Cooking and sharing food as an embodiment of hope: The influence of the kitchen as a collaborative cultural site.

*A Qualitative Study of Refugees' Wellbeing in *A Beautiful Mess, *Amsterdam.*

![Image of people sharing food](image1.png)

*Figure 1: A Beautiful Mess, photo taken by the researcher*

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Abstract

Wellbeing is a growing field of research in political science. My research has sought to push the boundaries of the field by employing a seemingly small part of our everyday as a mode of analysis: food. This study focuses on an independent initiative in Amsterdam, A Beautiful Mess, which formed as a result of policy gaps between local and national governments. Food is used as a lens to consider the wellbeing of refugees more widely in the Netherlands. I consider A Beautiful Mess to be a political community, one that has been shaped by the experiences of those in it. I reflect upon the role of food in the consolidation of this community through three sub-questions focused on: the role of cooking together, eating together and whether the initiative influences wellbeing as a whole. Through in-depth interviews, data was collected to consider how refugees consider the role of food in relation to their own wellbeing. Findings show that cooking and eating together are intimate acts which have a critical role in shaping the wellbeing of refugees. My research has endeavoured to take an innovative approach to wellbeing, demonstrating that seemingly small political acts can speak volumes.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the restaurant initiative A Beautiful Mess for opening its doors to me for the last few months. I have enjoyed working, celebrating, talking and, dancing with you all. Thank you to all who gave up your time to speak to me, telling me your stories, both the good and the bad. You are all so passionate about food and it reinforced the innate ability that food has to connect us. Thank you for letting me tell your stories here.
“This is possibly the country’s darkest hour, but even now in tiny flats in Beirut, Berlin and Bradford, Syrian families are searching out the best tomatoes and lemons, pomegranates and parsley, to recreate the dishes that remind them of home.”

Mousawi & Azzam, 2017:104
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List of Abbreviations

ABM: A Beautiful Mess
AZC: Regular Reception Facility
CAQDAS: Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis
COA: Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers
MENA: the Middle East and North Africa region
NGO: Non-governmental Organisation
RC: Refugee Company
RSC: University of Oxford Refugees Studies Centre
UNHCR: United Nations Refugee Agency
WFP: World Food Programme
1 Introduction

I first visited the restaurant A Beautiful Mess (ABM) for dinner. I had heard briefly before that it was a refugee initiative but as I got lost in the various rat-infested tunnels of the former prison complex Bijlmerbajes, I was perturbed that a restaurant could possibly function here. Then I found it. ABM was bright and welcoming and, as I ate the food, the seed for my thesis had been planted. I have previously been animated by ideas of food injustice and security, particularly in a class I took in Chicago which was concerned with the black community food security network. Yet, I had never considered the topic directly in terms of wellbeing and welfare. Upon preliminary research I found that not many others have either. This thesis seeks to bridge this gap, addressing a salient part of our everyday in a consideration of the wellbeing of refugees.

Refugees cross international borders in the search for sanctuary and, hence, their protection is dependent upon freedom of movement (Long, 2013). However, the policies of host countries are often more concerned with security and statistics: who can be let in and how many. Indeed, any focus and support are lost once those refugees gain access to the host country. Finding work and a permanent home, for instance, become major hurdles in the attempt to begin a new life after facing inconceivable trauma (Verwiebe et al, 2019; see 3.2 on collective trauma). Indeed, there is an awareness that refugees need more support in this endeavour. But what about the seemingly mundane smaller aspects of life, such as mealtimes? Refugees have lost all normality to their daily lives and, therefore, it is not simply finding employment or housing which can fulfil these aspects but, so too, reconnecting with the other small moments that fill our everyday. Or, in other words, reconnect with their familiar. This thesis contends that small acts can speak to much wider political themes, and thus, attention should be given to these aspects as well. The following section discusses the topic being addressed and why it is worthy of academic attention.

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1 The class was entitled: Urban History. It focused on the importance of the Black Midwest in the United States. See the work being undertaken in Detroit to create a self-sufficient food network for the African-American community at: [https://www.dbcfsn.org/](https://www.dbcfsn.org/)
1.1 Relevance of this Study

The aim of this thesis is to fill a gap in scholarship by considering the role of everyday food moments in an assessment of wellbeing, and more specifically, on the wellbeing of refugees. We are living in a divisive time where headlines speak about refugees as a collective – as mere statistics (The Guardian, 2015). As will be discussed in 2.1, news concerning the refugee crisis intended to scaremonger, and it worked. Yet, humanity was lost during the process of turning refugees into statistics, and in doing so, they were stripped of their individual stories. This study takes a humanist approach, embracing the individual perspective to conceive how refugees consider their own wellbeing and, indeed, what the role of food may be within this.

Food and mealtimes have been selected as the subject of refugees’ wellbeing since, to me, it epitomises the everyday. Food is a frequent part of our routine. It is social, individual, cultural, physiological, and, accordingly, I believe it to be a highly political act, integral to our daily lives (see Shepler, 2011; Watson & Caldwell, 2005). Since food can cover all these channels, it seemed logical to me that it could be utilised as a vehicle for exploring the wellbeing of refugees. In line with Watson and Caldwell (2005:5), food is an accessible medium which can illuminate a range of social practices: “when all else fails people will always talk about food”. For instance, in a study of Yucatán by Ayora-Diaz (2012), Diaz explained how specific kitchen rules, techniques and recipes, were a means for cooks to resist foreign colonisation. For Diaz (2012:33), it was food that was able to reveal the community’s beliefs about “the place in which they dwell”. Hence, we can consider individual and social identity through food practices. As Powles (2002) contends in the Journal of Refugee Studies: food is intertwined with belonging. Indeed, food practices exist in a complex web of contested relationships and power dynamics (Watson & Caldwell, 2005). Thus, an assessment of these practices can open up room to consider the individual perspective.

