

MORE THAN WHAT WE EAT: FOOD AS A RELATIONSHIP BUILDER AND CULTURAL  
TRANSMITTER

by

Lindsay Elise Jackson,

B.A., York University, 2017

B.S.W., Lakehead University, 2018

An MRP

presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Social Work

in the Program of

Social Work

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2019

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## ABSTRACT

More than what we eat: Food as a Relationship Builder and Cultural Transmitter

Master of Social Work, 2019

Lindsay Elise Jackson

Program of Social Work,

Ryerson University

The purpose of my research was to explore how people use food as tool to build relationships with family and transmit their culture. Using interpretive phenomenology as my methodology, I hoped to uncover an “essence” about food that incorporates and transcends different generations, genders, races, religions, ethnicities, etc. I used a conceptual framework of neoliberalism and cultural hegemony to examine the effects of Western ideologies on the relationships between food, family and culture. Ten participants from diverse backgrounds were interviewed. My findings discuss five major themes – necessity, togetherness, navigating through food, nostalgia, and passing down skills and culture. The implications for my research show that social workers need to have a better understanding of the importance of food in people’s lives and the effects of neoliberalism on everyday interactions.

Keywords: food, cooking, family, culture, neoliberalism, cultural hegemony

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of my participants and my supervisor, Purnima George, for their help and dedication to this project.

To my participants – it was such a joy working with all you. Each of you provided such a unique experience of food, family and culture that was fascinating to listen to. I am so grateful you shared a personal part of your lives with me, and I hope I bring your lives justice in this paper. Many of you invited me into your homes and shared some delicious recipes. To those of you whom I did not cook with – may be one day? I’ve never had so much fun conducting research as I did with all of you – THANK YOU!

To Purnima – thank you for pushing me to make this great piece of work. You’ve always been there to guide me through my many topics changes, and confusions with theoretical frameworks, and my overall mood of “what have I gotten myself into?”. Thank you for being patient with me and letting me come to conclusions on my own. This would not have been possible without your expertise.

## DEDICATION

### **David**

This paper would not exist without you. We have been together for 7 years and I have been a student the whole time. Thank you for dealing with my stress and the constant homework. I'm so glad I decided I could balance having school work and partner! You make me a better version of myself.

### **Dad**

This paper represents you – a love for food and knowledge. Thank you for teaching me how to cook and how to be curious about the world. You inspire me to always try new things and to always keep learning (in the kitchen and beyond!).

### **Mom**

This paper is for you. I know I would not be here if it wasn't for you. Thank you for teaching me how to be resilient and strong. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. I will never be able to truly express my gratitude for you.

I love you all so much. Thank you!

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## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

Food surrounds our everyday lives. Sometimes the ways in which food permeates through our lives is not consciously thought of - we eat multiple times a day, we cook food for ourselves and others, we buy food, we grow food, we centre social gatherings around food, we centre holidays and cultural celebrations around food, we see advertisements everywhere for food, and the movies and TV shows we watch often have food. Many of these activities are about more than just the food – they are about the social aspects, the ceremonial aspects, and the collective memory aspects. The purpose of my research is to explore these latent uses of food – how do people use food as tool to build relationships with family and transmit their culture?

The idea for my research came from a life time of experiences of food connecting me to people. As a child, food was always an important part of my relationship with my dad. I was always responsible for some food preparation activity in the kitchen, and we always ate dinner as a family at the same time. We also have a garden that I was actively involved in planting, maintaining, and of course eating! My dad and I were always experimenting with different recipes from all around the world and talking to people about the things they cook. These experiences set the precedence for a passion for food in many ways. It was particularly helpful while growing up in Canada, as I had friends from many different cultures. As a child, I would often go over to my friend's house and gladly eat their cultural food to the surprise of their parents, as they did not expect that from a white Canadian born girl. For this reason, food became a way for me to relate to people. I am always willing to try anything, and this would open up a place of trust and conversation between myself and people of other cultures and ethnicities.

From a social worker's perspective, I was always curious why food connection to family and culture did not appear to be an issue. At this point, all of my evidence was anecdotal; I observed that food as a community builder was incorporated into community meetings, but not critically reflected on as a way to connect people. Food was pushed to the edges, as something you had to do to get community members to attend meetings. Even within the structural contexts of organizations – everyone quickly ate at their desk while doing work. Many social services organizations I have worked at do not even have a communal eating space. I wondered why this was, as food has always been a gateway for connecting people.

Once I started doing an overview of the literature, I found that this was largely an issue not being addressed. An infographic report for Statistics Canada called *Time to Eat* displays some statistics about time spent eating, with who, and what else is being done while eating. The statistics show that Ontarians spend the shortest amount of time eating compared to the rest of the provinces (Statistics Canada, 2018). 30% of Canadian eat all of their daily meals alone, and 34% of respondents who had children under the age of 15 ate no meals together with their children (Statistics Canada, 2018). A final statistic is that “6 out of 10 Canadians sometimes ate while doing another activity” (Statistics Canada, 2018). These activities included using technology, watching TV, prepping meals, reading, and working/studying (Statistics Canada, 2018). After these startling findings, I turned to Canada's food policy to see if anything was being done to change this landscape. Canada currently does not have a food policy, however is in the process of creating one. *What We Heard: Consultations on a Food Policy for Canada* is the closest published document we have to a food policy. The four main themes found from the consultation were food security, health and food safety, environment and economic growth (Government of Canada, 2018). Within this report, there are almost no recommendations on

enhancing communities through food, or a national family strategy on food. The final place I looked before deciding that this topic needed to be researched was the social work literature. Using Proquest, a multi-discipline academic database, I searched simply for “food” under social work titled journals. Seven articles came up, ranging from topics about food security, alternative food movements, food banks, and climate change and food. One of these articles *Regrounding in Infertile Soil: Food Insecurity in the Lives of New Immigrant Women* by Lessa and Rocha (2013) was the only social work article I used in my research. Lessa and Rocha describe why talking to clients about food can be so crucial

Social workers should, first, be aware of the centrality of food for new immigrant women who are re-rooting their homes and understand the specific food insecurity challenges... An important social work learning from this paper refers to characterizations of contemporary forms of racism, discrimination and bullying through food choices (p. 200-201).

This quotation is where I began to critically think about the importance of food in social work and how that would play out.

I have already situated myself in terms of where my passion for this research came from, but it is also important for me to position my intersectionalities and how they factor into this research. I am white women of European and Christian descent, who was born in Canada, along with many generations of my family. Part of what drove me to researching food is that food is a common experience shared by absolutely everyone, in the sense that everyone needs to eat. This made it easy to “not check” my privileges because everyone has to eat and I could focus on that commonality alone with participants. As I began working on this research, I came to the realization that this was an idealistic thought, and that positionality greatly affects the way I navigate through interactions with food; my experience of cultural foods (which includes cultures of all races) was normalized, while racialized people and immigrants were often

ostracized and alienated. I still believe that sharing food is a great way to make connections between people, but as a white Canadian born researcher I must be cautious that I do not use food as a way to avoid and ignore my privilege.

The purpose of my research is to explore how people use food as tool to build relationships with family and transmit their culture. Through this exploration, I hope to uncover an “essence” about food that transcends generations, genders, races, religions, ethnicities, etc. The objectives of my research are:

- To explore how food keeps generations of families together through eating together, cooking, etc.
- To explore how food connects people to their culture through cooking, traditions, rituals, etc.
- To explore if neoliberalism and/or North American ideologies have affected their relationship between food, family and culture

The introduction has provided a detailed account of my position and interest on this topic, and a broad overview of how Canadians eat. In Chapter 2, I have explored the literature related to my topic and have provided an extensive overview on which disciplines are discussing food, family and culture, and what their focuses are.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is a vast amount of literature regarding the connections between food, family and culture. This literature, however, is fragmented in showing the deep connections that link food to family and culture. To start my literature review, I will focus on the two broad themes of the literature – physical health and nutrition and family meal patterns. These two themes are not mutually exclusive, as family meal patterns are often factors in what affects people’s physical health and nutrition. These two themes do warrant to be separate because literature on physical health and nutrition look at other demographic factors such as gender, race, and income, and some literature on family meal patterns move beyond looking at nutrition. From the literature on physical health and nutrition and family meal patterns, plus scattered literature from a variety of disciplines, I have identified four more important themes from the literature. These themes are: 1) food security, 2) connection to food/food practices, family and community, 3) love and reciprocity, and 4) resistance and power. All of these themes are integrated with issues of race, gender, ethnicity, religion and class, which will be woven in throughout the literature review. After the overview of the literature, I will provide the limits of the literature, and where my research can help fill the gaps.

### **Physical Health & Nutrition**

The biggest source of literature focusing on food, family and culture was from health and nutrition journals. The main goal of many of these articles was to look at socio-demographic characteristics and meal patterns to determine how to target “at-risk” populations through health and nutrition programs (Ahye, Devine, & Odoms-Young, 2006; Berge, Hanson, & Draxten, 2016; Gillespie & Johnson-Askew, 2009; James, 2004; Liburd, 2003; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2014; Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman & Beagan, 2008). For example, Berge et al. (2016) used

qualitative interview to compare racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse families that have “normal weight” children or overweight/obese children. Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2014) completed a similar study, but used quantitative data to calculate food scores across families of different sociodemographic characteristics. These two studies portrayed low-income racialized families in a degrading way, making it appear that they did not know how to eat healthy and just needed more education. Berge et al. (2016) and Neumark-Sztainer et al. (2014) labelled racialized families as having unhealthy eating habits, without exploring or even suggesting the reasons why this might be, such as cultural ways of eating, poverty, or food insecurity.

James (2004) and Ahye et al. (2006) look at health and nutrition using a culturally sensitive lens. Ahye et al. (2006) aims to understand how three generations of African American women living in one household negotiate their roles around food and nutrition. James (2004) looked at dietary and nutrition-related attitudes of African Americans and explored the impact community had on these attitudes. Both James (2004) and Ahye et al. (2006) investigated the nuances that race, gender and class played within food choices regarding nutrition. Ahye et al. (2006) found that the predominately female role of being a caretaker put a strain on families’ mental health when the grandmothers of the family were not able to participate in food practices. Although this put a strain on the other women in the household, there was also a sense of reciprocity that “You took care of me, so I can now take care of you” (Ahye et al., 2006). James (2004) laid out the impacts of slavery, persecution and segregation and how those affect African American food choices to this day.

What was most striking about food literature – not just the journal related to health and nutrition, but the others as well – is that food is almost always synonymous with health and nutrition. Welch, McMahon, & Wright (2012) and Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al. (2008) take a

deeper look into what health means in relation to food. Welch et al. (2012) examines how elementary schools only provide food pedagogies concerning what is healthy versus unhealthy, rather than other subjugated forms of knowledge such as “haute” food, eating sustainably and cultural models of food. Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al. (2008) turns the question of healthy eating to participants and asks three ethnocultural groups in Canada what they consider healthy eating. This takes a cultural spin on health, as many participants identified that their cultural/traditional ways of eating are healthy because their people have thrived many years by eating that food (Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2008). These are two examples of literature that shifts the ideologies of food, health and nutrition from positivist to constructivist. The positivist literature frames research as being completely objective, with rigorous and well-designed research accounting for any subjectivities, while the constructivist literature understands that meaning can be socially constructed and therefore emphasizes the participants’ words and meaning making as important and rich data (Neuman, 2006).

