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Concealed Kindness: Stories of volunteering in a food rescue organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Acknowledgements:

My journey into social anthropology started with an undergraduate paper taken on a whim while beginning a theatre and English degree. Stories of far off places and people different from myself might help me create interesting stories of my own, I thought! Then part way into my second week of classes I realised that actually, Anthropology was HOW I wanted to tell stories. Twelve years later and after a number of different forks in the road of my own tale, I'm finally here doing that.

This thesis would not have happened at all without the incredible support of my supervisors at Massey University, Dr Nina Harding, Dr Carolyn Morris, and Dr Robyn Andrews. Their enthusiasm for my project, and their unending patience has been incredible throughout a project that spanned five years and literally ran the gauntlet of births, deaths and marriages.

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Finally, to my incredible Dad, I wish you were still here to read this and then pester me with a million questions about how I planned to change the world. I promised you I would get this finished, and I've finally made good on that promise; I believe you would be proud. I love you, and miss you every day.

Abstract:

This thesis focuses on an Aotearoa-based food rescue organisation; a form of food charity that ostensibly rescues ‘waste’ food from landfill and redirects it to community groups. I was interested in the motivations of those who chose to volunteer at this organisation, as well as the duality of environmentalism alongside charitable work. I was surprised to find that the volunteers were much more focused on providing food to those in need than on the environmental mission.

Much of the literature on food charity is focused on reciprocity and Mauss’ (1925/1990) ‘the gift’, especially how the inability of charity recipients to reciprocate gift exchanges places them in a position of social debt and can therefore create stigma and shame.

Based on participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, I use Clara Han’s (2012) concepts of concealed kindness and mischief, to argue that the organisation instead uses its environmental purpose to allow food charity recipients to participate in the reduction of food waste instead of being forced to accept a gift they cannot reciprocate, thereby preventing the creation of stigma.

Previous literature on volunteering has suggested that volunteers accumulate capital through their actions. However, the concealed nature of this voluntary labour and the fact that no direct reciprocal relationship is established between volunteers and participants meant that this did not align with my participants’ experience.

I use Ghassan Hage’s (2025) concept of the augmentation of social being to argue that instead they are building satisfying and fulfilling lives for themselves through volunteering without any detrimental effect on recipients. Moreover, this work brings them joy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction:

It was about two years into my study: I sat staring blankly at my laptop screen full of fieldnotes and interview transcripts from my time volunteering in a food rescue centre, having yet another small to medium existential crisis. *What did these interviews even mean?* I'd had the assumption that at some stage I'd have a moment where I suddenly started finding common threads of conversation in my interview transcripts, but instead I was fruitlessly cutting and pasting paragraphs trying to make religious conviction align with queer visibility; patriotism match up with political critique.

Sometimes these things take time, and as life got in the way and my laptop lid stayed closed for some months, I still couldn't stop thinking about how to make all my ethnographic material and introspective musings come together. Now, as I look at all my pages of notes and scribbles, the connection feels obvious, but in its own obscure way: the link I was so desperately looking for was hidden in what *wasn't* there. In their own unique ways, all of my participants were concealing the same thing. There is a very direct element of kindness in the act of volunteering, but what I found in my participants was a practiced way of concealing the form of kindness they were delivering. The organisation I volunteered with was a food rescue: marketed and developed as a provider of environmental protection and change. Organisations of this kind have been created as part of a network to redistribute excess food or food deemed no longer 'sellable' by large corporate food suppliers such as supermarkets to those who can use it in the local community. Much of the outward appearance of this organisation was focused around the ability to stop food from ending up in landfills and therefore reducing carbon emissions, with a small sideline of feeding community groups. However this marketing echoed Clara Han's (2012) discussion on concealed kindness, as the environmental focus allowed for a large amount of social good to be provided in the form of food charity. In other words, in creating a project that is primarily advertised as an environmental one, the organisation has created a space where it is able to partially conceal the social kindness it is doing. The environmental mission focus allows the

recipients of food charity to be told that it is them who are providing the assistance, and this in turn can go a long way to reducing the stigma that can otherwise be felt in these situations.

When I was first deciding on my topic for my master's research, I knew I wanted to focus on people within my own community. I wanted to discover the everyday mysteries close to home, and perhaps eventually share them with the world. As it turned out, this was just as well as the world closed in the very next year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning I had also hoped to explore a positive anthropology, or an 'anthropology of the good' as argued for by Joel Robbins (2013). My own experiences with the negativity the world can bring made me want to explore how people bring good work into their lives, and how I could also be a force for good within my community, both through my research and beyond.

I initially chose to look at food rescue as I had already been interested in the concept of an organisation blending environmental and social causes. Then volunteering grew as a secondary focus from there as it was an organisation primarily staffed by volunteers. I knew I wanted to volunteer myself, to fully immerse myself in the work that was done, and I felt that this was the best way of truly practicing participant observation.

As I developed my research questions I expected to ask about a number of things: What did people think of the environmental work they did? What did they think about the social good of delivering food to those who needed it? What did they believe it did for themselves and how they viewed their own identities? Perhaps I would find green eco-champions, or social justice warriors, maybe some would have found their way here looking for work experience, or to look for a new community in their golden years of retirement? Instead I found a group of people who were largely humble, understated, passionate about their project but who didn't really focus on what it did for them as individuals. They all had entirely different backgrounds, ages, and past experience. They seemed, in fact, to have nothing in common. However, there was one thing they did have in common: they were all there week after week, regular as clockwork, and, unexpectedly, all of them seemed to have much more to say about the community that they fed through food rescue and the social needs of food delivery than they did about diverting waste from landfill.

The responses I got showed me a different picture to the background literature I had found as I first looked into food charity and volunteering as a research topic. Firstly, for the most part the focus had been on the experiences of recipients of food charity, not on the providers. These works looked at the shame and stigma often felt by those experiencing food insecurity, and how barriers to claiming food aid only reinforced the existing stigma of poverty. While my participants had a strong idea of how stigma affected those within this system, the comments they made and the connections I have drawn can highlight the providers' point of view of this stigma and what they do to try and lessen it. Some are very aware of intentionally reducing this stigma, while other attitudes sometimes reflect the societal values that can create this stigma in the first place. The way the charity is run enables the recipients to be set apart from either of these attitudes, without directly coming into contact with the volunteers themselves.

Secondly, I discovered multiple studies on volunteer motivation, but these were largely from quantitative perspectives, using surveys or questionnaires to capture a range of volunteer motivations and intended to aid volunteer retention from an organisational perspective (Burnett, 2006; Burden, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997; Harvey, Lévesque, & Donnelly, 2007). Those that focussed more on qualitative methods and interviews with volunteers analysed the information given from two different perspectives: a Bourdieusian sense of capital accumulation, creating a positive trajectory of self by accumulating social or cultural capital despite their labour being outside the realm of economic capital (Burnett, 2006; Dean, 2016; Harflett, 2015; Hayton & Blundell, 2021; Whittaker, & Holland-Smith, 2016); or by using Mauss' (1925/1990) concepts of gift exchange to show how volunteers could be seen to have a reciprocal gifting relationship with those they volunteered for (Sekine, 2024; Rescala, 2016; Georgeou & Haas, 2019). These concepts did not quite align with what I found in my participants' answers, as capital accumulation or an expectation of reciprocity did not seem to be their motivation either implicitly or explicitly. This is not to say that they were not gaining anything through their work, but the explanation I found best suited was one of an augmentation of social being, as described by Hage's (2025) work expanding on Bourdieu's theories.

Lastly, I discovered another of Clara Han's (2012) concepts was at play: mischief! Throughout my interviews, conversations and time volunteering there were many instances of my

participants directly or indirectly having a mischievous take on their work, whether it was an explicit reference to acting as ‘Robin Hoods’ or subtly gaining brownie points through putting ribbons back on boxes of chocolate to give to their partners. I feel this sense of mischief and fun is part of the *joie de vivre* that gives this work meaning. It’s the light and the joy in amongst the early mornings, the heavy lifting and the entrenched capitalist structures of inequality that keeps us all going. This light brings me back to my initial attraction to Robbins’ (2013) aim in studying the anthropology of the good:

“...to explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project” (Robbins, 2013, p. 457)

The Roadmap:

In Chapter 2: Context and Methodology, I will introduce the existing landscape of food charity in Aotearoa, as well as the day-to-day functioning of the organisation I spent my time with. In part this background will be narrated by my own first-hand experiences from an autoethnographic lens as I began my first anxious steps into the world of researcher and volunteer. I will briefly introduce some of my main research participants, who you will hear more from in detail later, and discuss the ways in which I gathered information. I conducted some semi-structured interviews, but other discussions with participants were in a much more casual style during our day-to-day work as this was either what was possible, or what was most comfortable for my participants, or both. My conversations as a whole were often relatively short as I discovered the humble and un-pretentious people my participants were did not lead them to lofty conversations about their intentions.

In Chapter 3: Literature and Theory, I will delve deeper into the existing research that has been conducted in the fields of food charity and volunteering. I will examine how this literature has directed my study, and where I found unanswered questions. There are two pivotal theorists whose ideas have been particularly influential on my research, Clara Han

and Ghassan Hage, and I will discuss how these two theorists informed my three main discoveries: concealed kindness, mischief and the augmentation of social being. My autoethnographic experiences described in this chapter will show the everyday nature of the work and how it quickly becomes a habitual part of day-to-day life, as well as highlighting the joy that mischief can bring to those who perpetrate it.

In Chapter 4: Ethnographic Stories, I will present five different participant conversations and how they each highlight different areas of my three main discoveries. Through the eyes of Julie, Mark and Janice, Stevie, John, and Graeme these themes of kindness, mischief and social being will be expanded and unpacked. I will conclude this chapter with my final personal experiences, my reflections on how the work changed me and the joy and companionship I found within it.

In Chapter 5: Conclusions, I will summarise my thesis findings and how the main concepts are illustrated in a number of ways by the stories of my participants.

Chapter 2: Context and Methodology

This chapter will introduce the context of my research including some background on what food charity models exist in Aotearoa and why. I will describe how food rescue functions on a day-to-day basis from within the organisation I volunteered with and outline my main research questions. I will then describe the methodology I chose to use and what research material these methods provided to base this thesis on. Finally I will illustrate this through the first of my sections of autoethnographic writing to further contextualise the work my participants and I were engaging with on a regular basis.

The food landscape of Aotearoa:

New Zealand has a mixed relationship with food production and consumption. We are large food producers compared to our size, and despite our population of just over 5 million, it has been stated we produce enough food to feed around 40 million people (Stats NZ, 2026; Radio New Zealand, 2021). Large exports include dairy, beef, lamb, wine, kiwifruit and onions (Stats NZ, 2026).

Despite the large production sector, food insecurity or regular access to enough food is a large problem for our local population, with a report from New Zealand Health showing that 1 in 5 children in 2019 were living in households struggling with food insecurity (Ministry of Health, 2019). The impacts of COVID-19 on our economy as well as a more precarious international trading economy unfortunately only seem to mean that this trend has been worsening in more recent years (Mathias, 2024). In New Zealand, the usage of food charity services has been reported as growing by 165% since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating cost of living crisis (NZ Herald, 2023). This dramatic increase in use has drawn more attention to the role of food charity worldwide and shows it to be an area where more understanding is needed.

Part of the food picture here is also that our food sale sector is largely based around a supermarket duopoly (Crossan, 2025) allowing prices to rise to levels unaffordable for many.

In part due to this existing food landscape, food rescue organisations have found themselves in high demand in Aotearoa and there are now multiple organisations operating in all regions of the country.

(<https://afra.org.nz/>)

This situation has led to the emergence of a variety of charities, the main two of which are food banks of various sorts, and food rescue charities.

or Red Cross. Both forms of charity rely on donations, often from large supermarkets, but the foodbank model as we know it in most Western countries is a more regulated organisation. This means that recipients of food charity from a food bank most often must be referred from other social support organisations after a process of means-testing and there is usually a limit to how often assistance can be received. Due to these barriers, a considerable amount of the research has explored the effects on recipients' sense of self-worth.

Food rescue organisations operate in a slightly different way to these consumer-facing charities: food is most often collected directly from large donors, either the supermarkets themselves or from smaller companies, orchards, community gardens or even individuals. In most cases the focus of these groups is to mitigate the environmental effects of food waste ending up in landfill, or to reduce waste overall and slowly diminish the environmental effects of over-production. The type of food also differs: while foodbanks collect largely non-perishable goods to prepare food parcels, food rescue has a focus on perishable items such as fresh bread, fruit and vegetables. Food collected is usually distributed to a range of different community centres where there is intended to be no barrier to entry for those who wish to collect kai from these 'free stores': on an open day anyone can show up and take what they and their whanau need.

Community centres:

I refer often to the 'community centres' that the organisation delivers food to, and therefore I feel it is necessary to describe what these look like in a local context. In many neighbourhoods in Aotearoa there are variations on these community centres; buildings such as town halls, churches, or old railway cottages that serve the needs of their local neighbourhoods. They sometimes have some part-time paid staff, though often they are almost entirely reliant on volunteers. Many different events occur at these centres: some run CV writing workshops, sewing classes, or cooking lessons. Others might offer budgeting advice drop-ins, or coffee mornings for local mums and babies. Sometimes it's simply about having a space that can be booked: somewhere for local choirs to rehearse, somewhere

where a group can practice the bagpipes away from their neighbours, somewhere to teach kids kapa haka, somewhere just to *be*. The ‘free store’ days that the organisation contributes food to are therefore just a part of the community tapestry that these community centres weave together.

The organisation in question:

Throughout this thesis I have not referred to the organisation by name, this is to retain the confidentiality of both the organisation and my participants¹. My home is in the heart of the North Island of Aotearoa, the Waikato region; it is here that this organisation also belongs. The total population of the district is less than that of the biggest city of Auckland, further north, but the region includes many smaller towns, surrounding the main hub of Hamilton. While most of the food collection points and supermarkets for the organisation are therefore in this hub city, they aim to make connections with regional community centres to help provide food throughout the region. Some drop-off points are included in regular runs as far north as Huntly, and at other times community centres from as far east as Thames are invited to collect parcels of the non-perishable items that have been put aside for them at a central depot.

Volunteer labour:

As I have mentioned, food rescue organisations and community centres alike rely on a lot of volunteer labour. Aotearoa has a strong volunteering culture, with the most recent statistics from March 2025 showing that over 50% of the population volunteered time in the 4 weeks prior to the survey (Volunteering New Zealand, 2025). In this same survey, it was shown that formally documented volunteering time was estimated to be 231 million hours around the country. What I hope to explore in part, is why? Why do groups of people give up their time

¹ This is per my ethics approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee #4000024737

for causes they believe in without it being a part of our acknowledged economic system? Is it altruism? Is it identity formation? What do they get out of it at the end of the day? Is it social capital? Cultural capital? A sense of identity? Or just plain warm fuzzies? The next section will describe the methods I used to try and answer these questions.