We often look to governments and policy-makers when considering political themes such as welfare, yet much can be learned from the individual perspective: those who are being directly impacted by the policies in place. Refugees have been the source of much policy debate, but this thesis contends that it would be far more effective if the views of refugees in question were consulted. The data obtained for this study is from the perspective of thirteen refugees in the cooking initiative A Beautiful Mess. ABM is a restaurant initiative founded by its parent company Refugee Company, with the aim of integrating refugees into Dutch society (see 2.3).
ABM has not been the subject of scholarly attention before. It is a partly self-supported initiative which only started receiving funding from the Amsterdam municipality in 2017. My intention is to shed light on the inner workings of this initiative, and how the refugees themselves conceive its role in terms of their own wellbeing.

If certain trends are established in the data, I hope for them to be considered in policy decisions. The data has ultimately been collected to answer the following research question (RQ):

Does cooking and eating food together improve the wellbeing of refugees in the Netherlands?

This RQ considers three salient concepts: cooking, eating and wellbeing. I pose further sub-questions to develop an understanding of them, whilst also allowing me to hone my analysis:

- How does cooking together affect the sense of wellbeing of refugees in A Beautiful Mess?
- Does eating together at A Beautiful Mess allow for a sense of belonging?
- Does the A Beautiful Mess initiative allow for an increase in hope and wellbeing as it aspires for?

The theoretical framework and following chapters discussing the data are framed by these three questions. The data was collected during my fieldwork at ABM in Amsterdam from the 25th of March until the 1st of May. I also volunteered with the team during events and had dinner with them on multiple occasions. Therefore, whilst the data is predominantly a collection of in-depth interviews, it is also grounded in participant observation.

The following section provides a background of topics central to this thesis. Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework. Grand theories have not been employed, rather the focus is

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upon the range of interdisciplinary studies which have previously been an addition to this topic. Since this topic has not been directly addressed so far, I have consulted several journals from a host of disciplines. This has allowed me to create a highly detailed framework in which my data can be grounded. My study is ultimately concerned with utilising food as an innovative mode of enquiry into a relatively new field of study. The state of debate for wellbeing is still being framed and I conclude by arguing that the field would benefit from a humanist focus on the everyday, incorporating the voices of those most marginalised in the conversation.
2 Background

2.1 Who is a Refugee?

In order to focus upon the wellbeing of refugees, it is critical to outline not only who they are but, so too, the process that they have been forced to go through. As specified by the United Nations Refugee Agency (2019), a refugee is defined as: “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so.”

The universal declaration of a refugee is contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is the “main international instrument of refugee law” (UNHCR, 2019). Yet, this convention is considered to be restrictive, as McAdam (2017:1) notes: “[it is] too old to respond adequately to the displacement challenges of the twenty-first century”. Indeed, since 2015, Europe has been considered to have suffered “the worst refugee crisis since the end of World War II” leading to unprecedented challenges for the convention (Europa, 2017). The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 but since turned into a proxy war, led millions of Syrians to be displaced and, in turn, exposed the cracks in EU immigration policy (Euronews, 2016). By 2018, it was revealed that more than 43,000 people had attempted to reach Europe by sea, risking their lives in the process (Europa, 2017). In fact, the UNHCR has claimed that in 2017, more than 3,000 refugees drowned in doing so (UNHCR, 2019).

The complexity of Europe’s migration crisis cannot be understated. Since 2015, the lack of a collective response from the EU resulted in confusion and escalating tensions across the geopolitical scale (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019). Media portrayals of the crisis have been particularly prominent in scaremongering and the right-wing press have been able to exploit the crisis for its own xenophobic aims (ibid.). Yet, this thesis does not consider the influx of refugees to have been a crisis and it remains particularly critical of the term. As Pallister-Wilkins (2016) asserts, the term is a ‘sticking plaster’, hiding deeper wounds of a much deeper socio-political landscape.

To manage the refugee crisis, it was agreed that 120,000 refugees would be divided amongst all member states (Government.nl, 2019). As an EU member state, the Netherlands was not exempt from this, yet it has only received 7,000 refugees in the last two years (ibid.). The Dutch
asylum process has resulted in an ‘asylum gap’ for those who are denied status, and this is hindered further by implementation gaps between national policy and municipal practices (Kos et al, 2016). As a result, as Chauvin (et al, 2012:243) notes, national policies “commonly encounter(s) contradictory forces at the local and transnational levels”, specifically when it comes to undocumented migrants.³ It has been criticised by other refugee initiatives such as ‘Wij Zijn Hier’ (2019) which calls the procedure “absurd”.

It is important to highlight the policy gap since it has allowed for new initiatives in response. This thesis seeks to explore ABM - one of the initiatives founded as a result. ABM’s (2019) aim is to have 70% status-holders, meaning that the other 30% are still going through the asylum process. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that the asylum procedure is a complex process. Uncertainty is felt throughout (Stichting Centrum’45, 2019) and it is a process that some of the respondents spoken with are still going through.

Lastly, the distinction between migrant and refugee needs to be established, since both terms will be employed throughout this thesis. Migrants are those who have chosen to move to a different country for numerous reasons such as economic distress, but not due to direct threat of persecution (UNHCR, 2019). This thesis refers to the 2015 migration crisis as it has been coined, yet it was an influx of refugees from numerous countries, who were experiencing warfare and persecution, not migrants. The two terms are often used interchangeably and frequently in policy debates about immigration. By turning refugees into statistics, and confusing the terminology, we lose our humanity when discussing their situation (Betts & Collier, 2017). Since the focus of this thesis is upon wellbeing, it is crucial to remember the connotations attached with the language and to use it accordingly.