### **Family Meal Patterns**

Family meals patterns was the main focus in the literature as a way to examine health, socialization, family connection and identity, and risky youth behaviour (Ahyes et al., 2006; Anving & Sallerberg, 2010; Devine et al., 2006; Gillespie & Johnson-Askew, 2009; Skeer, Sonnevile, Deshpande, Goodridge, & Folta, 2018; Trofholz et al., 2018). Many studies used quantitative data such as the frequency of family meals to showcase the benefits of family meals, however more recent literature is examining family meal patterns through qualitative data (Skeer et al., 2018). Skeer et al. (2018) found that family meals may reduce risky youth behaviour because it provided an opportunity for youth to discuss difficult topics in a family setting. Trofholz et al. (2018) inquired about how family meal practices are passed down through

generations and how immigration affected the passing down of these practices. Closely linked to passing down practices, Anving & Sellerberg (2010) looked at how food and food practices are used as a tool of socialization. Socialization through cooking and eating etiquette led children to becoming involved in food decision making choices and helped create a sense of family identity through those choices (Anving & Sellerberg, 2010; Devine et al., 2006; Gillespie & Johnson-Askew, 2009).

One underlying trend within articles about family meal patterns is families' fast paced lives affecting what and how they eat. Some examples that participants brought up were not being able to prepare the same cultural foods because of commitments such as employment (Lessa & Rocha, 2013), parents are too tired to cook (Skeer et al., 2018), busy schedules leading to a chaotic home environment (Skeer et al., 2018; Trofholz et al., 2018), changing contexts of family roles such children participating in extra-curricular activities and youth getting part-time jobs (Gillespie & Johnson-Askew, 2009), and other caregiving responsibilities getting in the way of food preparation (Ahyes et al., 2006). As these findings began to add up during my literature review, I felt that further research was needed in this area. These beginning explorations of fast paced lives affecting food life is one reason for using neoliberalism as my theoretical framework, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

### **Food Security**

Food security is “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active life” (FAO, 1996, as cited in Noack & Pouw, 2015, pp. 169-170). Food insecurity played a major role in how people connected to their families and culture through food. For families, there was often some negotiation that needed to occur between work, other family



activities, cooking, and eating together (Devine et al., 2006; Gillespie & Johnson-Askew, 2009; Lessa & Rocha, 2013; Trofholz et al., 2018). These negotiations and choices were often related to cultural food, as participants did not have access to cultural ingredients, cultural ingredients were expensive, or specific cultural dishes took too long to make (Lessa & Rocha, 2013; Trofholz et al., 2018; Zembrzycki, 2012). Food security most often affected immigrants and low-income families. Beagan, Power & Chapman (2015) studied people who had experience either upward or downward class mobility in their lifetime. Participants discussed that food was a signal to either align or distance themselves from particular classes (Beagan et al., 2015). Pragmatism versus pleasure in food was a distinction between lower and higher classes that was also seen as a factor between cooking cultural food or what is available (Beagan et al., 2015; Noack & Pouw, 2015; Zembrzycki, 2012). Lessa & Rocha (2013) and Zembrzycki (2012) highlight that families facing food security often cook whatever is available, rather than their traditional cultural dishes.

### **Food Connections to Family & Community – Spiritual Connection**

Connection to food/food practices, family and community - needs to be further broken down into two categories: spiritual connection and social connection. First, the spiritual connection is mostly related to food and food practices, however community does play a small role in this connection. Indigenous communities had a strong spiritual connection to food and food practices (Bagelman, Devereaux, & Hartley, 2016; Cidro, Adekunle, Peters, Martens, 2015). Participating in traditional cooking methods, harvesting food, and communal gatherings to share food were ways for Indigenous people to connect spiritually to the earth, the food, and each other; these acts are seen as sacred (Bagelman et al., 2016; Cidro et al., 2015). Other populations labeled food and food practices as sacred such as Jewish women, Muslim women, and East Asian women (Chapman & Beagan, 2013; D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Eidinger, 2012;

Sered, 1988; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). The sacredness people experienced came from food connecting them to God and/or deeply rooted cultural traditions and values (Sered, 1988; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015).

### **Food Connections to Family & Community – Social Connection**

Food brokered social connections with families and communities. In the literature, these connections were seen as bonding experiences, creating friendships, and experiencing social intimacy (Beagan & Chapman, 2012; Bagelman et al., 2016; Botterill, 2016; Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; Liburd, 2003; Skeer et al., 2018). Beagan & Chapman (2012) discuss the importance of “Big Momma” within African Nova Scotian communities as a leader who organizes community church events and coordinates food for the event. This gathering holds strong meaning to community members, because it is a chance to connect with people and with others they may not connect with in their day-to-day life (Beagan & Chapman, 2012). Sellaeg & Chapman (2008) show the importance of food as a family or communal gathering when they researched the food ideals of men who live alone. Sellaeg & Chapman (2008) found that men who live alone did not put strong emphasis on food because it was not pleasurable to cook and eat as one person, and participants had less time to cook at home because they were partaking in outside social events, some involving going out for food with friends and/or family.

### **Love & Reciprocity**

Although spiritual and social connections highlight the intimacy between food, families and communities, the concepts of love and reciprocity were identified as a different and specific theme. The role of a cooked meal for a family or community was a way of sharing a gift and showing love (Ahye et al., 2006; Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; D’Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Liburd,

2003; Moisio, Arnould & Price, 2004). Moisio et al. (2004) looked at the parallels between homemade food and love in constructing family identities. Homemade food was seen as a symbol of love that was most often used by the women in their family (Moisio et al., 2004). The reciprocity was shown in ways such as children helping their mothers/grandmothers in the kitchen, cleaning up, or simply enjoying and complimenting the meal (Moisio et al., 2004). Cappellini & Parsons (2012) identified that cooking a meal for a family was more satisfying when there was reciprocity – even if that reciprocity was as simple as being present during the meal and participating in family conversations. Using food as a sign of love is gendered, as most studies in my literature review only interviewed women’s experiences, and only female participants made the connection between food and love (Ahye et al., 2006; Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; D’Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Liburd, 2003; Moisio, Arnould & Price, 2004).

### **Resistance & Power**

The final theme is how food is used as a tool of resistance and power. Food was used as a form of resistance and power by two major groups – one, immigrant and racialized communities, and two, women. Immigrants and racialized communities used food to resist assimilation into Western culture and maintain their own cultural heritage (Airhihenbuwa et al., 1996; Beagan & Chapman, 2012; Chapman & Beagan, 2013; Slocum, 2011; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). For Black African American communities, so much of their culture was taken away by slavery and segregation, that food choices are used to connect them to their roots and used as a form of resistance to mainstream Western culture (Beagan & Chapman, 2012; Slocum, 2011). African American food choices also clashed with Canada’s white and Westernized health care system, as “Black ways of eating” were often seen as unhealthy (Beagan & Chapman 2012; Slocum, 2011). This often created distrust among African Americans and health care professionals, which seems

to create a trend of scholarly work around black families/communities and nutrition (Ahyes et al., 2006; Aihiebuwa et al., 1996; Beagan & Chapman, 2012; Berge et al., 2015; James, 2004; Liburd, 2012; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2014; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2008). Immigrant communities used food choices in a similar matter, as a form of resistance to assimilation and a form of ethnic identity maintenance (Champan & Beagan, 2013; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015).

Women also used food as a form of resistance and power against gender roles. Gender intersected with other identity markers such as ethnicity and religion to play a role in their forms of resistance and power (Cancian, 2012; D'sylva & Beagan, 2011; Eidinger, 2012; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). Women are generally seen as the gatekeepers of food, family and culture, therefore when women defy their gender role of cooking, it is seen as resistance (Cancia, 2012; Eidinger, 2012; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). Resistance from women about domestic duties does not mean that women do not enjoy cooking, as shown in the love and reciprocity theme, but rather are finding ways to negotiate their roles with their male partners in a society where many women have careers (Cancian, 2012). D'Sylva and Beagan (2011) interviewed Goan Canadian women about how food is used as power for them within their families. Participants said that food simultaneously works as a form of subordination and power – subordination in the expectations that women are always responsible for cooking, and power in controlling the terrain of the kitchen and deciding what the family eats (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011).

### **Limitations of the Literature**

Some limitations within the existing knowledge are the primary focus on physical health and nutrition, the latent discrimination within the studies, and the lack of social work literature. The focus of physical health and nutrition within the literature detracted from other uses of food. This is not to say that physical health and nutrition are not important, but without looking at the

other factors that influences people's food choices and lifestyles, scholars are not able to get a holistic picture of people's relationship to food. Articles from Beagan and Chapman (2012) about the meaning of food to African Nova Scotians, Airhiiebuwa et al. (1996) about cultural eating patterns of low-income African Americans, and James (2004) about how culture and community impact nutrition of dietary intake for African Americans, all play a role in expanding the knowledge of food beyond just what families eat, however they are still heavily focused on physical nutrition. The articles that focused on physical health and nutrition tended to conclude that the research could be used to develop nutrition programs and educated people on healthy eating (Airhiiebuwa et al., 1996; Ahye et al., 2006; Beagan & Chapman, 2012; Berge et al., 2016, James, 2004; Liburd, 2003; Newmark-Sztainer et al., 2014; Noack & Pouw, 2015). What if a researcher took the health perspective from a different angle and focused on food, family and community as an important element of people's mental health and well-being? Combining that information in conjunction with research on physical health and nutrition would provide a fuller picture of the connection between food, family and culture and its relation to a person's health.

The literature tended to focus on particular racial or ethnic groups with a focus on interviewing women or families. While the diversity in the literature was helpful and necessary, there is latent racism and sexism within the literature. African Americans were either the focus or one of the racial groups within many of the studies (Ahyes et al., 2006; Aihiebuwa et al., 1996; Beagan & Chapman, 2012; Berge et al., 2015; James, 2004; Liburd, 2012; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2014; Ristovski-Slijepceivc et al., 2008). The rhetoric behind these articles was that African American have "unhealthy ways" of eating and need to be taught through nutritional programs how to eat healthy. Some of the literature does look at what ways we can make health services more culturally appropriate such as James (2004) and Beagan & Chapman (2012), however their

conclusions still focus on nutrition and education programs. In relation to sexism, only one article focused on men, and it was about men who live alone, not men who live with families where gender roles play a factor in domestic activities (Sellaeg & Chapman, 2008). The literature assumes that because women do most of the cooking that women are the ones that should be interviewed. In the case of both racism and sexism with the literature, the researchers could avoid this by studying “up”. The research is currently looking at who is oppressed by gender, race, and ethnicity in their relation to food structures rather than studying “up” at the systems that maintain this oppression (Padget, 2008). This could be on an individual level, like interviewing men in families about their role in cooking to examine patriarchal structures or interviewing doctors about how they incorporate cultural sensitivity, or this could be at the institutional/societal level such as using discourse analysis to study the development of the Canadian Food Guide, or examining how food advertisements target female consumers.

