Cafe Connect Episode 12

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Chris Croly [00:00:10] Well, hello, ladies and gentlemen, and thanks very much for joining us on the latest Café Connect. So this weeks' Café Connect is entitled "The Right to Food". I'm Chris Croly, I am the manager of Public Engagement with the Research Unit at the University of Aberdeen and indeed, this podcast was brought to you by the University of Aberdeen. And the whole point of Café Connect is that we connect you with the latest research and the researchers that actually undertaken the research itself and it will explore that research and look at the different ways in which it should impact on everyday life in this country. So, today I am joined by my colleague Dr John Mackenzie.

Dr Chris Croly [00:00:47] So John works at the University of Aberdeen and in particular, John works at the world-famous Rowett Institute. But John maybe you'd like to introduce yourself and the Rowett Institute.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:01:01] Yeah, I'm Dr John Mackenzie and I'm a researcher with the Rowett Institute within the University of Aberdeen and our institute, as Chris said, is a world-famous school that looks within the life sciences department and it focuses on the links between nutrition and health. And in some ways I am a bit unusual within that group of staff there, because most of them come from biological science or nutrition science backgrounds. My background is in sociology, so I look at the social aspects of food and eating and have been involved with a number of different projects, including understanding eating patterns, food businesses in Scotland and what I'm going to be talking about today, which is food insecurity in Scotland.

Dr Chris Croly [00:01:59] OK, yeah. John, actually, there's just something before we go about food insecurity. It's a really interesting point that your background is in sociology, that you're really a social scientist and that makes you slightly unusual. But I think that's one of the real strengths of both research at the Sociology at the University of Aberdeen and, you know, the health research that is undertaken in Aberdeen. And it just gets really broad depth and range, and the fact that it draws in so many different academic disciplines is really only to the good. But yes, so, as you see the podcast is entitled Right to Food, and it's discussing the ideas of food insecurity, as I suppose is a good place to start. What is a definition of food insecurity?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:02:46] Well, there's been a variety of terms that's been used to refer to the phenomena such as food poverty. But more recently, there has been a consensus that the better term is food insecurity and the term has been adopted by the Scottish government. And a popular definition that's referred to is provided by Professor Liz Stewart, which just refers to the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food that is useful for health in socially acceptable ways, or the worry that you will be unable to do so.

Dr Chris Croly [00:03:27] OK, that's interesting. I suppose there's a couple of points here. It's the inability to consume an adequate amount and the worry that you may not be able to do so. So it's not just the impact of not having enough food, but it's the worry associated with it. It can be recognised as a whole set of fears and relationships that people would have with services and with other people, indeed. But also, I see there that you mention the Scottish government and of course, the Scottish government, I think, absolutely can be

key to this. So really, the piece of research that you've done, John, is associated with the recent Scottish MSPs proposal to establish a right to food in Scotland.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:04:13] Yeah, I mean, it's not connected with that or it didn't start out as connected to that. This is a piece of research that was initially funded by the Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Service division of the Scottish government.

Dr Chris Croly [00:04:35] But if you allow me to say, John, it's a bit of a mouthful.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:04:40] But that started in 2016 and it's part of a wider strategic programme of research. The bill by the MSP is much more recent than that. It's just that our findings are coming out at much and such the same time as this bill was being consulted on. So, this was about proposed by the MSP, Elaine Smith that explored whether we can establish a right to food in Scotland.

Dr Chris Croly [00:05:15] OK, so the research underpins it, it goes back a little bit further in time with the Scottish government collecting data on food insecurity in the country and it'll go longer term.

Dr Chris Croly [00:05:27] So what sort of insights into levels of food insecurity in Scotland do we have?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:05:32] OK. Well, again, prior to this research project, the Scottish government started to include questions about food insecurity in the Scottish Health Survey, and they started doing that in 2017 and carried on in 2018. Unlike many other pieces of research in the high-income countries, there's you know, the results are showing that there are rising levels of food insecurity within Scotland. So, yeah, that piece of research does some work towards, you know, like allowing us to look at patterns in increasing levels. But it doesn't really tell us what it's like to be food insecure. So that is where our research and our marking line comes into it. This is a qualitative research project in which we've carried out in-depth interviews to explore what it's like to be food insecure and people's day-to-day lives.

Dr Chris Croly [00:06:43] So, I guess that's trying to get it to the heart of the lived experience, not the statistics.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:06:49] Yes. Yes, exactly.

