuming appropriate food also became evident through the varied ways in which participants utilized the charitable budget to uphold cultural and religious norms. Many of the Muslim participants spent a major part of their budgets on halal meat from local Islamic butchers. Every week, a woman from Latvia used part of the budget in the Polish store to get particular sausages and cheeses. A participant from Curacao shared how she used the budget to buy traditional foods at the Tropical store:

"I get the products I normally pay for. I get it there [at the Tropical store], salty meat and pigtail for example." [Interview 12 April 2022]

Her notion "I normally pay for" highlights that outside her dependence on food aid, she can buy salty meat and pigtails, albeit probably at the expense of meeting other needs and wishes.

In essence, the provision of a charitable budget for groceries provides recipients with the financial resources necessary to exercise self-determination in their food provisioning. Fulfilling consumer choice is essential in participants' assessment of Beter Eten as better than previous forms of food aid.

Caring for children's food needs

Besides food choices enabling the expression of cultural identities, participants' role as caregivers is prominent. All but one interviewees are mothers and the children's needs were a central concern. Participants shared how receiving a food budget instead of food donations allowed them to buy products that conform to their children's tastes, such as meat, dinosaur cookies, pancakes, cornflakes, milk, and particular fruits. This can be illustrated through the following quote:

> "Now I buy cakes for my son, he loves those. Sometimes, I wish him that too. Normally [without the charitable budget] that is really not possible. He got these [cakes] when he was playing with a friend, and he liked them sóó much. But I really can't buy that for him on one salary. That really scares me. Those things are expensive! Just almost 2 euros for 7 pieces. I normally can't buy that on one salary. And now I'm lucky that it's on sale. So now I immediately bought two packs.*"* [Conversation 14 March 2022]

Besides the importance for parents to be able to buy food products that bring joy to their children, some mothers stressed how the grocery budget enables them to support their children in eating healthy, by buying fruits and vegetables of good quality at supermarkets instead of depending on leftovers from the open market. Yet, care for their children's needs was also raised in recipients' recommendations for improvements of the food aid debit card. Participants highlighted the importance of non-food needs for their children such as new clothes, birthday gifts, and diapers.

These results show how participants' role as mothers shapes the importance of making food choices. The importance of being able to care for their children through food choices was emphasized by statements like: "It is your child after all. Your child outweighs [is more important than] yourself" [Interview 22 April 2022] and "I have two children, and they may not feel or notice we live in poverty. I do my very best for that" [Interview 8 April 2022].

An autonomy paradox in making healthy food choices

A restriction that comes with the weekly budget is that participants may only spend it on healthy food products. If participants buy non-food products (such as washing powder or a plastic bag) or unhealthy products (like alcohol or candy), these products will not be refunded for the next week. While this limitation might be perceived as patronizing, none of the participants shared this sentiment. It was quite the opposite; participants noted that having money dedicated to healthy purchases enabled them to afford pricier fresh products, reframing the restriction as an incentive. As articulated by the following participant:

> "Yes, because now I can for example also choose real, fresh food, you know? Less canned food. And uhm.. because of that you really... I notice that I really start to eat better, like the name of the project. That is also literally what I started to do: I started to eat better. In the sense of that I buy fruit now, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, dates, so really the nourishing nutrients, which are maybe on the more expensive side normally, but really nutritious for me." [Interview 4 March 2022]

This quote illustrates how the participant experiences the charitable budget as a means of alleviating financial constraints, enabling her to purchase healthy, fresh food products that are comparatively more expensive. Most participants expressed a desire to eat healthily. This desire was also expressed by participants in evaluating their prior experiences with food aid parcels. They evaluated their dependence on the quality and amount of food donations, and on volunteers who had the power to distribute these donations, as a barrier to maintaining a healthy diet.

Recipients' positive evaluation of the restriction for healthy food products can partly be explained by their previous experiences navigating far more onerous state restrictions on their finances, and by trade-offs that people are forced to make when living with a very low income (for example sacrificing food for heating). Participants experienced the charitable budget dedicated exclusively to the procurement of healthy food items as a safeguard for their ability to buy healthy products. This dedication diminished the likelihood of diverting the funds to other necessities, as elucidated by the following participant:

> "I can really choose what I want to eat, and it's on this debit card, you don't have cash or something, so you cannot spend it on other things. If I would spend it on something else then I will not receive the refund, so that makes you aware that you really need to use this card for [healthy] food products." [Interview 4 March 2022]

This quote suggests that in a situation of poverty where financial constraints limit one's self-determination in food choice, receiving a budget with restrictions paradoxically enhances the "freedom to choose".