This thesis seeks to put the individual experience back into discussions of migration. Often the refugee crisis is debated with no input from the very people who are being impacted by policy changes. More can be learned from hearing the individual perspective than can be learned from generalisations and statistics made in a convention (Maley, 2016). This is the premise for this

³ After the introduction of the ‘Linking Act’ in 1998 and the New Aliens Act in 2001, Dutch national policies focused on exclusion. The idea was that exclusionary measures would encourage asylum seekers, (includes refugees) to return home. See more at: The Centre for Migration Law; Kos et al, 2016; PRI.org, 2019.
thesis. It seeks to hear the individual perspective of respondents in regard to a seemingly ordinary part of their everyday: food.

2.2 The Politics of Food

For scholars Gallagher and Lopez (2018), psychological wellbeing is measured on the premise of autonomy, amongst other domains. Indeed, research has shown the clear advantages of autonomy and intrinsic motivation for human development (Deci et al, 2005). The importance of autonomy for refugees has also been recognised by organisations such as the UNHCR. The UNHCR is a critical figure in the setting up and running of refugee camps, with a core part of its protection mission to “guarantee access to adequate shelter in humanitarian emergencies” (UNHCR, 2019). A vital part of its role and for other NGOs is the provision of food resources in the form of aid packages. For instance, in Iraq in 2007, the UNHCR provided 270,000 meals in specific locations (UNHCR, 2007). Yet, when conflicts are protracted, such as in the case of Syria, refugee camps have had the potential to become permanent ‘cities’, for instance Zaatari Camp in Jordan (AlJazeera, 2018). In cases like this, food aid is not a long-term solution.

In 2016, the UNHCR changed its policy to return control of meal consumption and preparation to the refugees in question (UNHCR Live Strategy, 2016). It began setting up communal kitchens as opposed to handing out regular meals (UNHCR Live Strategy, 2016; World Food Programme, 2012). In its policy document, it states that the kitchens increase “dignity, independence and culturally-appropriate, healthy eating habits” (ibid, 2016). Betts and Collier (2017) reinforce this idea, arguing that the shift from humanitarian aid to development has resulted in the restoration of “people’s autonomy”. Correspondingly, at the UN Summit for Refugees in 2016, the Director of the Refugees Studies Centre spoke upon the importance of self-sufficiency: “self-reliance in frontline countries is our only viable pathway to a sustainable refugee assistance model” (RSC, 2019).

The World Food Programme also carried out assessments of this notion, evaluating the impact of food assistance for 30,000 long-term refugees in a refugee camp in Chad. It implemented training with markets and gardens and introduced food coupons. It confirmed that: “the first successful implementation of the pilot project…confirms the positive impact of the joint programme…and will have a positive impact on other refugee camps” (WFP, 2015). In an additional study of refugee camps, it was also noted that whilst food utilisation has been
neglected in research, cooking has an essential role in the camps (Riva et al, 2017). Refugee satisfaction improved from the introduction of food markets and cooking supplies (Jahre et al, 2017). These assessments prove that there has not only been a shift towards autonomous development in regard to food security but that the benefits of doing so are also being repeatedly proven. As one refugee noted: “in refugee camps, there’s not very much to do. Cooking your own food gives structure to your day, it gives control over your life.” (National Geographic, 2019). This is precisely what this thesis seeks to explore through its first sub-question.

Since this thesis is focused upon the Netherlands, it is critical to assess the Dutch government’s response to food autonomy. The COA emphasises the importance of self-sufficiency but non-governmental organisations like the Dutch Council for Refugees have criticised Dutch reception centres for offering limited opportunities, resulting in “forced inactivity” (Klaver, 2016:7). Refugees are entitled access to one centre upon submitting their asylum request (ibid.). In shorter stay centres, meals are provided centrally (COA, 2019). However, in the regular reception facility (AZC), which is where refugees remain the longest, they are provided with a weekly allowance for food (ibid.). This is one of the only opportunities they have to be independent. It is therefore interesting that even though the government may emphasise the need for self-sufficiency, one of the only ways in which they seek to promote this is through food autonomy.

This suggests that food is an accessible means of providing autonomy, reinforcing its political significance. Refugees have lost control of their personal situations and so the ability to make and buy food for themselves is a first step in taking some power back. This thesis will explore the role of food and wellbeing in this manner.

2.3 A Beautiful Mess

The research herein focuses specifically on one initiative within Amsterdam: the restaurant A Beautiful Mess. ABM is an independent initiative run by Refugee Company, whose main goal is to make refugees socially and economically independent (A Beautiful Mess, 2019). The RC’s (2019) purpose is to “speed up integration by supporting people with a refugee background in social and economic independency” and so ABM is one of the ways in which they aim to do so. Indeed, scholars agree that “employment is the single most important factor
in securing the integration of migrants into society” (Phillimore & Goodson, 2006:1719). ABM focuses exclusively on preparing refugees for life in the Netherlands, as seen in its manifesto:

“Beginnings are always messy... Life is not perfect... We celebrate the beauty in the mess. The imperfections, broken parts and uncertainties. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and we choose to see the beauty in humanity. Wherever they came from and whatever path they had to take. A safe space where we speed up integration for people with a refugee background and celebrate diversity.”