The lack of social work literature about food, family and culture was quite shocking. Only one article in my literature review was from a social work journal – the Lessa & Rocha (2013) article about food insecurity experiences of new immigrant women. The rest of the literature came from disciplines such as health and nutrition, family studies, anthropology, food studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies. While the interdisciplinary findings were crucial in terms of the development a robust literature review, social work research would have provided a particular lens to link micro to macro and to link practice to theory. Lessa & Rocha (2013) connect their participant’s stories to the structures of social services and how overlooking food as an important part of immigrant women’s lives can lead to racism and discrimination while providing services. I did not find that level of analysis and critical insight in any of the other articles in my literature review.

## **Contribution of this Research**

My research will contribute to the literature in two ways. First, I will be adding to the limited social work research that exists about the connection between family, food and culture. Although there is extensive literature on this topic in various disciplines, a social work approach is needed to understand the importance of incorporating food in everyday practice. Finally, I will be using the concept of neoliberalism as part of my theoretical framework to uncover more information about how fast-paced lives and the influence of Western culture play a role in how we eat, cook and connect to family and culture (this will be further discussed in Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework). There is little research on how neoliberalism affects the everyday interactions in our lives, and I believe that neoliberalism has changed the way we enjoy food, eat with our families and communities, and pass down culture.

The literature review shows that systems that connect food, family and culture are complex. While food can be a sign of love and reciprocity, it can simultaneously be a source of oppression and discrimination. Despite the discrimination and oppression that some groups face within food structures, there is also strength within families and communities, allowing food to act as a form of power and resistance. In the next chapter, my goal is to further explain what lens I will be using to analyze the data I collect, and how that will play a role in adding to the gaps in the current literature.

### **CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

My literature review revealed that fast paced lives and the influence of Western society played major roles in how people cook and eat together. Trofholz et al. (2018) points out that many parents in their study wished that their children valued family meals the same way as they did when they were children. Cancian (2012) and Eidinger (2012) discuss the difference between mothers and daughters after the daughters were exposed to second-wave feminism. Many women felt a need to reject the roles their mothers had as primarily responsible for domestic labour, especially when many women also have full-time jobs (Cancian, 2012; Eidinger, 2012). My literature review also shows how the influence of Western society can have an effect on the ways people experience their culture. Vallianatos and Raine (2015) found that their Arabic and South Asian immigrant participants had to find new ways to combine traditional foods with Western food to satisfy their children, such as “Indian pizza”. These examples from the literature show that things change quickly from generation to generation, and factors such as immigration and growing gender equality affect how families interact with food and food processes. For these reasons, I have chosen to use a conceptual framework consisting of two concepts –neoliberalism and cultural hegemony.

#### **Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is a school of political thought that emphasizes free market and individualism (Cahill & Konings, 2017). Neoliberalism became predominant in the 1980s in the United States and England when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were in power (Ferguson, 2008). Three key elements of neoliberal ideology are methodological individualism, rationality and market supremacy (Ferguson, 2008). Methodological individualism claims that society can be looked at as many individuals pursuing their own self-interest (Ferguson, 2008).



When individuals are pursuing their own self-interests, they are always seen as rational beings in that process (Ferguson, 2008). Finally, market supremacy means that neoliberalists believe that the market or economy works best when there are few regulations, because of a belief that the market will correct itself if there are any imbalances (Ferguson, 2008). Neoliberalism has led to the privatization of social services, more precarious work and overall growing inequality (Cahill & Konings, 2017; Ferguson, 2008).

Neoliberalism can be seen as a policy, a discourse, or an ideology (Larner, 2000). For the purpose of my research I will use neoliberalism as an ideology within my theoretical framework. Neoliberalism has been successful in shaping the political landscape and individuals' lives (Larner, 2000). Constructing neoliberalism as an ideology addresses the strong influence on individual actions (Larner, 2000). Larner (2000) discusses the work of Stuart Hall and his examination of "Thatcherism" to explain the shift of neoliberalism only being viewed as a policy, to the concept of neoliberalism as an ideology. Hall argues that Thatcherism created a new form of political thought based on the ideals of neoliberalism that shifted the political climate (Larner, 2000). Hall believes there are three aspects invoked in this ideological transformation – "first, that neo-liberalism is not simply a system of ideas; second, that power is not constituted and exercised exclusively on the terrain of the state; third, that hegemony is only achieved through an ongoing process of contestation and struggle" (Larner, 2000, p. 9-10). These three points help explain the influence and control that neoliberalism as an ideology has that goes beyond policy and seeps into everyday life.

For my research, neoliberalism plays a role in the structure of family time and meals. Neoliberalism is about being a productive member of society; it is about selling your labour power for a wage (Cahill & Konings, 2017). Cancian (2012) points out that most women who

work a full-time job end up working a “double day” because they are then responsible for all of the domestic labour and child rearing in the evening. Cooking as domestic labour is not seen as productive labour under neoliberalism and is therefore not valued (Cahill & Konings, 2017). From empirical observations and research from the literature review, there is an underlying notion in North American society that preparing food is not a productive use of time. Lebel (2017) examines the food retail environment in Canada and found that the “food away from home” industry is rapidly growing. “Food away from home” refers to alternatives to cooking a meal traditionally (LeBel, 2017). For example this could be “speed scratch” items that reduce you prep time such as Hamburger Helper or meal-kits like Hello Fresh where proportioned and pre-packed food is delivered to your door and can be cooked in 30 minutes, “ready-made” meals like frozen lasagnas or rotisserie chickens that can be picked up at the grocery store, and “fast casual” meals, which are an upgrade from fast food, where you can purchase good quality food from restaurants or high-end take-out establishments through apps like Skip the Dishes or Uber Eats (Lebel, 2017). Advertising for these products and services is being targeted to family who have busy lives with work, school and extra-curricular activities, but still want to have a wholesome meal – sometimes as a sit-down family dinner, and sometimes on the go in between events. The message here is – the less time you spend preparing food, the more time you have to be a productive member of society, or the more time you have to do fun activities that support individual needs. At the same time, precarious and low wage work becomes more common through neoliberalism, therefore robbing people the time and money to enjoy leisure. Neoliberalism creates a paradox between enjoying individual leisure while simultaneously creating an economic environment that only the elite can enjoy.

## **Cultural Hegemony**

Cultural hegemony is a concept created by Italian Marxist thinker and politician Antonio Gramsci in the early 1900s (Jackson-Lears, 1985). Cultural hegemony describes what happens when the dominant culture and ideology is imposed on everyone (Jackson-Lears, 1985). The dominant culture is portrayed as benefitting everyone, however it is only serving the interest of the elite and those within the dominant group (Jackson-Lears, 1985). What is subtle about cultural hegemony is that it is not coercion or domination, but rather it is made to seem as if there is free choice, and that there will be some benefit from the dominant culture (Artz & Ortega Murphy, 2000). In the case of my research, the dominant culture would be North American neoliberal culture, and the subordinate culture would be everyone else. Subordinate groups see the effects of cultural hegemony amplified if they are racialized, immigrants, non-Christian, etc. Neoliberalism as a dominant ideology emphasizes that food should be shared and enjoyed, but not at the expense of you spending hours cooking. Advertising in a neoliberal society suggests that cooking is not part of one's own self-interest, and therefore the time could be better spend doing something fun or productive. In a society with precarious work, lack of affordable day-care and people working multiple jobs to make ends meet, the prospect of not cooking and relaxing with your children, watching TV or browsing your Facebook may sound more appealing, and feel like the freedom of choice rather than coercion.

Neoliberalism and cultural hegemony complement each other as a conceptual framework as neoliberalism looks at the larger structures in society, where cultural hegemony ties those larger structures in with everyday interactions. Neoliberalism is the dominant culture and ideology that overtakes the subordinate culture and ideology. Combining neoliberalism and cultural hegemony in a conceptual framework is particularly poignant for a Toronto-based study

because of the complexities of cultures that live within Toronto. Mehta (2012) provides an example of this while examining the landscape of South Asian cuisine in Toronto. Over the past few decades, various ethnic foods have become popular in Toronto, including Mehta's focus on roti and butter chicken. These dishes have provided South Asian immigrants with an imaginary homeland within a diaspora that holds a collective memory (Mehta, 2012). At the same time, popular foods become harnessed as representative of South Asian culture, where all South Asian food is seen as curry; there is a presence of a collective culture that does not actually exist within South Asian countries (Mehta, 2012). Neoliberalism commodifies particular aspects of other cultures and sells them to the masses as being authentic and exotic. This is also how cultural hegemony plays out within neoliberalism because it incorporates part of the subordinate culture, continuing to make it seem like free choice (Artz & Ortega Murphy, 2000). This is just one example of the complexities that neoliberalism and cultural hegemony have in shaping our everyday life in relation to food.

### **Relevance of Theoretical Framework to Research**

My conceptual framework is relevant to my research in two ways. First, most of the literature has shown a rapid shift in the ways we interact with food and food processes, family time and resources and the assimilation or acculturation into North American culture. For those reasons, I feel that using a conceptual framework that challenges why those changes exist and how those changes affect the participants is crucial. Since neoliberalism and cultural hegemony seem like very abstract ideas, I want to be able to bring them down to a micro level and examine how they affect our everyday lives. Neoliberalism appears to be a word I hear more often in regular conversation and on the news and is used most frequently to refer to our economic state. My goal is to show how neoliberalism permeates seemingly simple choices we make in relation

to food, family and culture. Second, I would like to show how cultural hegemony and neoliberalism affect social work as a profession, and explore how people's stories of food, family and culture can play a role in that. As explored in my introduction, food as a connector between family and culture seemed like a rarely explored topic within the social work field. Factors such as a shrinking welfare state and dwindling social services affect what services can be offered and how those services are offered – generally with a Westernized view of “helping” which focuses on the individual rather than a communal approach (Artz & Ortega Murphy, 2000; Ferguson, 2008). With that in mind, I hope to explore some social work alternatives under the gaze of neoliberalism that incorporates food processes as a part of social work practice.

The goal of my conceptual framework is to add to the missing data within the literature about the effects that our current Canadian society has on the way we cook and eat. Although my research is personal in terms of my approach of using interviews, I hope my theoretical framework will provide a larger context on how our society can affect everyday interactions between food, family and culture.

## **CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY**

This chapter will describe in detail my research design including my approach of inquiry, recruitment and sampling techniques, data collection methods and instruments, data analysis techniques and ethical considerations. A critical analysis of my methods will be applied to each subsection to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the methods I have chosen. By the end of the methodologies section, there should be a clear understanding of my research process, how I as a researcher fit into my work, and how my research process works to achieve my goals of filling the gaps within social work research using an anti-oppressive framework.

