

A Cookbook Approach to Building Community: Applying a Narrative Lens to Food Work

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Abstract

There has been a push from community food activists to create community food work practices which are more democratic, collective, and connected to social justice goals. As a response to these calls, this research project explore the research questions of “how can a collective narrative approach be applied to community food work programming in order to render this type of programming more inclusive and empowering for participants?” Using a narrative approach to probe this question, this community-based participatory project develops a “food narratives” framework to doing community food work. In-depth interviews, as well as a creative focus group session with community food practitioners served to gain insight into to the work being done on the ground. This research grounds this framework in theories of affect, intersectionality, and critical pedagogy, contending that “food narratives” can be mobilized within community food spaces as a means of exploring identity, creating community, and building resilience

Chapter 1 – A Cookbook Approach to Building Community: Applying a Narrative Lens to Food Work

I. Introduction

Over the past decade, the body of academic literature on “community food work” has grown exponentially. Researchers have become increasingly interested in studying, critically analyzing, and evaluating the community food work practices which practitioners are engaging in across the field. Within this body of work, researchers have repeatedly criticized the field of community food work for relying on neo-liberal “charity” models which shift responsibility onto the ‘individual’, for utilizing top-down planning approaches, and for simply being “too white” (Guthman, 2008; Power, Doherty, Small, Teasdale, & Pickett, 2017; Ramírez, 2015; Slocum, 2006). As a result, there has been a significant push from community food activists to develop community food programming which is more democratic, collective, and directly connected to social justice goals.

II. Research Question and Objectives

As a response to these calls, this research project seeks to explore to the research question of **“how can a collective narrative approach be applied to community food work programming in order to render this type of programming more inclusive and empowering for participants?”** This study is a community-based participatory project, utilizing a narrative approach as a means of probing this research question.

The objective of this research project was to explore what has been done in both the field of community food work, as well as within the realm of collective narrative practice, in order to draw out the connections between these two worlds of practice. Ultimately, this research project has sought to begin to develop a narrative framework that can be integrated into community

cooking group programs for marginalized groups (i.e.: newcomers, low-income populations, youth, women) as a means of exploring identity, creating community, and building resilience.

III. Significance of Research

It is important to highlight why “community food work” and “collective narrative practice” are two areas of practice which are compatible with one another. Community Food Centres Canada, (CFCC) the leader in community food work in Canada, lists “decreasing social isolation and increasing connections,” and “building skills, health, hope, and community” as two of the objectives of their programming (CFCC, 2018). In this way, the goals of community food work share several of those of collective narrative practice, particularly with this focus on creating connections between the lives of participants and building community. In many ways, it is likely that existing community food programs already utilize principles of collective narrative practice; however, this relationship has yet to be drawn out within the literature. This research seeks to contribute to the body of literature which exists on community food work by highlighting the possibilities for a more explicit connection to be made between these two realms of practice in order to work toward shared goals.

This research project is also timely; it is relevant to the current political and cultural climate in Canada, as the Canadian federal government recently began to develop a “National Food Policy.” Once this policy has been developed, there will be more of a focus on flowing funding to NFP partners across the country who deliver community food programs and services (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2018). With this influx of funding opportunities, we need to ensure that there are frameworks in place which can be utilized to implement programs which better fit the needs of participants.

IV. Situating the Research Project

As previously stated, this research project is seeking to contribute to the body of academic literature on community food work, aiming to fill an existing gap within this collection of work. Through the application of a narrative approach to community food work practice, this project is seeking to answer the calls from researchers in community food work literature for the decolonization of practice, a move to collective ways of thinking, and fleshing out connections between food issues and broader social systems (Levkoe, 2006; Power et al., 2017; Slocum, 2006).

Many authors within this field have pointed to the symbolic potential of ‘food’ within community food work as a signifier of identity, as well as a builder of community, and a connector to larger social issues (Delind, 2006; Figueroa, 2015; Levkoe, 2011; Power et al., 2017). However, there have not yet been any research studies conducted which explore how storytelling, or narrative, practices can be integrated into community food programming as a means of supporting these potential roles which food can play in these settings. This project serves to concretize the connections which already exist between these two realms of practice, but to further develop these connections in more explicit ways, grounding them in theory.

By taking up and mobilizing the folk culture metaphors and processes of collective documentation developed by collective narrative practitioners, this research has attempted to integrate these principles of the narrative approach into community food work programming in order to attempt to respond to the gaps in practice which have been identified by researchers. Although this research situates itself more prominently in the realm of “community food work,” it is also seeking to continue the development of the “Recipes for Life” projects of Natalie

Rudland-Wood (2012) and Meizi Tan (2017). However, this project differs from these initiatives in the way that it is shifting from introducing food into therapeutic practice to integrating therapeutic techniques into community food work.

Through the synthesis of these two realms of practice, this research aims to deepen the approach we use when doing community food work – to develop a more comprehensive community food work practice. This practice, informed by the shared principles and goals of these ‘worlds’, is one which deliberately focuses on cultivating collective learning and connections; it is also one which is more explicitly connected to notions of social justice within the realm of our food systems.

V. Situating Myself – Considering the Researcher’s Position

As a researcher, I believe it is important to speak to my own investment in this research project, and what it is exactly which motivated me to take on this study. Food has always been at the very centre of my life in so many ways – my personal life, my social life, and my professional life. Growing up in an ‘transnational’ family, food was always at the centre of stories connecting me to the many places I consider to be “home” – whether those ties were international – Jamaica or China, national – Nova Scotia, or local – Scarborough. Cooking with my grandparents, eating with my cousins, sharing recipes with my friends, all of these food practices have played an influential role in connecting me to the people I love, in bringing the people in my life together – both physically and symbolically.

Because of this intimate relationship with food, I chose to pursue work in the community food work field; for the past several years, I have worked as a community cooking program facilitator for youth in Scarborough. Doing this work has allowed me to further develop my

relationship with food in more meaningful ways, and it is what initially pushed me to begin to think about the research questions at the heart of this project.

Conducting this research has provided me the opportunity to synthesize my theoretical knowledge with the lived experience and practical skills I have, driven at the core by my deep, personal connection to food itself. As both a researcher and a practitioner, I am passionate about this project because not only am I invested in producing theoretical knowledge that can ‘live’ within the realm of academia, but because I am committed to developing and transforming my own practice within communities.

VI. Chapter Breakdown

The first section of this research paper provides a review of the existing literature relevant to the research questions, first exploring the overarching themes in community food work research, and then drawing out principles from collective narrative practice work, ultimately arguing that these two distinct bodies of literature share a number of significant themes.

The following chapter is an overview of the methodological design of this study. In this chapter, I first frame the research project in terms of paradigm, as well as theoretical underpinnings. In terms of methodology, a qualitative approach was taken, utilizing data collection methods of both individual interviews and a collaborative focus groups session – this section of the paper rationalizes the use of this methodological approach. This chapter also details the various ethical considerations, sampling techniques, and methods of data analysis employed during research.

Chapter four presents a discussion of the results of this research project; this chapter is divided into several sections, based on the themes which emerged from the data collection

process. These overarching themes, guided by the initial research questions, include the symbolic power of food in storytelling, food as a connector in community spaces, and the notion of ‘empowerment’ in community food work. This final section includes a discussion of these themes in relation to the broader realm of community food work, drawing out the implications for practice which these insights have, as well as recommendations for future research in this area.

Chapter 2 – Applying a Narrative Approach to Community Food Work: Drawing Connections

I. Introduction

For the purposes of this research project, this review will take into consideration journal articles and other scholarly sources from two distinct bodies of literature. The proposed project involves applying a narrative lens or “theory” to the practical work being done in the field of community food work; in this way, this research sits at the intersection of these two scholarly “worlds.”

Thus, firstly, the work which has been undertaken within the framework of “community food work” studies will be reviewed and analyzed for insights into the directions of this work.

Secondly, literature in the realm of “collective narrative practice” research will be scanned and explored to highlight the fundamental principles and practices which are at the core of this approach.

By looking critically at “what we already know” within these two bodies of work, it will be possible to begin to construct the foundational knowledge necessary to undertake this research project. Furthermore, this will help to draw attention to the areas of study within these domains which have remained, until now, unexplored or neglected; to explore the commonalities and shared goals of these two “worlds;” and to begin to forge connections between these bodies of literature which will ultimately guide future research opportunities within these fields.

II. Exploring Overarching Themes from Community Food Work Literature

i. Problematizing “alternative food initiative” narratives

Within the body of literature on community food work, researchers repeatedly draw readers’ attention to the distinction between narratives of “alternative food initiatives” and “community food security” discourses.

On this topic, Bradley and Herrera (2016) posit that alternative food initiatives “have a moral dimensions that make the movement problematic” (p.101). These authors argue that narratives associated with “alternative food initiatives” are structured using a form of binary morality which effectively renders the movements which promote these narratives patronizing and inaccessible – particularly to marginalized folks (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006). These ‘moral meanings’ include the valorization of notions of ‘buying local’, ‘alternatives’, and ‘organic food’ (Holloway & Kneafsey, 2000, p.294). Through promoting this type of individual action – more specifically, action directly related to purchasing power – as the ‘solution’ to an inequitable food system, the alternative food initiative narrative inherently positions itself as only truly accessible to those located in social positions of class privilege.

Furthermore, researchers in the field have argued that this type of narrative is not only problematic in terms of class privilege, but also as it relates to issues of race and colonization (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006). The discourses present within alternative food initiative movements insidiously “promote white cultural histories” through encouraging people to “reconnect with nature,” “work the land,” and “get your hands dirty” (Guthman, 2008, p.436). This approach to addressing the issues within our food systems does not take into account the experiences of black folks with enslavement and forced labour, or of Indigenous peoples and the

ongoing colonial projects which have displaced them from their traditional lands (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006). In this way, authors demonstrate that this type of narrative which focuses on ‘alternatives’ ultimately extols “the virtues of community and self-sufficiency in a manner that obscures the racist, classist and gendered features of the food system” (Slocum, 2006, p.330).

Researchers in this field look instead to discourses of ‘community food security’ and of ‘food justice’ or ‘food sovereignty’ (Levkoe, 2006; Power et al., 2017; Wakefield et al., 2012). This narrative focuses on supporting movements in the realm of community food work which engage “a broader perspective that includes sustainability and community building, as well as democratic decision-making” (Levkoe, 2006, p.91). In this way, people engaging in community food work are encouraged to mobilize “community food security” discourse as a means of reorienting the work and research being done in this field in a way which takes into account power dynamics, focuses on community, and adopts bottom-up approaches. These principles and practices of community food security discourse will be further explored in the subsequent sections of this literature review.

ii. Typologies of work done by food organizations

There are several different ways of categorizing the types of programs and services offered, as well as work done by, community food organizations working on the ground. Researchers within the community food work field mobilize different understandings and ways of organizing this type of information – ranging from ‘macro’ to ‘micro’ – based on the purpose of the study.

Horst, Ringstrom, Tyman, Ward, Werner, & Born tackle this issue of typology on a macro-level by sorting food organizations based on overall “approach.” These authors posit that

there are three types of approaches which community food organizations, or ‘hubs,’ utilize, with each approach being ‘oriented’ toward a certain target audience (Horst et al., 2016). The three approaches listed by Horst (2016) are ‘instrumental,’ which is a producer-targeted lens; ‘humanistic,’ which focuses on people as individuals; and ‘phenomenological,’ which is a community-oriented approach (p.211). In this way, the macro ‘approach’ which an organization espouses effectively informs and guides the delivery of specific services and programming.