A Beautiful Mess, 2019

ABM is one of RC’s ‘re-start programmes’ which trains individuals in a trade for up to one year before they connect them to a job elsewhere through its already established partnerships (Refugee Company, 2019). The initiative consistently uses the word ‘integration’ to describe its efforts and so this thesis will do so as well yet it remains critical of the connotations of this notion: integrate into what exactly? Integration implies a combining into one (Daly, 2006). In other words, for refugees to fully immerse themselves in Dutch society. Yet, this seems an outdated ideal considering that migration has cultivated and enriched the landscape of many countries, including the Netherlands. Thus, this thesis disagrees that refugees should be forced to ‘integrate’ in this context. But since the focus of this research is not on integration policies themselves, the term will be used since it is the goal ABM has set out for themselves. I nevertheless urge the reader to remain critical of this ideal throughout.
3 Theoretical Framework

As an everyday act, food practices are always related to our identity (Boutard et al, 2016). Food reveals complex relationships about society, character, relationships (ibid.) and, thus, it is political at its core. Yet, in terms of theory, food politics has often only been given its dues in relation to security and distribution. Kathleen Stewart (2007:4) advocates giving attention to the everyday by looking at “complex and uncertain singularities”. Indeed, food is a part of the everyday and whilst eating may seem like a series of singular private acts, they are interconnected. Food has the innate ability to connect us to people and places across time (Boutard et al, 2016). These connections are worthy of exploration. My research intends to take a humanist approach in order to contribute to the developing field of wellbeing, embracing the everyday experience of refugees. As aforementioned, this framework is guided by three sub-questions: cooking together (3.3), eating together (3.4) and overall hopefulness in relation to wellbeing (3.5), as is the central focus of this thesis.

3.1 Wellbeing

Since this thesis seeks to add to the wellbeing debate, wellbeing must first be conceptualised. Wellbeing is a “multi-faceted construct” (Pollard & Lee, 2003:60) that is difficult to define, but it is important to be clear about how it is understood in this thesis in order to assess whether food influences the wellbeing of refugees. There have been several attempts to highlight dimensions of wellbeing but a clear absence of “theory-based formulations” or definitions (Dodge et al, 2012:222). I find the current state of debate in terms of defining wellbeing inadequate and hence I seek to take a radical approach: utilising food as an analytical tool to consider the wellbeing of refugees.

White (2010) refers to wellbeing as a social process of improving one’s values, thereby an individual process which is ongoing and never fixed. Certainly, the wellbeing of refugees is never fixed. Wellbeing is a process, one that is influenced by societal factors and changes throughout the relocation process (Hall, 2019). Definitions of wellbeing are contested between disciplines. For instance, the view of wellbeing within psychiatry is “an absence of distress and dysfunction” but Joseph and Wood (2010) claim that this is a restricted definition, since it fails to consider any positive aspects of functioning. Psychology has dominated the study of wellbeing, an example being Ryff’s (1989) study which assessed the “essential features of
psychological wellbeing” after finding that positive functioning had not been represented empirically. But, ultimately, most definitions are too restricted and do not allow for the consideration of wellbeing as an ongoing process: one that is determined by the individual themselves. The premise of my thesis is to give refugees agency, specifically in regard to how they consider their own wellbeing and hence, I sought to find an alternative.

I am taking a radical approach to alter the field of wellbeing by utilising food as an alternate mode of enquiry. As aforementioned, food is an integral part of our everyday, critical to our physiological wellbeing. Yet, food is not only central to the nourishment of the body but so too, the mind and soul: critical components of our wellbeing. Food can be a significant indicator for the relationships we form with others as well as having embedded political and cultural meaning (Chen, 2012). Sharing and cooking food brings people into the same space, in turn functioning as a vehicle for socialising (Brown, 2009). This has a direct impact upon feelings of security, belonging and acceptance. Cooking can also enhance self-sufficiency which enables positive cognitive functioning (Ryff, 1989). The senses associated with food elicit memories – reconnecting with certain formative memories can be an incredibly positive experience.

Deneluin and McGregor (2010:511) consider food to be an inconsequential “basic” part of “living well together” in comparison to other more important components yet this is a gross injustice to the role that food plays in everyday life. In agreement with Fischer (2014:1), we should “provision the good life as widely as possible for how people themselves conceive it” (also see Rogers, 1961 as cited in Dodge et al, 2012). A shift to wellbeing can open up space for new conversations regarding human welfare (White, 2010:169), so it useful to consider all of the factors which may influence wellbeing. It is not helpful to hierarchise the different components that help people achieve a good life since there is not one common standard. For instance, many of the standards concerned with wellbeing have been western-centric, not taking into consideration that what may be deemed essential in one culture is different to another (Smith & Reid, 2017).

In fact, whilst Fischer (2014:23) understands the good life to be a normative statement in itself, he contends that, regardless, numerous instances of wellbeing are “linked to small moments that fill our days”. Since food is a critical part of our existence, it takes up multiple moments in our days and thus, the influence it has on “living well” is undoubtedly in need of research.
As Parsons (2015:10) notes, foodways have the “power to define who we are and where we belong”, as is central to a discussion of wellbeing. Utilising food is a powerful mode of enquiry which can alter the way we look at wellbeing entirely. I deem such a radical approach to be vital.

3.2 Traumatic Communities

My respondents are refugees: people who have had their assumptive worlds\(^4\) shattered and have since gone through a relocation process to move to the Netherlands. Consequently, trauma was present during my fieldwork and thus, it is necessary to elucidate the term here. It should be noted, however, that I do not seek to impose a broad conceptualisation of trauma. Although it can be said that refugees exhibit certain indications of trauma such as a mistrust in institutions and Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lerner, 2018), it is not my intention to categorise certain symptoms as indications of trauma (Matthies-Boon & Head, 2018:260). Rather, my focus is upon trauma as a web of complex power relations (Matthies-Boon, 2018) and how this can function in terms of the collective.