The participants in this study perceive the restrictions on their purchasing choices as a constructive limitation of choice fostering healthy eating. This is likely bolstered by the fact that the budget is supplementary, and most recipients

have the flexibility to use their own funds to purchase non-refunded products. As one participant expressed:

> "Because for example, we say 'you cannot have chips' or 'you cannot have chocolate', but those things I do buy for my children, but then I pay it with my own debit card. […] I don't have problems with it [the earmark for healthy products], let's put it that way. You just know you are not allowed to do that [buy unhealthy products], that's it. For instance, if I buy cigarettes, I know I cannot pay it with that card, so I pay with my own debit card. You know, just like that." [Interview 08 April 2022]

This quote underscores how limitations on the charitable grocery budget do not diminish her ability to purchase products that align with her and her children's preferences. By combining various budgets, this woman adeptly navigates and negotiates her choices within a complex web of dependencies, shaped not only by the particular design of food aid.

Thus, the participants appreciate having a dedicated budget exclusively for purchasing healthy food products, aligning with their aspiration for a healthy lifestyle. Recipients' self-determination to make food choices is shaped by an interplay of dependencies, introduced by Beter Eten as well as the complex financial puzzle of surviving on a very low income. These results present an intriguing paradox in terms of autonomy: the constraint on spending options with a charitable budget enhances individuals' ability to make healthier food choices. This can only be understood when embracing the relationality of autonomy, shaped by norms and values and embedded in a web of interdependencies.

Budget management with a safety net

The third theme captures the value of individual autonomy in the norm of financial responsibility. At the same time, it addresses the value participants assign to embedding this form of autonomy in caring relationships that act as a buffer against the downsides of individual budget management without a safety net. Most participants experienced vulnerability in their dependency on welfare arrangements, with severe consequences (e.g. loss of benefits, financial penalties) for perceived 'wrongs'.

Familiar dependencies and the norm of financial responsibility

With Beter Eten, food aid recipients are allocated a weekly grocery budget determined by the size and characteristics of their household (e.g. 20 euros per week for a single household and 50 euros per week for two parents with children). This budget is complementary, meaning that it is insufficient to sustain their food needs. Concerning the ideal of individual autonomy, a designated budget for healthy food that is administered by a food charity could be perceived as limiting the ability of participants to exercise self-determination over their spending. Yet, our analysis reveals a nuanced narrative understood through interdependencies and norms significant in situations of poverty. We illustrate this through three familiar dependencies in our sample: limited financial means, outsourced budget management, and thrift shopping skills.

Firstly, recipients did not perceive the limited weekly budget as unpleasant because they are familiar with a weekly budget and buying groceries within financial constraints. Several participants pointed out that they are under guardianship to pay off debts or use a weekly budget to manage their finances. As one participant explained:

> Interviewer*: "*With Beter Eten you receive a budget per week, how do you experience that?"
>
> Participant: "Right. I think it is good. I am already used to that. I also live with a weekly budget because I am under guardianship to pay off my debts. So yeah.. that is something I already know how to deal with. Some people experience this as a difficulty because they are not under guardianship, they don't know that system, they need to learn how to deal with this. But for me, it is quite easy, I am already used to it." [Interview 8 April 2022]

This participant does not feel restricted by receiving a weekly budget that is regulated by a charity, because she is used to similar dependencies. Her statement "I think it is good" even indicates that distributing a budget per week is understood as beneficial for people facing financial debts. The woman suggests that being used to a restricted weekly budget influences one's assessment of such regulations, as illustrated by the comparison made with those unaccustomed to outsourced budget management. She observes that they "experience this as a difficulty".

Accustomed to depending on a modest budget for grocery shopping, participants demonstrate well-honed skills to exercise self-determination over their spending. These skills encompass thrift shopping and adeptly seeking the most efficient ways to allocate their budget. One woman, who grew up in poverty, shares her perspective on grocery shopping with a limited budget:

Participant: "Yeah, yes, to be very honest, I am just used to it. I don't know better. And I focus a lot on special deals."

Interviewer: "Yes, as you told me you go through all the folders and per week decide what to buy based on the deals."

Participant: "Yes. And like now, I will go to [name supermarket] and the deals have changed from Wednesdays to Sundays, and then I sit down with my husband, like what will we.. you know, then we look at those folders together to see which groceries I need to get." [Interview 17 March 2022].

Similar to this woman, many participants didn't perceive the restrictions related to the charitable budget as hindering their self-determination to manage their grocery budget as they saw fit. They compared it to their usual grocery shopping routine, which is already constrained by a limited budget. Participants perform autonomies in their grocery shopping by leveraging discounts provided by supermarkets. Their ability to fine-tune their grocery shopping activities with these deals highlights their skilful management of limited resources.