In his many works on community food organizations, Levkoe (2011) mobilizes a more meso-level typology of community food work. The author deals with community food organizations in terms of their “initiatives.” In this way, Levkoe’s system of classification is based on examining the goals or missions which underlie a community food organization’s programming in order to make distinctions between the work being done. He identifies four types of initiatives as dominating the community food work sphere – social justice initiatives, ecological sustainability initiatives, community health initiatives, and democracy-enhancing initiatives (Levkoe, 2011, p.689). It is important to note that the author also indicates that the most effective community food organizations integrate all four typologies in order to apply a “whole food system approach” (Levkoe, 2011, p.695).

Finally, we can look to Tarasuk and Davis (1996) for a micro-level analysis of community food work programming; these researchers utilize a system of classification which sorts programs and services into two distinct categories. For Tarasuk and Davis (1996), “food assistance programs” are the programs and services delivered by community food organizations which work based on a charity model of providing food – this includes programs such as food banks or emergency meal assistance (p.73). The second category is “self-help and community

development programming;” the work which falls under this label are “participatory, community-based programs” such as collective kitchens, cooking programmes, community gardens, targeted nutrition education programs (Tarasuk & Davis, 1996, p.73; Wakefield, Fleming, Klassen, & Skinner, 2012, p.443). In the subsequent sections, we will explore the ways in which researchers and practitioners in the field understand, evaluate, and have called for change to these different typologies and approaches to community food work.

iii. Shifting away from “charity” model

It is widely acknowledged within the body of literature available on community food work that in order to create programs and services which truly respond to issues of food insecurity, organizations must effectively shift away from the ‘charity model’ discussed in the previous section (Tarasuk & Davis, 1996).

There is consensus within the research on this topic that this form of programming is inherently tied to notions of shame and a lack of dignity for program participants and service users (Figueroa, 2015; Power et al., 2017; Van der Horst, Pascucci, & Bol, 2015). Power and colleagues (2017) argue that the food security projects employing these charity-based strategies implicitly reinforce binary ways of thinking about and working with participants and service users, bringing up moral distinctions such as “the proud” and “the shamed” (p.247). Van der Horst and colleagues (2015) research bolsters this understanding of the feeling of ‘shame’ as being detrimental to participants and service users’ experiences with community food programming, arguing that “shame is often considered one of the more destructive inflictions of poverty in affluent welfare societies” (p.1509).

Furthermore, authors argues that the charity-based approach to community food work is rooted in an understanding which conceptualizes of food solely as a commodity (Power et al., 2017, p.239). The ideas which are at the core of these food assistance programs view service users and participants simply as consumers, rather than as citizens or community members (Power et al., 2017, p.239). Researchers in this realm repeatedly stress the importance of rejecting this capitalist conceptualization of our food systems; as Levkoe (2006) writes, “people’s relationship with food goes far beyond commodification” (p. 90).

Talking about food using this commodified language serves to reinforce the problematic neo-liberal notion of individual choices and actions which the alternative food narrative promotes, as well as to further exacerbate feelings of shame associated with these programs (Slocum & Cadieux, 2015). Van der Horst et al. (2015) expand on this inherent connection between neoliberalism, capitalism, and a lack of dignified access to food, writing that “the ideal of the independent person is strong in our culture... it makes the experience of needing to ask for help with a very basic need, the need for food, exceptionally degrading” (p.1516). In this way, there is a very clear call to action from researchers within this field of study to reject these outdated forms of intervention, and to instead adopt more comprehensive and anti-oppressive approaches to doing community food work.

iv. Applying a social justice lens to community food work

One of the most resonant themes which emerged from this review of literature is the importance of integrating critical ways of thinking about social justice into the community food work being done on the ground, as well as into the research which seeks to explore issues of food insecurity.

This is directly connected to the call for a shift away from charity-based models of food intervention.

Present within the literature produced over the past decade or so, there is a contemporary push from researchers, as well as practitioners and advocates, working in this field to draw attention to the structural inequalities which underlie the food systems we interact with on a daily basis (Wakefield et al., 2012; Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006; Levkoe, 2003). Researchers have highlighted the failures of the work currently being done to address food insecurity, with Slocum (2006) explicitly drawing attention to the lack of awareness about or “closedness” to “the ways that racism works in the food system and the community food movement” (p.330). In order to respond to and tackle these issues in ways which are meaningful and effective, authors argue that we must do the work of actively acknowledging that our food system has a historical basis in “forced labour and stolen land” (Slocum & Cadieux, 2015, p.32).

Community food work practice which does not grapple with race or class, authors argue, serves to create a space which is built solely for white bodies in positions of power; here, the connection can be made to our previous discussion of the dominance of ‘white cultural histories’ in alternative food initiative discourse (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006; Wakefield et al., 2012). This lack of acknowledgment of these structural issues also speaks directly to why community food work based on charity models do not work, as they simply provide temporary solutions to problems which are deeply-rooted in our society’s systems and structures (Power et al., 2017). Ultimately, Slocum (2006) argues, “without attention to social relations, community food and similar movements will remain limited in scope no matter how welcoming or inclusive they aim to be” (p.343).

Thus, we are presented with a new direction in the literature for a shift within community food work practice. Researchers call for a new commitment from community food organizations, practitioners, and researchers to acknowledge, address, and respond to the structural inequalities which underlie our food systems. Wakefield et al. (2012) highlight that we have already begun to witness the emergence of this shift, with newer organizations in the field “grappling more actively with how structural poverty and racism factor into their food-related work” (p.436). Authors argue that those of us who engage in community food work – whether it is practical work on the ground or research within academia – must reposition our practice, moving from focusing on food in terms of localization and individual behavioural change to understanding how the food system rests on patriarchal, capitalist, and racist relations (Slocum & Cadieux, 2015, p.31). As Slocum and Cadieux (2015) write, “organizing for socially just food systems coalesces around the need to address inequity and trauma” (p.32). In this way, community food work practice must begin to base the modes of intervention used on the lived experiences of the people who participate in programming. Effectively, this is a call to completely transform the models we use to organize around food to be rooted in anti-oppressive, intersectional philosophy; as Levkoe (2003) highlights in his study of the Stop Community Food Centre, community food organizations should adopt social justice issues in practice in order to create spaces which are conducive to community development and advocacy (p.130).

v. From the individual to the collective

With the call for an understanding of food which moves beyond commodification, and one which examines the underlying social structures, we can begin to understand practices of food –

buying, preparing, cooking, and eating – as holding a range of different meanings which are connected to our identities and communities.

Power et al. (2017) explore this depth of the symbolic meanings of food in their discussion of food citizenship, writing that “beyond the recognition that food is far more than a commodity – even with full accounting of ecological, nutritional and social justice concerns – is the experience of food in the social and cultural expression of individuals, families and communities” (p.241). Delind (2006) also speaks to this notion of the “social and cultural” ties which food practices carry, arguing that “How we eat, what we eat, when we eat, with whom we eat, where we eat are clearly a vital part of this instruction. As we have seen, food not only connects bodies to place and to the cultures and soils of place, but it teaches us a great deal about who we are and where we belong.” (p.136). In this way, for these authors, our connections to food and food practices are not only tied to our intimate understandings of self and personal ‘identity’, but also to notions of collective identity, of a sense of home, and of community.

Furthermore, researchers in the field have posited that beyond acting as a symbol of our personal and collective “selves,” our experiences with food also serve to reflect the underlying systemic relations which structure our lives. Figueroa (2015) writes that focusing on food relations in everyday life “helps make explicit the connections between food and other social phenomena” (p.500). Furthermore, the author argues that practitioners and researchers alike should begin to consider “food as a kind of prism through which the underlying relations of society are revealed” (Figueroa, 2015, p.503). In this way, the ways in which we access (or do not access) food, how we prepare or cook it, where and with whom we eat, and what we eat,

serve as conveyors of meaning which reflect a diverse range of “class and cultural subjectivities” (Figueroa, 2015, p.506).

By bringing these symbolic meanings of food and food practices into the foreground of how we practice community food work, researchers are pushing practitioners to redirect the focus of this work on how we can utilize food as a means of forging connections and creating a sense of collectivity. It is an emerging idea within the body of work that it is only through the mobilization of these expressive elements of food that we will be able to create a community food work movement experienced in a “felt, practiced, and committed way” by all those involved (Delind, 2006, p.127).

This new direction in this field signals a contemporary shift from viewing food as located within the ‘private’ sphere into positioning it within “the collective and public dimensions” (Lozano-Cabedo & Gómez-Benito, 2017, p.12). The ‘goal’ of this transformation in phenomenological understanding of food is to engender the possibility of fostering collective subjectivities within community food programming participants and service users (Levkoe, 2011). As Levkoe (2011) writes, this involves “moving beyond individual, market-based solutions towards ones that embed food within meaningful cultural and community relations while improving production of, and access to good, healthy food for all” (p.692). For these authors, utilizing food and food practices as a way of cultivating the self and community “offers a potential to enable participation in creative and innovative forms of collective action through (re)creating individuals as communal subjects” (Levkoe, 2011, p.692).

vi. Reconceptualization of the community food organization as a public space

With this push toward fostering ‘collective identities,’ researchers encourage us to reconsider our conceptualizations of what community food organization spaces, as well as the programs and services offered in those spaces, can and should look like. Horst et al. (2016) posit that we should begin to understand these “food hubs” as “nodes for social interaction” in order to refocus efforts on creating a sense of community and connection (p.210). Levkoe (2006) also reinforces this idea of the community food organization as a space for collective learning, writing that “social interaction [in these spaces] is important for breaking down seclusion and individualism and for building a strong community” (p.96).

This notion of the community food organization as a public gathering space – a place for community – circles back to Horst et al.’s (2016) typologies of food projects, specifically to the ‘phenomenological’ approach which “highlights people’s experiences within the food hub’s physical environment” (p.212). Delind’s (2006) research also reinforces this need for attention to creating a sense of community and place within community food organization spaces, arguing that “we need spaces within which to regularly and freely come together, to talk, to complain, to sweat, to laugh, to oppose and debate, to reflect, and to be awed.” (p.141).

Authors in this field argue that by utilizing the spaces of community food organizations in ways which leverage food as a symbolic tool for connecting people to one another, we will be better equipped to grapple with issues of food security in meaningful and holistic ways. As Levkoe (2006) asserts, “food offers a unique opportunity for learning because it has the power to galvanize people from diverse backgrounds and opinions” (p.90). Reinforcing this argument, Power et al. (2017) offer insight into the effects, as well as the power, of food systems, writing

that “few other systems touch people’s lives in such an intimate way and thereby provide such a strong motivation and opportunity for citizenship” (p.240). In this way, we must take the cue from researchers here as we move forward in this field, ensuring that the programming and services developed by community food work practitioners and service providers mobilizes food and food practices in ways which build strong, diverse communities.

vii. Decolonizing community food work practice

A final theme which emerged from the current body of literature within this field is that of the decolonization of community food work – both in terms of practice and in research. One of the failures in the field which many authors point to in their work is that of an ‘overwhelming whiteness’ in terms of leadership in the field, as well as in academia (Power et al., 2017). This characteristic of the work being done mostly *by* white people *for* or *to* racialized communities certainly hearkens back to our earlier discussion of the promotion of ‘white cultural histories,’ as well as can be historically tied to the roots of social work practice being rooted in white, western charity-based models (Figueroa, 2015; Guthman, 2008; Power et al., 2017).