Dr Chris Croly [00:06:52] OK, so how did you go about recruiting people for this?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:06:56] OK, we've used two methods of recruitment. We really wanted in this study to get beyond. Foodbank says, most research into food insecurity has been recruited directly through food banks, and there was evidence to suggest that there's a large number of people who don't use food banks who are food insecure. So, the first recruitment was through the Scottish Health Survey. So we got a list of people who answered yes to at least one of the three questions that were included about food insecurity and who agreed to be contacted to take part in further research. So we recruited through that and managed to recruit 23 participants, but that wasn't really enough. So we also had to complement that by recruiting through food banks and we contacted various food banks within Scotland and their staff helped us recruit some of their users. So that was a further 33 people that we got through that way.

Dr Chris Croly [00:08:07] So, what did the interviews themselves explore?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:08:11] Well, explored, first of all, just the demographic characteristics of the people. So their age, their background, education level, etc. But with regard to food insecurity, it looked at circumstances around their first experience of food insecurity and things that made it worse, things that made it better, the impact it had on people, the sports that they felt people require to get out of food insecurity and the various coping mechanisms that they drew on. And one aspect of this study that I forgot to mention as it's longitudinal. So we are interviewing the same people three times over a year and a half for every six months before going back to the same people, because, again, that's something that the statistical data doesn't tell you about how people experience that over time.

Dr Chris Croly [00:09:11] Now, that's a single snapshot, isn't it? And you will try to take it so you decide that longer term findings?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:09:15] Well, that was basically what the interviews covered. And yeah, I could tell you a little bit about the key findings.

Dr Chris Croly [00:09:25] Please do, yes.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:09:26] One of the interesting findings is that the participants recruited through that the Scottish Health Survey seemed to come from a different demographic than those recruited through food banks. So they were more likely to be employed, they were more likely to be homeowners, they were more likely to be younger and recruited through the health survey than through food banks. Although we have to acknowledge that are samples too small for us to make kind of, you know, claims, it was just their characteristics were different and tended to experience, report experiences of food insecurity that were slightly different. So those who were recruited through the food banks tended to report higher levels of food insecurity than those recruited through the Scottish Health Survey.

Dr Chris Croly [00:10:31] So can I just, there may not be a readily available answer to this, but those who experience food insecurity but don't use food banks, I mean, is it the case that they would be relying on their families, their immediate support networks?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:10:49] The answer to that would be some definitely do. So quite a number of participants that we spoke to said they didn't feel that they feel it necessary to access food banks, that they had other ways. They felt that their food insecurity was borderline and some of them just didn't know whether they were entitled to use them or to access them. So there is a variety of reasons. But yeah, those recruited through this health survey tended to have at times a wider network of family to draw on than those who were recruited through the food banks and those recruited through food banks, often their family members, were in a similar situation. Yeah. So they couldn't really help. So yeah. Yeah.

Dr Chris Croly [00:11:45] I guess you touched on that, you know, you said borderline food insecurity. So I suppose that means that there are, as with everything, different degrees of food insecurity that you're dealing with.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:11:53] Yeah, there's a standard measures of mild food insecurity, which relate to worrying about running out of food. Moderate food insecurity relates to

actually cutting back portions, reducing the quantity and quality of food, and then severe food insecurity, which relates to going without food for the whole day or more.

Dr Chris Croly [00:12:28] Right.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:12:30] And sometimes this can be for a variety of reasons. That's most often to do with money, economic, you know, economic resources to go and buy food. But there were a few participants who couldn't get out to shops because of childcare problems and things like that at short notice. So they would go a whole day without eating because they couldn't access food physically hour rather than they didn't have the economic resources to buy it. But largely it's an economic issue. Yeah, that's true.

Dr Chris Croly [00:13:07] Ultimately, of course, these are really only works and it is hard to understand what that actually means for someone in their life to see severe food insecurity. And I mean, I appreciate that this is research that's been ongoing for a number of years, but just to sort through a bit of a curveball. And as the pandemic comes to life as a whole, I mean, I guess the experience of this under COVID-19 has probably, I just didn't, you know, what do you think? Do you think it probably has made it worse, I guess?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:13:38] It's a very unusual case. There are two different answers. But certainly, because I had been interviewing during the lockdown and somewhere at the beginning initial stages before the full lockdown and somewhere during the full lockdown and somewhere once had lifted a bit. There was various responses and limited response because some people hadn't had an experience. But from what I've learned so far, there are some people who said that their food insecurity improved or the level decreased because they were getting food delivered to them by organisations. But there were those who felt more socially isolated. And one of the things that we're beginning to get a hint of from my research is that social isolation seems to intensify feelings of food insecurity. So though people might have physical access to food, they feel more worried and stressed out by the worry that they already know /that it'll all run out when they're more socially isolated. So I'll be, we'll get more about that in the next set of interviews because people will have a longer time to reflect on the effects of COVID. But it was interesting that some people felt that it was better and some people felt it was worse.