Methodology:

During my undergraduate studies, I had been introduced to an essay by Joel Robbins (2013) discussing the case for an 'anthropology of the good'. This, alongside those who advocate for activism in anthropology made up a large part of my internal framework. I wanted to study people making a positive difference in the world, not only to highlight their work, but also to feel like the work I was doing was itself making a positive difference. Therefore, I found myself narrowing in on the world of volunteering.

I had been aware of my local environmental organisation and the food rescue mahi they were doing for quite some time and had even thought about signing up as a volunteer previously. As with many good intentions however, this hadn't ever quite eventuated. Combining volunteering with my research became a great motivation to finally follow through with these intentions.

From the outset of planning my research, I knew I wanted to see what one of the cornerstones of anthropological fieldwork was like in person. I wanted to experience the entrenched participant observation method myself and discover what it meant to both become and observe. I wanted to do the work alongside my participants and feel how heavy the food was, how hot the truck became in summer, how sticky a spilled carton of juice could be. Alongside this I knew I wished to study within my own community, to set down roots and be a part of something I could then continue engaging with well into the future.

I began my research attempting to keep my mind a blank slate as much as possible while still constructing some open-ended research questions. I imagined I would talk to people about the different parts of the food rescue cause; the great environmental effects as well as the social empowerment. As you will see, and as so often is the case, things never quite go the

way you expect. Even at a basic level, the ideas I had of carefully established relationships leading to long conversational interviews never eventuated. Initially, as was the plan, I made sure all staff and volunteers at the organisation knew of my dual role as researcher and volunteer and gave consent forms to the volunteer coordinator to distribute amongst the team.

From there on though, the regularity of the roster planning meant that I spent a considerable amount of my time with just one or two other volunteers. I managed to conduct a recorded interview with both of these companions, but with others I soon recognised the need to make mental notes of the snatched conversations we had in passing in the depot, or while driving around in the truck as I grabbed my chances to fill in shifts when others were sick or otherwise engaged. These conversations were, in many ways, just as deep as the more structured interviews I did have the opportunity to conduct. These followed more of the structure of the go-along method of interviewing and researching (Duedahl & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020), being in another's present moment both physically and mentally.

I also employed a form of auto-ethnography in my research, the writing of which I have used to conclude each of my main chapters. As I spent so much time doing the work of volunteering and being a part of the embodied lifting, hauling and driving, it seemed only sensible to include passages of my own direct reflections and thoughts. I hope these go some way to immersing the reader in the world inhabited by my participants and myself.

In the following first autoethnographic section, I will show the everyday workings and experiences of volunteers. This section will also illustrate the sheer scale of the problem of food waste and therefore how kindness can be hidden behind a solution to this issue. It will also show my methods of participant observation and go-along interview styles.

Food rescue from the inside: Nervous Beginnings

I still can't be sure if the anxious knots in my stomach on the first day of a new job are a universal experience, but I don't believe many people step into an unfamiliar world feeling

entirely comfortable. Today feels like an especially large tummy tangle, as I'm faced with putting on two brand new hats at once: food rescue volunteer and researcher.

It's midway through September and the mornings are still yet to get the memo that spring has begun. My breath clouds in the air and my car windscreen remains resolutely foggy during my drive to the semi-industrial street housing the building everyone fondly refers to as 'the depot'. I'm trying to mentally prepare, making sure I have my folder of information sheets and consent forms and regretting not making coffee before I left the house.

I park my car on the largely one-way street that forms the centre of the commercial village and take in the bare trees, the cracks in the pavement. There is a curious mixture of shopfronts in this area: an organic shop advertising local produce and the health benefits of kombucha, a pub with a worn chalkboard proclaiming its 'Topless Waitress Tuesdays' and happy hour deals, one of the last remaining traditional butchers' shops in the city, and a nearby window display full of pieces of crystal and band T-shirts. Surrounding many of these are strips of scaffolding; part of the area is being developed into residential apartments. It feels both inviting and intimidating, old worlds and new worlds colliding.

Across from this development, the depot is hidden at the back of the organisation's building. The front half contains a warm and cozy retail shop, beeswax candles nestle amongst gardening tools, bamboo scarves, reusable takeaway coffee cups and shampoo bars. There is also a meeting space and offices for the staff working on other projects. This early in the morning however, the shop is closed and the offices silent. I walk around the side, stepping through the transitional space of the carpark garden: a way of proving there are alternative ways of using urban areas. A white van is parked next to a planter box of deep loamy soil, currently a home for spinach and herbs.

I hear the chatter of voices past the sheet metal fence and find myself swept into a whirl of activity. The depot itself is a surprisingly small space when you consider the amount of activity it contains. A walk-in freezer sits outside the corrugated iron roller door and a large chiller takes up about half of one room. Stacks of grey plastic crates lean against the wall and hi-vis vests and raincoats tumble off coat hooks onto the floor. It is, at its heart, a place of industry. In amongst the bustle and boxes there are still very clear signs of the times we are living through: yellow and black posters on the door remind visitors to stay outside and sign

in with the Covid tracer app, bottles of hand sanitiser are attached to the wall within easy reach, and while all the people I see are welcoming, I mostly have to gauge that expression through everyone's eyebrows above white paper masks.

I'm introduced to Rob, who will be driving the collection truck while I'm the hopefully helpful extra pair of hands. His short grey beard pokes out of the bottom of his facemask, and his deep laugh echoes around the concrete walls. A hi-vis vest is passed to me, along with a tablet to help record what food we pick up during the shift. There are two trucks, two pairs of us on duty for the morning: each truck taking a separate side of town to minimise the amount of cross-over and extra mileage. Rob collects the keys from the drawer, and the small group of us come together in the gravel carpark for a karakia before the work begins.

I grab the handle above the door and pull myself up into the cab of the truck, the diesel engine kicking into life with a throaty rattle. Above this I hear the whir of the refrigeration unit kicking in behind our heads. Small flakes of vinyl try to escape the seams of the seats, and a fleet of colourful rubber ducks keep a watchful eye on the world from the dashboard. As we pull into the traffic on the main road Rob turns to me:

"So, research, eh? What are you hoping to prove?"

I explain that I'm looking to understand their stories more than prove a theory, and he immediately sounds far more relaxed. One of my worries has been that people will think I'm assessing them or evaluating their actions, so I'm glad to be able to reassure him that this isn't the case.

"I'm mostly hoping to understand how you see your place in this big system really"

"Oh! Haha! Well, I think we're eco-warriors really. Robin Hoods, ya know? Steal from the rich – well, not steal, they give it to us, even better! – give to those in need!"

"Robin Hoods of the food world! How great is that?"

"I rang my mum up the other day, she's still in lockdown ya know, just to check in, and she asked how everything was going. She didn't know if I'd be working through level 3 or not, so I said, of course we are, eco-warriors, we're doing important work! Essential work! She just laughed at me eh, - eco-warriors, bullshit Rob -"

As we settle into the work of the morning one of the first realisations I make is how little I had thought about the hidden side of supermarkets. Trucks are in and out of the loading yards constantly, forklifts buzzing around like orange bees as they unload pallet after pallet of plastic wrapped goods. It brings home the industrialisation of the food system even more than the neatly packaged rows we see from the retail side of the stores. Rob backs up to the first loading dock and shouts a 'good morning' to the yard manager before opening the truck doors and pulling crates towards him.

"What are you waiting for? Grab a crate and we'll head to the chiller"

For a first stop, the amount and variety of what we collect makes my head spin: Potatoes, mushrooms, a whole crate of daikon radishes, many bags of pre-cut zucchini noodles, broccoli and lettuces. It all looks in near perfect condition, I think I had imagined the food we'd be rescuing to look a little shabbier: the limper lettuces, or the cracked carrots. It seems to be more a case of moving on the leftovers from the end of the day, to make room for the stock that just keeps on arriving. Even in amongst this bounty of produce, it's the bread that I can't stop thinking about. From this first stop we pick up two full supermarket trolleys of loaves, buns and muffins: an estimated 30kg worth. We stack most into the crates, but some are piled into some somewhat unwieldy plastic bags that we throw over our shoulders. None of it seems to be more than a day old. We ferry these crates and bags up and down stairs and across the yard in about six fully laden trips each. I remark on how much food this seems to Rob and his laugh ricochets around the cab of the truck.

"Oh, that's pretty normal! More some days I reckon!"

As we drive to the next stop, he tells me to enter all the weights into the collection app on the tablet I was given. Everything is estimated, although as accurately as possible. A crate of fruit and vegetables is often around 10kg, a crate of bread closer to 5. Things like the potatoes Rob adds up by feel, having gotten used to the weight of the crates over time. I tap the numbers into the right categories and hit send, hoping I've put everything in its right place.

We continue our rounds, and I try to soak in all the information I can; the route with its collections and drop-offs feels like a tangled cat's cradle that pulls together in an intricate knot. Six supermarkets to collect from, and five community centres to deliver to. Different

supermarkets have variable times at which the yards close for breaks, and community centres have specific deadlines they need deliveries by. Amongst this Rob also decides which pickups we need to come back to if he says the queue of commercial delivery vehicles is too long. After seeing a large articulated truck waiting outside one, he declares it'll take at least an hour and that we'll carry on.

The mental math and adjustments continue with our deliveries, as Rob decides how much of each product to drop off where. This depends not only on how much the centre can use, but also on how much we're likely to pick up at our next collection. There is far more of a 'knack' to the whole process than I imagined before we began this morning.

"We'll drop off a few more of those sausages here, they've been making meals for folks for a while now, so they really appreciate more of that, and there's a freezer here they can fill up. We'll give a bit more of the bread over to the next one, lots of families there that'll use it for school lunches. Put some of the bananas to the side for them too, would ya?"

By the time our last deliveries have been made and Rob parks the truck back in front of the depot roller doors I feel the tiredness sink in. We've been on the road for about four hours and a dull ache is settling in between my shoulder blades and in the middle of my back. Many of my days have been spent in front of a desk in recent times, and the cycle of lifting and stacking has taken my body by surprise. I expected some of this physical strain, but the mental fatigue has come out of left-field, trying to keep up with the whirl of activity and decision, as well as trying to remember every sensation and detail of my first day in this new environment.

Before I go to leave the depot, Rob stops me:

"You haven't got anything for yourself! Julie, sort the girl out, eh?"

Julie, one of the paid employees of the rescue pops her head out of the chiller:

"Oh! Please, grab a drink, there's some Bundaberg in here! A ginger beer? Would you or the whanau like a couple of packets of rolls? Actually, there's a heap of butter got delivered just yesterday..."

I initially feel uncomfortable, not sure if I should be taking food home with me when I'm here trying to give back in return for their time and knowledge. I think Julie feels my hesitation and smiles warmly:

"There's always more kai coming in, you've seen how it goes today! It's the least we can do to say thanks for all the mahi, please, it all helps it not go to waste!"

I leave my first shift with a cold lemonade and a couple of blocks of butter and wave to Rob as he hops in his car with a frozen pizza for his lunch later in the day. Everything seems to find a good home.

Conclusion

Aotearoa, like many western societies, is juggling the dual problems of food waste and food insecurity. One way of tackling this is through a form of charity described as food rescue, distributing 'waste' resources to the wider community. Food rescue, with its focus on alleviating the environmental impacts of food waste, can provide food charity with fewer access barriers for recipients.

In the next chapter I will describe how these ideas have been previously analysed in the existing literature. I will also describe how some of my findings did not align with these existing analyses and illustrate the main concepts and theorists that I have used in my own research.

Chapter 3: Literature and Theory

In this chapter I will discuss the existing literature about food charity and volunteering. Within the field of food charity, the anthropological literature is limited, but studies within sociology and psychology highlight the stigma often felt by recipients of food charity. Volunteering itself is a much broader subject, with many disciplines wanting to better understand the reasons for and motivations behind people's drive to offer their time and labour without economic exchange.

Overall, I found that within the writing on food charity there wasn't much existing literature about the volunteer experience of those providing the food, or how they might be trying to address the stigma of recipients. Also, the theories most commonly used to analyse volunteer behaviour didn't exactly match with my experiences or the experiences of my participants.

Below I will introduce the main theories that I found explained my and my participants' experiences better; Han's concepts of concealed kindness and mischief and Hage's ideas about the augmentation of social being.

Firstly, on food charity:

With the increase in use of food charity services, many disciplines have focused on the topic. The majority have been from within sociology (van der Horst et al., 2014; Garthwaite, 2016; Lee et al., 2023), psychology (Sheldon et al, 2023; de Souza, 2019; Möller, 2022) and economics (Agostinho & Paço, 2012; Lambie-Mumford, 2016; Caraher & Furey, 2018; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2022; Reynolds et al., 2015).

The psychology literature has taken a largely quantitative approach, with a methodological focus on motivational surveys or small questionnaires. This analytical approach has sometimes been used to explore the motivations of volunteers in these organisations

(Sheldon et al., 2023), but more often it has emphasised the stigmatisation of food bank users as they navigate the neo-liberal approach to charity (de Souza, 2019; Laihiala et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2018). For example, Möller (2022) takes a 'critical psychology' approach and uses food charity as a canvas to show how the 'psychologization' of societal problems can allow the onus of care to be shifted from the state to the individual.

The sociology literature has taken a more qualitative approach, with studies using in-depth interview techniques. Instances of this include Garthwaite's (2016) work which has involved many of these interviews and her own experiences volunteering at a food bank. Van der Horst, Pascucci and Bol, (2014) also conducted interviews with charity recipients, with a particular focus on the emotional responses they noted. The focus in this work has largely still been on the recipients' experiences, aiming to shine a light on how the sense of stigma can reduce the ability to access these services. For example:

"Using the foodbank was often described as something only to be drawn on when people "had no choice". People waited until they had exhausted all other avenues of support available to them, such as relying on family and friends to loan them money, have meals with or pay off their debts, before they asked for a red voucher. I spoke to people who thought their benefits would stop if they came to a foodbank. People who were afraid their kids would get taken away by social services because they didn't have enough money to feed them. People who would not tell close family and friends just how much they were struggling because they felt too ashamed." (Garthwaite, 2016, p. 136)

"Stigma related to visible poverty, feelings of inferiority and dependence on income transfers or in-kind provisions are regularly identified as causes for such shame. Shame is not just considered an effect of poverty, it is even being seen as one of the causes for the persistence of poverty, even across generations" (van der Horst et al., 2014, p 4)

Some studies have taken a more anthropological focus (Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023; Riol & Connelly, 2023; Howarth, 2016; McNaughton et al., 2021) with ethnographic methods including participant observation and in-depth interview techniques. These studies have also

tended to focus on the experience of food charity recipients. Howarth (2016) describes the experience of requiring food aid as an example of ‘vulnerable corporeality’, Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023) highlighted the ‘stigma-power’ of the experience as increasing the sense of state control on human bodies, while Riol and Connely (2023) took a genealogical approach of exploring the neoliberal creation of food aid.