### **Approach of Inquiry**

The approach of inquiry I used was interpretive phenomenology. Phenomenology looks at “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 57). Phenomenology aims to find an “essence” within the experiences of all participants – something that holds true to everyone who experiences that phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon in terms of my research is the connection that food provides to family and culture; therefore, I hope to find an essence or commonality surrounding food, family and culture in all of my participants’ stories. I have chosen specifically interpretive phenomenology as it sees researcher’s interpretation as only one interpretation, recognizing that a researcher’s interpretation is ultimately influenced by their own experiences (Creswell, 2013). “Bracketing” out the researcher’s experiences is generally seen as a more objective way to conduct a phenomenological study; however, my research topic is heavily influenced by my life experiences and worldview, and therefore it would be inappropriate to bracket myself out of the researcher. Preston and Redgrift (2017) suggest that interpretive phenomenology is more aligned

with anti-oppressive practice because it makes the researcher's presence more visible throughout the research.

One challenge I may face with phenomenology is finding an essence within such a diverse group of people. While the requirement for participants in phenomenology is that they have all experienced the same phenomenon, usually participants are linked by something more closely than something like their connection to family and culture through food, for example all participants are the same profession, experience the same event, or have some of the same demographic characteristics (Creswell, 2012). One reason why I chose interpretive phenomenology was to actively incorporate my meaning making of experiences as a way to provide an explanation and hold accountability within my research. I will actively work with my supervisor and personally reflect on my analysis of the data to ensure I am not creating an essence that is not truly there for the sake of coming to a clean conclusion.

### **Recruitment and Sampling Techniques**

I used purposive sampling to find participants. Purposive sampling involves choosing participants who can provide “a unique approach to a problem or situation, or a special perspective, insight, expertise, characteristic or condition the researcher wishes to understand” (Yegidis, Weinbach, & Lyers, 2018, p. 216). Purposive sampling was used because some knowledge about the person participating was helpful in determining who has a strong connection to food and the ways food connects to family and culture. Before confirming participants, I would discuss with potential participants what the research project entailed, while also inquiring about if they are the main cook in their family, and if they feel that food brings their family together and keeps them connected to their culture. When recruiting participants, I did not use or provide a specific definition of family or culture for participants. This allowed

participants to create their own meaning of family and culture. Using purposive sampling in interpretive phenomenology, where participants are sought out based on their knowledge and experience on the topic is aligned with anti-oppressive practice (Preston & Redgrift, 2017).

Recruitment was done through my networks, by either contacting people I believed were well-suited for the research, and through posting on Facebook (See Appendix A for recruitment statements). My sample size was to recruit 6-10 participants. Participants must have met four broad criteria to participate in the research – 1) have a strong connection to food and the ways food connects you to your family and your culture, 2) be born in 1980 or earlier (1980 is when neoliberalism started growing in North American, and I wanted my participants to have experienced lives before neoliberalism), 3) be fluent in English, 4) live in the GTA.

### **Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

Data was collected through interviews, either individual interviews or family interviews. Linked interviews (or as I coin them in my research, family interviews) are “intended to explore the personal experience of the individuals alone and in conjunction with each other” (Padgett, 2017, p. 116). Since my research involves the connection between food and family, family interviews were offered as a way for participants reflect off their family members, and for families to co-create their story. A main participant, which was determined either by who I contacted or who contacted me, were asked if they had a family member who met the participant criteria that they believe would be interested in participating. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of four broad questions, with some prompt questions (See Appendix B for interview guide). Participants were provided a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. Semi-structured interviews within interpretive phenomenology allow for the



researcher and the participant to “co-create” the story (Preston & Redgrift, 2017, p. 92).

Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

As part of relationship building and reciprocity, I added an optional food/cooking activity before the interview as a way to better know the participants, and to share our love for food as a relationship builder. The food/cooking activities were negotiated with the participants to be mindful of their time and resources. Activities ranged from potluck lunches to cooking a full family dinner. These activities were not recorded, however my experiences from participating in the activities will be used throughout my analysis.

Consent was obtained from all participants before starting the food/cooking activity (See Appendix C for consent form). All participants were made aware of the structure of my research process before meeting with them in person. Participants were compensated for their time and food with gift cards to the grocery store they frequented most often.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was completed through thematic coding. I analyzed the transcripts and look for significant statements that describe the phenomenon of connection to family and culture through food and create clusters of meaning from those statements (Creswell, 2013). The next step was to create a textual description of the overarching themes from the clusters of meaning while also using my personal experience as the researcher to create a structural description (Creswell, 2013). Finally, this led to the development of the essence of the experience or the commonalities between the participants (Creswell, 2013).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Approval from Ryerson’s Research Ethics Board (REB) was obtained in February 2019. Within the REB submission, I identified two potential risks for participants. First, the potential

for psychological risk in terms of sensitive content that may come up in participants' interviews. Discussing food in relation to family and culture could bring up upsetting memories such as the loss of a family member, the breakdown of a family, the loss of a culture through migration, assimilation, etc. I mitigated this risk by informing the participants of the potential, and ensuring they had someone to talk to after the interview if discomfort were to occur. Second, the potential for a dual-role risk, as I have previous relationships with some participants. I mitigated that risk by assuring participants that our relationship would not change due to the research, and that they could contact my supervisor if they had any further concern.

Beyond the ethical considerations of the REB, I wanted to ensure I was incorporating anti-oppressive practice to the fullest extent. I did this in two ways – one, adding the food/cooking component of the study, and two, using interpretive phenomenology to understand and illustrate my biases and privilege within my own work. The goal of the food/cooking activity was to provide a space where the participant and I have a reciprocal relationship – a space where we are two cooks in a kitchen or two people enjoying a meal together. Powell & Takayoshi (2003) discuss how creating space for reciprocity intended by the researcher does not always work in the ways we intend. The roles that I intend to play with the space of the food activity and the interview may not be the roles that the participants need me for (Powell & Takayoshi, 2003). With that in mind, I wanted to create a space outside the actual interview where participants may use the time and reciprocity as something different than I intended, and I will shift my roles accordingly.

I will use concepts from Attia and Edge's (2017) article about becoming a critically reflexive researcher when reflecting on my research. Attia and Edge (2017) define the developmental approach as "one which foregrounds the continuing growth of the whole-person-

who-researches as integral to the research process” (p. 34). They believe that qualitative researchers need to have an empathetic ability to understand their participants’ experiences, and also have humility in acknowledging that they have a specific standpoint as a researcher (Attia & Edge, 2017). In order to practice the developmental approach, a researcher needs to be able to practice prospective reflexivity – the effects the researcher has on the research, and retrospective reflexivity – the effects the research has on the researcher. With these concepts in mind, I used this approach of my critical reflexivity and looked at the cyclical relationship between myself and my research. This means I will be conscious of the ways that I affect my research, and the way my research affects me.

As I discussed in the Approach to Inquiry section, part of my choice for using interpretive phenomenology is for my research to be transparent by reflecting on my own experience of food, family and culture and how those experiences and my positionality will affect my research. Pretending that my work can be completely objective is unethical to my standards of ethics, and the aspects of subjectivity within my research provide a fuller picture. All of the choices within my methodology have been actively reflected on to ensure every step of my research is as ethical as can be.

## **CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the profile of my participants and the major research findings from their interviews. I conducted eight interviews, six individual interviews and two family interviews for a total of ten participants. I present a profile of each participant or group of participants and their connection to food. In situations where the participants engaged in the cooking component of the research process, I also discuss about the food we cooked together. All participants have chosen pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

### **Profile of Participants**

#### ***Brandon***

Brandon is a Filipino man in his mid 40s. He came to Canada as a young child with his family. Brandon became interested in cooking as a teenager, with his mom reluctantly allowing him to help in the kitchen. Brandon's mom regularly cooked Filipino food, which was difficult as a single mother with four children. Brandon lives with his partner and is the main cook in their home. He is learning to make the traditional Filipino dishes that he loves from his mother. Brandon tries to accommodate the different eating habits between him and his partner, but it can be difficult with their busy work schedules. For the food component of my research, Brandon and I grabbed a coffee and took a walk before the interview.

#### ***Daisy & Giselle***

Daisy and Giselle are mother and daughter from Sicily, Italy. Daisy is in her mid-70s and was born in Sicily. She immigrated to Canada in her 20s with her husband and son. Daisy has four children, with Giselle being the youngest. Giselle is in her early 40s and was born in Canada. Daisy lives with Giselle's family – her husband and two children. Daisy does most of the cooking, supported by Giselle. Both are very immersed in Italian cuisine and culture, and

mostly cook Italian food at home. As part of the food component of my study, Daisy, Giselle and I prepared a Sicilian dish very specific to the area Daisy grew up in, called *Voda Voda*. The most traditional *Voda Voda* is a panzerotti style dish stuffed with parsley, garlic, tomatoes and olive oil. We made another *Voda Voda* consisting of sausage, potatoes, spinach, garlic, tomatoes and olive oil. Daisy, Giselle, and I enjoyed this meal together.



Illustration A – Voda Voda

### ***Ed & John***

Ed and John are father and son and are multiple generations Canadian. Ed is in his mid-80s, was born in Canada and identifies as German and Canadian. Ed was a cook in the Canadian military and often travelled around for work with his wife and two sons. At one point, the family owned a restaurant, where John helped out. John is in his early 60s and identifies as German, Ukrainian and Canadian. Both John and Ed have been the main cooks in their family. Ed is now retired and lives in a seniors' condo. He comes over every Sunday for family dinner and cribbage with John, his wife and their two daughters. For the food component of my research, I was invited to Sunday dinner where we cooked a traditional Ukrainian meal consisting of homemade perogies, *patychky* (breaded pork on a stick), boiled beets and for dessert, apple crumble.



Illustration B – Ukrainian Dinner (*from left to right* – perogies, boiled beets, patychky)

### *Inacia*

Inacia identified herself as a Caucasian Portuguese woman in her mid-50s. She immigrated to Canada with her husband and son in 2003. She grew up in a small town in Portugal with 8 siblings, living on a farm, growing their vegetables and raising livestock. Inacia has worked as a cook in a variety of settings in Portugal, but since she arrived in Canada, she has switched careers. She is the main cook in her house, and also helps cook at all family gatherings. As part of the food component of my study, Inacia and I prepared a traditional Portuguese dish called *Bacalhau à Brás*

– a codfish dish mixed with onion, garlic and homemade fries, topped with olives and parsley.

We shared this meal together with her husband and son.



Illustration C - Bacalhau à Brás

***Petra***

Petra is a Caucasian Dutch woman in her 50s. She grew up on a farm with her family, where they grew their own food and raised their own livestock. Petra's mother always made three-course homemade meals. Petra follows a similar, but simplified tradition of her mother, always preparing homemade food with little to no processed ingredients. Petra has two grown-up children. Petra is known for hosting large family meals as a way to bring everyone together. Petra and I unfortunately did not have the time to partake in a cooking activity, however I have eaten many of her baking delicacies before.

***Sabira***

Sabira is a woman in her mid-50s and identifies as Indian from East Africa. She grew up in Tanzania, where her family owned a restaurant that her siblings helped with. Sabira immigrated to Canada in her 20s and has many relatives in Canada. She lives with her husband and has two adult children. Sabira mostly cooks her cultural food at home, which her children prefer over Western food. Sabira is Muslim, and her religion plays a large role in her connection to food, family and community, as her mosque in collaboration with other mosques, put on many religious and cultural events with food, where everyone cooks. Sabira and I cooked *beef pilau*, a rice dish flavoured with ingredients like garlic, ginger, chilies, and cumin. We also made

*kachumbari*, which is a fresh salad with tomatoes, onion and chilies – similar to salsa, which is meant to be eaten alongside the beef pilau.