In addition to utilizing thrift shopping as a means to exercise self-determination in their grocery shopping, this practice also demonstrates the significance of financial responsibility as a norm among people experiencing poverty. Participants expressed great pride in their thrift shopping skills, highlighting their responsible budget management. Passionate about bargain hunting, participants continued to shop at the local open market where produce can be bought very cheaply, even though many vendors do not provide receipts (preventing reimbursement). The significance of thrift shopping in recipients' grocery shopping practices is substantially shaped by the daily realities of living in poverty as well as the neoliberal ideal of autonomy associated with personal responsibility.

So, recipients' familiarity with depending on partly outsourced budget management, a limited budget per week, and individual budget management skills shapes their positive responses to the restrictions introduced by Beter Eten concerning the budget, as well as an underlying norm of financial responsibility.

Protection against financial hazards

In addition to describing the restrictions of the grocery budget as not unpleasant, some recipients even considered these limitations as a form of care that acts as a buffer against the stress of individual budget management without a safety net. Recipients experience relief in having financial resources that are protected for groceries. Given the challenges of living on a low income, an adequate grocery budget is often jeopardized by competing bills. In addition, participants seem to have internalized negative stereotypes about people with low incomes being "irresponsible spenders." These feelings come out in the following conversation, where a weekly budget is appreciated as a safe boundary:

Participant a: "I think if you would receive this [budget] monthly you would not have a balance, I believe."

Participant b: "Indeed. Per week is just right."

Researcher: "Because what would happen if you would receive it per month?"

Participant b: "I think that you would unconsciously spend it because you know 'Oh there is 200 euro on my account, pin, pin, pin' and when it is needed you don't have money left."

Researcher: "Yes, so it is constructively managed in this way.."

Participant a: "Yes, every week you can buy something and every week you go to [names supermarkets]."

Participant b: "This allows you to feel like a child. You receive pocket money."

[Conversation 22 April 2022]

The expression "feel like a child" has a positive connotation here, as it is introduced by the words "this allows you to". Her expression of feeling like a child refers to feeling carefree, not worrying about the risk of overspending or misspending her budget. This sentiment was shared by other recipients, who explained that it would create stress if they had the option to spend it all at once or for other purposes. Thus, a limited weekly budget appears to be evaluated as 'good' for people who do not have enough money to protect an adequate grocery budget. Living on a low income means facing the everlasting dilemma of how to manage insufficient resources. A weekly complementary budget that can only be used for groceries provides relief from this endless calculation.

However, the responses by recipients could also be explained by internalized stereotypes. People living in poverty are often blamed for being irresponsible spenders. When indicating the risk of spending the budget all at once and on other things, participants tended to talk about

'the other' and not about themselves, e.g. "there are people who immediately will buy impulsively from the budget" and "you would unconsciously spend it". Internalization of such stereotypes can shape individuals' perceptions of their potential actions and identities (Anderson 2014; Mackenzie 2014a), in this case, they may even doubt or diminish their own budgeting skills. While such stereotypes could explain the lack of dissatisfaction recipients expressed concerning restrictions, this does not undermine the significance of the felt need to be protected against financial hazards that jeopardize food budgets when living on a very low income.

Budget management through a mobile application

Finally, recipients' autonomy in managing their charitable grocery budgets is shaped by a dependence on the mobile application of Beter Eten. Recipients are required to use the application to document their reimbursable expenses by submitting digital receipts. They can also use it to review their debit card transactions and find approved products. The app is used by the food charity to administer the budget and ensure that it is spent on healthy products. Although participants did not convey negative reactions to their reliance on a limited weekly budget that was restricted to healthy food purchases, they did evaluate the need to use the mobile app to navigate these limitations as unfavourable.

This app induced significant stress among many participants and posed challenges to their autonomy in grocery shopping, compromising their ability to exercise self-determination over their food choices and spending. Some participants lacked the necessary skills or materials, such as a smartphone, to use the app independently. This led to instances where participants had to seek assistance from children or others to check their budget details on the app. However, beyond participants' technical abilities, some hesitated to use the mobile app for fear of making mistakes submitting grocery receipts. Instead, these participants consistently sought assistance from volunteers they already knew from their local food charity. As one woman explained:

> Participant: "With that card, there is just one thing that I dislike: those receipts. I sometimes lose those and now when I get my food at the tropical store, I have to hand in that receipt and make a picture [makes a groaning sound]. […] But that is why we have [name volunteer who manages the app for this recipient]"
>
> Interviewer: "Yes, because is it difficult for you to submit those receipts?"
>
> Participant: "Ehh [confirming sound], technology… I struggle a bit with technology and stuff. That is unpleasant for me anyway." [Interview 12-04-2022].