What all these studies have in common is a focus on the recipient experience of food charity. They show how difficult access to food charity can be, as well as the feelings of intense shame and ‘last resort’ that affect people who access food banks. There is much less focus on the volunteer experience of food charity, and whether the staff and volunteers at food banks are actively trying to mitigate recipient experiences.

Food banks vs Food rescue:

Food rescue organisations often describe their primary objective to be an environmental one, differentiating them from the foodbank model. As the food they receive is often perishable items including bread, fruit and vegetables there isn’t time to require the barriers that foodbanks do, which can help reduce this sense of stigma. The critiques of these organisations therefore are often from the economic perspective (Office of the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor, 2022; Reynolds et al., 2015; Clare et al., 2023). These critiques include noting that food rescue itself does not combat the larger systemic failures of our food system:

“The simple logic of food rescue as a ‘no brainer’ solution to food waste is deceptive. Although critical today, food rescue is a symptom of a broken food system, with overproduction and waste engorging our carbon footprint. Furthermore, food insecurity can’t be solved by charitable food provision in the long term – to be food secure means to have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food on your own terms.” (Office of the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor, 2022, p. ii)

Moreover, food rescue can itself create environmental damage due to the transportation and refrigeration required to move and store goods (Reynolds et al., 2015). Clare et al.

(2023) provide a more positive economic framing from within the Aotearoa food landscape, and with an SROI (social return on investment) lens, which suggests that investing \$1 in food rescue provides a social value return of \$4.50.

These analyses of recipient shame and a critical lens on the 'food waste solution' left me with two questions to ponder. As food rescue involved less barriers to entry, was this a way of combatting shame and stigma vs the more entrenched food bank model of food charity? And were the economic critiques of food rescue organisations missing a vital piece of the puzzle about their motivation?

Volunteering:

As both food banks and food rescue organisations are often run largely by volunteers, I knew that volunteering would be a big focus of my research. I wanted to experience the world of volunteering myself but I also wanted to ask volunteers at the organisation what had led them there and what they thought of their own work experiences.

The realm of voluntary labour is a rich study environment for social sciences of all kinds. When we live in such a capitalistic environment, why do so many of us choose to donate our time and efforts with little or no material reward? Some of the research I discovered had used Marcel Mauss' (1925/1990) gift exchange theory (Sekine, 2024; Rescala, 2016; Georgeou & Haas, 2019) to explain volunteering as a form of exchange as suggested here:

"The study shows that there is an exchange being made when volunteering, although the helper does not get something material back, but they get to feel or be seen in a certain way by others" (Rescala, 2016, p. ii)

Mauss' (1925/1990) work on reciprocity has been a foundational text in anthropology and sociology, as we attempt to understand forms of gift exchange across cultures. Some of the most important aspects of Mauss' (1925/1990) work here involved the 'obligation of reciprocity' of the gift as the practice of exchanging gifts is often not voluntary but obligatory to maintain social standing and community cohesion. Failing to reciprocate in a gifting relationship can therefore lead to feelings of shame, or even ostracization in more extreme

cases. In the current neoliberal society of Aotearoa, not being able to reciprocate in a gift exchange relationship can result in feelings of social debt, and an embodied sense of 'owing'. As I got to know the volunteers I was working with at the food rescue, and as I worked more regular shifts myself, I discovered however that this specific form of volunteering did not really seem to fit within this frame of reciprocity. Importantly, volunteers with the organisation were not directly in contact with the recipients of their gifting but separated through the medium of community centres. They were not the ones engaging with and establishing a relationship with the recipients of food charity and therefore a direct gift exchange relationship was not being created between the two; no sense of debt was evident in my conversations at any time with my participants. They were overall humble about the work they were doing, happily sharing their insights but not necessarily telling the world about their achievements. There was an element of feeling 'good' after knowing that good work has been done, but it did not seem to fit the same patterns as some other community-facing volunteering environments.

Other researchers have used the framework of Bourdieu's theories of capital to explore the field of voluntary labour (Burnett, 2006; Dean, 2016; Harflett, 2015; Hayton & Blundell, 2021; Whittaker & Holland-Smith, 2016). In this context it is explained that by providing services and making networks, individuals participating in volunteering are gaining forms of social and cultural capital for themselves: knowledge, relationships, skills and mutual recognition that could then be later converted into economic or social advantages.

Harflett (2015), Dean (2016) and Hayton and Blundell, (2021) used Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital to explain the most common demographics – white and middle-class - of those volunteering and suggested that being able to volunteer in the first place requires a base of cultural and/or economic capital.

Other researchers (Burnett, 2006; Burden, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997; Harvey et al., 2007) used the concept of capital accumulation to explore the benefits that people find in volunteering, for example:

The fact that opportunity may lead to empowerment and investment in volunteering, is a worthwhile choice for the individual. The rational choice of becoming a volunteer is based on the principle of investing human capital as a trade-off for future economic capital

where social capital relates to opportunities of access to a structured programme that may legitimize the claim of personal and social empowerment (Burnett, 2006, p. 289)

I found that several of these studies (Hayton & Blundell 2021; Burnett, 2006; Harvey et al., 2007; Whittaker & Holland-Smith, 2016) focused specifically on sports volunteers, which was a different style of community building to the volunteers I had chosen to work alongside.

I personally find Bourdieu's theories of capital a very logical way of making sense of personal choices in that they allow for some otherwise baffling human interactions to be tallied against a chart of positive or negative trajectory. However, even with my own affection for the theories I still felt that this way of thinking of capital accumulation as a form of 'trade-off' did not entirely describe the ways in which my fellow volunteers described their experiences.

Narrowing the gaze further into research that has been done with volunteer groups in Aotearoa, I found that the research was largely from a psychological standpoint, and most focussed on the motivations of volunteers, or the ways in which organisations could look at improving their volunteer retention (Stark, 2017; Foley, 2024; Sextus et al., 2025). These are very useful case studies for the organisations themselves, especially with their statistical background, but again, do not quite paint a full picture of the volunteer experience.

Volunteering within food charity:

So, where did I find myself sitting within this research landscape? I had questions about the shame and stigma felt by food charity recipients and wondered if the sub-genre of food rescue with its free access model could assist with this. Was this part of the point of difference of food rescue? Or did volunteers find themselves there for environmental reasons?

I wanted to further understand the volunteer labour experience, both by participating in it myself, and by talking to a small number of volunteers to find out what had brought them there to this specific form of volunteering.

In conclusion, I found the frameworks of gift exchange and capital accumulation were both informative. Gift exchange theory explained how the feelings of shame and stigma were replicated within the field of food charity. The concept of capital accumulation could describe what some volunteers could stand to gain while not receiving direct financial benefit from their labour. However, they did not entirely help me make sense of what I experienced or what my participants said. My experience was one that did not involve a direct relationship with charity recipients, but instead was behind-the-scenes, interacting only with other volunteers, and those I spoke to were often very aware of the stigma that could be inadvertently enforced on recipients. Again, due to the behind-the-scenes nature of the work, the possibility of capital accumulation was diminished, as the networks being formed were largely within the same peer group, and the work was hard physical labour without learning greatly valued cultural skills or knowledge.

In the next section I will explore the theoretical framings and theorists I found best filled these gaps for me: Clara Han's (2012) ideas of concealed kindness and mischief, and Ghassan Hage's (2025) extension of Bourdieu's theories to formulate an idea of the augmentation of social being.

Thematic analysis: Following the threads

As I began to organise my research, I found myself struggling to make sense of it all. Every time I thought I found a shared thread to follow I lost it just as quickly in a conceptual labyrinth. One volunteer talked about personal experiences of food insecurity, another talked about a strong motivation to be a 'good Christian', while yet another spoke of a patriotic sense of making our country better. For my own part I found myself revelling in the feeling of having done something that felt like 'real work' after a long-time doing office work. For a long time, I struggled to think of what my research had told me: I moved a rainbow of Post-it notes around like the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic and hoped that somewhere in my notes I would magically find something that sang. Eventually it became clear that throughout all the different backgrounds, different thoughts, different political

attitudes, different religious attitudes, the main common ground was that they were all *there*. Week after week they showed up for a cause they believed in, doing a truly kind act for those who needed it, despite never directly seeing the effect they had on others. For me this speaks to a level of altruism that cannot be completely explained by reciprocity or the nature of ‘the gift’. There certainly is a sense of a job well-done, of doing ‘real work’ and knowing that you’re doing something *good*. But it’s also hard: muscles ache, eyelids want to stay closed, your body doesn’t want to haul a 20kg bag of bread rolls into the back of a truck at 7am. So why *are* they all there?

Throughout my undergraduate studies, I had often found Pierre Bourdieu’s theories some of my favourite conceptual frameworks. However, I hesitated to associate these theories with my research initially, concerned that this would lead me down a somewhat reductive avenue showing my research participants purely as accumulating capital in our neoliberal society. Late in the thesis process, I found myself with a copy of Ghassan Hage’s new book *Pierre Bourdieu’s Political Economy of Being* (Hage, 2025), and from the very first page I breathed a small sigh of relief:

“Pierre Bourdieu often defended himself against a utilitarian understanding of his conception of practice. He particularly objected to those who took his claim that social agents “accumulate capital” to imply a conception of the individual akin to that of marginalist economics: someone always aiming to maximize profit. He once retorted, “It is not true to say that everything that people do or say is aimed at maximizing their social profit; but one may say that they do it to perpetuate or to augment their social being.” (Hage, 2025, p.1)

To distinguish social being from the concept of capital, Hage describes social being in terms of creating satisfying and fulfilling forms of lives. Instead of ‘having’ capital, social being is something that we *are*; to augment our social being then is to make our own lives more satisfactory, more worthwhile, and to flourish in the process.

“This is why, rather than “to be or not to be,” the question becomes of the order of “How much can one be?” (Hage, 2025, p.2)

This moment also fully unlocked the other theoretical element I had been toying with for months. From early on, I was influenced by a piece of Clara Han’s work from her book *Life in*

Debt (Han, 2012) namely her concept of ‘concealed kindness’ in a very poor community in Chile. Concealed kindnesses are acts of kindness that people pretend are not acts of kindness at all. This concealed kindness is designed to protect the dignity of members of the community going through “critical moments” or those moments of everyday crisis, both big and small: poverty, drug addiction, hunger, job loss or relationship troubles. Han speaks of neighbours offering help but disguising that they were doing so: offering ‘leftovers’ from dishes they had not yet cooked to those they know are struggling to afford food one week or casually mentioning a new work contract to those they know are out of work:

Concealing allows for the enduring to endure. It protects a “living with dignity” by not explicitly recognizing the critical moment and one’s act of kindness, since as a neighbor one should not have personal knowledge of such critical moments. Such concealing differs from Bourdieu’s elaboration of the gift within games of honor.
(Han, 2012, p. 86)

I found Han’s notion of ‘concealed kindness’ insightful in relation to my group of volunteers because of a particular discovery I made early on in my research. The organisation explicitly advertises itself as an environmental one; the stated purpose is to reduce the amount of food waste going to landfill and therefore cut down on carbon emissions. However, for all my participants, this was absolutely a secondary motivation compared to the motivation of community and social care.

The concept of concealed kindness helped me make sense of this puzzle. Even when they weren’t explicitly aware of the act of concealment, they were still involved in practicing it and in doing so allowed for the endurance of dignity in those who would receive the food.

The way in which the organisation works is very much aligned with the ideal of not creating social debt. The recipients of the food are not expected to give anything in return and are in fact positioned as doing the environment a favour by taking this food away from landfill and into their own cupboards. This whole idea of pretence also made me question whether some of my participants were concealing the idea of kindness even from themselves. Hage also connects to this sense of concealment as he discusses gifting:

Given that every minor aspect of what is given, where it is given, and how it is given matters, one’s sophistication in reading an offering affects one’s ability to give back

appropriately. Second, it involves degrees of deftness, adroitness, and inventiveness necessary for knowing and being able to act on the knowledge of what, where, and when to give back. In giving back, social agents want to do more than just satisfy “the rule of giving back.” They usually want to send a positive or negative message to the person who initiated the exchange. Indeed, not wanting to send a message is a message in itself. (Hage, 2025, p. 26)

My participants and the organisation as a whole are in indeed attempting to carefully craft the message they are sending: “Help us to help the environment” instead of suggesting that through distributing food they are expecting any form of reciprocal offering. The rule of giving back is deflected from the organisation and shifted to a broader collective experience.

The third concept I use is that of Clara Han’s (2012) description of mischief:

However, the contemporaneity of giving—this pretending—reveals a different aspect of living with dignity. That is, the mischief that sneaks in during pretending: the act of kindness that is allowed and made possible, a generosity that can neither be registered as a debt nor accounted for solely through the expectations of otherworldly salvation in a future. Could such “mischief” of impersonal generosity and kindness open anthropological imagination to a possibility of justice in this world as it silently persists alongside the accounting practices of the social debt (Han, 2012, p.90)

I found this sense of mischief co-existed with the sense of joy I often felt when volunteering with my research participants. The act of ‘fighting back’ against the system, the wonder of being able to do good without creating shame, the mystery of discovering the little treasures each day that were left in baskets and trolleys for us to pick up; would it be caramel hot cross buns? Pre-cooked rhubarb? Venison fillets? Jokes and laughter were shared in amongst a shared mission of a group who believed strongly that the world could and should be better.

In conclusion, in the work of Clara Han (2012) and Ghassan Hage (2025) I found answers to my questions around what drove my participants to keep coming back every week for their volunteering shifts with such joy and conviction. I also found a way of explaining how the organisation worked to achieve its dual purpose of environmental and social protection.

In the upcoming auto-ethnographic snapshot of my time within the organisation and speaking to volunteers, I will expand on the three concepts of concealed kindness, social augmentation and mischief to illustrate what this group of committed people can show us about kindness, altruism and concealment.

Food rescue from the inside: Comfortable middles

It's near the end of February the following year when I start to realise how much I've become accustomed to this new role. The humid warmth of the Waikato is at its peak, our hi-vis vests stick to the synthetic seat covers of the truck, and it feels a welcome relief stepping into the chilled departments at the supermarkets.

It was quickly suggested to me how useful it would be to have an additional volunteer driver on the roster, so for several months now I've been adjusting to the chunky manual gearbox of the smaller of the two trucks. This means I now have a regular route on a Thursday morning, as well as a regular volunteer companion: Graeme. We've become comfortably acquainted with each other's routines and life events, but due to the ongoing nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, I can still count on one hand the number of times I've seen the bottom half of his face. He has a tall, wiry frame and despite his impending 80th birthday, I'm fairly convinced he's fitter than I am. There's an educated, polished tone to his voice, and he has a habit of leaning back in his seat with folded arms when he has a point to make in the conversation. A baseball cap often covers his grey hair while we're working together, and between that and our organisation-issued face masks, I've become accustomed to gauging his reactions through the crinkles around his eyes.

This morning, we arrive at the depot within minutes of each other; he walks around the corner as I shake the key for the roller door to the front of my keyring.