This “whiteness of staff” also speaks to the level of privilege which informs programming planning and approaches to intervention undertaken within the field, with certain structures of class and racial oppression remaining unaddressed by leaders who do not have lived experience of the inequities embedded within these systems (Slocum, 2006, p.330). This domination of the field by white leadership has led to community food organizations often “adopting colourblind mentalities and essentializing discourses,” as well as “promoting ‘white’ notions of healthful food and bodies” (Power et al., 2017, p.450). As Ramírez (2015) frankly states, “acting from a white epistemology perpetuates existing structures of of power and

privilege within food spaces, for it enables white activists to speak from and to survey and navigate social space from a position of authority” (p.752). Ultimately, this ‘overwhelming whiteness’ within leadership roles in the world of community food work has created a space for practice where the structural inequalities which inform our society’s food systems are being replicated and reinforced.

Thus, as a response to this lack of representation within leadership roles, researchers and practitioners alike have called for democratic participation within the community food work field. As Slocum (2006) writes, “those who experience food insecurity – American Indians, Latinas and African Americans, disproportionate to their numbers in the population, single women heads of households and people working for unlivable wages – tend to be ‘on the table rather than at it’” (p.330). Dismantling the systems in place which privilege white leadership, and shifting these power structures in ways which create more inclusive and accessible forms of organization, are crucial steps which must be taken in order to ensure that we create more effective and responsive programming and forms of intervention in the field (Ramírez, 2015).

In this way, authors are calling for a transformation of the hierarchical power relations which exist within community food organizing in order to integrate a more democratized, feminist, decolonizing system of leadership which amplifies the voices of the people who have lived experiences of the inequalities of our food systems. For example, Bradley and Herrera (2016) speak to this aspect of decolonization through the leadership of racialized and Indigenous folks, writing “decolonizing food justice, we argue, also must take shape and develop from our own perspectives and for our own purposes, and based on our own stories and the theories used

to explain them... we use the phrase ‘our own’ to refer to indigenous peoples, people of colour, allies, and all marginalized and oppressed peoples” (p.105).

Finally, there is a call within the literature to reconsider and re-construct the methods of intervention which are utilized within the community food work field (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Figueroa, 2015). It is not only by including more racialized persons in leadership roles that we can effectively decolonize our practice, but also by transforming the practical approaches to addressing food security issues taken by community food organizations. Currently, as Figueroa (2015) notes, the strategies which dominate the field treat marginalized communities using a ‘deficit lens,’ perceiving these groups and the issues they face as “requiring top-down educational, technocratic, and aid-based solutions that rely on a high level of intervention on the part of outside actors” (p.501). Instead, researchers encourage practitioners to adopt a bottom-up approach – one which is community-oriented and community-led (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Figueroa, 2015). There is consensus within the body of work that it is only by integrating this type of re-focused approach that we will engage in community food work practices which are meaningful, as well as effective in responding to the broader structures and systems of oppression (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Figueroa, 2015).

viii. Methodological insights

In terms of looking at the body of existing literature on community food work, there seems to be several common approaches which inform research methodologies across the board; each of these approaches correspond with the research questions of the study. First, we have case studies which take on a mixed-methods approach to analyzing and evaluating specific community food organizations and programming. These studies often focus on either critically exploring the

programs and/or services of one specific organization – Figueroa (2015), Wakefield et al. (2012), Levkoe (2006) – or conducting comparative analyses of several organizations – Power et al. (2017), Ramirez (2015), Horst et al. (2011) – to draw out trends, successes, or gaps. These research projects are often focused on developing a more in-depth understanding of the methods of, as well as approaches to, program and service delivery which community food organizations utilize.

Another shared methodological approach which emerges from the literature is one which draws primarily on the personal experiences of community food advocates and leaders as a means of developing a dataset. For instance, Bradley and Herrera (2016) reflect on their personal experiences as community food practitioners to gain insight into “possibilities for a more inclusive food justice movement and more just scholarship” (p.97). Welsh and MacRae (1998) also take on this approach, positioning their articles on food citizenship and belonging as a “discussion of central lessons from our experiences” (p.239). In her work on race and food justice, Slocum (2006) critically analyzes her personal experience as a community advocate, also utilizing interviews with her peers, to better understand the notion of white privilege within community food efforts. These studies are often focused on exploring the issues which exist within the realm of community food work practice having to do with inclusivity, diversity, and belonging (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Slocum, 2006; Welsh & MacRae, 1998). Projects which take on this approach acknowledge the value of the lived experience and knowledge which practitioners working in the field have; they draw on this expertise as a means of recommending ways forward to build a more progressive field.

The final methodological approach identified within this body of literature is one which focuses primarily on qualitative research with the service users and program participants of community food organizations. These studies utilize individual interviews, focus groups, and participant observation as methods of data collection. For instance, Van der Horst et al. (2014) present a qualitative research paper which is based on in-depth interviews with receivers of food assistance, as well as observations, and interviews with volunteers in order to “address how food, social status as well as the interactions at the food bank induce emotions in receivers, such as shame, gratitude, and anger” (p.1506). Another study, conducted by Dachner et al. (2009), took on a similar approach – researchers utilized participant observation at a number of community food programs as a means of understanding the disparities between what food organizations provide, and what service users need. The studies which take on this style of methodological approach are often seeking to produce studies which reflect the lived experiences of participants, making space for the people who access these services and programs to make their voices heard.

III. Exploring Overarching Themes from Collective Narrative Practice Literature

i. De-centering the practitioner

A commonly discussed topic which emerges from the body of work on collective narrative practice is one which concerns the position and role of the practitioner – therapist, community workers, or researcher – when engaging in practice in communities (Freedman and Combs, 2009; White, 2003). Authors within this field strongly encourage practitioners to, firstly, take on a stance of ‘not knowing’ when entering into ‘community assignments’ with groups (Freedman and Combs, 2009; White, 2003). Taking a cue from Michael White (2001), one of the founders

of the narrative approach, Freedman and Combs (2009) discuss this position of the practitioner, writing that

Narrative community workers and consultants do not see themselves as in possession of pre-existing solutions or expert schemata for communities or organizations... We do believe that narrative therapy offers skills and experience in how to cooperate and collaborate with the members of communities and organizations in useful ways, but we believe that we are most useful when we are de-centered but influential in our approach (p.349).

In this way, collective narrative practice should position the participants or ‘client’ as the “expert” in the situation – it is their knowledge and lived experience which should ultimately guide and inform the work being done (Freedman and Combs, 2009; White, 2003).

This privileging of the participants’ expertise also speaks to another important theme which emerges in the literature on collective narrative practice – a democratized, feminist-informed, and community-led approach to practice (Godmaire-Duhaime, Bellemare, Caine, & Laul-Sirder, 2018; White, 2003). Authors in this field agree that practitioners should be working *for*, and working *with* communities, rather than working *on* them. As Michael White (2003) writes, one of our commitments as practitioners of narrative therapy in communities, “as for any assignment that is given by those who have the authority to do so, we understand that, in the performance of all tasks associated with any community assignment, we will be responsible to those who invited and contracted us to undertake the assignment – that is, the people of the community” (p.21). In this way, the practitioner is there only to assist, and to facilitate when asked; it is the community members who should be encouraged to take the lead, as they are the

“experts” who can connect with their peers in ways which they understand as relevant to their own experiences. It is widely acknowledged within this body of work that practitioners should always employ “flexible leadership styles,” avoiding rigid methods or structures in order to allow for organic adaptation dependent on the community they are engaging with (Godmaire-Duhaime et al., 2018, p.32).

ii. Re-authoring stories of resilience

One of the core principles which sits at the core of collective narrative practice is the understanding of people’s lives as stories which are multi-voiced and constantly being re-negotiated and re-told. The “self” we are dealing with is not a static, fixed “identity,” but an ever-evolving form of selfhood which is relational in its nature. For practitioners of narrative therapy, people’s lives are conceptualized of as constantly in flux, and thus, inherently ‘fragmented’ and multi-layered. As Michael White (2001) argues, “these identity conclusions exist within the context of a multiplicity – as an outcome of the ongoing social negotiation of these identity conclusions, people’s lives become multi-intentioned” (p. 19). Thus, for collective narrative researchers and practitioners, the ultimate goal of practice is to make clear “how stories give meaning to lives and relationships, privileging some people and relationships and making others invisible” (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p.1034).

The act of re-authoring is brought to the forefront in collective narrative practice as a means of reclaiming personal agency through engaging in shifting or transforming personal narratives about our lives (Combs & Freedman, 2012; White, 2003). This involves re-thinking, re-evaluating, and re-telling stories about our lives in ways which move away from discourses which internalize the problems people face; as Combs and Freedman (2012) write, “we are not

focused on solving problems, but rather on helping people immerse themselves in life stories that offer different possibilities and directions than those offered by the problem stories” (p.1034). Instead of dealing in deficit and defect, re-authoring allows for people to reconstruct their understandings of personal “identity” in positive terms, emphasizing agency, self-determination, and their personal purposes, intentions, hopes, and dreams (White, 2001).

Practitioners in this field argue that it is a revolutionary practice which actively rejects traditional therapeutic models which often focus on pathologizing discourses which prompt feeling of shame or guilt; as Ungar (2005) writes, “terms like resilience, even strengths, empowerment and health, are a counterpoint to notions of disease and disorder that have made us look at people as glasses half empty rather than half full” (p.91). Focusing on this legitimizing power of reauthoring as a practice, Combs and Freedman (2012) argue that engaging in this act brings into play “the power involved in being in the position to decide which stories will be told and retold, and which will not” (p.1034). Thus, in this way, re-authoring is an empowering activity for people to engage in, as it allows for us to rethink and select the stories we tell about ourselves – it is a means for people to ‘take back’ power.

iii. Re-locating “problems” as social issues

The ways in which collective narrative practitioners understand the issues and “problems” which people face is directly connected to the fluid conceptualization of “self” and identity discussed in the previous section. As we come to talk about the “self” in terms of intentional states rather than internal states, we are also pushed to view “problems” in this same way; taking on an externalizing stance, narrative theory principles positions the “problem” as separate from the “person” (Denborough, 2012; White, 2003; White, 2001). As Denborough (2012) writes, “rather

than locating problems within individuals, narrative practices locate personal problems in the realms of culture and history” (p.43). This understanding of the problem as distinct from a person’s self-conceptualization of identity continues the active rejection of traditional models of therapeutic intervention which are based in systems of knowledge that construct individuals as inherently flawed. Combs and Freedman (2012) speak to the strengths of this externalizing approach, writing that “the non-pathologizing stance of externalization offers alternatives to the marginalizing effects of pathology-focused treatment... All narrative work is social justice work in that it always has the intent of countering and undermining the marginalization that can happen in pathology-based approaches to ‘mental health’” (p.1041)

In this ‘re-location’ of the problem, collective narrative practice encourages us to draw broader connections between the problems that a person is experiencing and larger societal structures and systems. As Denborough (2008) writes, one of the underlying principles of collective narrative practice is to “conceive of the person meeting with us as representing a social issue” (p.16). For collective narrative practitioners, contextualizing a person’s problems or issues as located within a wider network of social relations and cultural connections is an important step in engaging in practices which are empowering; this is informed by the notion, as voiced by White (2001), that “our understandings of life and identity are not arrived at in an historical and cultural vacuum.” In this way, we engage in further distancing the problem from the individual; not only is the issue not viewed as an internal ‘flaw’ or ‘defect,’ but it is understood as a product of systems and structures which are inherently inequitable. As Brubaker et al. (2012) argue, “as clients tell their stories, clients may begin to free themselves from internalized oppression and begin to understand how society has oppressed them” (p.127).

iv. Connecting lives

Another principle which underlies collective narrative practice is the act of “enabling the person to join a collective endeavour in addressing, in some local way, this social issue” (Denborough, 2008, p.16). This is intimately linked to the externalizing stance which practitioners of this approach adopt; by moving the ‘problem’ out of the ‘private’ personal world and into the ‘public’ realm of social issues, the problem then inherently takes on a nature which is collective and tied to the lives of other people experiencing the same ‘problem.’ Freedman and Combs (2009) discuss the importance of this notion of the ‘collective’ nature of “collective narrative practice,” arguing that

A key element in any narrative community project is this linking of lives through shared purposes. We look for ways to spread both the news of people’s purposes and their knowledge about how to pursue those purposes. We take responsibility for forging new links among people in which they share the stories of their hard-fought struggles and the knowledge they have gained in those struggles” (p.355).