While this woman acknowledges that collecting receipts can be stressful, she finds the digitalisation process to be the most anxiety-inducing. The insight that several of the participants in this study sought assistance without attempting to use the app themselves, underscores their fear of making mistakes. This fear could be rooted in the high level of distrust that people with low incomes experience from public institutions, which can be uniquely patronizing, threatening, and punitive in their treatment of people who have been deemed incapable of acting autonomously or behaving morally. In this light, the results also show how recipients adeptly navigate their dependence on both the charitable app and the welfare state, which both penalize mistakes to different degrees, by seeking assistance from people they trust.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored how forms of autonomy and dependence coexist, interrelate and are experienced by recipients in the context of a food aid initiative that provided monetary donations restricted to purchasing healthy food instead of food parcels. Based on reflexive thematic analysis, we constructed three themes that incorporate notions of autonomy interrelated with forms of dependence: (1) concealing and revealing charity, (2) upholding norms and caring through food choices, and (3) budget management with a safety net.

We can draw three main conclusions. First, exercising self-determination in food provisioning played an important role in recipients' positive evaluation of the new form of food aid. Whereas in parcel-based food aid participants depended on unreliable and inadequate food donations and their social relations with volunteers to meet their food needs, the investigated form of food aid shifts these dependencies in a way that enables recipients to acquire culturally appropriate food, in ways that conforms with norms of consumer societies and care for children. These observations show that exercising self-determination through food choices is embedded in relations of interdependence.

Secondly, our results indicate that restrictions on the budget, namely the weekly allocation and healthy food requirement, did not limit their appreciation. Besides fitting into familiar dependencies and upholding a norm of financial responsibility, these restrictions helped participants to secure food needs and realize an aspiration to purchase healthy food. These restrictions shield people with low

incomes against the daily challenges they experience, such as having to sacrifice their grocery budget to pay competing bills.

Yet, the experiences of recipients with the charitable grocery budget were not only positive. A third conclusion we draw based on our data, is that shifting from a dependency on food donations to monetary donations creates anxiety and stress among recipients due to broader dependencies on welfare arrangements that carry the threat of sanctions. These anxieties reduce people's willingness to receive monetary gifts as a form of food aid.

Our case study contributes an important perspective to the existing literature as it demonstrates the significance of combining a relational autonomy perspective with an empirical ethics approach to advance debates on autonomy in the search for appropriate forms of food aid. While the relational autonomy lens helped us to view autonomy as shaped by interdependencies, the empirical ethics approach enabled us to gain a nuanced understanding of desired forms of autonomy and dependence that help individuals meet norms and values in a particular context.

In addition to the valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, although gender was not a selection criterion, the sample comprised solely women which reflects the gendered nature of food provisioning, household management and consumption. This raises important questions about how men relate to such activities and experience dependencies. Secondly, as the study focused on a pilot program, it may reflect higher stress, anxiety, and uncertainties among recipients compared to established initiatives. Additionally, the study was conducted in the Netherlands, and it is uncertain how the findings apply to other wealthy welfare states. In this case study, recipients' perceptions towards receiving monetary gifts are greatly influenced by the prevalence of fear and distrust toward social welfare providers. Future research could address these limitations by examining men's experiences with food aid, understanding recipients' experiences over extended program durations, and comparing similar initiatives across diverse welfare contexts.

According to the latter, it could be noted that our findings mirror research on the effectiveness of the SNAP EBT cards in enhancing food security while safeguarding peoples' autonomy and dignity (Gundersen 2020). They also contribute to ongoing debates on how public food assistance programs like SNAP can better support healthy eating (Richards and Sindelar 2013; Valluri et al. 2021), showing that restrictions are not always unpleasant. Finally, our findings challenge some of the liberatory assumptions in Universal Basic Income policy and suggest that an influx of cash alone will not reduce stress for people with low incomes who cannot afford to jeopardize their access to (more than financial) support from public and third sector institutions.

While our case study enhances contextual understandings of appropriate food assistance, it is important to note that we do not negate broader understandings of good care for individuals facing poverty, as defended by food justice movements. These movements advocate for a comprehensive approach to food security, wherein all people have access to sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food, produced sustainably, and distributed in a manner that upholds human dignity (see e.g. Goldberg 2013; Riches and Silvasti 2014; Spring et al. 2022)). While we interpret the Beter Eten program as a transition towards more pleasant dependencies for recipients, it is crucial to recognize that food aid by means of a charitable budget does not address the structural causes of poverty or safeguard the universal right to food. We claim that transformations in food aid should be accompanied by changes in social policy and institutions that acknowledge citizens' entitlement to food and counter the narratives that attribute situations of poverty to individual responsibility.

Based on these insights, we conclude that providing households with low incomes with appropriate food aid includes: self-determination in meeting food needs and upholding the social norms of consumer choice and financial responsibility, embedding food aid in relations of care that alleviate stress, and protecting the grocery budget and healthy consumption.

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