"Good morning, beautiful day for it!"

We pick up our usual vests, keys and tablet, with an extra step to drop off some offerings for the shared lunch the team are holding after the morning's shifts. A container of brownies on the steel bench from me, a box of vegetable sushi goes into the chiller from Graeme.

We check the back of the truck for the expected pile of grey plastic crates and fabric drawstring bags. The bags are a newer addition to help pack in the bread supplies instead of taking up valuable crate space. As we climb in, I note the festive reindeer antlers have finally reluctantly been removed from the truck, but a cheery red nose remains on the front grill. The rattle of the diesel engine is unchanged and always marks the proper start of the shift for me.

In recent days the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been escalating, and I can almost feel Graeme sizzling in the passenger seat before he folds his arms and says:

“That Putin, I can’t think of a more jolly rotten fellow...”

Our drives together often include a shared grumble about the state of world politics, or happy chatter about Graeme’s planned trips to the family beach house; most often a bit of both.

As we pull in at our first supermarket for collection, one of the yard managers approaches the passenger door and asks if we can use a box full of old issues of kid’s magazines. Graeme gestures towards me with a chirpy

“I’ll check with the boss”

I lean over and give a keen thumbs up

“We’d love to take them, I’m sure the centres will find them a home!”

Despite Graeme’s six years volunteering with the organisation, and therefore his definite superiority in experience, he’s deferred to me for decisions since the first few weeks of us working as a team. At first this felt a little overwhelming as I tried to learn the ropes myself, but it’s forced me to gain confidence quickly.

The magazines do indeed find a very happy home; they’re the bright coloured activity book kind, with ‘toy included’ featuring a grinning Peppa Pig or Paw Patrol puppy. I sprinkle them throughout our community centre drop offs during the day and the volunteers we see light up, one of them immediately planning some kids’ care packages.

I’ve become used to the rhythm of our morning route, pulling into the backlots of supermarkets and offering a friendly wave to the yard managers I’ve gotten to know by

name. Each supermarket has a different way of putting food aside for us: some in crates that we swap over, while some stack items in trolleys for us to wheel over to the truck. Three of our five collection points regularly keep items aside for us in the chiller or freezer, while the others stick to leaving us bread and vegetables. I've also become more accustomed to what and how much the different community centres will be able to manage. Some locations don't have space for a fridge or freezer but will still take some items like milk they know they can find a quick home for. For one centre we've had to limit the amount of bread we drop off as they just couldn't get through it fast enough and were starting to find discarded extra bread rolls in their parking lot. Things are always shifting, but the regularity of my time here means that I feel like I'm a part of the changes, not just swept along for the ride.

As one of these changes, we've taken to bringing all canned or non-perishable items – pasta, washing powder, cocoa, blocks of chocolate – back to the depot at the end of the shift. This allows them to be sorted and for us to make sure that they're all still in sealed containers from a safety perspective, as well as now being put together in boxes for collection from some community centres as far away as the Bay of Plenty. I occasionally find myself needing to remind Graeme of the new plan, breaking years of habit of moving everything out of the truck as soon as it comes in.

As we arrive back at the depot and begin hauling in the remaining crates I'm struck by the absence of strain in my shoulders. The past few months have strengthened my arms and becoming more familiar with regularly lifting awkward sized or heavy boxes have made me conscious of intentionally lifting using my knees. Mentally too, the drain is not the same; I've started to wear my position as a volunteer as a comfortable – albeit fluorescent orange - garment. It's become a habit, a part of myself.

Graeme and I finish offloading, and we bring the empty crates over to the old re-purposed bathtub that sits outside the roller doors for cleaning. The steel floor of the truck is swept out, the seats and steering wheel given a once-over with anti-bacterial wipes. As we finish our duties, Julie, Hine and Amber haul some trestle tables out into the carpark garden to set up for lunch. Other volunteers begin to trickle in, and the tables gradually fill with food: our own offerings are combined with hot chips wrapped in paper from the local shop, a whole smoked Kahawai from a fishing trip Julie has been on. Rob and Stevie are some of the last to

arrive after getting stuck in traffic on their own morning route; Rob carries a large pavlova with him.

“We got given a whole two crates of these this morning! All a little messed up, must have been an accident with the forklift unpacking them I reckon. But hey, I’m never sure they’re always what they’re CRACKED up to be anyway!”

His belly laugh sets off a group chuckle, and everyone gathers to fill their own plates. The atmosphere is light, and as warm as the late morning sun; the feeling of a group brought together by purpose.

As things begin to wind down Amber and Julie pack any leftovers into some cardboard takeaway boxes:

“Make sure you take something home! We don’t want anything going into the bin now do we!”

Conclusion:

As I grew more accustomed to the work and the day-to-day practices, I found myself aware that the sheer volume of food we picked up on a daily basis made it particularly easy to establish the concealed kindness relationship I have discussed. In some instances where we had to try our best to find homes for excess bread so it didn’t go to waste it was particularly clear that those taking it were in fact doing us a favour, they were a true part of the network and the system that allowed this work to continue. Even in the closing remarks from Julie, I reflect on how much this attitude of non-reciprocal gifting is entrenched. As volunteers we are always encouraged to take food with us to help continue the flow of produce moving.

I also discovered the ways that my own social being was augmented through this work, I became more physically present in this work than I had been in a long-time in my own paid employment. I also felt more fulfilment in myself in the ways I felt connected to our network of volunteers and the positive impact we were having on our community. It was humbling to see the quantity of food that could now reach places it was needed due to our work.

Finally, I absolutely loved the conversations, laughter and joy I shared with my participants. Each time I went out on a run with fellow volunteers I left with a bigger smile on my face than when I'd arrived. It might have been shared stories or Graeme's ever so polite way of describing a dictator as a 'jolly rotten fellow', Rob's self-aware terrible puns, or the grin on the faces of those putting together Paw Patrol themed care packages for children. Mischief and joy fuelled us all.

In the following ethnographic stories, I will expand further on these three concepts and illustrate them with the stories and conversations of my participants.

Chapter 4: Ethnographic stories

This chapter contains five different stories from my research participants, whom I met during my time volunteering at the food rescue. In each story you will get to see the three main concepts of concealed kindness, augmentation of social being and mischief I have identified throughout this thesis explored in all their differing ways.

I have arranged these stories in an order that illustrates these themes from the clearest to the opaquest; starting with those who are explicitly aware of their own concealment, and finishing with those whose concealment applies even to themselves.

Julie:

I begin with Julie's story as one of the clearest examples of how the augmentation of social being can create a fulfilling life, even to the extent that when she has now found herself a paid position within the organisation, it no longer quite seems to have the same level of fulfilment. She is also someone who described explicitly how her own experiences of the stigma of food insecurity led her to this kind of work, and how the concealment of kindness and gifting can go a long way towards reducing this stigma.

I recorded my first impression of Julie on my very first day at the food rescue:

"As I walked into the sorting room of the food-rescue, Julie was one of the first to catch my eye. It was hardly as though the others were fading into the background as everyone was wearing fluorescent Hi-vis vests in varying shades of yellow and orange. Perhaps it was her bright blue hair, pulled up into a practical knot at the back of her head, but I also felt the less tangible feeling of a calm and friendly presence, which felt like an anchor for my nervousness." – *from my field notes*

Between this, the way she gently persuaded me to take food back with me after my first volunteer shift, and the sheer passion she exuded about her work, in hindsight it's hardly surprising that her words were some of the ones that went around in my head until my themes fell out.

'Tis the season

It's approaching Christmas when I first go out on a run with Julie. The trucks have been through a seasonal makeover: foam reindeer antlers are taped to the wing mirrors, a Santa hat sits on the dashboard, and spray-on-snow has been stencilled onto the glass in a snowflake pattern. The latter only lasts halfway through the morning before we lower the windows to allow some airflow, watching sadly as the crisp lines melt into a uniform fog.

We pull to a stop at our first supermarket pick up of the day, step out onto the already warming tarmac, and push aside the thick plastic ribbons covering the warehouse door. Julie looks around the space until she catches the eye of the store manager:

“Morning Joe! Anything exciting for us today?”

After some good-natured banter and a debate about whether mince tarts are the best or worst thing on the family Christmas table, we collect our trolleys and crates.

“Hey Joe, how do you like your coffee huh?”

After a classically kiwi response of a flat white with no sugar, she responds with a thumbs up and a wave. We step back outside into the humidity of the yard, and Julie turns to me, tapping her nose conspiratorially.

“I want to try and get all the managers at least a coffee sometime this week before Christmas, just something small to say thanks, you know? They put in some hard mahi all year.”

Eventually after our rounds are all finished and the truck is emptied of food, we arrive back at the depot, stepping briefly into the walk-in chiller to cool off. Sitting on Julie’s side of the desk is a box carefully wrapped in metallic red paper. A similar box sits next to Amber who looks up at us as we come in:

“It’s from Mark and Janice, our regular Thursday morning volunteers, they just wanted to say thanks for all the work you’re doing!”

Julie looks a little flustered, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Oh man, they didn’t have to do that! It’s just doing my job!”

This interplay of kindness and bashfulness is a consistent feature of Julie’s form of kindness and giving. Her own sense of mischief is alive and well in the playful way she plans on surprising the supermarket managers with coffee, but when the favour is returned to her in such a similar way she finds it almost hard to comprehend.

A job or a purpose

Julie is one of the few paid employees working for the food rescue, and between her job and her children she's often a very busy woman. I try to arrange a few different times to talk to her that are thwarted by misaligned schedules or illness before I suggest combining a more casual interview with helping her out on a collection run one day. While the organisation is now a very large part of her day-to-day life, this wasn't how she started work here.

"Well, I started out as a volunteer here, I helped at a charity shop too for a while, the one just behind the depot. Then a friend got me involved here, our kids go to school together, so I've known her for a while now. I'd been taking a bit of a break from work to spend more time with my kids, I was working as a social worker, and it was pretty demanding for a while."

She describes some of her experiences, as well as some of her feelings of burn-out and the tiredness that kept her from engaging with her family as much as she wanted. When she stopped work, volunteering a few hours a week kept up a sense of routine outside the home which she didn't want to give up entirely. It also gave her a real sense of accomplishment:

"You know, when I started here, when I was volunteering, there was something so, SO amazing about it. It gave me such a buzz like, every day I came in: 'Yeah, we got this! Look what we're doing for people!'. There was always a bit of sadness with it too, just seeing people in need, especially the Kaumātua, they shouldn't have to be lining up for food boxes in the sun, that's not on. But overall, it felt so good."

She drums her fingers against the steering wheel as we pause at a traffic light.

"When they offered me the job driving, well obviously it's good and it was nice to start bringing in a bit of money again, but there's something that changed. It feels a bit less special now that I HAVE to do it, now that I get PAID to do it. It's just different. I keep thinking of things I can still do to give some time back and feel that same buzz again."

This difference between time spent volunteering and time spent in employment is something Julie has clearly thought about quite a lot. It's not that she doesn't feel fulfilment from knowing her work is meaningful, but it doesn't quite match up to her original experience.

"Especially before Amber came on board to help with the admin side of things, it was getting hard for a while. I love getting out here and seeing people, connecting with the community, but having to go back and try and make schedules and records and everything? Nah, it just doesn't do it for me."

When she speaks of the more administrative elements of her paid position at the food rescue, I can see she finds this role dramatically less engaging. Her passion is the community and carefully nurturing relationships, and her feeling seems to be that this is something not done via spreadsheets and emails.

The difference that Julie recognised between her time volunteering and her time as a paid employee made this one of the most fascinating conversations I had during my time with the organisation. I often brought it up in discussions with my supervisors as I puzzled through my different theories. What did this mean, that by being paid for work it suddenly meant LESS? One way I have come to think about this is that the way Julie is augmenting her own social being is in the very nature of a non-reciprocal gifting relationship with her work. By being a volunteer, she was able to feel an incredibly embodied form of giving, but once she is reimbursed for her labour the dynamic shifts beneath her feet.

Creating community

We pull up outside the closed gates of our next supermarket, looking in to see if we can gauge the progress of the forklift unloading the large, refrigerated truck in front of us. Sometimes it's better to move on and come back, but as there are only a few more stacked pallets, Julie switches the engine off and puts a foot up on the centre console.

"What made you want to get involved with the work here?"

“There’s something about it, I don’t really know the words for it, maybe about gratitude, about giving back to the community? Helping when you know sometimes people are going through rough times. Me and my kids, we’ve gone through rough times, but I’ve always told them, no matter what’s happening, there’s someone out there doing it harder. We just have to give back where we can!”

“Do you see that as giving back to the environment as well?”

“I suppose I do, but it’s definitely more about the people. I do think that environmental side of things makes things a bit easier to talk about though! So, like I said, me and my kids have had some hard times; one of those I think we went nine days, NINE days where all we had to eat was those instant noodles. I still can’t eat them after that, even now! But what I mean is, while we were going through that, I was too embarrassed to ask for anything, there was too much whakamā to ask for help. Now, if I see people stuck with those same ideas, I try to tell them they’re doing us a favour right? They’re helping us to stop all this food going into landfills, it all helps US.”

There’s something about the way that Julie talks that often feels as though she’s letting you in on an important secret. I can imagine how much this plays a role when she tries to encourage others to break through those barriers of shame that get in the way of accessing help.

The point she brings up here about making the recipients aware that they are in fact helping the organisation achieve its purpose; that is the distillation of my discussion around concealed kindness. In making the goal of food rescue something that can be shared between the organisation and the participants, the stigma can be rebuffed. How can it be charity when you’re doing an important job? Why should there be shame felt about taking extra bread home when in doing so you’re reducing carbon emissions?

Above and beyond

As we drive around our side of the city, Julie talks about the values she wants to pass down to her children. She relays several anecdotes about how she encourages getting involved with the community.

“The last few years the kids and I always try and do a pay-it-forward kind of thing for Christmas. We’ve made food hampers, we’ve made toys, all sorts of things, but I’m a bit stumped this year! I need to sit down and have a chat with them about what they think would be best for this year, it’s been a pretty stressful one for everyone!”

It sounds as though this framework of giving back has already been well engrained:

“We used to have a really high fence at our old place, and one time my youngest said to me: ‘mum, a really little kid goes this way to school and he looks really cold, I don’t think he has a jacket’. So, we started hanging out jackets on the fence, spare ones we picked up from the salvation army or something you know? First we just had a little notice saying, ‘Take one if you’re cold, just leave the hanger please’, then a bit later when we kept running out of them we had to change it to ‘Take a jacket, just leave the damn hanger!’.”

She bursts into laughter at this memory, and at the strange contradictions that altruistic efforts can sometimes create. Closer to the end of our morning, she returns to her point about the work feeling different now that it is her main paid employment.

“I find myself thinking sometimes, maybe I need to add in some more volunteering time. I might look into it and try and see if there’s anywhere that needs some extra hands, maybe go build something with Habitat for Humanity or something! Who knows.”