In this way, collective narrative practitioners seek to encourage and cultivate relationships between members of communities which can foster connections emerging out of shared experiences and collective knowledge (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Denborough, 2012; Godmaire-Duhaime et al., 2018). Ultimately, facilitating the development of these types of relationships serves to “link people who are working to overcome particular kinds of marginalization together so that they do not have the experience of being alone in their struggle” (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p.1053). Through the creation of a sense of togetherness and

community, spaces are created and nurtured in which people can feel as though they “belong,” or included.

Furthermore, researchers in this field posit that this principle of connecting the lives of people to one another fosters the “recognition of a shared reality of oppression and privilege,” which can then be mobilized to address or respond to the broader social issues which impact our daily lives (Godmaire-Duhaime et al., 2018, p.30). In this way, not only does this engender feelings of inclusion or belonging, but also creates a space for resistance, agency, and empowerment. Godmaire-Duhaime et al. (2018) speak to this transformative power of creating community, arguing that “changes can occur by forging connections between individual and collective stories, thereby creating a space for the legitimization of alternative discourses; allowing people to overcome blame, guilt and internalised oppression; and creating distance between individuals and the difficulties they have encountered” (p.34).

v. Folk culture metaphors

There are a number of mechanisms which collective narrative practitioners employ as a means of facilitating conversations which serve to ‘connect lives;’ however, one which a number of researchers in the field return to time and again is that of “folk culture metaphors” (Denborough, 2010; Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006; Rudland-Wood, 2012; Tan, 2017). These metaphors bring into practice local meanings, preferences and ways of understanding life which are relevant to the community being engaged (White, 2001). There are several projects which have been undertaken in the field which incorporate this folk culture mechanism including the Tree of Life, the Team of Life, the Kite of Life, and Recipes for Life (Denborough, 2010; Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006; Rudland-Wood, 2012; Tan, 2017).

In each of these projects, practitioners mobilized narratives which were interwoven with “particular values linked to the person’s [or community’s] heritage, family, culture, and community. In this way, people’s identities become multi-voiced again; the voices of parents and grandparents (or other significant persons) are evoked in the present, making them feel less isolated and deprived” (Jacobs, 2018, p.283). In this way, folk culture metaphors provide practitioners with an entryway into talking about and exploring a ‘problem’ in linguistic terms which are personally resonant and culturally relevant to the community members they are engaging with.

Particularly relevant to the current research project is the “Recipes for Life” model created by Rudland-Wood (2012), later further developed by Tan (2017). These projects utilize food metaphors as a tool for opening up group conversations about identity and community; as Rudland-Wood (2012) posits, “it’s not only personal memories that are associated with foods. History, culture, tradition, and collective memories are also passed down in our recipes, displayed in the way we prepare our food.” (p.35). Thus, existing research in this field has already demonstrated the potential to leverage food and food practice narratives as resonant folk culture metaphors which serve to connect people to one another, as well as to broader social and cultural meanings.

vi. Collective documentation

Finally, practitioners of collective narrative practice seem to collectively agree on the importance of concrete collective documentation as a ‘deliverable’ of a narrative project in a community. This documentation can take on a number of forms, including written notes, songs, videos, photographs, drawings, and poems, as well as more innovative forms of documentation emerging

more recently in practice, such as children's storybooks, letters, and cookbooks (Dinneen & Denborough, 2004; Freedman & Combs, 2009; Godmaire-Duhaime et al., 2018).

This type of formalized documentation serves two separate purposes, one which is connected to the processes which go into the act of documenting knowledge, and a second which relates to the final 'product' which is developed. Researchers argue that the narrative process of collectively creating a document is a very important step in that "taking back the power" which was previously discussed in the act of re-authoring (Combs & Freedman, 2009; O'Neill, 2004). Engaging in the development of a collective document allows community members to decide which stories are being told; as Combs and Freedman (2009) discuss, these documents give a concrete form to the stories we tell about ourselves – they write, "documents are a further help in making new stories a lasting part of a community's reality. The process of making a document, checking to see that it is worded and arranged in ways that fit for community members, then receiving a formal copy of the document, can be viewed as a definitional ceremony in and of itself" (p.355).

In their work with young people experiencing suicidal thoughts, O'Neill (2004) reflects on what was learned, writing about the importance of creating collective documents, we heard that this exchange of information was providing very useful ideas and suggestions as to ways of dealing with these negative thoughts. We also heard that the process of exchange was particularly significant as it contributed to making these young people feel not so weird or bizarre or isolated. Instead, they felt joined with others in what became a co-research project (p.38).

In this way, it is recognized within this body of literature that creating and publishing these types of collective documents can also serve the functions of widening networks of knowledge, as well as fostering and strengthening the connections between folks with shared experiences.

vii. Methodological insights

The overarching focus within the body of literature on collective narrative practice in terms of methodology is one which emphasizes a collaborative approach to both practice and research. The concept of ‘co-research’ is one which is present within the literature, which speaks to the idea of bringing together people with similar experiences, connecting them to exchange ideas and produce knowledge in a joint, collective process (Dinneen & Denborough, 2004; O’Neill, 2004). O’Neill’s (2004) work with young people experiencing suicidal thoughts takes on this approach, involving a collaborative process between the researcher and three individuals with lived experience engaging in ‘co-research’ conversations which led to significant knowledge production about the nature of suicidal thoughts. This methodological approach is reflective of two of the main principles of narrative practice, discussed in previous sections – the client as expert, and connecting lives. Through this process of co-research, participants in research are provided with the opportunity to share lived experience, having that knowledge validated and recognized as important, and through this process of sharing, they are able to connect with their peers who may have similar experiences.

The second methodological approach which is important to highlight within the work being done around collective narrative practice is that of ‘collective documentation,’ which was discussed in detail in the previous section (Combs & Freedman, 2009; Godmaire-Duhaime et al., 2018; Rudland-Wood, 2012; Tan, 2017). This approach is innately tied to the method of

“co-research,” as the development of these documents in the research process creates a space for participants to directly be involved in the research process through the co-creation of knowledge, or, data (O’Neill, 2004). The process of engaging in the creation of collective documents is a research method which furthers the principle of the client as expert, providing research participants with the opportunity to tell their own stories in a very tangible way. As both a research and practice tool, Godmaire-Duhaime et al. (2018) argue that collective documentation embodies a number of possibilities for transformation, primarily by “forging connections between individual and collective stories, thereby creating a space for the legitimation of alternative discourses” (p.34). In this way, this methodological approach serves two significant purposes – first, it benefits the research participants through forging connections; and second, it benefits the broader community through the development and dissemination of knowledge based on lived experience (Godmaire-Duhaime et al., 2018).

IV. Implications for Research: Where Does This Project Fit?

This review of the literature relevant to these two distinct literary bodies has revealed the emergence of several important themes which the two realms of practice share. The first dominant theme which can be extracted from the community food work literature explored is that of widening community food work practice to address structural issues, we see a similar principle reflected in narrative practice with the re-location of ‘problems’ within the realm of social issues. Secondly, community food work practitioners are calling for the integration of participatory bottom-up responses centering the voices of people with lived experience; we witness this notion mirrored in narrative approaches with the decentering of the therapist, as well

as the flexible structures of practice which are encouraged. Finally, community food work literature suggests that we should further develop and capitalize on the phenomenological capacity of food to act as a tool which can bring people together; these same notions of connection and community are mirrored in collective narrative practice research with the emphasis placed on connecting people's lives.

The identification of these overlapping and interconnected themes will serve to inform the current research project in a number of ways, particularly in terms of how this research positions itself in terms of approach and objective. Through the application of a narrative approach to community food work practice, this project is seeking to answer the calls from researchers in community food work literature for the decolonization of practice, a move to collective ways of thinking, and fleshing out connections between food issues and broader social systems.

By taking up and mobilizing the folk culture metaphors and processes of collective documentation developed by collective narrative practitioners, this research will integrate these principles of the narrative approach into community food work programming in order to attempt to respond to the gaps in practice which have been identified by researchers. Although this research will situate itself more prominently in the realm of "community food work," it is seeking to continue the development of the "Recipes for Life" projects of Natalie Rudland-Wood and Meizi Tan, but differs from these initiatives in the way that it is shifting from introducing food into therapeutic practice to integrating therapeutic techniques into community food work.

Through the synthesis of these two realms of practice, this research aims to deepen the approach we use when doing community food work – to develop a more comprehensive

community food work practice. This practice, informed by the shared principles and goals of these 'worlds', is one which deliberately focuses on cultivating collective learning and connections; it is also one which is more explicitly connected to notions of social justice within the realm of our food systems.

Chapter 3 – Methodology: Research Paradigm, Theoretical Frameworks, and Design

I. Overview of Methodology

The methodological framework for this research project – a participatory narrative approach – has been developed and informed by the fundamental ontological, epistemological, and theoretical underpinnings which will be discussed in the following sections. This methodological framework was selected specifically for its bottom-up, or grassroots, approach that seeks to engage in collaborative research processes which disrupt traditional Western ways of knowing and constructing knowledge.

The ‘narrative’ element of this methodological framework is directly connected to the ‘interpretive’ element of the paradigm which underpins this research project; this approach also speaks to the theoretical framings of affect theory and intersectionality, rooted in the notion that individuals’ felt experiences are unique based on their social location. In this way, because this research project is seeking to ‘listen to’ or ‘hear’ people’s personal accounts of their own subjective experiences, a narrative methodological approach is fitting, as this method of inquiry “lends itself to a qualitative enquiry in order to capture the rich data within stories” (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003, p.2).

Wang and Geale (2015) write that, experiences are not expressed as standalone entities, but are constructed as we negotiate through and around constantly shifting meanings. Narrative inquirers are not interested primarily in the facts or truth of these accounts, but rather in the meanings portrayed in story form” (p.197)

This project reflects the individual and collective experiences of the people who have facilitated community food work programs; informants were asked to tell the researcher ‘a story’ about their experiences in the spaces of community food programming as a means of gaining insight into the social interactions which occur within these spaces. In this way, this methodological approach directly connects to the nature of the ‘data’ which was relevant to the research question at hand.