Illustration D – (top) Kachumbari & (bottom) Beef Pilau

### ***Tamif***

Tamif is a Canadian-born woman in her mid-40s, with her ethnic background from West and South Africa, specifically Lesotho and Nigeria. Homemade cooking from her mother was a large part of Tamif's childhood, and only grew from there as she began to help in the kitchen. Tamif's mother also grew a large vegetable garden in their backyard. Tamif regularly cooks homemade meals, despite her busy schedule as a full-time student and caregiver. Tamif feels that food gives her a closer connection to her Basotho heritage. For the food component of my research, Tamif and I did a meal swap, where she prepared me roast chicken with orzo and sautéed bok choy, and I prepared homemade vegetarian pizza.





(left) Illustration E – Roast Chicken, Orzo and Bok Choy  
(right) Illustration F – Homemade Vegetarian Pizza

### ***Zoe***

Zoe is a Jewish Canadian-born woman in her early 40s. Her parents immigrated to Canada in fear of persecution from their home country for being Jewish. Zoe's ethnic background and her religion have caused tension for her and her family throughout the years, so they tend to follow more of the Eastern European Jewish traditions. Zoe loves to bake and prefers it over cooking because baking represents food that is made for pure pleasure and enjoyment. Zoe has four children that often get involved in baking. She is known throughout her community as the baker, and often brings treats to school and community events. Zoe and I started the process of making *Challah bread*. Since the bread takes about five hours to make, we started the dough, and let it rise during our interview. A picture of the final product was sent to me that evening.



(left) Illustration G – Challah Dough  
(right) Illustration H – Baked Challah Bread

## **Major Findings**

While reviewing all transcripts, I identified five major themes. These themes are 1) source of survival, 2) facilitates togetherness and expressions of love and reciprocity, 3) brings nostalgic memories, 4) signals gender role expectations, and 5) medium for transmitting culture. I present below a discussion of each of these themes.

### ***Source of Survival***

The first question I asked my participants was “What does food mean to you?”. The purpose of this question was to get participants’ thinking broadly about food. The answers I received from participants discussed the necessity of food. Participants used words like ‘necessity’, ‘health’, ‘survival’, and ‘sustenance’ to describe the importance, yet simplicity of food. This is what Sabira had to say “Food is always important. Because first thing you come home, of course, you're hungry. You go up in the fridge, What's in there? What can I eat?” Sabira’s comment reflects that food is often in participants’ minds, which is an accurate representation of what others discussed in their interviews. The theme of necessity was difficult to represent through participant quotations because it was often just short statements about the “matter of fact” nature that food is a necessity. The theme of necessity was more of an underlying feeling within the interviews, rather than a topic that was blatantly discussed.

### ***Facilitates Togetherness and Expressions of Love and Reciprocity***

Bringing people together was a theme that was heavily reflected within the interviews. Togetherness extended beyond family to friends, colleagues and communities. Petra discussed the importance of family meals.

“Like my daughter has a birthday last weekend and then a whole bunch of people came for brunch on Saturday. It's just lovely to sit around the table with a big group of people and all have a good time and chatting. It's a nice way to feel connected and to feel that there is this circle of

people around you. And that my kids also have that even though they don't have extended family here. That by inviting others, not only family to those things that they have that bigger circle of people. That matters to them.”

Petra emphasized that incorporating others beyond family in gatherings was important to her and her children – especially for people with small families or where extended family lived far.

Sabira discussed how food is important at community gatherings. According to Sabira,

“When we have big events and we cook for thousands of people and that would attract people to come and enjoy the food. We hold a big event at the International Centre, and we cook right in the back. We start cooking overnight and the event happens in the afternoon. People from other mosques are coming from all over the GTA.”

Sabira mentioned that mosque is a common place for communities to come together around food. The togetherness comes from not only eating together, but also cooking together. Sabira mentioned that at these large events for mosque, multiple mosques from the GTA come together to help coordinate the event and cook.

Food bringing people together was talked about commonly in the interviews, however another idea that was presented is that cooking food is not the same without people to share it with. In my family interview with John and Ed, there was an exchange between them that emphasized the shift in Ed's feelings towards cooking.

John: Food brings my family together. Food is love – it's corny.

Ed: To me, food is a necessity. It's something that must be done on a daily basis to keep going. That's basically it.

John: But you never used to feel that way

Ed: No, but I never used to be 86.

John: But you enjoy coming over here. We have a nice meal.

Ed: Yes I appreciate coming here. I come over here – it's not just the food, but the games and camaraderie.

Lindsay: So I hear you saying that food is not the same when you're by yourself?

Ed: Right, eating food is just part of a routine at home when I'm alone.”

Ed expanded on why there is more joy in cooking for people, rather than just for himself.

“I love cooking for people, or family or whatever. I enjoyed cooking. I really did. But once you’re by yourself – even when it was just my wife and I and the boys had left, it was more of a chore. I think we went to more canned stuff and more frozen stuff. But I still enjoyed cooking for a living. But you had to have somebody to cook for.”

Ed pointed out that a sense of togetherness is necessary in order to enjoy cooking and eating. Most participants discussed the joys of eating together, rather than the downfalls of cooking or eating alone. Both are equally important in examining how food connects people, families and communities.

For some participants, preparing food for their family was a way of showing their love. Giselle and Daisy in their interview regularly discussed how Daisy is always going out of her way to make something special to show her love. Daisy explained what she did for one of Giselle’s friends that was coming to their house for a party.

“I make pizza, and a friend comes over, and I know he doesn’t like pizza that I made, so I no make four, I make five different ones, as soon as he gets here, I put it on a plate with a nice cover, and I say put it in the truck and take it home – nobody touch it!”

Daisy made an extra pizza for Giselle’s friend that was his favourite and saved it just for him.

John also loves cooking for his daughter and uses it as a way to entice his daughter to come visit.

“I’ll cook a fancy meal just to get my daughter to come home. She’s a busy girl. I miss my girls. I love to spoil them. If I can get you to come home by cooking a fancy meal, then I’ll cook a fancy meal.”

Although showing love through food may seem to be a one-sided relationship, there is a component of reciprocity when a person shows gratitude through wanting more. Zoe explained her experience with her eldest son as follows:

“My big kid actually is almost 16, his friends are a bit obsessed with Mama Zoe cookies is what they call them and so he’ll just say “cookies again” and he’ll take an entire batch of cookies to school and you know

all the teenagers will just inhale them. I kind of love that. I have a way into his life that's apart from me, but he still wants to bring cookies."

Zoe loves that her son and his friends still enjoy their cookies, and that her son is constantly asking for more cookies.

With the responsibility of cooking and bringing people together, comes the responsibility of "navigating food". The concept of navigating food came from Zoe describing her 'picky eating'. Zoe comments "I'm a relatively picky eater, so it's always been like navigating – what is going to be safe? Food has always felt like a bit of work". All participants discussed that accommodations were always being made for people with allergies, specific diets and lifestyle choices, or 'picky eaters'. As all of the participants are active cooks in their house, this presented some challenges for them.

Inacia describes the navigating she does in order to still eat traditional food from her home country, while also tailoring the meals to her health concerns.

"I keep cooking my food [Portuguese food], our traditions, but different way now – maybe more light? Because our food is very rich in salt, olive oil, pork. But I try to keep the same traditions, but I do less things – less salt, less fat."

For Inacia, cooking healthier Portuguese food is something that has been done through experimentation – which is easier when she is the main cook of the household. Brandon expressed the challenges he faces in relation to cooking food. He says,

"I do like to try to make certain foods, but it's really difficult because my partner is a very particular eater – can't really eat a lot of spices or certain cuts of meat. I've also gotten a weird sensitivity to pork now. So it's a bit more a challenge to find something we can both eat."

Brandon's struggle with navigating food is different because not only is he dealing with food sensitivities for himself that have developed over time, but he is also working around what

his partner likes to eat. This navigating can be difficult as trying to find meals that satisfy them both can be limiting and cooking multiple meals can be exhausting.

In the most extreme case of navigating food, Petra explains what it's like to cook for someone with a severe allergy.

“The partner of one of my kids has fairly severe allergies. And it's like she goes into anaphylactic shock. It's really the risk of doing wrong or giving her the wrong food is really big. It is really important to me that she feels safe eating at my house. So I'm very adamant, like I'm having people over for Easter and they can't bring in food that is not prepared at my house because people don't know how to stick to the rules. They think a little bit of butter won't do any harm. So it is really important that people are all included in that. I do find it a bit difficult to manage all the all the allergies on top of them, this person is vegan, and this person is vegetarian. That kind of makes it hard at times. But it doesn't stop me from having people together.”

Petra is dealing with someone in her family that has allergies so severe it could be a life or death situation. She also discusses that navigating people's food choices such as being vegetarian or vegan can also be difficult, as Petra tends to have up to 20 people over for Easter dinner.

### ***Brings Nostalgic Memories***

All participants brought up at least one story about food that brought them back to a place of happiness and joy. Brandon describes how food is connected to memory to create nostalgia:

“Certain tastes, smells and flavours bring you back to a certain time. You know, if you eat s'mores, what do you think of? Campfire, camping, the whole outdoors experience and looking at the stars. Or if you were to try something for the first time, say in a different country, like you tried a souffle in France – you'll always remember that time. So what does food mean to me? It's a way of remembering things and putting you in a certain place in time in history.”

For many participants, the nostalgia was connected to their childhood, often times around grandparents and their home country. Giselle reminisces,

“When we made this traditional dish, it brings you back to your childhood, and things you used to do as a kid. I remembered when I went to Italy when I was 13 and I watched them make stuff in the huts with the brick ovens outside.”

The excitement in Giselle’s face when telling this story was clear. It was also one of the first things she mentioned in her interview. Tamif echoes similar sentiments as Giselle.

“It was a way of connecting three of us in my family, my sister, my mom and me. It was a way that my mother brought joy to us through foods. So we would be sleeping on Saturday mornings, when all of a sudden you smell sausages cooking. And you're like - yes, pancakes. Because my mom used to make the best pancakes. No recipe - still can't figure out how to do it. They were just awesome. Whenever we smelt that we knew that it would be a wonderful day just because we start with that.”

Tamif even brings up the importance of smelling the sausage as she wakes up – something that Brandon also discusses. The importance of the nostalgia falls within all the senses – smelling the sausage, tasting the souffle, seeing the brick ovens, etc.

### ***Signals Gender Role Expectations***

Despite the fact that cooking was a way of showing love for some participants, and that there are feelings of reciprocity from those that the participants cook for, there was a gender struggle that played into feeling taken advantage of for some of the female participants. Inacia explains below what it is like being the only woman and cook in her household.

“I like to cook because I’m picky, well not picky but sometimes I don’t like how others cook, so I prefer to cook, but sometimes I feel frustrated because when I’m working and he’s working, fine, but this month he is stable, and he don’t do anything, just eating and sleeping, so when I come home, I feel like yeah... I worked all day. And I come to cook and clean.”