I consider ABM to be a political community, one that has been shaped by the experiences of those in it. This is central to Hutchinson’s (2018:33) contention that trauma is “a defining social and cultural condition” which can shape communities. Trauma can result in a detachment from refugees’ assumptive world, which in turn disconnects them from the sense of belonging and sense of self that they had before (ibid.). But trauma can also result in constructions of new forms of political communities (ibid.) functioning as a form of communality (Erikson, 1991) as I contend ABM to be. Hutchinson (2018) contends that traumatised individuals often turn to a community in order to better comprehend the experience that they have gone through: this can form the structural fabric of the community itself. Erikson conceptualises this as a “post-trauma community” (Erikson, 1994 in Hutchinson, 2018:53). Individuals in ABM have been drawn together due to their circumstances, yet bonds have been formed due to the common ground between them.

Being a part of a positive, stable space is critical in allowing us to positively function (Matthies-Boon & Head, 2018). Hence, such a space is critical for the wellbeing of refugees. The premise

\(^4\) Generalised beliefs about the world (Matthies-Boon, 2018)
for ABM is food, and thus the connection between food and suffering is also in need of further elaboration.

### 3.2.1 Food and Trauma

An understanding of the way in which food functions in narratives of suffering is critical in an assessment of refugees’ wellbeing, particularly when considering food as an embodiment of hope. Research has shown that experiencing trauma can negatively impact an individual’s relationship with food, for example with eating disorders (see Mason et al, 2014; Imperatori et al, 2016). But is the relationship between food and trauma deeper than that?

Food is inherently political. When we talk about access to food resources, the deprivation of those resources and the exchange of them, we are referring to how a physiological necessity can be manipulated and contested by different power structures (Watson & Caldwell, 2005). For example, food relief campaigns, food banks and food initiatives are all symptomatic of larger political messages (ibid.). Refugees are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and are, as a result, more reliant upon social enterprises such as food banks which are designed to provide aid (McKay et al, 2018). It hence follows that refugees are situated directly within the socio-political context referred to when thinking about food in this way. Yet, how do refugees consider this in relation to their own wellbeing? In a series of refugee stories cited in the Journal of Refugee Studies, the first theme mentioned in several of them is the hunger experienced and how this changed upon finding asylum: “when we came to Kalova we couldn’t believe how much food there was!” (Powles, 2002:82). In another refugee narrative the individual directly connects food with belonging and that not eating well was symptomatic of not living well (ibid:98). Indeed, it is not atypical for refugee narratives to emphasise meals or lack thereof.

Whilst undertaking fieldwork following the war in Sierra Leone, it was not Shepler’s (2011) intention to collect stories of food. Yet, ten years after her fieldwork, she found that many of the narratives she had collected had centered stories of their suffering around food (ibid.). One woman, for instance, whose son had been abducted described her experience of the war:

> “When the rebels took over our village, life was very hard. They made us work for them. We were totally cut off from the market. Try to imagine: we didn’t even have salt to cook with!”

Shepler, 2011:44
Food is a frequent part of an individual’s everyday routine and, consequently, changes to this will be noticed almost immediately. Mealtimes can evoke recollections that are inherently emotional (Shepler, 2011:45). Food can thus function as a language (ibid.): a way in which people can communicate much larger political themes. In this instance, being cut off from salt speaks more widely to the ongoing violence and disruption war had waged upon everyday life. Hence, food has the ability to tie everyday experiences with “broader cultural patterns” and wider political issues (Holtzman, 2006:9). Correspondingly, much can be learned from personal narratives relating to food, which is why food is an effective lens into wellbeing. The most seemingly mundane things, such as salt, can speak volumes.

3.3 How Cooking Together Influences Wellbeing

Cooking is a means of communication which brings people into the same space (Ohana, 2019). It is introspective (ibid.) since it forces the individual to focus upon what they are doing in that moment, as well as facilitating connections with others through the dishes being made. This section focuses upon the space of the kitchen in terms of its three different functions: as a cultural, social and sensory site.

3.3.1 The Kitchen as a Cultural Site

The kitchen is an intimate space that can hide more complex connections than have been previously recognised. As contended by geographer Angela Meah, when looking for definitions of the kitchen, most describe it as “a room where food is kept, prepared and cooked” (Meah, 2016; Cambridge Dictionary 2019). Yet, the kitchen is a crucial space where “a range of practices cohere, reflecting multiple meanings and uses” (Meah, 2016:2). It has been neglected as a topic of study in its own right, yet it functions as a dynamic multifunctional space, often considered to be the “heart of the home” (ibid:4). Its functions vary depending on the needs of those who use the space but it has the capacity to become a place of reflection, worship, learning and socialisation. As Pérez (2011:678) understands it, after conducting ethnographic research on the Lucumí, the kitchen “afforded… a vantage point that profoundly altered my perspective on the practice”. Pérez considers the kitchen to be a deeply political site whereby Yucatecans use cooking as a way of stressing specific aspects of their identity (ibid:117). Pérez consequently made the kitchen the micro-site of his anthropological research, contending that “the work done in kitchens needs more analysis” (ibid:680).
The kitchen functions as a cultural site (Sutton, 2001) since it is where culture can be displayed and shared: through recipes, food and conversation. Cooking is thus not simply a physiological need for sustenance but is interconnected with one’s culture. In Fine’s (1996:1) words: “food reveals our souls”. The foods we choose to make and consume result in the construction of the human body itself: biologically, psychologically and socially, and thus it has a crucial connection to wellbeing in a much larger sense that just physical health (Fischler, 1988:275). Boutard (et al, 2016) considers food as a culture act since the way that we understand and relate to food directly connects to our identity. For Boutard, food is a “cultural identity marker” to be used as a lens to analyse power and politics itself (ibid.). Therefore, relating to food and culture can be a way in which to translate the tension that defines our identity construction itself – food not only translates our values and habits but so too the political context of the time (ibid.). The human relationship to food is a complex one (Fischler, 1988:275) and defining it in this way enables us to explore it politically, understanding the vast influence it can have in shaping the world as we see it.