In conclusion, Julie’s story shows us a clear practice of reducing stigma by concealing the act of giving from those she speaks to who are in need of food assistance. By telling people directly that they’re doing the organisation a favour by taking the food and therefore helping the planet, a relationship that does not require reciprocity is created.

Her very clear acknowledgement that the work feels different when she is compensated monetarily for it, when she is accumulating economic capital in return for her labour, illustrates the concept of the augmentation of social being. She prefers the feeling that being helpful gives her and intends on pursuing other voluntary efforts to regain this feeling.

Julie finds mischief in small ways. Her paid role now in the organisation means she clearly takes things seriously, but she still tries to sneak in moments of surprise for the supermarket managers.

In the next story of Mark and Janice these themes will be explored further, especially the explicit recognition of concealed kindness at an organisational level.

Mark and Janice:

My conversation with Mark and Janice shows the concept of concealed kindness most overtly. Mark describes the environmental mission of the organisation as he sees it as a sort of front, disguising their more important work of feeding the community.

As a couple nearing full retirement, they have found themselves with more time to now give back to their community. Their own personal sense of their identity is intrinsically linked with giving back and helping their community where they can, and now that this time is available to them, they show great affection for a role in which they can now continue to augment their social being in this way.

They are quick to laugh and joke, and we can begin to see more clearly the sense of mischievousness and joy that I found evident in this work.

Unfinished sentences

Mark and Janice were two volunteers I knew to wave at, but we often felt like ships in the night despite working on the same morning each week. They started early and were often packing up by the time Graeme and I returned to the depot. They were the last of the volunteers I arranged a sit-down chat with. By this stage in my volunteering journey, I felt a lot more comfortable chatting to other volunteers, about my research and about the work in general. This means this conversation includes more of my own voice, noted in italics.

Mark and Janice have been married a long time, with grown-up children out living their own lives and careers starting to wind down. The ease they share together makes me feel instantly comfortable, as if I'm sitting in their living room rather than in the back staff room as we make ourselves a vanilla latte from a sachet (rescued from an opened box) and a peppermint tea. They laugh easily, both with smile lines in their tanned faces after a long hot summer and they often finish each other's sentences.

I begin with my most generic questions:

“So, first, how long have you both been volunteering here?”

Mark: “Well, for me it’s been about 6 years I’d say?”

Janice: “How long have I been doing it?”

Mark: “You can probably count at least a year, you used to help me out in summer holidays though too, maybe a couple of years?”

Janice: “Hard to know now isn’t it!”

A happy coincidence

“Mark, you would have been some of the starting crew then, right?”

Mark takes a moment to think, looking back over the years,

Mark: “I suppose so, but it felt pretty well established when I came in! I think they were just starting to bring volunteers in? So, it had been running for a while but just with a couple of staff”

“So it was expanding a bit more? Do you remember how you heard about it to start with?”

Mark: “Yes! Through my sister and brother-in-law, they’ve volunteered even longer than us with the food rescue over in Tauranga. They always used to talk about it when we visited, so after one trip I just looked up if there were any running here and then gave them a call. So, it was really because we had family involved! A happy coincidence of timing with me retiring or at least semi-retiring too.”

I love these stories of coincidence in life; the ways in which our individual threads cross over, connecting, knotting, creating our own life stories in all their unlikely ways.

A happy coincidence indeed! Was it all because of word of mouth? Was there anything else that made you want to get involved?

Mark: "Well, I think the idea of it, and I'm different from some of the people round here because I look at the back of the truck which talks about saving food from landfill. That's a non-event because most of the food won't go to the landfill if it didn't go here, it would just go to pig farmers. For me it was about, you know, there's so much surplus food in the world really, and then there's a need, and the food and the need are not in the same place, and it was really about making a difference on that side of that things, to say well look, there are people who really could do with this but they haven't got any way of getting access to it, and if we don't pick it up it's just going to go to pig farmers, so that to me is I think the motivation, you know, the bigger reason behind doing it, rather than just enjoying a Thursday morning getting up at 5 and driving round in the truck"

We share a collective laugh at this. The work we do is hard and repetitive; early mornings in the cold or the heat, but we're still here, week after week, soaking it all in.

I'm struck immediately by how explicit Mark's recognition is of the subtle concealment and misdirection I've been unearthing. The idea that this food waste from supermarkets would almost certainly stay out of landfill even without their intervention is not something the others have brought up to me before. Certainly, it would be more environmentally efficient for people to eat the food directly rather than through pork products later down the line, but it still veers away from the direct 'rescue' model that is advertised. This brings me back to Han's (2012) discussion of mischief within her discussion of concealment:

"Could such "mischief" of impersonal generosity and kindness open anthropological imagination to a possibility of justice in this world as it silently persists alongside the accounting practices of the social debt? (Han, 2012, p.90)

Mark is describing a collective concealment of where some of this rescued produce may end up. Not for any nefarious purpose, but to allow for the mission to continue in the best way they know how. The justice involved in providing food to those who need it far surpasses the detail of whether the final resting place for lettuces and cabbages might be the landfill or the inside of a pig.

As with the other volunteers I've spent time with, it's clear that Mark and Janice's main reason for being here is to help their community, to put the food and the need in the same room and do their own small part to connect the two.

It doesn't hurt to help

"Had either of you been a volunteer before this?"

Mark: "Only really with the schools when the kids were there, like coaching sports teams..."

Janice: "Planting around the lake"

Mark: "Lots of ferrying back and forth, but never anything regular for me I suppose, not in normal work hours anyway"

There's a small pause as Janice thinks for a moment:

Janice: "for 25 years I was involved in a music group, and we did a lot of charity events. When our group disbanded we had a whole \$5000 in the treasury and because we were an incorporated society we could have gone to dinner and spent up large, but we decided no, we just donated to the air ambulance and St Johns. Most of us go to the East Coast for summer holidays and the Whangamata surf club needed enough money for a defibrillator, so we sent some there. Weird thing was, I later met a surf lifesaver at Whangamata and she said the day the defibrillator arrived they saved the life of a man."

"Oh wow!"

Janice: "It was wow, but I mean, the obvious thing about what this is about is about linking to people and supporting them. You know, I've been at one stage in my life where money was SO tight and it's not pleasant; there's a lot of things that you can stumble on before you accept help or go looking for help. I think the people who are working in the community centres and the people who are working for this place: they've all got the same attitude of well, 'Everyone pulls their trousers on the same

way' as my dad would say. It doesn't hurt to help. I think too, being a teacher, I think anybody who's been in the service industry which is what teaching is and what YOU did through the agricultural side of things and the medical side of things, you always do more than what you're paid for. Always. It's just a habit, I guess, not a habit as such, just... who we are I think."

Mark: "It's the way"

Janice: "It's the way... someone else is always first"

Mark: "It's the way you think about life really, it's not... Not in a high and mighty way, just..."

Janice: "No, no... It's the way we were brought up too I think"

Mark: "Probably"

This conversation feels to align perfectly with how Hage (2025) describes elements of augmenting social being as something that we *are* rather than something we *have*:

"[it] is a kind of coat I am always wearing, which allows me always to have not just an abstract capacity, as when I have a coat at home, but the practical capacity to shield myself from the rain and the cold. Never would I have to say I left it at home, because the coat in a sense has become part of me. In fact, it is me." (Hage, 2025, p. 45)

Giving their time and their service is more than just a 'nice to do' for Mark and Janice, it's a part of their own sense of being. 'You always do more than what you're paid for' has now continued past their formally employed lives and into a voluntary position that continues this same ethos. The lovely inherited analogy of 'Everyone pulls their trousers on the same way' shows how they identify their own lived experiences with those they aim to help, even if they do not directly meet those they are helping.

A blimmin' big village

"Over these years you must have met a lot of different people!"

Mark: "Oh hell yeah"

Janice: "Neat people! Kind people, really positive, like at that lunch the other day, we were saying about when we were dropping off in Huntly, people just on the street would come and help. They didn't want anything, they just helped. It's like a chain reaction, a group effort."

"It's really lovely to see that sometimes isn't it, that connection"

Mark: "And if you think about it, most of the people we're delivering food to are also not paid, also volunteers, which I think, it's one of the things I've realised is just HOW many people volunteer. And once people start volunteering, it's like they keep looking for more opportunities to do more, to..."

Janice: "To help. You know, it used to be that people lived in a village, well, our village is blimmin' BIG, but everyone still should pull together. It's the same thing we try and teach kids at school about not throwing rubbish out of the window you know, do you love being part of New Zealand Aotearoa, well then why are you throwing rubbish out your window? Do you love being part of the community, well then why are you being disrespectful to that person, whatever. What do we want our world to look like?"

Mark: "I think people... There are a lot of people who are nowhere near as well off as we are. And I think, in a country like this, that produces as much food as we do, where there is as much infrastructure and wealth and everything, that I think. Well, I think that to me is just wrong, that we can't get food to people who can't afford it."

Janice: "And the implications for not having food are huge"

Mark: "Well, everything starts on that!"

This sense of 'pulling together' as a community and passing down a sense of 'the right things to do' is clear throughout my conversation with Mark and Janice. It echoes some of the sentiments Julie expressed of passing down her sense of community connection to her children and how these ways of augmenting our social being can become intergenerational over time.

It is also interesting that the state of the country's food system creates a sense of bafflement for them both, and elements of this confusion are picked up in some of the following conversations with other volunteers. There is a patriotic sense that Aotearoa should be better than this, and that the fact that so many people are requiring food charity to survive is shameful.

Food and pride

Mark: "I've said lots and lots of times, like, there are also people who receive the food who are also gaming the system, but the thing is you can't not do it because 5% of the people are taking advantage. You've got to look at the bigger picture and say 'Well, there is a need and most of this is getting to the right place'. And I think that I've had quite a few conversations with my brother-in-law who sometime gets annoyed because it's not ALL going to the people who need it, that there are some people who manage to get into the system to get a whole lot of stuff when they could easily afford to buy it themselves. BUT it's only a proportion and it's probably not a very big proportion at all"

Janice: "Who cares as long as it's still getting to the right place."

Mark: "Exactly, MOST of it gets to the right places. But yeah, I think it's a good thing to do, volunteering like this, and specifically in relation to food because you can see what you're doing. You're picking up food that would have otherwise gone to the pig farm, it's ending up in community centres and things like that"

In Aotearoa, as with many neo-liberal societies, there is an underlying rhetoric that lays blame squarely at the feet of individuals and their 'poor choices'. In fact, this rhetoric is exactly what has helped to perpetuate the stigma at the heart of most food charity. It is interesting here to note that Mark's brother-in-law, the very person who is a regular volunteer for a food rescue in Tauranga and lead to Mark's own volunteering position, also holds this belief.

Janice: "It's interesting that the current situation about supermarkets and the prices they charge, and yet there are supermarkets where they have barrels of free fruit to attract custom, you know, customers to come in. You know, giving... it sounds weird, but... giving away food, when they charge so much, somewhere in there is something... not quite right..."

Mark: "And also, we're picking up 300kgs of bread every day, and I bet you the supermarkets aren't losing money out the bakery!"

"Surely they wouldn't keep doing it if they were!"

Mark: "But then, if they got their act together and didn't waste so much, there would be less for things like this. But then, the things in the supermarket MIGHT be more affordable."

Janice: "Well, then we wouldn't NEED as much for things like this, and how prideful would that be, to be able to do it yourself!"

"It's interesting, even what you were saying about pride, I think food is so connected with that, it's so tangible"

Janice: "It's a basic necessity, if you can't meet a basic necessity, it's like hygiene really. And it affects everyone, especially the kids; I can remember when I was on such a tight budget and there were Smarties to be had, and one of the packets of Smarties the children had split and went everywhere, and there was no more money to buy another one, I'll never forget that wail."

"There's so many other things that are, well, a bit easier to hide, even if you have issues with power bills you can keep that to yourself a bit more, but food, you just can't. I think a couple of people have talked about, well, it's still a bit hard to KNOW about places like the community centres unless you get pointed that direction"

Janice: "Yes, we've talked about that too, that we've discovered community centres that we didn't even know existed, so if WE don't know, and we're not silly, not everyone has access to, or a pathway to find out these things, and even if there is a pathway they don't know how or what questions to ask."

The tangibility of food insecurity is something that is at the heart of many of the experiences of shame and stigma around accessing food charity. Food and the lack of it is something that becomes impossible to hide for families. Mark and Janice's discussion of pride connects to the retention of dignity that Han (2012) describes as being at the heart of the act of concealed kindness. If pride can be kept intact, even while receiving food in some of these 'critical moments' then the organisation's purpose is working at its best.

Making a difference

"Are there any other interesting experiences over your time here?"

Mark: "I crashed into a taxi one day?"

Laughter

Mark: "I think... I mean, you speak for yourself obviously, but I do like it because of the range of people you get to meet and it's an interesting thing to do. We're just about to go into full retirement, so it's quite cool to get out and about, go to 8 or 10 different places in a morning saying hello to everybody."

Janice: "I like it cause then you're in a truck, you sit higher and then you can look into people's back yards"

"You get to be a nosy neighbour to EVERYBODY"

Mark: "You do see a lot more. No, I think it's a cool thing to do, it's a cool thing to do NOW, almost my whole life I didn't have the time to do it, even if I wanted to I couldn't have done it because of jobs and things... so why not? Try and make a bit of a difference."

I loved Mark and Janice's direct acknowledgement and revelry in their own mischief here. They are a couple who, despite their own hard times in life, exude so much joy in their conversations. The cheeky way in which Janice especially speaks of her nosiness made us all laugh into our mugs of tea.

In conclusion, the concept of concealed kindness can be seen the most explicitly within Mark and Janice's conversation. Mark sees the environmental side of the organisation as something of a cover story to allow the social good to happen most effectively, and their discussions of pride and how this connects to food as well as their own experiences on the edges of food insecurity show how they see the importance of being able to maintain dignity during life's 'critical moments'.

The augmentation of their own social being is shown in how, even while entering their retirement years, they are pursuing voluntary labour that allows them to continue to give back to their community. They see this as a part of themselves, a sense of duty to give back to the community and the country that has allowed them to live their own lives. The way in which they describe this way of giving back as just being 'who they are' aligns with Hage's descriptions of social being, allowing them to increase 'how much they can be'.

Mischief is seen here in the ways especially Janice revels in her ability to now be 'a nosy neighbour' to everyone, but also in the clear recognition that they are playing along with an 'environmental' purpose despite not believing that this is the main issue at play. They are happy to be a part of the organisational concealment which allows for dignity and reduces shame.

Mischief and joy will be explored further in the following story of Stevie's experiences.

Stevie

The element of mischievousness in concealing kindness is most clearly illustrated in Stevie's story. This can be seen in his sheer joy and delight at finding and supplying the treats that come through the truck. His energy and enthusiasm brought extra life to the volunteering runs I got to do with him, and he was always excited to try new things. Even when we got lost on new routes or accidentally set off alarm systems at a community centre one day when we arrived early, he was ready with a quip and a giggle.