The second element of the methodological framing of this project is the ‘participatory action’ component, which, in many ways, goes hand-in-hand with the principles of the narrative approach. This element of the methodological approach embraces participant ‘empowerment’ – participatory action research seeks to engage in democratic, collaborative processes of data collection, which serves to develop a resource for critical change which is accessible and shared. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) write that “action research is best conceptualized in collaborative terms. One reason is that action research is itself a social - and educational - process. A second and more compelling reason is that action research is directed towards studying, reframing, and reconstructing practices which are, by their very nature, social” (p.22). This participatory nature of the methodology of this project can be linked to not only the community-based focus of the project, but also to the critical paradigm, as well as to the theoretical foundation of critical pedagogical thought, which inform this research.

Since participatory action research is critical in its aims, and thus involves seeking to change the power structures together, this methodological framing has served to guide the “who” of this research project. Rather than engaging in participant observation, or an even further-removed process, such as discourse analysis, the research output of this project is, at its

heart, be the product of collaboration between the researcher and the individuals who facilitate community food programs across the city. Involving the facilitators of community food programs in this study has served to ensure that the research produced has been informed directly by those who have lived experience of, and therefore are the experts on, this specific subject. Because this research project specifically aims to contribute to the development of a community food work practice which is more democratic and empowering, it was important that the design of the project itself utilized a participatory approach which includes and represents a diverse set of voices of community members.

II. Paradigmatic, Ontological, and Epistemological Underpinnings

Pozzebon (2004) writes that “critical research emphasizes communicative orientation, which implies interest in human understanding, which, in turn, implies hermeneutics, which is the heart of interpretivism” (p.278). This blending of two ‘paradigms’ to which Pozzebon speaks – of applying a critical lens to an interpretive worldview – is the approach which has informed this project. As a researcher, this understanding or ‘worldview’ which brings to the forefront the subjective experiences of individuals, but contextualizes these experiences within larger social constructions, is one which resonates with me deeply.

Smith (2000) writes that “the interpretive paradigm is grounded in the idea that reality is socially constructed by individuals during social interaction processes; individuals act in ways that correspond to the meanings that are produced during this construction. The key task for interpretive research is to uncover how meanings and reality are constructed by individuals.” (p. 304). It has been my experience that the colonial structures of power within Western society invalidate these more subjective experiences, instead favouring ‘objective’ ways of looking at

the world. As a result of the ways in which I have always personally experienced and ‘made sense of’ life, I believe that the ways in which I, and others, ‘feel’ – those affective, and embodied, elements of one’s experiences – hold value and should not be disregarded. Basing my research in a space which makes room for the felt experiences, stories, and meanings of individuals – for reality to subjectively interpreted in a multitude of ways – feels like an important, and very meaningful, stance to take. Taking this approach allows me to develop and produce research outputs which truly reflect the ways in which I understand reality, as well as to adopt a way of doing my academic work which is less hierarchical and pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally accepted as valid “knowledge” in academia.

Thus, I contend that research should constantly be engaged in the interpretation of people’s individual experiences and meanings, because each of these experiences has the potential to teach us something about the world we live in. However, I also contend that these experiences must be contextualized within larger systems of power. It is the structural barriers we face, the systems of power and domination which we come into contact with, and our social locations within these structures and systems which ultimately inform the ways in which we ‘affectively’ experience our individual realities. Thus, in order to probe more deeply into our personal understandings of reality, to create more layered conceptualizations of the ways in which our individual felt experiences are inherently connected to broader, shared realities, Smith (2000) writes that “research should incorporate a critical framework, informed by social reproduction and resistance theories” (p.305). As someone who identifies as a woman, a second generation immigrant, and of mixed race, my experience of reality has been informed by a number of social constructs which have created a number of tensions which I have felt very

sharply in my experiences. Exploring these felt tensions, grounding them within systems of power, and being critical of these systems as a means of prompting social change, I believe, is what should lie at the heart of meaningful research.

III. Theoretical Framework

i. Affect Theory

The theoretical framework which has informed both the research questions and design is composed of three distinct areas of theory which have been stitched together in an effort to develop a more comprehensive approach to the research. The first theoretical foundation which lies at the heart of this research is ‘affect theory.’ Affect theory is an approach to research which takes into consideration the felt, the symbolic, or rather, the ‘affective’ elements of social interaction (Gregg & Seigworth, 2011). This theoretical understanding of people’s lives shifts the focus of research from what can be objectively ‘observed’ and ‘proven’ to the embodied experiences of individuals and communities; in this way, this theoretical framing is directly rooted in the interpretive paradigm of understanding the world.

For this project, affect theory is important on a number of different levels. First, this project frames food and the food practices we engage in as a social ‘object.’ In this way, this research is seeking to examine a realm of community food work which often goes unexplored in community work research – the affective meanings we attach to food, cooking, and eating. Highmore (2001) highlights this affective realm of food, writing that “you could imagine such an approach politicizing school dinners in a way that wasn’t simply dedicated to the instrumentalism of nutrition, but oriented to the communicative pedagogy of multicultural food. This would be a modest, everyday politics, a politics of the gut as much as the mind, oriented

more toward ethos than eidos” (p.136). Here, this theory has served in this research to recognize and explore the power of food to construct personal meanings about identity and community, as well as to ground broader experiences of oppression and marginalization in the intimate, felt experiences of the everyday.

Affect theory has also served to inform the research focus on the affective realm of our social interactions, particularly in terms of the social interactions which take place within the spaces of community food programs. Lawler’s (2001) affective theory of social exchange speaks to the ways in which the social interactions and relationships which occur within a particular group or network are directly connected to building a sense of community or collaboration. They write, “a network, in which a given relation encourages relations to other available members of the network (positively connected network), tends to become a source of social similarity and common identity” (Lawler, 2001). In this way, this research project has mobilized this affective theory of social exchange as a means of better understanding how the social interactions which occur in relation to food function in terms of connecting the lives of participants.

ii. Intersectionality

The second theory which has been central to the theoretical framing of this research project is that of intersectionality. Mattsson (2013) writes that, “in social work, intersectionality has been used as an analytical approach during recent years and it has been a way to understand both complex identities and how social structures affect people’s living conditions” (p. 10). The people who participate in and access, as well as the individuals who facilitate, the programming and services offered by community food organizations largely represent marginalized populations. These participants are often understood as having intersecting identities (i.e.:

racialized women, newcomer youth), which effectively creates more complex and layered experiences of systemic oppression and structural barriers for these individuals. Thus, it was crucial to apply to this project an intersectional lens which takes into consideration the different forms of oppression which people face based on their intersecting identities, as well as draws attention to the imbalanced power dynamics which inform these structures of marginalization.

Mehrotra (2010) draws attention to the ways in which intersectionality is directly connected to a critical paradigm or worldview, arguing that “because social justice has always been a core tenet of intersectionality theorizing, building and drawing on epistemologically diverse intersectional frameworks must remain grounded in a commitment to social change” (p. 427). In this way, this “intersectionality” piece of the theoretical framing of the project speaks directly to the objective of this research to ground the felt experiences of individuals within larger systems of power and domination, and to, effectively, push to begin to change these systems which oppress.

iii. Critical Pedagogy

The final thread in this ‘theoretical tapestry’ which provides a base for this research project is Freire’s critical pedagogical theory; however, we are looking specifically here to how critical pedagogy can function both within the context of research, as well as within the setting of community work spaces. Ledwith (2001) writes about the foundation of critical pedagogical thought, noting that “critical thought leads to critical action” (p.177). As previously discussed, the paradigm which guides this research project places an emphasis on pushing for critical change; in this way, this notion of critical pedagogy lies at the heart of what this research is seeking to do.

Ledwith (2001) speaks to the importance of dialogue, asking questions, and working in collaboration in relation to critical pedagogy, arguing that “through the process of dialogue, we listen from our hearts and minds, connecting with people through our common humanity” (p.177). Generally speaking, critical pedagogical theory encourages “educators” – whether they are teachers, researchers, or community workers – to explore in collaboration with the “students” the complex intersections of difference, contexts, and levels to understand the root causes of oppression (Ledwith, 2001, p.178).

This research project sought to develop a framework which would effectively create a space in which these types of discussions can take place. In this way, the purpose of this project is to begin to develop a type of programming which can be utilized in the community food work field as a means of raising consciousness and empowering participants through critical pedagogical processes; however, this could only be achieved through engaging in processes of critical pedagogical exploration with the facilitators of the programs themselves. Thus, it is not only the ‘objectives’ or ‘content’ of the research which was shaped by this theoretical framing, but also the design and methods utilized. The methodological framework which structures this project sought to engage in critical pedagogical dialogue throughout the research process, as a means of developing a research output which reflects and has been produced through democratic and participatory ways of sharing information.

IV. Research Design

i. Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilized in the research process to construct the initial sample; according to Tongco (2007), purposive sampling is a nonrandom technique which involves the researcher

making a decision about “what needs to be known,” and then setting out to “find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience” (p.147). Since “what needed to be known” for this research was directly related to both the content and context of community food work programs, this project involved participants who work, or have previously worked, as program facilitators at community food organizations in Toronto. The participants involved range in terms of age and other demographic characteristics, however, each participant had experience planning, coordinating, and facilitating community cooking workshops with members of marginalized groups, or other similar community food work programs.

The researcher has previously worked at and volunteered for a number of community food organizations across the city, and thus, already held connections to several potential participants for this study. Tongco (2007) notes that a study of “different sample sizes of informants selected purposively and found that at least five informants were needed for the data to be reliable,” – based on this requirement, a snowball sampling technique was then implemented after the first two or three participants were identified (p.152). Snowball sampling involves getting “handed from informant to informant” as one seed informant creates a list of other potential participants within the community, and then recommends an individual from the list to interview (Bernard, 2002, p.193). Thus, the participants which the researcher already had connections to were asked to suggest names of other facilitators working in the city in the field of community food work.

It has been argued by Bernard (2002) that snowball sampling approaches run the risk of excluding potential participants because “every person does not have the same chance of being

included” (p.193). However, this method proved to be effective for the research project due to the relatively small number of community members working in community food security organizations in the city. From what the researcher has encountered within the field of community food work in Toronto, it seems that these organizations are fairly tied into one another, often collaborating and exchanging information. Thus, it was found that the sample population was likely to either personally have connections to, or at the very least, to know “of” the other people doing work within this field; Bernard (2002) notes that in a situation like this, “snowball sampling is an effective way to build an exhaustive sampling frame” (p.193).

Through the combination of these two sampling techniques, the participant selection process for this research project produced a representative, but manageable sample of six community members who are immersed in the “world” of community food work in Toronto, working with diverse marginalized populations, who were be able to provide deep insights into the research question at the heart of this project.

ii. Data Collection

A) Unstructured Narrative Interviews

Each participant was asked to engage in a one-on-one discussion with the researcher -- these sessions ranged from thirty minutes to one hour in length. These sessions were held in a private study room booked at a public library, at a location based on convenience for each participant, as well as in participants’ private organizational offices. These sessions with participants were recorded on two separate devices, and handwritten notes were also taken as a precaution in order to avoid losing any important data (Bernard, 2002, p.218). Afterwards, the conversations were

transcribed by the researcher, anonymizing any identifying data, prior to the process of data analysis.