Boutard (2016:1) splits the relationship between food and culture into two “identity dimensions”: narrative and figurative. The narrative level is concerned with the social aspect of food: the relations to one another that arise from eating, living and meeting together (ibid.). The figurative dimension, however, relates to sociological levels: the objects, locations, situations and behaviours that are associated with food (ibid:2). In other words, the very representations, values and beliefs that govern our relationship to food (ibid.). In both factions, food functions as a language, whether it be through creating a reason for the social interactions themselves or in the way it conveys social practices and conventions that people of a certain culture become accustomed to. Cramer expands upon the idea of food as a language, noting that:

‘Food conveys culture precisely because we use it as a means of communication...food functions symbolically as a communicative practice by which we create, manage and share meanings with others’  

(Cramer et al, 2011: xi)
Food is therefore able to speak about culture and speak about the world in a way like no other, particularly since it is non-verbal. This allows meals to connect people from around the globe who do not speak the same language and consequently are not ordinarily able to communicate with each other. In this way, food can function as a symbol of one’s culture as Finkelstein (as cited in Lindgreen & Hingley, 2009:39) iterates: “food habits are inseparable from the culture a person inhabits and these habits vary from culture to culture”. What is interesting in this instance then is how food can also function as a point of entry into a new culture. It can pave the way for an individual to reconnect with their own culture and can indeed also introduce another to it for the first time.

So too, cooking allows individuals to reconnect with their culture even when they may no longer be living in their country of origin. Diaspora concerns “a community of people who live outside their shared country of origin but maintain active connections with it” (Diaspora Alliance, 2019). This can usually be in a number of ways, whether it be economic ties, participation in governance or accessing global markets (ibid.), yet on a more personal level, food is a critical part of staying connected to one’s culture. As Mannur (2009:3) contends “when it comes to thinking about South Asian diasporic bodies, food is never far”. This suggests that food is connected with diaspora, both of which are then inextricably connected to culture. This thesis thence considers food, culture and diaspora as an intersection, as relayed in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: The intersecting relationship between Food, Diaspora and Culture.](image-url)
Food is an integral part of culture and diaspora too is directly concerned with culture and, so, consequently, the three remain inextricably linked. When any of the three are mentioned, this symbiotic relationship is also being referred to.

The relationship depicted in Figure 2 is best demonstrated through looking at instances where individuals interact with the diaspora in their host countries. Food festivals are just one example of the importance of food in this instance. And, as aforementioned, food functions as a form of cultural communication – this is evident in festivals as well. Cultural festivals are a form of “localised diasporic experiences [which construct] an imagined home” (Wu & Chang, 2015:100).

This is reinforced by the vast number of nostalgic cookbooks in circulation. Childs (1984:84) conceptualises the cookbook as: “an intricate and dynamic body of organised knowledge which is a domestic phenomenon”. Cookbooks are inherently tied to the imagination of national communities (Ayora-Díaz, 2012:165): how they perceive their culture and how they want it to be perceived. Through cooking, specifically in the space of the kitchen, individuals are able to share techniques, recipes and conversations, all of which are inherently cultural. But, crucially, the kitchen also functions as a primary place where people come together. Thus, it is an intimate space where people can forge connections to one another, all based around the cultural aspect of food. This will be explored in the following through an assessment of the kitchen as a social site.

3.3.2 The Kitchen as a Social Site

The kitchen is a shared space and, as argued by Meah (2014:2), it is a “place of sociality”. In Pérez’s (2011:676) own fieldwork, people came together constantly and most of the time these interactions took place in the kitchen. Hence, it was not just about cooking but, critically, about socialisation. As Mousawi and Azzam (2017:111) explain in relation to Syria: “Syrians are masters of adversity and nothing unites and inspires them as much as food”. Culture is thus a part of the fabric of the kitchen but notably it aids in bonds being formed between people.

Short (2006:16) contends that people’s identities and very sentiments of belonging “come from how we organise, serve, prepare and cook food”. Short discusses the varied meaning of ‘cook’ arguing that its complexity “reflects the complexity of the domestic practice…and the
approaches of those who do it” (ibid:29). Indeed, this thesis does not consider cooking to be the act of making a meal but rather all the social and cultural components that led up to the meal being made.

Adapon (2008) perceives the act of giving and receiving of food to be a process of exchange whereby two people are involved: a donor and a recipient. For her, cooking is “enacted and embodied, not usually articulated”, yet ‘the emotional state of mind of the cook is always revealed in the outcome of cooking’ (ibid:14-19). Hence, the process of cooking for someone is inherently emotional since it is a skill that an individual has spent time on, in turn sharing a part of themselves with another.

Critically, to be taught how to *cook* requires a teacher, further reinforcing the importance of cooking as a series of bonds and social interactions. To gather expertise in making a certain meal requires time, since the knowledge has to be “accumulated slowly” (Pérez, 2011:671). This can aid in creating relationships since it involves working on something for a prolonged period. Farmer (et al, 2018) argues that cooking enables bonds to be formed since learning to cook evolved as a “survival mechanism”, in order to fulfil a primitive need.

Correspondingly, it is also important to highlight the individual benefits associated with cooking. Studies have suggested that the act of cooking can yield psychological benefits (ibid:168). Culinary art therapy (Ohana, 2019) is a concept in line with this, claiming to result in “increased self-esteem and enhanced brain development”. It utilises cooking as a way to gain life tools, claiming:

“When a person has the ability to relax and engage in something creative, fun and inspiring, they have the ability to feel freer, more vulnerable, honest and ready to connect.”