His version of augmenting his social being feels initially like a contradiction to the factor of concealment, as he discusses often the satisfaction he gets from the chance to be visible, especially in his queer identity. However, to me this only goes further to cement the fact that the organisation itself is creating concealment; Stevie has the chance to engage with his community by smiling and waving to children he has seen at the local community centre, but he is still not directly involved in a reciprocal relationship. Instead, the relationship he is forming with his community is one of shared experience.

Joyous generosity

I first meet Stevie on one of my first days of volunteering, while I'm still trying to get my bearings and decipher what exactly is expected of me. He bounds into the depot, a whirl of bright blue ruffled hair and constant smiles. He notices me as the new face in the room and immediately introduces himself before letting loose a stream of questions and compliments about the tattoos on my right arm. His enthusiasm is infectious, and over the next few weeks I quickly adapt to his energy and his habit of referring to most things as awesome, amazing, or incredible. He lends a generous and joyful presence to the place, and as one of the closest to me in age amongst the team, we quickly bond over chatter about board games, pets and pop culture.

Stevie has been helping at the food rescue about 6 months longer than I have, also with enforced gaps in his involvement due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. He accompanies me on my first day driving the truck, and his non-judgemental company helps ease me into this specific volunteering role. He helps me to navigate the sometimes-circuitous routes around the city, and keeps us both entertained with music, memes and his own life updates.

“Hey, I tried bagels for the first time the other day after we picked some up! I’d never had them before ‘cause they always cost too much... I still don’t know if they’re worth it, even when they’re free!”

On one occasion we collect a whole crate full of expensive boxes of chocolate, being given away to us because someone had removed the decorative bows. Stevie looks conspiratorially at me:

“I might take one of these home with me and put some extra ribbons on it for my partner, she absolutely loves these, but we pretty much never get them. Brownie points for me!”

He keeps the box in the front footwell of the truck for the rest of our run, occasionally looking down at them and grinning, still not able to believe his luck. These moments of marvelling at the materiality of the work we do come up often in Stevie’s chatter. The value of what we collect, both monetarily and personally never ceases to amaze him. In our conversations I uncovered yet another side to the mischief and joy of this work; the same kind of wonder that comes with opening presents on Christmas morning. You’re always surprised by what shows up at the back of supermarkets, what’s deemed unfit for sale, and what the capitalistic system has decided to class as waste for the day.

Interview day

The height of the summer heat has started to fade by the time we finally sit down together for a recorded interview. Stevie’s hair has changed to a vibrant orange, but his smile is still firmly set in place, and the fine lines in the corners of his eyes deepen as he spots my

car and waves cheerily. As soon as I spot him outside his recommended bakery venue, I notice he seems to be carrying what looks like a bird cage. On closer inspection it's a selection of succulents contained by the thin metal bars; a trailing chain of green hearts cascades out one side, straining to meet the pavement.

"I helped a lady out with a bit of gardening just down the road from here this morning and when I was done, she asked if I'd like a few of these! Then she told me to just take the whole cage to make them easy to carry. Awesome eh!"

Stevie beams at me and sets the succulents down on the tiled floor to keep a watchful eye on us for the rest of our conversation. We leave them only briefly to stare up at the menu daubed in bright new chalkboard paint above the counter. He's initially clearly a little hesitant to make any requests, until I remind him some caffeine and a snack is the least I can offer in repayment for his time and experiences. Another 'awesome' and a grin later and coffees and a generous pile of potato wedges are on their way.

Food rescue introductions

"Ok Stevie! First off, do you remember when you first got involved at the food rescue?"

"It must have been just a couple of months before the first Covid-19 lockdown we had, so I guess right at the beginning of 2020. I started there... just started working and then there was a lockdown, and it was like, 'Nope, you can't work anymore'. It was quite upsetting cause it sort of felt like 'Yay, I have something to do' and then I'm stuck at home. It wasn't fun. It felt like that first lockdown lasted about a year I reckon. I know really it was only a few months, but it did feel so good to come back afterwards. I think I just signed up to help as many days as I could after that."

I often see Stevie's name splashed across the weekly volunteering roster, picking up shifts whenever he's able. Often, he'll stay behind at the depot to see if anyone needs any extra help, content to lend a hand sorting groceries and mopping floors.

"How did you first hear about it all?"

“Um, it was a neighbour who I was talking to when we were struggling a bit with food costs who mentioned that there was a local church that does food drives. I was waiting for food and I see one of our trucks dropping off Kai! The next few weeks I saw the same worker driving the truck, with different people helping, and one day she didn’t have anyone with her, so I asked if I could help. Afterwards I asked if I could properly volunteer, and she took my number. Then that was it! I’ve been helping out since then! It was the right place, right time, you know?”

He leans back, stretching his arms out in front of him before scooping a dollop of sour cream onto a crisp potato and letting it cool.

“I love it, it’s so fun, and getting to volunteer there is amazing. Seeing the impact it makes is so awesome, knowing that you’re able to help people actually be able to eat is... It’s huge. Especially because I know what it’s like to struggle, when I grew up, it was just basically mum and us two kids, and that was difficult, really difficult. It’s even worse now I think, with all the prices going up. So yeah, having somewhere like the food rescue is amazing cause there’s somewhere people are able to go and know that there’s food security. Knowing that they have something to eat for dinner that night, you know, that makes such a big difference.”

A solemn expression crosses his face, something I haven’t seen often, as his eyebrows knit into a frown.

“I remember what it was like to not have food, and sometimes we got bullied for that at school even. Stupid things: not having the right shoes, having an old uniform, not having snacks, it really wears a kid down. And like, I often couldn’t focus on class ‘cause I was hungry, it just makes that much difference. Knowing that there’s kids like me that can’t concentrate, or they’re being punished, or they’re just falling through the cracks, it’s heart-breaking. I don’t want anyone else to go through that.”

For Stevie this personal experience of hardship, both in childhood and off and on in his present, is truly at the core of what has brought him to this voluntary role. Being able to provide for others and to be able to create a different experience to his own is a strong motivator.

A life of service

Volunteering has been a big part of Stevie's life for a long time, and he's talked to me in passing before about the different odd jobs he's had and the organisations he's helped out with. I ask him to run me through them again and a smile lights up his face, reminiscing on a lot of captured memories.

"I've done volunteering work with SPCA, animal shelters, I've done after school programmes... rubbish collection days, cleaning up local parks and everything. I've also been on the radio talking about the community centre that I've volunteered at as well, which was pretty cool! Yeah, I was raised to do volunteer work as a really positive thing to do. Mum always got us involved in a lot of youth groups and everything, which got us involved in just little things like helping old ladies with gardening, you know? Volunteering like that... it encourages you to get out into the community and meet people but also, it just feels really nice to be able to give. You're not necessarily getting any monetary value back or anything, but it's more than that... it just feels good! It's the gratitude of knowing that people genuinely care and are thankful. I suppose I was raised to believe that giving is such a positive thing, because what you receive back is so much more."

He takes a deep breath, cradling his coffee in his hands and flexing one thumb against the rim of the mug, collecting excess cocoa powder. One thoughtful sip later he looks back up at me:

"I really think that like, I could be homeless, completely poor, whatever... but if I volunteered, I'd be completely happy. Cause it's just knowing that people know who you are and they're like 'Oh, it's you!'. They see you in a positive light because you're able to give them something, which is really nice."

Being seen

Visibility and a sense of being seen is a big deal for Stevie, who is proudly part of the LGBTQ community. His brightly coloured hair, combined regularly with rainbow striped shoes and a backpack covered in metallic stars are a joyful celebration of his own identity. From the snippets of his personal story he's shared with me, this pride has been something carefully cultivated over the last few years, and getting to this point hasn't always been an easy journey. Being able to be authentically himself in public spaces is something that has helped him a lot with his sense of identity.

"I'm happy to be visible because it gives others, not only hope but also a sense of like, 'oh, ok, this is cool, it's ok'. I'm very visibly queer, very visibly out and ME and while I'm volunteering I feel like I won't be judged for doing this because I'm different. I notice people seeing me around more, recognising me more, and I think the way that they're thinking about people like me is changing. They're not looking at me as this weird person, they're seeing me as good, as helping and I love that, it's awesome."

He picks at a corner of his paper serviette on the table, twisting it a little between his fingers, working out how to explain his full experience.

"Honestly though, it's a very strange feeling 'cause I'm used to working behind the scenes, like, I'm not used to people seeing my face and knowing who I am. It's strange, but it's also very rewarding. Sometimes, if I'm having a bad day, I'll go out for a walk and I'll see kids that I know go to food pantries and they'll see me and wave, it's the cutest thing. Being seen like that, it's a warm fuzzy feeling like getting a hug from someone you care about. There's just this positivity around it and it feels very genuine, like there's a genuine care and respect from people"

Stevie leans forward across the Formica table and looks squarely into my eyes:

"Something personal is when you're struggling in the dark you don't see how close you are to a light. If there are others struggling and one person turns on a light, you

all suddenly see how bright it is. I think that's what I take away from it, is knowing that I am one person, but I am helping huge amounts of people. I may not have much, but if I can give, and if other people see that and THEY give, then eventually we'll have enough."

Organisational impact

I've been interested in how particular people see the impact of the food rescue in different ways, and whether they most engage with the environmental purpose, the sense of social good, or in a way that's more personal. It's clear that the community mission hits close to home for Stevie, but to make sure I'm not missing anything, I still query how he thinks about the ecological side of our work.

"Oh, when I think about all the food waste, the amount that we get? it's huge, and knowing that that's NOT going in landfills and not going straight into waste is amazing. Seeing all that plastic that gets recycled, seeing all the 'quote unquote rubbish' just get taken and actually used; it's all really great!"

It's clearly something he feels proud to contribute to, but it's evident that the level of passion isn't quite the same when he talks about this compared to the smiles on children's faces, or the knowledge that a family has access to good food for their table. I decide to dig a little deeper into how he sees the organisation as a part of the community.

"I think that I've noticed more people getting involved with it, it's helping break down that barrier that people have for asking for help. Like, online now there's more people offering extra food, or even asking for it if they're having a hard time. It's changed the atmosphere, especially where I live which isn't the best area, so I see poverty first-hand pretty often. I think it even helps lessen crime! Honestly, anything that helps with how desperate poverty can feel, it'll be good for everyone involved, cause desperate people do desperate things. If you can help stop that desperation, then it makes a massive change."

There's a quality to his voice when talks about these changes and what he's noticed in his own community that contains a lot of emotion. He's in his element when he can speak about the people around him and those that he cares about. He gestures across the road to the depot itself:

"You know, it's crazy to think 'Oh yeah, I'll just go and volunteer' and then you end up meeting people and learning their lives and you end up, not entangled, but you end up... like a whole community soup, so to speak. You end up in that soup and then it's just this huge, amazing community of people and then knowing we're helping and changing things... it's so vibrant, it's incredible."

How change happens

The topic of how change occurs, and who creates it is a thread that weaves in and out of our interview. I find myself sometimes slipping into a more binary frame of thinking when I try to categorise my participants' thoughts around where responsibility lies. There's a part of me that wants to be able to neatly separate two lines of thought: either we need systemic change or change on an individual, personal level. As I listen back to Stevie's thoughts, I realise how poorly this way of thinking is serving me. Stevie wavers somewhere in between, seeing issues from both sides and moulding his own more malleable worldview into a shape he prefers.

Sometimes he is clearly critical of the way our current food system is structured, especially in terms of what supermarkets classify as waste:

"You know during the lockdowns when you'd go into the supermarket and you'd see the shelves are completely bare? But here we are out the back carrying three, four, five trolley loads of food! Why is that not being given out by the supermarkets? Even if some of those loaves of bread they try and sell for \$5 or \$6, if they just made them a bit cheaper surely they'd throw less of them away? I assume there's more reasons and it's all a bit too political and all that..."

He often refers to things being too political, or not wanting to get involved in the politics of it all. Maybe as a way of distancing himself from the situation or a way of dismissing the elements that make very little practical sense to him.

“It still surprises me when we get a lot of expensive stuff, like venison or duck or fancy chocolates. Like, the value of the stuff that just would otherwise get thrown away, it’s huge. Sometimes it almost feels like this food is made just to be thrown away, it really feels like that some days. How is that right? I guess that’s just how it works in capitalism.”

Stevie doesn’t often swear, but the way he stresses the word capitalism makes it feel like it’s intended as an expletive. Even more so when he follows it by pretending to spit on the bakery floor. He looks up at me seriously before his grim facade breaks and he lets out a peal of laughter which I can’t help but join him in.

“Seriously though, I can’t wait for the day that the food rescue isn’t needed anymore because everything is just self-sufficient. That would be amazing. If I can’t work here anymore because there’s no need for it, that’ll be the best thing. But what do I know? I’m just an idiot with hopes and dreams.”

His self-deprecating nature begins to fall away later in our interview as he talks more about his feelings on a particular passion of his: gardening. In discussion around food security, individualised production of food comes up often in different contexts; for Stevie, it’s here that I particularly notice his diversion from purely seeing food security as a systemic or structural issue.

“In an absolutely perfect world, everyone would have their own vege patch, everyone would have their own fruit trees, every block would have a different set of trees so they could constantly be swapping. You could have people who could do specific skills and trade and barter, sort of going back to medieval times... but hopefully without the plague...”

We both stop for a small, somewhat sardonic chuckle at this, recognising our current position in the Covid-19 pandemic. He goes on to describe what he gets out of his connection to self-sufficiency through cultivation.

“I think I must have thousands of seeds now, and I’ve even been able to trade those for other things sometimes. I really do think everyone should be able to grow something for themselves. I know people complain about space, but even if you’ve got a bucket, or a space on the front porch, even a pot in the bathroom or something! You can grow something anywhere if you try; just get a box, throw in some lawn clippings and leave it, it can be so easy.”

He gives a small shrug. Gardening is something that feels like second nature to him; an activity and a purpose that he sees as something important but overwhelmingly simple.

“It’s something you can DO as well, you know, something to be an active part of it all. I remember my Grandma saying to me: ‘Gardening is a legal protest’, and it’s like, such a big middle finger to the system. I think taking some action is really important, even more than what we’ve talked about, about awareness. Like, pretend there’s a boulder in the middle of the road blocking the path. One option is to sit and talk about the boulder...”

“Now we’re all very aware of the boulder”

“Exactly, we’ll be really, really aware of the boulder. but at the end of the day, we still won’t have actually moved it out of the way.”

Forming identities

As I talked with Stevie about his own experiences with hardship and food insecurity, I gained more of a sense of his drive and purpose that fuels his enthusiasm for the work. From a young age he has been instilled with the idea that to give back is to be a good member of the community, and he has carried this through into his adulthood.

His discussions about his own identity as part of the queer community also show how much it means for him to be seen as visibly doing good work. He wants to be a trusted role model and feels responsible for the way that others see him in the world. I believe this sense of personal responsibility transfers to the way that he discusses actions like gardening; a way of being self-reliant and taking matters into your own hands.