Dr Chris Croly [00:15:04] I suppose that's the point, isn't it? It's a complex world, isn't it? Things never work uniformly for all the people, they always work slightly differently and there are different sets of circumstances for different people, a little bit different circumstances, different people, different cultures. And there's a whole other range of issues, I guess, that we haven't touched, been their cultural issues or in foods, and that is an impact on food insecurity.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:15:31] Yeah, I mean, one of the definitions of food insecurity talks about culturally acceptable food, for example, so they've got, it could be the case that there could be a bag of insects that you could eat and would be highly nutritious and good for you. But within our culture we don't, by and large, eat insects. So we don't define that as food and most people would struggle to eat it regardless of whether they were hungry or not. But this could also be mud, so some religions define certain things as not food. And yeah, there are cultural aspects to the food insecurity itself, but also on ways of coping with that. So having cooking skills and budgeting skills can be a way of negotiating or mitigating the effects of food insecurity. But not everybody has those skills so readily available and the other cultural aspect comes in the form of shame and embarrassment about being food insecure and accessing food aid. So, there was one chap I spoke to who

took six weeks before he could actually bring himself to enter the food bank because he just felt so ashamed. He'd spent all his life, as a relatively well-off oil worker and then found himself signing on because of ill health. And had to wait 12 weeks before he got any kind of payment. So he was really struggling but struggled with going on to the food bank.

Dr Chris Croly [00:17:21] So, no, I mean, because you alluded to Universal Credit, I'm sure at some point we'll come back to this conversation. Those issues of shame and embarrassment that it's difficult to talk about because I don't know how I would feel in the same circumstances, I imagine I probably would. And this is one of these big tensions in society, isn't it? You know, on the one hand, I feel as though I want to live in a society where there is a safety net, where we are good and kind to each other and that, we shouldn't use those words. But at least where there is provision for people, but by another tool, we are told you need to be self-reliant. You know that you're a provider. You do this on the other end. So there are those tensions here and people will feel drawn between them. And yet again to see for us, these are just words, it's not the delivered experience, really isn't. And you also mentioned the oil worker earlier, again it threw a curveball into the conversation. We are in Aberdeen and Aberdeen is an unusual place. And oil, gas, the energy sector as a whole, actually, effectively in Aberdeen was relatively untroubled, I think, by the 2008 financial crisis. But, you know, much more recently with the collapse and price of a barrel of oil a few years ago, and then, you know, really that there was a sea change and in Aberdeen and its economy, that really sort of led to something. So does your research principally at Aberdeen or does it draw more widely in Scotland?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:18:46] Oh no, it's from all over Scotland. So, you know the Urban Rural classification of Six-fold, we've got some from every category. I mean, not only those of preponderance and the large urban areas, but we have spoken to people from the Shetlands, from Orkney, from Argyll, all throughout Scotland.

Dr Chris Croly [00:19:11] Of course, there'll be a preponderance of the urban areas. You know, I can't be certain for the population level, it's probably not entirely accurate, but certainly, a lot of people do live in the urban areas of Scotland. So,I guess moving on from the cultural issues around food insecurity, the title of this podcast is Right to Food. You mentioned the MSP, Elaine Smith's proposal to the Scottish government. So what broadly does a right to food mean?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:19:43] OK, well, when one misconception about this idea of the right to food is it's not about providing free food for everybody in Scotland.

Dr Chris Croly [00:19:53] So, it's not a super school meal scheme or something.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:19:56] No, no. It's about establishing a strategic framework of policies aimed at trying to ensure that people do have access to acceptable quantities of healthy food. And they are never really going to be 100 percent guaranteed because people will have problems at the individual level that means that they still cannot or choose not to access that. So it's about trying to get in-principle policies that will allow people to achieve that and also about monitoring how effective these policies are and about changing or modifying them so that there are more effective.

Dr Chris Croly [00:20:49] OK, so based on this, you're assuming there's a willingness on the part of the Scottish government to really make this available for every Scottish citizen.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:20:58] Yeah, I mean, that could be seen as a good food nation bill, which sets out that there should be ready access to healthy and nutritious food for all. And the National Health Services Position statement aiming to eradicate, to reduce food insecurity, but also on the fact that the Scottish government included the questions on food insecurity in the Scottish Health Survey, and that they have funded this research and held a consultation on the possibility of a right to food. So I think the Scottish government has already demonstrated a willingness and a desire to set up this policy framework

Dr Chris Croly [00:21:46] So were there other countries that we're following the example of, for example, other countries that have fully explored this?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:21:54] Yeah, there's been some predecessors or some other similar frameworks put in place in Brazil and Finland. One of the things that they've done in Brazil, for example, is to try to give people access to land where they can grow some of their own food. So it's about trying to equip people as best as they can to access food and in socially acceptable ways.