Inacia describes the frustration she feels about not receiving help with cooking when her husband is not working. She explained that culturally, it is expected of women to always cook.

Zoe also explains this frustration but in relation to her being a mother and breastfeeding. She says:

“I had been a relatively autonomous person in the world. And suddenly, I was completely at the mercy of this tiny person. Like if I wanted to sleep or use the washroom or bake cookies or leave the house, they needed me, it didn’t matter what my needs were. I think that lack of egalitarianism really rubbed me the wrong way. We could not co-parent equally because one of us was always necessary, and one of us was ancillary. So as soon as they [the children] could eat food, I was like – you’re feeding them!”

Zoe explained earlier in the interview that she does not enjoy cooking, only baking, because baking is related to pleasure, while cooking is related to necessity. After breastfeeding four children, Zoe was tired of being the parent that was constantly needed and shifted the responsibility of cooking onto her husband.

Gender norms appeared differently depending on the family. I asked Brandon, who has two brothers and one sister, whether his mother had intentionally taught any of her children how to cook, and he responded: “No, she didn’t, but funny enough, out of the four of us, the boys wanted to learn how to cook more than my sister.” Without bringing up gender in my question, Brandon knew there was an assumption that mothers only teach daughters how to cook.

### ***Medium for Transmitting Culture***

Transmission of culture as a theme that encompasses the ways participants experienced their own culture, as well how mainstream Western culture has affected their lives.

Using cooking and food as a way to pass down practical skills or pass down cultural practices was discussed in every interview, however the method of passing down skills and culture varied between participants.

“Maybe when Giselle was 15 or 16, me and husband had to go to a lawyer or something, I don’t remember exactly, but when we came back, I find the table set up all with the food cooked and dinner on the table. Me and my husband look at each other, and it’s just like ....” *Daisy showing a look of shock yet joy on her face*



Both Daisy and Giselle describe in their interview that Daisy did not intentionally teach Giselle how to cook, rather Giselle would just watch her mom in the kitchen frequently. That's why in the quote given above, Daisy is so shocked but delighted that Giselle had cooked dinner for them while her parents were out, because Daisy had not yet realized what Giselle was capable of cooking by watching her mother cook. For Tamif, passing down skills and recipes seemed more intentional than for Giselle.

“One thing I always wanted to learn before I moved out was how to make my mother's stuffing. She never had a recipe. So I would try and she'd say “Almost, but not quite there yet”. So when I was 19 years old, I made it and I'm anticipating her tasting it. And she tastes it and says it's perfect! And so she stopped making anything. So for family meals she wasn't cooking anymore. Since I was 19 I'm the one who does it now. I don't know if that was such a good idea (*Tamif and I laugh*) But it was a wonderful “I'm passing on the torch” thing. I didn't mind – she was more willing to have me do the cooking so she could work in the garden.”

Tamif discussed regularly helping her mom cook, and always trying to perfect her mom's recipes. There is also a clear passing of responsibility to Tamif once her mother felt she could cook well enough. Tamif later brought up that she and her mother still worked as a team to cook, because her mother grew vegetables that they would cook with.

Sabira had the unique experience of learning how to cook food from someone else's culture by the people of that culture. This experience is part of the same story mentioned from Sabira earlier around cooking for large mosque events. Sabira explained that they often rotate the style and culture of food depending on the holiday.

Sabira: “At this event we cooked more based on Central Asian because it was the Persian new year, so we cook the food their way and how they like it.”

Lindsay: “So how did you learn to make it Persian style?”

Sabira: “Oh because we have Persian people cooking with us.”

This is a way of not only passing down culture to those within your own ethnicity, but to other ethnic communities as well. For Sabira, Islam is part of her culture that cannot be separated from her ethnicity, so passing down culture and food always intertwines Islam and her North African and Indian heritage.

Some participants experienced discrimination against their cultural foods in a variety of ways. Brandon's experiences towards what Canadian's thought of Filipino was the most direct form of discrimination related to cultural food.

"A lot of people were a little weary about what Filipinos are cooking at home. I'd never eaten a dog before, but that was a thing back in the 70s, fear from the Philippines that people are eating dog. It was such a bad stigma. People still use that stereotype unfortunately, and now I play into it because I make jokes about it." – Brandon

Zoe describes how the discrimination her parents faced affects the ways she passes down Jewish traditions within her own family.

"I think their [Zoe's children] connection to it [Judaism] is in the matzo ball way, in the Eastern European way, much more so than anything for my particular culture. It's also interesting as a mixed family - what do you preserve? How do you preserve? Because food was so strangled in my household of origin. What we make on Passover, are my husband's family recipes because that's what's been passed down and my family doesn't really have that same connection in some ways. So I think for kids, they definitely feel a connection, but around particular kinds of Jewish foods that are skewed much more to Eastern European."

For Zoe, the discrimination comes in part from her ethnic background and religion backgrounds clashing; her parents fled from their home country in fear of persecution and hid their cultural roots once they moved to Israel. From there, her husband's Jewish roots being Eastern European were adopted in her family because they are seen as more of the norm in Judaism. Zoe's story is an example of cultural hegemony, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Finally Giselle felt an internalized form of discrimination towards her cultural food.

“I used to be so embarrassed bring my lunch because she used to send me pepper or rapini sandwiches, and I would be embarrassed because people had like bologna or cheese sandwiches. I don’t think I got made fun of, I was just embarrassed, I was self-conscious of it.”

As a child growing up with white non-Italian classmates, she knew that her food was different.

Daisy described much of the discrimination she faced as an Italian immigrant, and Giselle internalized that discrimination.

Not all participants had a strong link between their culture and food. John explains that his family has been in Canada for multiple generations, and they have lost some of their ways of cooking traditional Ukrainian or German food. Choosing food for John has more to do with the way he shops.

“My kids they laugh because I’m like ‘whoa look at the sales in the grocery store.’ And I’m making the list mentioning this store’s got this and this store’s got this so we can price matches here, well I want this meat but I don’t know maybe I can get it would reduce to clear at this store, so we’ll check here first. And that’s the way I shop. If strips of beef are on sale, then we’ll make a stir fry.”

John focuses more on what’s available or what’s on sale rather than picking out specific cultural foods. He attests his ways of shopping come from raising two children during financial hardships of the 1990s.

Petra, on the other hand, has a strong link to her culture, just not through food.

“I don’t think there is a savvy strong Dutch culinary culture. We have some traditional dishes that we ate at home and that I also cook. Indonesian food was a big thing in Holland, because Indonesia was a Dutch colony. So we all grew up with a couple of Indonesian dishes and I would cook those. And I would cook some of the Dutch comfort foods and I stick to the tradition of dessert after meal.” – Petra

She describes that other parts of Dutch culture are more important such as the particular way in which they celebrate holidays. For Petra, food is important, but not necessarily “Dutch food”.

Many participants had drastic shifts in lifestyle between their childhoods and their adult life – this was most prominent when participants immigrated from another country. Inacia explains what food was like growing up in a small town in Portugal in the mountains.

“Before I ate meat only once a week. We don’t have meat or fish every day. Because the time, 57 years ago, my family is a poor family, and we don’t have meat over there. Only the chickens my mom take care of. Chickens, rabbit, pork – only once a year they would kill pork to have meat to eat for almost a year, they put in salt. And fish maybe sometimes once a week because the fisherman drives to our town to sell fish.”

When Inacia discusses her cooking routines at home, she has meat or fish almost every meal. The biggest change that she mentioned from her childhood is going out to eat. This is something that never happened during her childhood because of the access to restaurants and their economic status. Inacia describes that going out to eat becomes an occasion that she and her family can enjoy in a different way.

“The reason to go out altogether or just me and my husband is the moment is different. I think I’m more available. At a restaurant, we are more close, I think. No TV, or checking phone.”

Other participants also mentioned similar changes in lifestyle. Petra also grew up on a farm as a child. Ed discussed the difficulties having to go to vegetable market, butcher and bakery just to buy all his groceries. Brandon and Giselle described the joys of eating out at restaurants that they were not able to do as children. Daisy used to make her own tomato sauce, but now it is too laborious. Many of these changes will be connected to my theoretical framework of neoliberalism in the following chapter.

Participants were asked about whether the wide availability of fast foods and processed foods changed the way they cooked. For some participants, it was as simple as canned or frozen

vegetables were sometimes nice to have on hand, but it did not seem to dramatically affect their cooking patterns. There were some comments from participants that contributed to the overall concept of the research that are important to mention. Tamif provides definitions to the two terms and have each of them affect her life.

“For me, there's a difference between fast food and processed food. So, for me, because of who my mother is and how she's exposed to different types of foods, we realized that fast food can be a Jamaican patty, samosas, shawarma, falafel. Processed food is McDonald's or Burger King - all that stuff. So fast food isn't a bad thing. Sure, I'll go to McDonalds. Last year, I went once because it's not a priority. Right? And who feels good after the McDonalds? So I think that the way that we ate and the way mom showed us, all these different ethnicities with respect to food. Fast food is very, very separate from processed food.”

For Tamif, fast foods were a way of experiencing other cultural foods, like Giselle and Brandon in the theme above.

John discusses using processed food as a means of taking care of his younger brother.

“Well, for me, it was just because I was a latchkey kid, and I was the older brother. It was TV dinners, and Kraft Dinner and grilled cheese. And it just from there, you build right. It was just a matter of survival.”

John talks about how his cooking skills came from making processed foods, which were easy for him as a child to make for his younger brother when his parents were not home. At the time, processed foods were a necessity for him and his brother.

Within the Western context of having access to processed foods and fast foods, there are also options for people to try a variety of cultural foods different from their own. Despite many participants enjoying their ways of cooking traditional cultural foods, some participants expressed their enjoyment of living in a place like Toronto that has many food options. Giselle explains:

“When we go out for dinner, I like to try different things because I eat Italian all the time. If I go out to a restaurant and I have to order a plate of

pasta, I'm not going to enjoy it because I don't like the way it's made. So I would rather go out for something I don't have like Chinese or Mexican food."

Giselle specifically avoids Italian food when she goes out because she knows that she and Daisy can make it at home. Giselle wants to use her time out at a restaurant to experiment with different culture's food.

Brandon discuss his excitement for seeing Filipino food fused with other types of food.

"It's a steamed bread [puto], and they use the bread as an English muffin. They put bacon, eggs and other stuff on it. And that one actually blew me out of the water because it brought me back to eating it as a kid, and really hating it, but it's actually not that bad. But it blew me away because I didn't realize people knew about it. When I asked the server about it, she explained that the chef was Filipino and passed on how to make it. They're using a traditional Filipino item and giving it a twist."

The findings of my research provide a general overview of the themes discussed within the interviews. The major themes provide a broad base for the overarching themes discussed in every interview, while the secondary themes provided some of the nuances that come from interviewing a diverse group of people. In the next chapter, I will provide an analysis of my findings using my two theoretical frameworks – neoliberalism and cultural hegemony. I will also explain where this research could be moved forward, and my own reflections my on my research.

## CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will analyze the findings of my research using my conceptual framework of neoliberalism and cultural hegemony. As a recap, neoliberalism is a school of political thought that emphasize a free market and individualism. Neoliberalism believes in little to no government intervention on goods and services, and emphasizes individuals being free to make their own choices in the market (Cahill & Konings, 2017). Cultural hegemony is the concept that the dominant ideology takes over other ideologies (Jackson-Lears, 1985). The dominant ideology, in the case of my research being Neoliberalism and Western culture, is imposed on everyone and made to seem that it benefits everyone.

It is difficult to conceptualize the everyday affects that neoliberalism has on the way we share food and culture. Since neoliberalism is associated with economic developments, the link between food security and neoliberalism appears to be the strongest within my literature review. I argue that there are other effects of neoliberalism on the ways we gather together and share food. Neoliberalism promotes self-interest, which tends to be taken up as “do only what you want to do, and nothing else”. The ideology of self-interest and individualism can dismantle the structure of family, and everyday family practices like cooking. Within my own research findings and the literature review, I believe women going into the workforce, and not being supported in other ways played a large role in the cultural shift of cooking, eating together, and passing down skills and culture.

To preface my argument about neoliberalism, gender roles and food, I want to make clear that I do not believe traditional family structures with rigid gender roles are the answer to families enjoying each other’s company around the dinner table. I also recognize that before neoliberalism, there were working-class women who worked outside the home decades before

first-wave feminism and neoliberalism. I believe there are series of historical events that led us to a point where values around food and eating together have been pushed aside for self-interest and the rationality of always being productive. Middle-class women started participating in the workforce, which meant they had less time for domestic work, like cooking. With both parents working full-time, it did not mean that domestic work got divided evenly, rather it meant that women started working a “double day” – paid labour during the day, and domestic work during the evening (Cancian, 2012). It is no coincidence that 7 out of my 10 participants were women, and that almost all of them learned to cook from their mothers.

Neoliberalism plays into the argument because it benefitted from women being in the workforce, however when neoliberalism intersects with patriarchy it tends to create a double burden on working women. First, neoliberalism is about saving money through cuts to health insurance and job security. Women are more likely than men to work precarious jobs or part-time work, have lower pay and fewer benefits (Young, 2010). This is attributed to family obligations and discriminatory practices in the workplace (Young, 2010). Second, neoliberalism supports families purchasing their own daycare services, rather than providing government subsidized day care. With the precarity of work, many women or families cannot afford daycare on their wages. In my literature review, researchers like Lessa and Rocha (2013), Skeer et al. (2018), Trofholz et al. (2018), and Gillespie and Johnson-Askew (2009) provide examples of how women and their families struggle to cook and eat together because of being tired, work, and busy schedules. This is because of neoliberalism.

In terms of my findings, the struggles of neoliberalism, gender and precarious work affected some more than others. I believe part of the reason is the participants I interviewed did not identify current financial struggles and based on their love for cooking, they seem to have



continued to prioritize cooking and have family gatherings despite their circumstances. Inacia and Zoe discussed the complexities involved with their relationship to cooking and the gender roles that are expected of them. Both of them have full-time employment and feel the pressures of providing for their family through food. John discussed the difficulties of raising two children in the 1990s on a tight budget, during a time where the Ontario conservative government was slashing social programs. Tamif is a full-time caretaker because resources are difficult to obtain or are expensive. Brandon discussed the difficulties of him and his partner both working full time and trying to cook during the week, while both being exhausted from long days. All of these examples are ways that the ideology of neoliberalism has seeped into some participants' lives.

For those participants who did not seem to struggle with balancing life, it was difficult to pinpoint why that was. During my interview with Giselle and Daisy, I asked them a hypothetical question – if Daisy did not live with you [Giselle], your husband and two children, and did not do the majority of the cooking, what would life look like? Giselle expressed that life would be much more stressful if she was the sole cook in the house. Vallianatos and Raine (2015) found in their research that Arab and South Asian women struggled when they moved to Canada because they did not have the same family communal support of mothers, grandmothers and aunts helping them cook for the family. Some participants had a variety of supports that lessen the blow of neoliberalism, such as well-paying jobs and flexible work schedules, other family members, paid support workers to aid in caregiving, and cooking routines that have been ingrained in them for years.

The effects of cultural hegemony on participants were not prominent as I originally thought they might be. Although there were quotations in the findings about discrimination against cultural foods, many participants said they did not face discrimination related to their

cultural food. This is not to say that participants did not face discrimination, but rather it was because of their looks, colour, dress, etc. Some participants mentioned that growing up or in their own ethnic neighbourhoods in Toronto acted as a protective factor against discrimination.

Another aspect of living in Toronto that was important to participants was food fusion. Being able to find other types of ethnic foods, or a fusion of different ethnic foods was a positive for some participants. Mehta (2012) explains that the “diversity” within the food scene in Toronto can be seen as cultural hegemony because the dominant culture can determine what types of food are considered “ethnic”. The example Mehta (2012) provides is that curry is becoming the universal food to represent South Asian, and the Toronto food scene is missing the nuances of other regional foods. The cultural appropriation of food was not something that was brought up with any of my participants, rather seeing their cultural food represented in Toronto was positive.

The commodification of cultural foods is something that combines my theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism and cultural hegemony together. First, neoliberalism has created an economy where the availability of cooked food outside of the home is vast. John points out that processed foods were a necessity for him as a child when looking after his younger brother. Many participants expressed joy going out to eat at restaurants, especially in relation to eating cultural foods that were not their own. Neoliberalism in this sense has a positive impact, as it offers many options for people to explore different cultural foods. On the surface it appears that minority cultures and foods are having a strong influence on dominant communities, like in the example of Petra learning Indonesian dishes in the Netherlands. The issue is neoliberalism supports cultural hegemony because it washes over the nuances of culture by also offering and commodifying processed and fast foods. This impacts how people experience their own cultural

food. For example, Zoe makes her own Challah bread, which takes about 5-6 hours. If Zoe did not have a flexible work schedule that allowed her to work from home, this would not be possible. Challah bread can be easy to find at a Jewish grocery store or bakery, but what if a Jewish person does not live in a Jewish neighbourhood? Does this mean they sacrifice not eating Challah bread because they do not have time to either make it themselves or travel far to buy it? There seems to be tension between the advantages of availability of a variety of cultural foods and the disadvantage of losing the importance of one's own cultural food in a neoliberal context of commodification of food, promotion of processed and fast foods, and discrimination towards certain cultural foods.

The findings of my research support some of the themes found in my literature review. Connections between Food, Family and Community and Love and Reciprocity were the strongest themes in connection to my research. Beagan and Chapman's (2012) article discussing the importance of big communal gatherings in Black communities resonated with the stories of some of my participants, in particular Sabira's story about her mosque, and Petra's story about large family dinners. There was also a glimpse in my research from Ed in connection the Sellaeg and Chapman's (2008) work on men who live alone. This showed that sharing food with others is an important part of eating and means something very different when a person eats alone. Love and reciprocity was conveyed in many interviews. Cappellini and Parsons (2012) explained that cooking a meal was a way of showing love to a person's family, and that even "being present" for the meal could be a form of reciprocity. This is represented in Zoe's story about her son and his friend wanting her cookies, and Inacia's story about going out to eat with her husband.

Some themes, such as Family Meal Patterns and Resistance and Power, were represented in subtle ways. Since I did not specifically interview families with dependent children, family meal patterns was not a prominent theme in every interview. Many of the articles that discussed family meal patterns, such as Trofolz et al. (2018) used quantitative measures to discover the effects of families eating together, while my research was qualitative. My overall findings of positive experiences of families eating together matched the findings of articles related to family meal patterns. Resistance and power was an underlying theme within the interviews. In articles like Slocum (2011) and Eidinger (2012), they overtly discuss resistance against racism and gender roles through food. Only Zoe overtly discusses her resistance against gender roles. Other participants did not see their acts of cooking as resistance or power. I would argue that most participants were resisting neoliberalism by actively cooking and not falling into regularly eating processed foods or fast foods.

My findings that did not support the literature review were Physical Health & Nutrition and Food Security. This is not because my findings contradicted my literature review, rather these themes were not the focus of my research. I purposively designed my research questions to move away from the discourse of physical health and nutrition. Although this theme occasionally came up in some interviews, it was not the focus of my research. Food security was another theme that I did not focus on within my research. Articles such as Lessa and Rocha (2013) focused on new immigrant women, or Berge et al. (2016) comparing families of different socioeconomic backgrounds – these populations are more likely to face food insecurity. For my research, I chose a diverse group of participants, but I did not focus on the class or income of my participants. For this reason, issues of food security rarely came up in my interviews.

My theoretical frameworks are what bring my research beyond my literature review. In my literature review, articles by Lessa and Rocha (2013), Skeer et al. (2018), Trofholz et al. (2018), Gillespie and Johnson-Askew (2009), and Ahyes et al. (2006) find that families have trouble co-ordinating cooking and shared meal times because of their fast-paced lifestyles. I believe my theoretical framework of neoliberalism begins to address some of those issues. My research also provides a qualitative way of examining the ways families negotiate food, culture and changing lifestyles. Articles such as Berge et al. (2006), Berge et al. (2016) and Anving and Sallerberg (2010) measure the benefits of family meals through demographics, and quantitative measures such as how many times a week does a family eat together, and what types of foods are being eaten. My research allows for the participants to explain what is important when it comes to food, family and culture – experiences that cannot be quantified. Finally, my research begins to explore how the experiences of different races, ethnicities, genders, citizenships, and religions can share similarities; an essence around food, family and culture that can connect those who are seemingly different.

### **Moving Forward**

There is much to unpack from my findings that is not possible within the scope of this paper. Moving forward, I believe there are four areas which this research could expand, and which hold implications for social work practice and policy.

First, from a micro-level social work practice perspective, my participants expressed a relationship between good mental health, cooking, and sharing a meal with their family. As social workers in Canada, we need to be aware of falling into Western and neoliberal ideologies that believe that focusing on the individual is the most important. Self-care tends to be viewed as an individual activity, rather than experiencing more communal forms of self-care. I believe the

exploration of family self-care through cooking together, eating together, and passing down culture through food would be a next step to further the discussion of food, family and culture within social work practice.

Second, the effects of neoliberalism on families and the ways it interacts with food and culture could be expanded within the literature. As I have mentioned in my literature review and discussion sections, there is research that discussing fast changing family dynamics between generations, and changing habits within family structures, but these changes are never linked to neoliberalism. I believe my research is only an introduction to the variety of topics that could be explored between neoliberalism, food and families, such as linking precarious work to changing eating habits, how processed and/or fast foods affects family time together, and how new ways of eating and ordering food such as food couriership services like Skip the Dishes, meal-kit services like Hello Fresh, and grocery delivery services like PC Express play a role in family meal time and transmission of one's culture through food.

Third, this research could benefit from an analysis of specific demographics of participants. Within the parameters of a Major Research Paper, I was unable to delve into the intricacies of food, family, and culture with the intersections of sexual orientation, class and gender. Future research could look at queer families and gendered relations playing out within those families, or with a focus on how the term "family" can be a loaded word for non-traditional family structures. Future research could also focus on the class differences between how families experience food, family and culture. Examining the intersections of a person's identity could provide more in-depth and nuanced details about the relationship between food, family and culture.