This rebellious streak and the way that he speaks about capitalism and working to fight the waste of the food system remind me of the conversation with Rob, the first driver I went on a run with, and his ideas of being a 'Robin Hood of the food world'. Stevie's own ideas about barter systems and being able to give and take outside of the capitalist framework mean that he is more than happy to take food home from the rescue when it is offered and loves to be able to share this with his partner and his neighbours when possible.

In conclusion, we see the threads of mischief and joy throughout Stevie's story and experiences. He has worked hard to cultivate an identity that allows him to be the person to 'turn on a light' when others are struggling in darkness. He prefers not to associate with a particular political framing, but sees himself as an individual creating something positive in his own community and even in his own family. Sometimes this is sneaking in some extra ribbons to surprise his partner with chocolate, at other times it's his tongue-in-cheek attitude to how he spits out the word 'capitalism'.

As I initially stated, his attitudes to visibility put him in a less explicit space of concealed kindness, but the outcome remains the same thanks to the organisation's outward mission of environmentalism. He has had his own experiences of severe food insecurity, especially as a child, and so recognises the shame that came from others noticing his lack of food as well as the internalised shame at being unable to focus during school. It is clear he does not want that shame to continue, but he also sees an element of personal responsibility at play in his suggestions that everyone should be trying to grow their own food.

The notion that people should take personal responsibility comes through most clearly in the next story from Graeme, but, like Stevie, this way of thinking is concealed from the recipients of food charity. This allows any personal bias or stigmatising views of the volunteers to continue to be concealed from recipients, reducing any potential for shame.

Graeme

I spent a lot of time looking through the transcripts of my interview with Graeme, trying to make sense of his views through the lens of my concepts. I had spent so much time with him over the two years of volunteering, but he still felt like an outlier in comparison with my other participants.

His sense of social being is connected to a strong sense of self-control, individual responsibility, and a degree of patriotism. Some of these ideas echo the conversation I had with Mark and Janice, but without so much critique of the existing systemic challenges. In some matters the views he holds can be seen as mirroring some of the stigmatising attitudes that challenge recipients of food charity, and yet he still shows up for this work, week after week, year after year. Once again, the organisation's ability to conceal kindness and create distance between volunteers and recipients allows for the good work of the organisation to continue.

Without a need

I've written earlier of Graeme and the relationship we forged over months of a Thursday morning routine. His fitness and eagerness to engage with his community despite his increasing age, his habits and his pride in his family. After so long in a comfort zone of regular work, it felt almost stranger to ask him for a more structured interview than it did the people I had seen less of; it broke the mould of our usual interactions.

We arrive back at the food rescue depot one Thursday morning and find Amber and Julie crinkling their noses in consternation at a leaning tower of small jam jars, part of a recent delivery from a connected food rescue network in Auckland. Most often these deliveries provide a much-appreciated boost to pantry staples like flour, sugar, even toilet paper, but a few lately have been more difficult to distribute. Amber had recently asked if I

could think of any use for approximately 180 large bottles of English mustard. Another time I had arrived to find an entire pallet of boxes of individual 11g portion packets of tartare sauce.

“Morning Clare! Hi Graeme! Would either of you like some jam? The label says it’s *premium* even!”

I chuckle a little as Amber holds out one of the jars to Graeme, underlining the premium sticker on the front with her index finger.

“Oh, no, no it’s fine, Eliza insists it all stays for the community where it’s needed you know. There’ll be a good home for it, and we don’t have a need”

I’ve spent enough time with him now to know this is a deeply embedded feeling for him, and from what he’s told me, his wife Eliza’s inclinations are the same. There’s a sense of not wanting to take when it’s not needed, even in situations like this, where Amber’s barely veiled subtext is to please, please take some of the damn jam.

Good character

We pack away our crates, sweep out the back of the truck and wipe down the steering wheel and door handles with disinfectant wipes. The smell of synthetic pine clings to my jacket as we gather up our belongings. We’ve decided to head just down the road to a small café to conduct our interview. There’s a crispness to the air outside and we walk through drifts of orange-brown leaves on our route. The café itself is open and bright, with only a few contented coffee conversations floating around the front veranda. I offer Graeme a herbal tea, as I know he frequently fasts until later in the afternoon as part of a health regimen, but he insists he’s fine with a glass of water. I order myself a coffee, partly so as not to impose on the café too much, but largely so I can ensure I’ll have something to do with my hands.

“So, Graeme, I know you’ve been volunteering here for a while, how did it all start?”

“I’ve been trying to remember exactly, and to remember how I heard about it in the first place. It would be POSSIBLY because I was involved in neighbourhood support

and it was a flow on from there, or I read something in the newspaper? I can remember the first get together I went to though, it must be about 6 or so years ago, there was a group of I would think six, seven or eight people all gathered round a table talking about it and then we got invited to join up! I'm not even sure if there wasn't a sort of interview process to make sure that people present were of good enough character to keep... to be able to get involved. But that was certainly the start of it as far as I was concerned"

"Were you involved in neighbourhood support for long?"

"I would have been involved in that for oh, 20 years? Maybe longer? In our old neighbourhood before we moved into the retirement village. Mainly I think it was to protect each other's property and keep an eye out for any baddies. It was a bit different to the more positive side that the food rescue has gone to. Oh, I mean, neighbours were very helpful to each other, they were all on little acreages and very, very friendly to each other. If anybody had any issues, they would certainly be jumping into the breach. But people did not live on each other's doorsteps then, so just a different environment."

Graeme has his own firmly set moral compass, his judgement calls based on what feels like a distinct separation between good and bad. The current pinnacle of bad character that he references often is Vladimir Putin, as the situation in Ukraine escalates on a weekly basis. While the neighbourhood baddies he refers to are almost certainly not actively committing war crimes, the way in which he speaks seems to lump anyone of 'bad character' together.

Bad decisions

As we speak about the purpose of the organisation itself, Graeme speaks of his surprise at realising how great the need was for food in our local communities:

"Well, I think the organisation does a wonderful job, picking up the surplus which would otherwise potentially go to waste, and having it available for people who haven't got enough to eat. That is something that flabbergasts me, in that I thought

that New Zealand was such a comfortable, financially evenly spread, country. Not totally even, but without anybody being totally hard-up. That there is actually a need for that, to have that made available... I find that quite hard to follow.”

He shakes his head a little, his egalitarian vision of New Zealand has clearly been shaken a little by the work he does at the food rescue. His long career as an accountant would likely have kept him sheltered from much personal experience of financial precarity, and certainly his descriptions of his life have been one of true stability. Graeme looks away to the opposite wall, looking something close to a little sheepish, before looking back at me with a very small shrug. He seems to be gauging my opinion before continuing.

“As I say, I just find it a shame that there is a *need*. I’m not sure to what extent that need could not be at least partly overcome by getting people to lead a slightly different lifestyle. Maybe getting them more educated in relation to their budgeting, their planning, probably relationships and the things that some of them might get up to. If they spend more time in the pub than they do... doing things which would enable them to feed the family better... oh I don’t know. I haven’t studied it, but I have a suspicion that there’s an element of that in the system as well. I don’t know how much you can do about that without re-educating people. The thing to do I think is to get at them at a very young age and that probably means capturing them in primary school and educating them regarding how they might lead their lives and budget their finances and that sort of thing. This is something that I have got a little bit of a bug in my bonnet about. They could change the education system just a little bit and probably introduce a few subjects which are more useful to people in the long run than even history and geography and those sorts of things.”

I put aside the small pang in my social scientist heart at the dismissal of these disciplines and nod along as he continues to muse on the practical skills that he believes could help the situation. His belief is that many of the issues of poverty could be eliminated if people just made better choices. While he acknowledges some of this would be easier with better access to education, he still places himself in the position of judgement as to what ‘good education’ and ‘good choices’ entail. I find it intensely interesting that someone who holds this belief that food insecurity is largely a problem of the individual still regularly and eagerly continues to participate in voluntary labour to alleviate it. This sense that those experiencing

food insecurity should make 'better choices' is something that is internalised for many recipients of food charity. However, due to the behind-the-scenes nature of the organisation and the messaging around environmental change that it promotes, Graeme's views can be held without them being passed on to recipients. The work continues, the concealment continues, and Graeme helps this concealment occur, despite his individual opinions and even whether he is aware of the concealment itself.

Happily occupied

"Have there been any other types of volunteering that you've done over the years?"

"Oh, I did do some while we lived in Papua New Guinea of course. When I retired as an accountant we went and had a nice big holiday, we might even have done a cruise at that stage. Then I took up this job in Papua New Guinea for nearly two years. I got involved there in helping people to sort their finances if they got into financial trouble. I'd help sort out how they might get themselves out from that kind of thing, so I did that for a few years."

Graeme smiles at this, reminiscing over what he's told me before were some very happy years living overseas. He's told me about going for runs along the beach, and how kind everyone was while they were there. He takes a few moments while I sip my coffee to tell me about how things have changed since they've moved into their retirement village, occupying their time with a variety of different activities and friend groups. He walks me through a schedule of golf, beach trips, ukulele groups and regular catch ups, pausing to show me a small clip he has saved on his phone of one of his favourite songs to play on the piano accordion.

"And somehow, you've still got some extra hours to fill in with volunteering?"

"We do keep ourselves happily occupied, never an idle moment! But it's a good life, we're very lucky, we keep in good health and at this stage there's every indication that that might well last for a few more years. I'm very happy to be able to be still doing this work. It's good for you this work, it's one small useful thing that that can

be done, and I enjoy that. I enjoy all the people that are involved in it too, they're all motivated, they've all got a great attitude around it, they're all very friendly, and it's a great community I think."

The best country

Graeme is part of a large family and grew up living what could well be viewed as the idealistic 'Kiwi dream'. His parents were market gardeners for much of his childhood and grew fruit and vegetables on a small acreage in what is now a densely populated residential area. He sometimes points out the site if we drive past it on our route, remarking on just how much the city has changed. In comparison to his beliefs on more social issues, he believes that the government should take a larger role in protecting the environment, but still sees the food rescue's environmental mission as a useful one:

"It's wonderful stuff, and definitely does help the environment. It's better having people eat the stuff than having it dumped isn't it! Whether that totally solves all the environment's problems I'm not sure, but it reduces whatever is left over into something of a more manageable level. Now, I have said for a long time, if we could stop relying on dairy as much, convert the country into a horticultural base, we could solve some of our bigger problems."

He and his wife Eliza have been avid supporters of a plant-based diet for the last several years. Along with his fasting practices, this has been largely for health reasons, but he has commented on the environmental benefits before now as well. As we begin to wrap up our interview, I ask Graeme whether he has any final thoughts about volunteering at the organisation. He leans back in his chair, folding his arms as he does before making a statement he feels is important, and smiles:

"I do enjoy it, I think it's a credit to the country. It's totally consistent with what I think is just the flavour of the whole country, it's got that attitude overall. You get bad elements and it's such a shame that they hit the news and you sort of say 'What the hell are they doing', but overall, the country is just absolutely top-class. As far as

just about everything is concerned. The best country in the world. We've got it made here; I think we're extremely lucky. You could live to a ripe old age here!"

A grin spreads across his face as he gestures to himself. We both laugh and I push my coffee cup to one side. Later, as we walk back through the weak sunshine, he tells me he hopes he's said at least one thing that might be helpful.

In conclusion the theme of the augmentation of social being is clear in Graeme's story. His own attitudes of self-restraint, clear in the way he refuses to take surplus food from the depot, and even in turning down a herbal tea during our conversation, is a way of producing an embodied form of the individual responsibility he sees as deeply important.

Alongside this emphasis on personal responsibility is a view that as citizens we are all responsible for upholding the values of the country. This patriotism led him to describe how it 'flabbergasts' him that there is a need for food charity in Aotearoa. The fact that this bewilderment was shared by Mark and Janice in their conversation suggests there is a common thread among older volunteers who struggle to make sense of the gap between what the country *should be like* and how it currently is.

Instead of Graeme acting consciously to conceal a gifting relationship from the recipients of food charity, the organisation instead helps to conceal his attitudes from recipients. The outcome remains the same, highlighting how concealment works at a number of different levels.

While I do not think that Graeme himself would recognize or accept 'mischief' as a part of his work in the organisation he still finds joy in the work. His ability to be 'happily occupied' in his retirement, and his pride in doing good work to help the country live up to the standards he holds it to, still connect to the feeling of joy held by all my participants.

Like Graeme, my last participant, John, does not appear to be explicitly aware of the concealment the organisation practices.

John:

John was one of my participants for whom finding his motivation wasn't a problem in the slightest, but finding common themes with my other participants was a little more of a challenge, even once I had identified my theme of concealed kindness.

He is highly religiously motivated, and the social being he is augmenting in his work includes his sense of connection with God. His view of gifting and charity appears to be one of generalised reciprocity rather than one with a sense of exchange or balance. He believes strongly that if you spread kindness and 'blessings' then those blessings will come back to you. His sense of reciprocity is so generalised that it does not allow for the creation of any reciprocal debt or shame in situations where this reciprocity cannot be repaid.

Morning Blessings:

I met John after a few months of volunteering; the changing pattern of rosters means that sometimes the team members can feel like ships passing in the night. I've been trying to pick up extra shifts when people are away so I can get a chance to put a few more faces to names on the weekly emails. He's a tall man, with wide shoulders that carry the weight of a large camouflage print backpack. He often adjusts his cap, sweeping a broad hand across his shaved head as he chats to me about his exploits at the local gym; he has a particular fondness for Zumba classes.

When he first jumps into the passenger seat of the truck on our first morning driving together, before I can start the engine, he requests a pause for a Karakia. I fold my hands in my lap, close my eyes, and wait for him to begin:

"What a beautiful, glorious morning the Lord Jesus has blessed us with to start off our new day today. Hallelujah thank you and praise you Jesus. Mōrena to you Clare, I hope you are well, full of joy, peace and happiness. Lord, let us return safely and

bless our community with the Kai we collect. Lord, please watch over our drive today, this is the first time I have gone out with Clare, and I don't know what to expect. Āmene."

I inadvertently blink my eyes open as he requests safe passage from my driving and suppress a nervous giggle as the bluntness takes me by surprise. John nods solemnly to me and I turn the key in the ignition.

Getting to the point

After one more volunteering shift with John, I ask if he would be interested in participating in an interview for my research. He's taken an interest in how I've described it to him on our drives and talks to me it in almost reverent terms about it being an important purpose for me. In the few hours we've spent together on the road I've adjusted somewhat to his manner, and this situation is no exception from his calm matter-of-fact attitude.

"I don't have a lot of time, especially on my days off. But I can answer a couple of questions right now if you want. I just have to be at the church by noon to practice with the worship band."