Dr Chris Croly [00:22:30] OK, fair enough. So, how will you actually achieve this? There's going to be an awful lot of barriers really to sort of achieving this ultimately.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:22:44] Yeah. I mean, unfortunately, our studies suggest there is not one policy that could be put in place to establish it, because as I said earlier, there are those who do not use food banks and those who do seem to experience food insecurity differently. So there's a wide set of needs, there need to be provisions for people, the working poor, but also some establishment of a welfare system that doesn't sanction people and leave them without money and the benefits are more quickly accessible. The role of the Universal Credit and the long delay that people experience has shown that they not only experienced food insecurity then but end up in debt that they can't afford to pay. So it takes a long time for them to work out of that.] So yeah, there's a wide array of needs to be met, but there are also geographic differences. Those in rural areas, particularly the most rural areas, often said that the price of food there is so high that it was much more difficult for them to access food and also that they didn't have the same opportunity to shop around in different places. You know, there are social reforms that are required, but also that there are some individual reforms that may be required that could help achieve that. So teaching people how to budget, cook and shop efficiently, could be one way of trying to address the issue at the individual level.

Dr Chris Croly [00:24:35] I guess, you mentioned the individual earlier, what we're almost addressing here is, again, the tension in society between the individual and the state and how far should the state intervene in someone's life or interfere in someone's life. All being in a benevolent way but some people would view this under fear of public resistance, that's potentially because they don't want the state interfering in their life, or because they view it entirely as "This is my responsibility", or there's a view in society that food insecurity is probably a personal problem and should be dealt with at an individual level.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:25:10] OK, yeah. I think you're seeing a similar resistance to that period poverty that was getting put in place. And there is a certain amount of adjustments that could be made at an individual level and for some individuals more than others. But given the prevalence of food insecurity and its increase in high-income countries, it doesn't seem possible that changes in the individual alone could reform the food insecurity that we're looking for. So, I think there is a certain amount of societal reform that would have to be done if there are such issue issues to be addressed. And I think for Scotland, one of the

biggest issues through the years is that although the Scottish government might have the devolved power to enact the Right to Food and its laws, achieving these goals might be at odds with some of the UK-wide policies, such as we've mentioned already, the roll-out of Universal Credit, a lack of support for people on the lower incomes, etc. So it's a very difficult issue to address and I don't think 100% would ever be completely addressed. But I think social reform could take us to a stage where it's more a personal problem rather than a public issue or certainly workers' towards that.

Dr Chris Croly [00:26:56] I think we have to take heart from the fact that the Scottish government as elected is a reflection of the Scottish people, it's a reflection of where Scotland wants to be, where it wants to see itself. So these ideas are a reflection of what's percolating in society as a whole. So, John, I suppose, as we draw towards the end of the fascinating half an hour that has been just really kind of skimming the surface of this. What are the next steps with the research?

Dr John Mackenzie [00:27:27] Right away, college students start the third round of interviews with the same participants, and then that's where we're going to particularly look at the relationship between food insecurity and stress because our feeling is that worrying as a component intensifies the feelings of food insecurity. So how it's felt, there were participants who had limited access to food but didn't really worry about that. Strangely enough, that there were others who were almost completely obsessed, it was just really their central focus. So we're going to be looking at that in the third round. And alongside that, we're also going to be doing a study of holiday food-provisioning programmes for families with school-aged children that be entitled to school meals during the COVID lockdown and see if there are any lessons that can be learnt from that could inform good practice in the future. And really, other than that, it will be a case of writing up papers and doing conferences and just all the usual academic stuff. So that's where we are at the moment.

Dr Chris Croly [00:28:50] Beyond that, it's very hard to believe. You do a lot of public engagement work yourself. And I think I mean, personally, I think that's, you know, the key to this as well as you've talked about this in public, getting it to be out, getting people to think about it and be more aware of it, be more mindful of it, I guess ultimately. And it's good that the research is going forward. And it would be great to have you back to talk about, you know, the next stage in the research as you do it. So what I should actually have said to listeners at the start is that normally, we would drink cafes by, but in days pre-COVID if any memory can stretch to those days and, you know, we would normally encourage Q&A at the end. And it's no different just because we're online here. We really like you. You know, if you have questions for John, please email me and the University at PERU@abdn.ac.uk. And I will certainly pass your questions on each and we'd be delighted to answer them. But John, that's incredibly interesting research, also very sensitive research in its own way. I mean, in particular, the next round I, I don't envy Freeman the questions, you know, have you sort of approach a list, but that's a separate conversation for another day. Thanks very much for your time today. And ladies gentlemen, thanks very much for joining us.

Dr John Mackenzie [00:30:23] Cheers. Thank you.

Voiceover [00:30:27] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.