Ohana, 2019

Cooking forces the individual to be mindful and focus on what they are doing in that moment, as journalist Butturini (2010:223) attests to: “the mere act of cooking centered me”. Thus, culinary art therapy functions as a “reflection on the care of the self”, which directly influences one’s wellbeing (Mentinis, 2016:27). It is also crucial in helping us to bond with others. Parsons (2017:1079) conducted lengthy research to understand whether there was a connection between cooking and wellbeing for incarcerated people and her conclusion was that: “Everyday cooking
to share with others is an invaluable tool for improving self-worth. It has the potential to build pro-social self-concepts and improve human capital”.

Smoyer (2015) looked more specifically at foodways in prisons and how inmate foodways had been constructed to resist institutional powers. In this way, cooking groups were used to construct and negotiate peer groups within the prisons themselves (ibid:36). This demonstrates how cooking can constitute communities and the benefits associated with being a part of these groups.

The intimate bonds formed through cooking together and the sense of community this entails can also be mobilised into a form of resistance. Childs (1984:79-82) researched the connections between cooking and black culture,contending that the “cooking of food by black people” functions as cultural resistance. For her, cooking is a phenomenon in the process of African-Americans attempting to reconcile with the history of slavery, since the kitchen has always been able to function as one of their only liberated spaces (ibid). Yet, the meanings associated with cooking are so complex that culinary knowledge in black America, for her, has become “emblematic of the basic strength and continuity of African-American culture itself” (ibid.).

This is reinforced by Mousawi and Azzam (2017) who wrote a Syrian cookbook to show that, whilst Syrian culture has been attacked on an unprecedented scale, one part of their heritage remains intact: the traditional Syrian dishes that they can make. For them:

“Syrian women are fighting back against the destruction of their home with the only weapons they have: pots and pans”

Mousawi & Azzam, 2017:149

The authors spent three months in Beirut, spending their time with women who had escaped the war. They found a key common ground between them all: food (ibid.). These studies have been employed to demonstrate the impact that cooking can have amongst different communities. For the Syrian community, cooking has been a way to resist total cultural annihilation (ibid.).
3.3.3 The Kitchen as a Sensory Site

As well as an intimate space, this thesis considers the kitchen to be a sensory site, whereby a mix of senses resulting from different smells, tastes and sounds, can trigger a range of emotions, memories and responses. Pérez (2011:665-6) discusses the “sensory turn” of social sciences in the late 1970s arguing that we should not only turn to Western models for answers but instead look to the “interanimation of senses”. Pérez coins the human body a “multisensory interface” and, therefore, it follows that research should be undertaken in a space where these senses are triggered (ibid.). Pérez goes further in advocating that this results in the kitchen becoming a space where somatic knowledge is transmitted (ibid.). In other words, individuals in the kitchen become more aware of themselves and their feelings due to their interaction with a range of sensory stimuli (Cramer et al, 2011). Since feelings are the very foundations of wellbeing, it is essential to consider where they are produced.

Scholars have found that refugees gain sustenance through maintaining their culture (Fielding & Anderson, 2008:14). Their communities reflect traditional values since they seek the familiar to aid in their recovery, thus it is no coincidence that the foods they cook are a reminder of home (ibid:18). Focusing on the power of food in terms of memory was first fathered by anthropologist Sutton in 2001. He understood that food has the ability to hide powerful meanings, yet it had not yet been seen as a topic conducive to thought (Sutton, 2001:3-4). If food is being considered to hold great meaning, it must be considered how it functions in this way: memories are a key part of this inquiry.

A key part of Sutton’s research is focused upon food as a sensory experience, similar to the way the kitchen has been conceptualised. This certainly touches upon neurology as to how the mind connects senses such as smell and taste to past experiences and, indeed, how it then processes these senses (synaesthesia). For him, food is not only a “cultural site”, but one that is able to produce memories and knowledge (Sutton, 2001). Synaesthesia is central to this in terms of how the “power of taste and smell can take on many levels of identity” (ibid:86). Synaesthesia is a crucial aid to memory and the union of senses can have a particularly powerful effect, resulting in the recreation of past experiences (ibid:101-2).

Importantly, Sutton distinguishes between episodic memories, referring to life-history memories and semantic memories, which refer to recognition of phenomenon (ibid:89).
Episodic memories are more powerful to us since they relate to ‘the long-term retention of contextually rich…past experiences’ (Payne & Kensinger, 2010:290). According to Sutton (2001:89), smells from food have a direct link to episodic memories, as opposed to semantic. This would suggest then that food can be a powerful tool to bring back defining memories. If this is the case, it follows that an individual could select certain foods in order to trigger their senses and, consequently, relive a specific memory. Correspondingly, Hutchinson (2018:67) contends that, for traumatised individuals, social conceptions of memory are a powerful mechanism since they sustain feelings of communal solidarity. To relate this to the kitchen, it suggests that food memories are powerful since they can connect refugees back to their culture, which they may share with others in the same space.

Indeed, for those who are in search of a new start after losing everything, one of the very few things they have to hold onto are memories. As Sutton (2001:168) understands it, “deprivation creates a space” to focus upon memories, since they are some of the very last things that people hold onto. Thence, not only are memories one of the few things that refugees still have, but they are constantly revived in order to facilitate the individual’s own wellbeing. For Sutton, reclaiming one’s memories are the moments that give them “the strength to carry on” (ibid:82). This reinforces the power that food can hold, and specifically for refugees, how it functions as a coping mechanism, in turn, demonstrating their resilience.