I decide to take what I can get, and while I ask whether he would like to go across the road to one of the local cafes, he gestures to the table at the back of the depot and suggests we just talk here without wasting time going anywhere else. There's no sense of him being unkind or even dismissive in how he speaks, purely a feeling of efficiency. He sometimes speaks in lists, describing his schedule as a long to-do list, checking off each item with a contented smile as he envisions a full day well spent.

A good and faithful servant

"Why did you first start volunteering, John?"

“Well, my journey as a volunteer evolved from being a good and faithful servant to the Lord, to serve and make a difference. That could be at church, my marae or wherever there is a need where I could bless and use my body, mind, and spirit to help in anyway without seeking any reward for myself. Just to serve with a spirit of excellence in all that I do to glorify God. I heard about the food rescue just by word of mouth from some of the people at church talking about the good that it was doing for the community. That would have been about 5 years ago. I would volunteer at the Gospel Faith Ministry nearby on a Monday until about 12pm, then head over here for 1pm to help sort food and set up for the free store we ran then.”

His memory of timing and the structure of his days even 5 years ago impresses me, his sense of service and duty seems inextricably linked with how many hours are committed in a day. He works hard and takes care of himself physically and spiritually, and clearly expects the same of others. This becomes even clearer as he describes some of his early work at the organisation:

“The setup in the free store for the public was in a U shape as you walked in. There were 5 different food stations with a volunteer wearing a Hi Vis and a name tag manning each station. It was set up that way to maintain a good and safe environment and to ensure the public took the required amount of that particular food. We would be rationing the food, preventing over-indulging and a lack of food for the late comers to the free store. Also, we had a person outside the front entrance of the store to coordinate the people into 2 lines and send them in 2 at a time. It meant we could ensure a good and safe vibe, prevent people pushing in and make sure people respected one another while standing in line.”

There is a connection for him between restriction and sacrifice and becoming a good person. In his opinion to be a good servant or to be a good member of the community takes work.

Earning your blessings

On our second drive together, John ran me through how his day had played out the day before. It started with an early morning church service where he helped as an assistant for the Pastor, then practice with the worship band he regularly sings with. He then helped prepare lunch for the church meeting happening that day, and with cleaning dishes afterwards. He rushed over to his Zumba class afterwards:

“I was running a bit late with everything going on, and I forgot my water bottle, I thought ‘Oh no’ this is going to be hard work. But the instructor blessed me with a brand-new bottle she had with her. I knew I had to pass those blessings on, and later that afternoon I met a woman outside the service station who needed some Kai. It all made sense, so I blessed her with a pie; these things all connect you know.”

He has a clear picture of how performing good deeds will ensure he himself has a good life. This seems to extend not only to acts of social good, but individual well-being as well. Later, during the same trip we pass a man jogging along the road as we approach a bridge across the river.

“Ah, good man! Good man! It’s so good to see people being active. Look after your body and it will look after you, I always say that!”

Seeing an impact

Much as I’ve previously asked other members of the team how they see the organisation’s impact; I pose a similar question to John. Given how he structures his own answers, and his daily life, I offer the question as more of a list than an open-ended invitation.

“Can you tell me how you see the organisation effecting the environment, the community, and yourself?”

“Well, to think that all that good kai would have just been going in the rubbish, stacking up the landfill. Praise God for the supermarkets and for everyone at the food rescue for making sure people can eat it and enjoy it instead! It’s much better for the environment in people’s kitchens than in the bin.”

He pauses for a moment, collecting his thoughts for the next item on the list:

“I’ve watched the community at the food rescue change a bit since I’ve been here. When we stopped running the free store and started delivering to community centres, that changed things. It’s grown so much, I see it like an octopus extending its tentacles, reaching further and further out to new boundaries. Every time knowing there’s more people walking out of these places with food and seeing some of those people with smiles on their faces, it makes it all worthwhile.”

John smiles, scratching his forehead with the brim of his cap as he leans back in the white plastic chair.

“And for me... I’m just glad to be an ambassador of goodwill and kindness in Jesus’ name. I give thanks to the Lord every day for putting me in the right place where I can be used for his kingdom to bless others.”

He slaps his hands against the steel table, and stands up, smiling down at me.

“Right, hopefully that all helps, send me an email if you’ve got any questions! God bless!”

In conclusion, John’s story shows us yet another facet of concealed kindness. His view of reciprocity is so generalised that there is no expectation of direct exchange in his work ethic. ‘Passing the blessings on’ is his motivation in life and in work, and volunteering for the food

rescue organisation is simply another way of achieving these blessings and being an 'ambassador of goodwill and kindness'.

His social being is augmented through the work he does, and through the way he controls his own behaviours to be the best he can be in Jesus' name: the methodical way he remembers his past actions as a timetable, and the way he views efficiency as paramount, with no time for frivolities such as visiting cafés.

In John's story the one concept I have not been able to tie down has been mischief, but I feel that I would almost be letting down his sense of duty if I were to try and unearth it. It is not that he does not find joy in his work, but this is far from his primary motivation or critical to his experience of volunteering.

Food rescue from the inside: Reluctant endings

I've used the term reluctant here as it has felt like more of a pause or a hiatus than a proper end to my journey with the food rescue team. During 2023 I was pregnant with my son and while I was able to carry on my regular morning shift for the first several months, I eventually decided I would have to pick a date to slow down and stop moving boxes in and out of the truck.

The last few weeks of being on the run, Graeme was away overseas with his wife visiting family and old friends. My husband James signed up to help for this last stretch, partly I'm sure to make sure I wasn't lifting too many heavy crates of potatoes. Having him along for the ride brought back how new the whole experience had felt two years ago. He felt the same sense of scale about the amounts of bread we regularly collected, though relished the opportunity to cash in a pizza bread breakfast if we came across a whole bag full.

As well as reaffirming how much I had learned about the route and the nuances of the deliveries and pick-ups over the time I had been volunteering I had the less comforting experience of discovering the physicality of the work all over again as my body changed around me. Lifting, bending and getting in and out of the truck at 7 months pregnant made me feel very much like I had the first couple of weeks of volunteering; out of practice and achy.

During the last shift both James and I found ourselves a little overwhelmed with the kindness and generosity of the people I had come to know over the years. At every community centre there were hugs and well-wishes, and from one team – who had always been full of laughs and banter about my reluctant truck reversing – a little collection of baby gifts: muslins, bibs and tiny socks.

We pulled into the depot for the last time, and after I had hung up the hi-vis vests and the truck keys, Julie, Amber and Hine disappeared briefly into the chiller, bringing out a large box.

“We got a huge delivery of cheese the other day, there’s a few blocks in here, and a bunch of pies for the freezer, you’ll want them in those first few weeks when you don’t want to think about cooking!”

Amber grins at us as she hands the box over

“Oh, there’s some sausages too in there, just freeze ‘em too if you’ve got space, I always found things like that good!”

This from Hine as she pats my arm, she’s had 10 children herself and knows exactly what she’s talking about.

“Promise you’ll let us know as soon as he arrives eh! I want photos!”

Julie gives me a huge hug, then as we start to pack the box of goodies into the car, I see her run to the back of the depot

“I almost forgot! There were extras of these this last Easter! I’ve been holding on to one for yous”

She tucks an enormous soft stuffed rabbit into the backseat of our car.

We wave out of both windows as we head off into the late morning sunshine. I feel incredibly grateful to this team of people, for giving me their time, their thoughts, and so much of their kindness. I hope I’ll be back again soon.

Conclusion:

The concepts of concealed kindness, the augmentation of social being, alongside mischief and joy enabled me to make sense of the stories I was told by my participants. As I have described, some of these stories had connections that were clear to me from the outset, and others took a lot more time to uncover.

Concealed kindness can be seen on an explicitly recognised individual level in the stories of Julie, Mark and Janice. These three describe how they see the environmental purpose of the organisation as a way of engaging and connecting with food charity recipients, or even as a

mischievous front to hide the real purpose of feeding the community. For the others - Stevie, Graeme and John - the concealment is achieved by the organisation as a whole. For Stevie, it allows him to explore his own visibility and connection with community without there needing to be a reciprocated gifting relationship involved. In the case of Graeme, it allows for food charity to exist in this de-stigmatised way without his own attitudes regarding individual responsibility finding their way to the recipients.

The accumulation of social being takes a number of forms in the lives of my participants. Julie is highly aware of how her own fulfilment and satisfaction has been affected negatively by the introduction of economic capital accumulation and now finds other ways of re-creating the buzz of volunteering while also teaching her children the value of giving back. Mark and Janice also see their social being as intergenerational, in their case both passed down to them by their parents and continued through their own family and the ways they have brought up their own children. They see a life of service as something that is 'part of them' and simply the way they do things. For Stevie, accumulating social being is highly connected to his own queer identity and wanting to be a visible member of this community by actively participating in creating social good. He identifies his own experiences with food insecurity as shaping his childhood and sees his purpose to help others going through similar experiences. Graeme's social being is deeply connected to individual responsibility, for both his own actions and how he sees these actions impacting the social cohesion of the country he holds dear. Finally, John's social being is a deeply engrained religious connection to God that motivated him to be an ambassador for good, in his work and in the way he spreads blessings to his community.

Mischief and joy is an undercurrent in almost all these stories, and one I have experienced in my own volunteering journey. Sometimes it's a clear sense of sticking it to the system, like in Stevie's stories. At other times it's a gleeful sense of providing joy for others, like Julie's intentions to sneak coffee onto the desks of supermarket managers. Mark and Janice find joy in spending more time in each other's company, as well as their cheeky descriptions of being 'nosy neighbours' from their viewpoints in the truck. For my own part I recognised the excitement of finding out what goodies we would collect from supermarkets each day, the wonder of discovering what felt like a hidden food network as I discovered the scale of food

waste, and the simple happiness of shared laughs, shared food, and shared purpose, sometimes even a shared stuffed rabbit.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

I began my research at a food rescue organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2021. I wished to experience anthropological research within my own community, working and speaking with those who were motivated to create better worlds for themselves and others.

My initial assumptions were that as the organisation depicted itself largely as an environmental one, my participants would be split between those who believed in the environmental purpose, and those who were mainly motivated by the ability to do social good. I was interested in whether people thought they were creating large-scale change, or whether they believed there was a systemic issue in our food system. These assumptions fell flat, especially as every time I brought up the environmental purpose of the organisation I got very short responses, acknowledging it briefly, then quickly moving back to the community they were connecting with. My participants were humble, hard-working people, from a wide variety of life experiences, with very little in common to connect them. I was left feeling more than a little adrift, with two different mysteries to solve: What were my participants getting out of this? Why wasn't anyone talking about the environment?

Methods:

I would not have gained the insights I did into the everyday work of this volunteer labour without participating regularly in the work myself. I gained a true insight into the value of participant observation through this work and the ways in which we gain not only a better academic understanding, but a better embodied knowing of our field and our participants' lives. Practicing self-reflection in my auto-ethnographic work allowed me to further process the ways in which the work changed me over time; my body adjusted physically to the heavy lifting and early mornings, and I became mentally aware of the ease of juggling food quantities and drop-off points in my head. It also made clearer for me where my own interpretations of the organisation's concealment sat; I was proud to be a volunteer and

when speaking to others about the work I found myself primarily continuing the 'party line' of how much food we saved from landfill and how many kilos of bread we collected every day, not wanting to let the real motivations slip. I loved the feeling akin to unwrapping Christmas presents when we arrived to find mystery boxes of goodies stacked on shelves, excited to find out what treasures we could deliver that day. While I initially intended on conducting semi-formal interviews with all my participants, I'm glad I could be flexible and intertwine this with the go-along method of conversational interviewing that allowed me, in particular, my conversation with Julie in between her busy schedule. The combination of these methods allowed for a deep connection with the work that I will carry with me for years to come.

Literature:

The existing literature on food charity and volunteering did not entirely answer the two questions I became concerned with. Food charity research has largely focussed on food banks rather than food rescue organisations. A lot of this research has provided insights into the recipient experience, especially the shame and stigma that is felt when attempting to access food charity and overcome the societal and governmental barriers that are placed in their way. While some of this research has included the insights of volunteers, there is little that brings together the discussion of recipient stigma with the experience of volunteers. My contribution is to address these two gaps and relate them to each other: to focus on food rescue and how it differs from the existing foodbank model, and what volunteers' contributions are to the work and the potential reduction of recipient stigma.

Theory:

The theories often used to make sense of voluntary labour include Mauss' (1925/1990) work on the gift and reciprocal exchange, and Bourdieu's theories of capital. While these go some way to explaining the social benefits that volunteers can find through their labour, I found they did not fully align with what my participants were telling me.

Therefore, I found two theorists whose work became the backbone of my analysis: Clara Han's work on concealed kindness, mischief and joy, and Ghassan Hage's extension of Bourdieu's theories through his concept of the augmentation of social being. These concepts helped me to untangle the often-hidden threads that were woven into a complex tapestry that was more about the concealment of something than an explicit presence.

Han's concept of concealed kindness helped me to make sense of the contradiction between the explicitly stated environmental purpose of the organisation, and participants' actual focus on getting food to people who needed it. This worked through giving recipients an environmental purpose: they were not receiving only charity but rescuing food. This reversed the flow of reciprocal exchange as no demand for the return of a gift was created. This meant that recipients were under no obligation to return the gift, therefore reducing stigma and shame. This was why the environmental aspect of change was not at the forefront of my interviews and conversations.

Hage's concept of the augmentation of social being gave me a way to understand the motivations for my participants to volunteer, as a more traditionally Bourdieuan analysis of capital accumulation just didn't seem to fit. Being able to distinguish social being as something we *are* instead of something we *have* helped me to unpick how my participants saw their place in the social world. In volunteering they were working to create fulfilling and satisfying lives for themselves in their many different ways.

Han's notions of mischief and joy helped me make sense of why these volunteers keep coming back week after week to do work that is basically gruelling physical labour. What I found in amongst the early starts, fighting the weather and lifting heavy weights, was that there are smiles, there are laughs, there are small everyday rebellions that bring the group together.

Together, the ideas of the augmentation of social being and mischief and joy helped me solve my second mystery; what were my participants getting out of being here week after week.

Final thoughts:

My research and my own time spent volunteering in the food rescue have reinforced my belief in the value of studying the anthropology of the good. I hope that my research and identification of the act of concealment within charity can add to the existing body of work on this subject. Robbins' call to action for this anthropology of the good is as follows:

"The point of developing this new kind of anthropology would not be to displace the anthropology of suffering, which will continue for the foreseeable future to address problems we need to face. It would be to help realize in a distinctively anthropological way the promise suffering slot anthropology always at least implicitly makes: that there must be better ways to live than the ones it documents" (Robbins, 2013, p. 458)

There are many challenges in our current geo-political climate that mean that there is never a shortage of suffering or injustice to study. However, even in the face of this, there are many people doing good in small, everyday ways. Sometimes, like in the organisation I studied, this good is multi-faceted, being able to achieve good things while also allowing people to maintain their sense of dignity in a world that wants to take this away from them. In summary, the volunteers I worked with are making better lives for others, while also making better lives for themselves.

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