This first session consisted of an unstructured narrative interview. Bernard (2002) argues that unstructured interviewing is ideal for when “you want to know about the lived experience of fellow human beings;” this reflects the objectives of this research project, as the researcher was seeking to better understand the participants’ experiences facilitating community food work programs (p.213). A narrative approach was taken into consideration in terms of selecting the interview style; Glover (2003) writes that in an interviewing process which takes on a narrative approach, “storytellers are invited into the researcher’s work as collaborators, sharing control over the research process. Interviewing, in other words, is understood as discourse” (p.155). In this way, the researcher and the interviewee are engaged in “dialogical processes” which serve to “untangle the complex meanings of their own lived experiences” (Glover, 2003, p.155). This element of “dialogue” was particularly relevant to this research project, as the ultimate objective of these interviews was to work through the personal experiences of participants together, in order to effectively mobilize the valuable knowledge and expertise they possess as a means of developing a framework for doing community food work.

Furthermore, a narrative approach was utilized in these interviews as a means of allowing the participants themselves – those with lived experience of the issue at hand – to “take the lead.” As Glover (2003) writes, “narrative inquirers prefer less structure in the interest of giving greater control to research participants. With this in mind, interviews under this approach begin with the simple request, “tell me your story,” and the remainder of the interview flows according to the storyteller’s direction” (p.155). As this interview format provides the participant with the

majority of the control in the conversation, it is not necessary to create a detailed or fixed interview schedule for this type of discussion (Bernard, 2002, p.216). Instead, a “main topic of conversation” was selected – participants’ experience facilitating community food programs; based on this, a list of open-ended questions, as well as probing and follow-up questions, was generated around the more granular themes which frame the research project, including questions related to group dynamics, the power of food as a storytelling tool, and community development. This list of questions served to create a light, flexible structure – or, a skeleton – for the interviews which took place with participants (Bernard, 2002, p.222).

B) Participatory Collective Documentation

Participants were then given the option to participate in a 2 hour collaborative focus group session. This focus group was held at the Centre for Social Innovation in downtown Toronto. Four participants were scheduled to participate; however, only three were able to make it on the day of the group session due to illness. This second session consisted of a participatory activity of engaging in the creation of a collective narrative document. This element of the data collection process connects to the project’s methodological framing of ‘participatory action’ research. This type of research “aims to help people to investigate reality in order to change it;” the purpose of this participatory activity was indeed to provide participants with the space to explore their own experiences together, and to begin to document the ways in which these practices can be transformed (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p.24).

Furthermore, this participatory activity was rooted in the narrative methodology of ‘collective documentation,’ which involves “producing and documenting ‘social memory’ of resistance and sustenance is at the core of this methodology and finding audiences to witness

these stories by use of collective documents in the form of letters, certificated, diplomas, declarations and manifestos” (Ginty, 2016, p.61). Engaging in this collaborative process of creating and developing a collective document employed a narrative approach through “weaving together different community members’ contributions around shared themes” (Ginty, 2016, p.62). However, it is important to note that this technique also served to work toward the goals of action research, as it involved participants in “this act of externalizing and sharing,” which ultimately “constitutes the act of responding and taking action in regard to the problem” (Ginty, 2016, p.63).

The collective narrative document that participants were asked to contribute to was a symbolic ‘recipe’ for empowering community food practice. This format of narrative document is one which was developed based on Natale Rudland-Wood’s “Recipes for Life” (2012) methodology. In their narrative project, Rudland-Wood (2012) emphasizes the symbolic power of ‘food’ and ‘food practices’; this methodology focuses on encouraging participants to “consider not only recipes for food, but recipes for life, for instance the recipe you use for ‘getting through hard times’, or the recipe for ‘making a transition in life’, or a ‘recipe for happiness’, or for ‘good relations in the family’, and so on” (p.36).

Working with this concept, this project prompted participants to develop a ‘recipes for community food work’ which emphasized the empowering, community-building, and transformative potential of this type of programming (*see Appendix A*). Using the thematic coding from interviews, I printed out a number of themes and keywords from interviews, and provided participants with collage materials to work with. Participants were invited to bring a recipe of their own, and to share with the group what the significance of the recipe was to them.

This activity prompted conversations around participants' relationships to food and food work, practices they use with communities, and ways they might transform their work. Participants were asked to work together to generate lists of the "ingredients" needed to create a community food practice that is inclusive and empowering for participants, and to develop a 'method' for using those ingredients. This recipe (*see chapter 4*) is at the heart of the 'food narratives' community food work framework which this project has developed.

iii. Data Analysis

The data gathered during the collection process of this research project – both the transcribed audio from the interview, as well as the collective narrative documents produced – was then analyzed and interpreted through a process of thematic narrative analysis (*see excerpt from code book in Appendix B*). Glover (2003) writes about the process of narrative analysis and the ways in which it differs from more traditional methods of data coding and analysis, arguing that "in short, the process is a synthesis of the data rather than a separation of it into its individual parts. With this in mind, the researcher determines the importance of a theme, not by the frequency of representative keywords or phrases...but by what he or she interprets as its centrality to narrative fidelity, meaning, and identity" (p.157). In this way, narrative analysis does not seek to break down the data collected in a systematic way, but instead, through a joint process of "analysis and interpretation" which includes taking into consideration the personal meanings ascribed to the stories gathered (Kim, 2016, p.189). This was a useful approach applied to the data produced, as we were seeking to explore the personal and social experiences of the participants within the setting of the community food programs. Each of these facilitators used different 'language', different storytelling techniques, and different felt experiences; thus, using a coding technique

which is more focused on systematically deconstructing the language would not have produced the same meaningful type of analysis which speaks to the content and themes behind the story.

Glover (2003) also notes that this type of analysis is useful when a researcher is seeking to uncover the “common narrative ground shared by the research participants” (p.157). Kim (2016) also speaks to this power of the “analysis of narrative,” arguing that this mode of data interpretation “aims to produce general knowledge from a set of evidence found in a collection of stories” (p.197). For this project, because we were looking to gain insight into how community food programs are experienced by the people facilitating them, it was crucial to identify and explore that “common narrative ground” in order to draw larger, meaningful conclusions about these community spaces (Glover, 2003, p.157).

A recipe – a list of ingredients, where to get them, and how to use them – is, in its own way, a form of storytelling. Thus, the “recipe” created in the collective focus group was also explored utilizing a narrative analysis approach, with the major themes and ideas which emerged out of the discussion around creating this recipe incorporated into the data analysis.

V. Ethical Considerations

The ethical risks involved in the project were fairly minimal, and were mitigated quite simply. Despite providing detailed information ahead of time, the researcher was aware that participants may still feel anxious prior to or during the interviews. Although this was unlikely due to the fact that participants were speaking about professional, rather than personal experiences, any potential emotional risks were managed by going over the informed consent form guidelines with the participants prior to beginning, as well as outlining the options participants have during

the sessions without any repercussions, for example, taking a break or leaving the discussion (Ali & Kelly, 2004, p.121).

The other consideration which should be taken into account is the previous relationship which the researcher had with select participants in the study. The relationship which exists between some of the potential participants and the researcher is one based on professional networks – connections made through previous professional placements during my MA and MSW. In many cases, this could have been a potential source of tension between the researcher and the informants, particularly in terms of imbalanced power dynamics. However, in this case, the researcher did not occupy a position of professional "power" in relation to the potential participants, and thus, participants choice to participate was completely voluntary, and did not have any impact on their relationship with the researcher.

In addition to considering the risks which might have come into play during this research, it was also important to think about the potential benefits for participants. These types of open-ended discussions about lived experience can be extremely empowering in many ways to the participants involved, as they are provided with the opportunity to be valued as experts. Also, the participants of an interview are presented with a moment to share their own stories; the value of this experience of sharing your narratives should not be underestimated – in this way, these research methods have the potential to offer many beneficial assets to the participants.

Furthermore, the research outputs produced through the action-based, collaborative nature of this project will serve to benefit the participants as it can act as a resource to potentially inform and transform practice on the ground. As one of the participants, Sandra, remarked in a

response to the invitation to participate, this research project is, or rather, is seeking to be,
“something that community-based individuals and groups could totally benefit and learn from.”

Chapter 4 – Analysis of Data

I. Food narratives as a means of exploring the “self”

The first overarching narrative theme which developed during my one-on-one conversations with participants had to do with the power of food narratives in terms of exploring how we understand our own identities. Several micro-themes surfaced under this umbrella idea, which will be critically explored in this section.

i. The “universality” of food practices

The first theme which emerged out of these conversations between researcher and participants had to do with the accessibility, or understandability, of ‘food’ as a narrative tool – as an instrument for storytelling. Participants across interviews emphasized this ‘accessible’ nature of food in terms of the ways food is something which every individual can relate to, including marginalized populations.

Highlighted in these discussions was the notion of the ‘universality’ of food practices; in this way, participants seemed to share the opinion that although our experiences may vary widely, every person possesses some sort of relationship with food, eating, and cooking. As one participant, Sandra, spoke about her approach to facilitation, she reflected, “I like to come in with the idea and I believe this that everyone has food experience and knowledge, whatever it might be. Like often sometimes participants will come in like they say, I don't have any experience. Like I don't know anything about food or cooking, but that's not true.” Threads of other conversations were interwoven into this thought around universality, with another participant, Cindy, remarking on the shared experience of food practices, noting that “we [all] eat three times a day.”

Another dimension of this ‘accessibility’ theme which emerged speaks to the sensory experience of food, with participants arguing that the ways in which we physically engage with food and food practices allows individuals with diverse styles of learning to connect with these practices in a number of different meaningful ways. Abarca and Colby’s (2016) work on the relationship between food, narrative, and identity speaks to this sensory engagement with food, with the authors writing that the way in which we connect with food, “works along with sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell... to establish the connections that join food to memory to produce narratives of personal and collective cultural and social identity” (p.4). Participants in interviews highlighted the hands-on, ‘touch’, experience which comes with food – including the steps involved in transforming produce into a full meal, as well as the many other sensory elements, such as the smells, sights, and tastes which allow us to develop a connection to the things we cook and eat.

In this way, what we can learn from participants here is that there is no ‘one size fits all’ relationship with food, as the ways in which we interact with food are unique to each of us; however, at the same time, food practices are something which every person engages in. It is this expansive, yet granular nature of our relationships with food and food practices which participants recognize as making food a rich port of entry into talking about ourselves and our lives.

ii. Food stories and memory

The second micro-theme we can look to explore here is one which concerns the felt experience of food; the affective realm of cooking and eating which constructs the emotional connections to and relationships with food which we each hold. The participants interviewed for this project

indicated that they take an approach to facilitating community food programming which engages with food not only as a source of sustenance or nutrition, but as a social object which we connect with personal experiences. The “curriculum” design which Sandra developed for a youth cooking group is centred around prompting conversations which look at this relationship between personal experiences and food, as she explained in our interview –

And usually I'll start with an activity. I'll put a number of different things on a table to kind of get them talking. Like what, do you have any stories about any items? I'll have a number of objects, selections of things, like it could be a plant, it could be a box of Kraft dinner and often that will like get them to be like, “oh yeah, I remember making Kraft dinner with my cousin when we were three and then someone put too much chili peppers and it was so spicy.” So it's like conjuring up these memories.

This idea which leverages food narratives as a tool for probing the past can be directly connected to Highmore’s (2001) affective framing project, which pushes researchers to think about an “everyday politics of the gut” – one which is “oriented to the communicative pedagogy” of food (p.136). In this way, rather than simply talking about food in a way which is functional, educational, or ‘pragmatic’, participants use the community food work program as a space for opening up conversations about the ‘felt’ realm of food. Fox and Alldred (2018) further develop this concept of the affective dimension of food practices, writing that “food is an important ‘site’ of memory in which memories mediate social and cultural values and norms that impact on identity, cultural continuity and sense of belonging” (p.6).

iii. Connections between food and identity

These notions of “cultural continuity” and “personal identity” touched on by Fox and Alldred (2018) were also mirrored in my conversations with research participants. In this way, participants connected the potential of food narratives to elicit memories to individual processes of identity development and formation.