Finally, I believe an interdisciplinary approach is crucial to this work. There were themes identified in my research such as navigating food through dietary and allergy restrictions and processed/fast foods that I felt I did not have the knowledge or capacity to examine further. The same goes for my theoretical framework of neoliberalism. Interdisciplinary work on this topic could bring researchers from disciplines such as social work, nutrition, health studies, economics, sociology, and gender studies and this would provide a rich analysis of findings.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Two strengths of this research are the diversity of participants and the cooking component. First, the diversity of the participants allowed for rich and in-depth data. The stories and insights participants provided from the perspectives of their gender, race, ethnicity, home country, religion, and age allowed me to explore the nuances between food, family and culture. Second, for those who were able to participate in the cooking component of the research, it was helpful in furthering the connection between myself and the participant. I feel that it created a sense of ease and comfort for myself and the participant before the interview and allowed us to get to know each other in a causal way.

Two limitations of this research are the use of phenomenology as my approach of inquiry and the scale of the research. First, phenomenology was a difficult approach of inquiry to use with the diversity of my participants. Finding an “essence” within a group of people who are so diverse was difficult, and debate whether I was able to provide a true essence. Second, the amount of work put into this research felt too big for a Major Research Paper. In some respect, I do not feel like I did do the participant’s stories justice with the limited time and space I had to conduct my research.

## **Self-Reflection**

As I look back on my research experience, I realize just how much my biases play into my research. Every interview I completed was different than the one before and I wondered how I would ever find a common theme among them. I expected different experiences, but not quite at this level. One of my biggest learnings that came from my research was understanding that not everyone has thought about this topic to the extent I had. I realized in the early stages of interviewing that I was trying to pull insights out of participants that just were not there. I had been thinking about this topic for years, and done an extensive literature review on the topic, so when it came to the interviews, I expected participants to have these deep critical insights that I had been desperately waiting for. After every interview I felt more confused and more worried that I was not getting the rich data I expected.

After reading the transcripts many times, I realized I was quite wrong about participants not having “deep critical insights”. The problem was, I was not listening. At the time of the interviews, I was so consumed with finding common themes and an essence to their experiences, I overlooked valuable information. Once I started reading the transcripts, I found I had all the information I needed and more, it was just presented in different ways – through different language and storytelling. My research has taught me to listen in a meaningful way and to be patient in trying to find answers.



## **CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of my research was to discover an essence of food, family and culture that connected all of my participants. As shown through my findings, this is a difficult conclusion to draw because of the diversity of my participants. Despite their diversity, I draw on the two themes of necessity and nostalgia to conclude my research. These two themes draw on the vast experiences of my participants to provide a feeling people have about food. All the participants stressed the necessity of food – as if this should be such an obvious statement, why do they have to point it out to me? There is a simplicity and a neutrality to this statement that can make food feel like a passing thought. Nostalgia is what provides the deep meaning to food. Every participant had multiple stories about food in their childhood or their favourite culture foods that would lead into stories about loved ones and celebrations that are important to them. These stories had such deep emotion to them that it is hard to describe. The themes of necessity and nostalgia may seem dichotomous, but I believe in this case they are complimentary. Food is a necessity – as humans we cannot deny this. Participants accepted that food as necessity means that it is not always memorable; it is something we need to do to survive. When we add family, friends, and communities, we reveal a sense of joy within food that is not always present. Adding culture to that mix is just another component that creates the nostalgia around food. Food is always a necessity, but only under the right circumstances, is nostalgia.

This research has led me to thinking about more philosophical questions about where our world is headed. I wonder how we can hold onto traditional values, while embracing some of the positives that come from technology and globalization. I wonder how or if we can alter traditional values that have deeply embedded sexism, racism, xenophobia, etc. I wonder how we can embrace new models of families without discrimination. I wonder if we can have a country

without cultural hegemony. I wonder when and if neoliberalism will implode. I wonder how we will save food amidst the realities of climate change. These thoughts and questions are bigger than any research project can answer. My hope is that through the learning from my participants about food, family and culture, and my theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism and cultural hegemony creates space for a bigger conversation about where we are headed. Food is a topic everyone can relate to, and can be a starting point for meaningful conversations about families and cultures.

## **APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT STATEMENTS**

### **Recruitment Statement for Facebook**

Do you love food? Does food have meaning to you that goes beyond just how delicious it is? You may be interested in participating a study about the meaning food in connection to your family and culture. This study is being conducted as part of my Major Research Paper for my Master of Social Work at Ryerson University.

In order to participate in this study, you must:

- Have a strong connection to food and the ways food connects you to your family and your culture
- Be born in 1980 or earlier
- Be fluent in English
- Living in the GTA

This study will need a time commitment of 2-4 hours, with the first half comprising of cooking and/or sharing food, and the second half being the interview.

If you are interested or have any questions, please feel free to email me at [l2jackson@ryerson.ca](mailto:l2jackson@ryerson.ca).

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### **Recruitment for in-person and/or telephone**

Hi! I'm looking for people to participate in my major research paper for my Master of Social Work. My research involves looking at how food acts as a relationship builder between family members, and as a cultural transmitter. I believe you fit my criteria to participate in my research, as you have a passion for food, family and culture. Are you interested in participating in an interview for my research? The time commitment involved is about 2-4 hours, with a cooking and/or eating component that can be discussed between us. Here is a form that I would be providing you to obtain your consent if you say yes. It has all the information you would need to know about my stuff. You are also welcome to ask me questions now to help you make your decision. You can also email me at [l2jackson@ryerson.ca](mailto:l2jackson@ryerson.ca) if you need more time to think about your participation.

*Present Consent form to participant in person or send them by email.*

## **APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### Interview Questions

- What does food mean to you?
  - How does food go beyond “just what you eat”?
  - Does food help your mental health? How so?
- In what ways does food keep you connected to your family?
  - Do you find your current lifestyle benefits or hinders you having regular family meals?
  - How was food a big part of your childhood? Have you tried to replicate that for your children?
- In what ways does food keep you connected to your culture?
  - Have you faced any discrimination towards your cultural foods? Can you explain or provide an example?
  - Has cultural food helped teach your children, siblings, etc. about your culture?
  - Do you feel like our current political, economic and social context have stopped you from staying connected to your culture?

## APPENDIX C – CONSENT FORM



### **Ryerson University Consent to Research Agreement**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

#### **TITLE OF STUDY:**

*More than what we eat: Food as a relationship builder and cultural transmitter*

#### **INVESTIGATORS:**

This research study is being conducted by Lindsay Jackson, a graduate student, and her faculty supervisor, Purnima George from School of Social Work at Ryerson University.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Lindsay Jackson, l2jackson@ryerson.ca, (647)866-2901 OR Purnima George, Eric Palin Hall room 219, p3george@ryerson.ca, (416)979-5000 ext. 7146.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of my study is to explore the shared experiences people have with food through family and culture. One focus is how people use food as a way to stay connected to their families – through cooking, eating together, planning family gathering, etc. My second focus is how people use food to stay connected to their culture, through cooking and passing on traditional cultural meals, teaching about culture through food, etc.

I am looking to recruit 6-10 people for my study.

You are eligible to participant if you were born in 1980 or earlier, hold a meaning to food that includes the feeling that food has connected your family in the past or present, and/or that food plays a large role in maintaining you culture and are able to speak English well.

The results of this study contribute to my Major Research Paper, which is a requirement to complete my degree.

### **WHAT PARTICIPATION MEANS:**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- You have the choice to be involved in a pre-interview activity that involved food. This could be anything from cooking a meal together to a potluck where we each provide a dish. If you decide to participate, you and the researcher will discuss what format is best. The time commitment for this will be anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours depending on the activity. *\*This is not mandatory.*
- Provide demographics about yourself such as gender, ethnicity, age, religion and citizenship status. You are not required to provide answers if you do not feel comfortable.
- Participate in an individual interview or family interview with one other family member. The choice of interview format is up to you. This interview will take approximately 2 hours.
  - Note: If you choose the option of a family interview, all participants must be over 18 years of age.
  - Sample questions: What does food mean to you? In what ways does food keep you connected to you family?
- Interviews will be audio-recorded with participant consent
- Input for the analysis phase of the study. How much you participate in this process is up to you. This would include, but not limited to:
  - Reading over the transcript of your interview for accuracy and possible deletion of text.
  - Reading drafts of the Major Research Paper to ensure my analysis aligns with your perspective (first full draft is due May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019)
  - Any other input you are willing to provide throughout the process

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS:**

The potential benefit is to build relationships through food. As part of the reciprocity of this project, I would like to share anything about food and food processes. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS TO YOU AS A PARTICIPANT:**

There are two low potential risks within this study. First, you may feel some discomfort as topics that may come up for you surrounding family and culture may be sensitive. Throughout the interview process, if you ever feel uncomfortable discussing anything, we can change the subject, stop recording, take a break, or delete sections of the audio recording. Second, if there is a previous relationship between you and the research, you may feel obligated to participate in ways you are not comfortable. Throughout the process, you will be actively reminded that you can withdraw any or all of your consent without any consequences. You will also have the contact information for Purnima George, the MRP supervisor, in case you have any concerns you would like to express to someone other than the researcher.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

All information that is provided for the purposes of this project will be kept confidential. If you participate in a family interview, your confidentiality cannot be guaranteed with your family members. Your names will not be used in the study, and you will be asked to choose a pseudonym to keep your identity confidential.

## **Data Storage**

Your information (this includes notes from the interview, the audio-recording of the interview and the transcript of your interview) will be kept on a secure, password protected computer. All of the interview material you provide will be kept until August 2019. Once the finalized MRP is complete, all of your information will be deleted.

By agreeing to participate in this research, you are not giving up or waiving any legal right in the event that you are harmed during the research.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. Your consent and participation can be withdrawn or modify any time up until May 31<sup>st</sup>, when the first full draft of the study is due. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose to not have your data included in the study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or the investigators, Lindsay or Purnima involved in the research.

## **DATA DISSEMINATION:**

Any data pertaining to your interviews, such as audio-recordings and transcripts, will only be heard/viewed by myself and Purnima George, my MRP supervisor.

The final published research paper can be found on Ryerson's Digital Depository at <https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/>.

## **QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:**

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Lindsay Jackson, l2jackson@ryerson.ca

OR

Purnima George, Eric Palin Hall room 219, p3george@ryerson.ca, (416)979-5000 ext. 7146.

The REB file number is REB 2019-024.

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study please contact:

Research Ethics Board  
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
416-979-5042  
[rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca)



## **More than what we eat: Food as a relationship builder and cultural transmitter**

### **CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pseudonym

Your signature below indicates that you are consenting to your interview being audio-recorded. Your audio-recording will be held on a secure computer and will only be used for research purposes. A transcript will be made of the audio-recording that will be stored on the same computer. After August 2019 when the final MRP has been submitted, the transcript and audio-recording will be deleted. You may revoke your consent for an audio-recording at any time.

I agree to be audio-recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand how these recordings will be stored and destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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