It is widely recognized within literature on the sociology of food that our food practices are inherently linked to the development of identity conclusions. Fox and Alldred (2018) review a number of research studies which analyze the relationship between food, memory, and identity citing Lupton’s 1994 research which linked childhood memories of food to family relationships, as well as Duruz’s 1999 study on food memories of the past, which was connected to the construction of Australian identities, as well as to a sense of security (p.7). For participants, telling food stories was viewed as a means of guiding people to explore their relationships with different meaningful ‘parts’ of themselves, including personal histories, culture, family, and ‘home’. Participants stressed that this is particularly meaningful for folks participating in community food programming, as these individuals often have a number of intersecting experiences of marginalization which contribute to feelings of loss of or disconnection from ‘self’.

Cindy spoke to how telling food stories is particularly important for seniors experiencing social isolation, as it provides an opportunity for them to share narratives about their past – “I facilitated that this one group lunch was a group of Hispanic seniors and the workshop like us cooking wouldn’t even start until like an hour until the workshop because they would just be sharing stories, drinking coffee, like just telling things about their whole lives.” In this way,

through telling these food stories, individuals are able to experience a sense of re-membering and re-claiming the 'self'. She also highlighted the ways in which this space for food storytelling is particularly meaningful for newcomers or second-generation immigrants, noting that,

“Like it's like, cause it's built off family and tradition and culture. So as you go along in life, some people may lose those things and like if if you don't have a family that's close by or, or things like that, or people who are newcomers to Canada, they might have feel like they've lost a little bit of their culture because they're in the new like westernized environment. So just being in a like a safe place with other people, it's a good way to like bring that back. Yeah. And reconnect.” (Cindy)

Similarly, Dave, who facilitates programming with men who have experienced homelessness, echoed this notion of 're-connecting' with a previous sense of self. He explained,

“I mean people have great divides in their lives, whether that's from moving to Canada or... but they're kind of bringing who they were before. Right. So they're kind of bringing that sense of self from before, whatever disaster – and all of these men that, at least from what my chatting with him, you know, it was an industrial accident, or it was chronic mental health right, or the death of a loved one like that – whatever disaster caused a pretty quick switch into homelessness. So for them to all kind of reconnecting to something from before that time. Yeah. It super impactful.” (Dave)

In this way, this engagement with memory which food narratives prompt pushes individuals to re-examine and re-connect with parts of their 'identities' which may have previously been difficult to reach or harder to voice.

iv. Re-authoring through food narratives

On the subject of food narratives, Abarca and Colby (2016) write that “Every time a *food memory* is narrated—in an oral, written, or performative form—the food recalled is reproduced as an embodied experience. In telling what “we eat,” we are showing who “we are”... In short, *food memory*, as an embodied sense, has the capacity to season the narratives of our lives” (p.7).

Conversations with participants supported this argument, as they conjured up ideas around self-determination and ownership of narratives within the space of community food groups. For interviewees, participants in their programs who engaged in this act of sharing their personal food narratives were effectively engaging in an act of self-definition;

“So, but that's not necessarily true, you know, people might self-identify as, well, I'm Canadian, I'm not like, you know, Indian just because I look Brown or whatever. Right. So it's kind of nice doing an activity like this around food stories to kind of get them started, sort of set up that framework for them to self-identify you know, share their narrative in the way they choose to share it.” (Sandra)

Thus, in this way, talking about our personal food stories, sharing those stories in the way we choose to share them with others, can be viewed as an exercise in personal agency.

In terms of how this theme around food narratives can be connected to the the directions for community food work previously explored in the literature review, we can see that this focus participants have in their facilitation approaches on centering the stories of those participating in their programs directly relates to the push for programming informed by lived experience (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Figueroa, 2015). If we use the language of collective narrative

practice to explore this connection, we can understand this opening up of space for participants to tell their personal food stories as a strategy for re-authoring, and thus, a bottom-up approach.

As previously discussed, re-authoring is an empowering activity for people to engage in, as it allows for us to rethink and select the stories we tell about ourselves – it is a means for people to ‘take back’ power. (Combs & Freedman, 2012; White, 2003). In this way, this approach to community food work allows us to de-centre the facilitator, instead directing attention to the voices of those with lived experience, and providing them with the room to construct these narratives. Through the application of this narrative lens, participants in community food programming can begin to take the lead, begin to shape the direction of the program itself, through the sharing of these personal narratives.

II. Food narratives as ‘connectors’ in community spaces

The second ‘macro’ theme which emerged out of interactions with participants is that of the power of food to ‘connect’ people. Food was viewed as playing this ‘connector’ role first at a very basic level, with participants drawing attention to the ways in which the presence of food fosters more positive, comfortable social interactions and exchanges.

One participant, Chet, reflected that “I think food is so important for like any kind of social gathering, right? It's a staple. It has many different dynamics. One is it connects people together, uh, as a meeting point.”. Similarly, Julia stated, “I see a lot of how, um, food allows people to come together and to connect – how I feel more comfortable meeting someone or going somewhere I don't know if there's food. Um, and so that way it can be a kind of mediator.”

The capacity of food in a community space to function as this “meeting point” or “mediator” is an important idea which we can link back to the review of literature, which

highlighted notions of collectivity, people coming together, and the “linking of lives,” as key elements in both community food work and collective narrative practice (Freedman and Combs, 2009, p.355). Participants drew out several different ‘connections’ which food, food practices, and – most specifically – food narratives can establish, which will be further developed in the following sections.

i. Fostering bonds between people with shared experiences

The first form of ‘connection’ which food narratives were viewed to establish was those between people with shared experiences, or shared identities. Participants shared that people experiencing marginalization can often feel isolated due to the number of systemic and structural barriers they face on a daily basis. As a response to these feelings of isolation, participants understood the community food space as a place for individuals to share stories with people with similar experiences, which effectively works to create a sense of ‘solidarity’ and support. Rachel shared a story in our interview which truly embodied this notion of ‘linking the lives’ of people with shared experiences:

It's been really cool to see refugees and then when they come to group meeting people from their part of world, so like from Nigeria or Ethiopia. And they get so excited and it's been cool to see people be like, oh, did you have this in Africa? You see them connecting that way. Because being a refugee, from what I've heard from our folks like that is very isolating and can be obviously so lonely when they come to Canada because a lot of the time their families back home. So it's cool when they can bring their recipes and their food here and teach other people and sort of create that sense of family here and meeting other people from their home country.

Participants across interviews echoed this thought, noting that this sense of collectivity, or of community, established based on shared experiences was important for any group of people experiencing marginalization, including newcomers, low-income youth, racialized groups, men experiencing homelessness, and seniors. Dave shared that in the group he facilitates with men experiencing homelessness, “You always hear at our cooking and drop-in meal programs, people trading tips like, oh so on Tuesday afternoons, here's where you can get lunch or a food bank or what's happening.” In this way, participants in this programming experiencing shared barriers or engaging with similar structures begin to build positive relationships which can help them in navigating these systems.

This idea can be connected to Lawler’s (2001) affect theory of social exchange, which posits that emotions people experience within social spaces – in our case, emotions which are connected to the sharing of stories about food – have a significant impact on the production of group solidarity (Lawler, p.348). As Lawler (2001) writes,

If the interaction is successfully accomplished and generates a positive result for actors, they are likely to feel good... A social network, by promoting repeated interactions among the same set of actors, could generate a group identity that binds together the actors in the network and distinguishes them from others. (Lawler p.348)

In this way, we can understand that through this ‘repetition’ of these narrative-sharing interactions – whether it is weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly community cooking sessions – participants begin to construct strong bonds to one another, ultimately forming a larger sense of group identity based on shared experiences. This mirrors the principle of ‘collectivity’ in collective narrative practice, which Freedman and Combs (2009) argue is responsible for

“forging new links among people in which they share the stories of their hard-fought struggles and the knowledge they have gained in those struggles” (p.355).

ii. Creating relationships across difference

“Yeah, I mean when running programs, especially in regent park, the groups are so diverse. So creating these spaces where kids can like tell stories about their own food or talk about the food from their own culture makes like the other kids in their class have an opportunity to like listen and learn about that food too. I know like a lot of immigrant kids when they were younger there was like, there's that whole like lunchbox, I forgot what it was called, but just like kids who are embarrassed to eat around other kids because they say their food smells or like other kids didn't know about it. And I certainly had that experience. But then with running these programs with kids now and seeing, giving them the opportunity to like try all these different cultural foods and having the kids in their class know what food that is and then the other ones learn about it is so valuable. You know, just like it like starts with food but then like kids don't have to be embarrassed about other things, like culture.”

Here, Hana shared a story which speaks to the ways in which sharing food narratives in community spaces can not only serve to connect folks to those with similar experiences or shared identities, but can also effectively serve to forge connections between people who, at the ‘surface level’, might not have anything in common. As previously discussed, people participating in community food programs often have a number of intersectional identities, which can result in many shared experiences within groups, as well as many differences. Other participants working with diverse groups of people echoed this notion, viewing telling food stories as a way of

exchanging new information and knowledge, which can serve to create connections across perceived differences.

This can be linked to the review of literature, which highlighted Levkoe's (2006) argument that the community food space is inherently a collective one, writing that "social interaction [in these spaces] is important for breaking down seclusion and individualism and for building a strong community" (p.96). In this way, we can see participants' ideas about breaking down walls of difference mirrored in the literature. A common thread through these conversations was that constructing space to share our food narratives creates an environment where the 'distance' between people can begin to shrink. Another participant, Sandra, recalled a cooking session where the recipe being shared was a curry dish, which led to participants from a number of different backgrounds sharing and engaging with the different curries connected to their own cultures. In this way, food stories are inherently very personal and meaningful for each individual, and yet the subject matter can also be universally understood and engaged with at the same time. This again speaks to Lawler's (2001) writing on building solidarity through the affective modes of social exchange, as the sincerity, vulnerability, and honesty of storytelling serves to build positive associations.

iii. Drawing connections between people and systems

Participants believed that through providing participants with spaces to share their food narratives, conversations can be opened up about the larger structural implications of these stories. As Sandra explained, "food brings people together and we can dissolve conflict and, you know, so I think I like it as an avenue to sort of explore these complexities and also how it just, you know, it's interconnected to these larger systems issues that we have as well as at the

individual level, right down to the microscopic level if we're looking at it like soil and environments and ecosystems.” It is important to note that participants did not think that these larger, sometimes very difficult discussions, would simply occur naturally, but rather, that through food narratives we can scaffold in a less intimidating way to begin having these important conversations. The ways in which food narratives create space for these conversations can be connected to the use of folk culture metaphors in collective narrative practice. Folks culture metaphors provide practitioners with an entryway into talking about and exploring a “problem” in linguistic terms which are personally resonant and culturally relevant to the community members they are engaging with; with food narratives, we can begin to explore the lived experiences of marginalization and oppression in ways which are accessible and easy to conceptualize (Jacobs, 2018).

This power of food narratives to open up these conversations is an important element to note, particularly in relation to pushes from within the community food work field for practice which is intentionally focused on social justice. As Slocum (2006) writes, “without attention to social relations, community food and similar movements will remain limited in scope no matter how welcoming or inclusive they aim to be” (p.343). In this way, community food workers can draw upon the potential of storytelling practices within community spaces to shift the focus to these larger systemic issues. This idea around emphasizing structures of oppression through food storytelling can also be connected to the principles of critical pedagogy, and how the work of critical pedagogy can be translated within a community food work setting. Ledwith’s (2001) writing on critical pedagogy within community work speaks to this notion, arguing that without these conversations which explore broader systemic implications, we are not truly engaging in

“critical action” in our work:

For the community worker, then, central to the task is an understanding of how dominant ideology deceives, fragments and distorts the interests of the many, in favour of the power and privilege of dominant interests. Without insight into the structures of dominance which subordinate the interests of the more vulnerable, the community worker is not able to effect the critical action necessary to transform these social relations (Ledwith, 2001, p.177).

One of the main factors which informed participants belief that community food spaces are good venues for these broader conversations about systems, was that the community food space was viewed as a safe space free of shame or embarrassment. In this way, through encouraging storytelling, sharing, and listening, the community kitchen becomes a place where people can be honest and open. As Julia noted on working with children in cooking groups, “Kids will, they'll definitely be honest or not have a filter and say things like, um, well, like, you know, this is what I like. I Mcdonald's, I had McDonald's for dinner. Um, or like if I didn't eat last night, like kids will say stuff like that.”

This ‘frankness’ was a theme which emerged across my conversations with participants, as most noted that participants in their programs often felt comfortable to share certain parts of their lives which they might not outside of this space. On working with youth in a low-income neighbourhood, Chet noted that “And after they ate, they were mentioning that when they go home, there's there, they're living with their single parent or there might not be food at home or they said there's not going to be food at home.”

Opening up this space through storytelling which allows for this type of honesty was

viewed by participants as a step toward scaling up and discussing how these lived experiences were individualized reflections of larger systemic issues. Participants expressed that through this storytelling, conversations about structural poverty, racism, and colonialism could be opened up. They also noted that these food stories can also act as an avenue for exploring the needs of participants in the programming which are interrelated to their experiences of marginalization. As Dave explained, “You're doing like a monthly nutritious food bag program, but it's been a really interesting, a kind of example of how it's been a way for us to kind of have these conversations about people, how they're doing, what other supports they need based on the fact that like, oh, like he's like, you need food. So what else does that mean that you're missing?”

III. Empowerment through food stories

The final overarching theme which emerged from conversations has to do with the potential for food narratives to ‘empower’ participants in community food programs. This idea emerged in relation to the two previously discussed themes of identity and connections, building on the different capacities of ‘food stories’ within community work spaces to come to this notion of ‘empowerment’. This theme, which will be developed in-depth in the following sections, is particularly relevant to the field of social work, and the ways in which this ‘food narratives’ framework of doing community food work can serve to foster agency and strengthen communities.

i. Food storytelling creates opportunities for leadership

Firstly, one of the most powerful qualities of this ‘food narratives’ framework is its potential for fostering a sense of agency within participants. Conversations with interviewees reflected on the

democratic, non-hierarchical nature of the space of the community kitchen, which allows for participants in programming to take on leadership roles. Julia expanded on this idea, highlighting important ideas around expertise, control, and power:

I think, it is an area where people can feel like an expert and anyone can. And I think about that a lot in relation to a lot of the women in my family who, um, don't have formal jobs, but they work in the home where they are, like they prepare all the food for the family three, four times a day. Um, and how for them like, oh, we're in the kitchen and when they're teaching me to cook or one where I'm just talking about it, like that becomes a very much like the area of expertise, um, and uh, a place where they can kind of, um, have a lot of control and a lot of say in a way that maybe they don't have that kind of power in other situations. Um, and uh, yeah. And become kind of like the boss, you know, the, it very much in control.

Participants emphasized these opportunities for leadership through sharing food stories as legitimizing for people engaging in community food work programs. These leadership roles – easily accessed through choosing to share a recipe, or a memory associated with food – offer participants a position of power, or a sense of agency and self-determination, which can often be difficult to access for people experiencing different forms of oppression or marginalization. Hana also spoke to the importance of this flexible structure of facilitation – “Like having space so people can, can like show and demonstrate and like their experience and skill. Um, you know, like being able to like teach other people and have kind of like an exchange of knowledge instead of it being like a one sided thing.”

This notion of community food programming led by participants can be directly

connected to one of the calls within community food work literature of the adoption of bottom-up approaches driven by community (Bradley & Herrera, 2016; Figueroa, 2015). Providing participants with the space to share their food stories contrasts with the dominant approach to community food work which utilizes a “deficit lens” (Figueroa, 2015, p.501).

Centering the food stories of participants allows us as community food workers to ‘take the lead’ from people with lived experience, acknowledging the assets they bring to the kitchen table. This mirrors the principle of collective narrative practice, which posits that the participant’s or client’s knowledge and lived experience should ultimately guide and inform the work being done (Freedman and Combs, 2009; White, 2003). Not only does this allow participants to take on the driving leadership roles within the space, but, the food stories we hear in the community kitchen from participants – the stories they choose to share, and the ways in which they choose to share them – can serve to better shape the programming we provide as we continue to develop and adapt our approaches.

ii. The community kitchen as an inclusive space

Another element of ‘empowerment’ which participants emphasized across conversations was that of the ‘inclusive’ nature of the community food work space. Participants discussed the low barriers to participation in community food programming, which allows for a range of diverse people and populations to engage. Furthermore, participants understood community kitchen spaces as making room for knowledge and sets of skills to be valued which might traditionally fall outside of what we understand as valid forms of knowing. There is room within these spaces to begin to do some decolonizing work by opening up the colonial, western constraints around how we can ‘come to know’, and how we can ‘teach’.

With the ‘food narratives’ framework, the community kitchen lends itself well to oral tradition, bypassing certain limitations around what we define as ‘literacy’ in the western sense. Furthermore, stories are valued in this space which are not only told in English, but in a number of different languages, and through a number of different storytelling mediums, including songs, actions, and dances. One of the stories Hana shared speaks to this idea of moving beyond what we consider transmissible knowledge in the colonial setting – “I remember this one woman and she didn't speak English and she was Pakistani. Um, and she came in and cooked, I think like Biryani chicken, and rice, with the group. But like, even though she couldn't speak English, she, she told her story about like this food that we were making and being back home like through her actions.”

This expansive potential of the ‘food narratives’ framework to include folks from diverse backgrounds, but to also bring to the foreground different ways of knowing and sharing, can be linked to calls from community food work scholars and practitioners for the decolonization of the field. Bradley and Herrera (2016) speak to this process, arguing that “decolonizing food justice, we argue, also must take shape and develop from our own perspectives and for our own purposes, and based on our own stories and the theories used to explain them... we use the phrase ‘our own’ to refer to indigenous peoples, people of colour, allies, and all marginalized and oppressed peoples” (p.105). In this way, integrating this framework which functions based on the stories of marginalized communities can be understood as a step toward decolonizing programming within the field of community food work.

iii. Validating people’s experiences through community food work

And I think kinda going back to what I was saying before about marginalized people,

giving folks regardless of what their end goals are, like some sort of hopefully, feelings of agency and self determination. Right? Cause it's so rare for people experiencing homelessness to be in a venue where they have agency over what they're doing or where people are listening to them and trusting them. Right? So giving them though that even just a sense of, oh, like I am valid and I am able to like teach people something like that.

That's a great feeling to have, right? When you teach somebody something. (Dave)

Participants' ideas about what "empowerment" should look like coalesced around this notion of "validation" – of bearing witness to, of recognizing, the skills, knowledge, and experiences which people share through their food stories. For participants, as community food workers, this seemed to be the most significant, or most meaningful, outcome of the programs they had facilitated. Sandra spoke to this notion, mirroring Dave's ideas about why this bearing witness is so important for the participants engaging in this type of programming:

"...validating people's existence and your experiences. So your experiences, real lived experience of whether it's like mental health issues and poverty. Um, as someone who faces certain types of marginalization is real, you know, your feelings that you're not being seen in the day to day normative, you know, the fact that you're being racially profiled or like not seen as whole or whatever it is. Um, so I think the power of stories or the power of like the, to share your recipes allows you to be like seen and appreciated when you're sharing your family's dumpling recipe. And everyone's eating and they're like, this is delicious. Like there's a sense of pride that comes out of sharing your stories and having people see you when you're not necessarily seeing are validated outside of that. And so I think that gives people sometimes a sense of power because you know,

they get to define themselves.”

In this way, this ‘food narratives’ framework becomes a medium for acknowledging the lived experience of people, of validating these experiences in a way which can be incredibly transformative for everyone involved. This approach to community food work honours people’s lives, taking cues from the Latin@ research approach of ‘testimonios’, which validate and center the experiential knowledge of People of Color, recognize the power of collective memory and knowledge, and are guided by the larger goals of transformation and empowerment for Communities of Color” (Huber, p.83). Ultimately, bearing witness to the stories of marginalized communities can foster a sense of pride, of understanding, and of recognition for participants which respects principles of the autonomy and self-determination of people over their own lives.

One pot recipe for community

Ingredients:

A shared space

Many hands

People (voices, knowledge, experiences)

Food (food that means something, food to fill our bellies, food that nourishes)

Trust and safety

Togetherness

Method:

1. Mix food with voices, knowledge, experiences to generate stories.
2. Make room, create space, for anyone to take the spoon.
3. Combine everything in one big bowl.
4. Season with pride, validation, and understanding.
5. Place in oven and watch it rise. Bear witness to the transformation.
6. Take what you need, and pass the bowl.
7. Share the experience of eating together.

IV. Conclusions

Through exploring the connections between narrative practice and community food work (which intersect through this notion of a ‘food narratives’ framework), the potential for doing food work

which is validating and empowering for marginalized participants begins to emerge. This is important because it moves away from traditional ways of talking about or evaluating community food work which focus solely on more practical, or tangible, measurements such as nutrition or access to food.

This research project has revealed that this mobilization of narrative practice within the community food work field is already taking place. Instead of developing a framework for practice ‘from scratch,’ I was able to draw on the insight from the ways in which practitioners approach their work, as well as from my own practice, to theorize and validate the work which is already being done. The work being done within this framework is, in many ways, responding directly to calls within the literature to decolonize, democratize, and politicize the work we do in the field. This project has demonstrated the ways in which this framework can be engaged in the work we do around food in communities, as a means of fostering a practice which is ultimately more empowering and inclusive for marginalized folks.

Engaging practitioners working in the community food work field served to provide an in-depth, developed picture of the ways in which this ‘food narratives’ framework looks ‘on the ground.’ Talking with my colleagues, and bringing them together through the group session to discuss our ideas, our practice, and our experiences, was a rich learning opportunity for all involved. Speaking for myself, it was a creative opportunity to talk about my own practice with communities in a more grounded way, and also to share and exchange knowledge which will serve to inform my work in the future. In terms of conceptualizing a framework for practice which is grounded in theory, this approach of working directly with practitioners served the project well, strengthening the research outcomes.

In the future, research projects should be done in collaboration with participants of community food programming in order to evaluate the impact of a narrative approach to food work. This might involve more in-depth, long-term case studies undertaken within community kitchen programming with different marginalized populations. Further work could also be done to dive deeper into the question of how we can ensure that a narrative approach to food work includes a focus on social justice – analysis of data has demonstrated that this is indeed a possibility within community food spaces, but that it is not something which arises without prompting.

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Appendices