This section has established the connection between cooking and wellbeing, demonstrating that cooking encompasses a lot more than has previously been considered. Food is directly connected to culture and diaspora and what an individual chooses to cook can hold great meaning to them. Aside from individual benefits, cooking also has an important role in terms of community, not only in bringing people together but empowering them. Correspondingly, there are many strands of cooking which are directly connected to an individual’s own wellbeing and these have been considered. The next section discusses the role of eating together in facilitating a sense of belonging.

3.4 How Eating Together Influences Wellbeing

This section assesses whether eating together facilitates a sense of belonging. Further to this, it is concerned with food choice, discussing the cultural meanings behind the foods that individuals choose to eat. Research has been done upon the importance of eating together in
the home, viewed by Short (2006:2) as “the cornerstone of family ritual and family life, the fabric of society”. However, this section assesses the relationship between eating together and wellbeing outside of the home. Firstly, this section shows the importance of meals, as critical to the familiarity of the everyday. Secondly, it assesses the benefits of commensality, before addressing the sub-question directly by focusing on commensality and belonging.

### 3.4.1 The Familiarity of the Everyday

The benefits associated with cooking together relate to positive functioning: how it brings the community together and how this impacts the individual. The focus of this first section is upon how the power of the *familiar* aids in recovery following trauma. Food and, crucially, mealtimes form a frequent part of the everyday. In this sense, it embodies the *familiar* in terms of when people eat, how they eat and the food they consume. In other words, a process is cultivated: food habits develop which form routines to definitively form a crucial part of an individuals’ *familiar*.

Mealtimes vary between cultures but, generally, meals in the home are reserved for family members or close friends, functioning as a “social cement” which validates the membership of individuals in that group (Ayora-Diaz, 2012:33). In the MENA region, there usually exists a presentation of dishes which comprise the meal, one that the family shares together (Chiva, 1997). These meals form a routinely part of the everyday, and hence mealtimes and family time become inextricably linked through the familiar. This is crucial to note since Fielding and Anderson (2008) contend that refugees seek the *familiar* to help them recover from trauma. When all components of life have been changed beyond recognition, it is logical that the individual would crave stability, indeed anything of the former *every day* that they can grasp onto. This can be applied to both the meals themselves as well as mealtimes: both can be recreated unremittingly, thus forming a way back to the familiarity of the past. The recovery process can be sped up when the individual feels empowered enough to not only begin the process but play an active part in it themselves (Steele & Kuban, 2014). This is critical to wellbeing since it demonstrates a positive shift in terms of autonomy and purpose. Mealtimes can remind the individual of the moments that formed a regular part of their days. Hence, refugees may long for the *familiar* of their pasts and food is unique in that it can form a cathartic path back to these memories, in turn facilitating the recovery process itself.
3.4.2 Nostalgic Foods

Just as people travel, food and recipes travel too, contributing to the reproduction of national identities in different areas (Mintz, 2008:510). Mintz (ibid:515) discusses the “impulse to seek food [as] a desire that cannot be inhibited or repressed” and since there are no other desires as essential to life, food becomes a topic particularly worthy of academic study. Yet, in line with Boutard (et al, 2016:1), it is rare that people simply seek food, rather since food is a “culture act” in itself, people are in search of specific sensations and flavours that are of meaning to them. This becomes particularly prevalent for refugees who have been physically separated from their culture, and in turn, away from the foods they are used to. This begins a journey to navigate the diaspora (Mannur, 2007:26), one that will inevitably start and end with the food they choose to make.

As an immigrant in the United States, Mannur (ibid:11) explains her nostalgia after moving away from her “childhood home in Bombay”. After moving, “food [became her] intellectual and emotional anchor” (ibid.). This demonstrates how food itself is crucial for the wellbeing of those who have been separated from their home. It reconnects them with their culture – to the familiarity of what they have lost. A particularly common symptom of culture shock is, in fact, an excessive preoccupation with food since it becomes a way for migrants, and indeed refugees, to ensure the maintenance of their ethnic identity (Brown, 2009). In this way, food can reflect the changing values that a migrant may have. There is an important connection between eating and emotions, and so, when an individual goes to great lengths to achieve a mono-national diet (ibid.), it suggests that they are searching for a way back to the familiarity of their everyday.

Brown (2009) undertook her own ethnographic study of how international students in England adjust and found that food was of central importance in the adjustment process. Often, students rejected English food completely, reverting to preparing foods from their home country, with some going to great lengths to emulate their national diet (ibid.). Her central finding was that food was considered a “love object” of which students “derived emotional sustenance”, crediting it with alleviating feelings of stress and loneliness (ibid:47). This suggests that food provides more than physiological sustenance but that it also attends to ones’ wellbeing by ensuring emotional stability. Certain meals can be referred to as a home comfort, yet this research is crucial in proving just how vital this comfort can be.
This study has been necessary to assert in this framework since it was rare for me to come across studies which had food at their core. Moreover, it demonstrates the symbolic power that people attach to food (ibid.), reinforcing the innate ability of food to function as an analytical tool into wellbeing.

3.4.3 Benefits of Commensality

If food is a metaphor for social wellbeing, food practices, including the sharing of food, are in need of further discussion. As anthropologist Adapon (2008:40) relays, “whenever it comes to food or eating, a crucial element of sharing is involved”. The kitchen has been previously conceptualised as a social site, yet the benefits of sharing food at the table need to be considered as well, critically in terms of community.

The sharing of food is conceptualised as commensality: the practice of eating together with other people, signifying unity and sharing in cultural contexts (Tuomainen, 2014). Commensality refers to networks and relationships (ibid.), hence it is important in this sense in terms of the role that sharing food has in forming, and strengthening, these relations. In Bailey’s (2017:57) study of Indian migrants in the Netherlands, he found that the sharing of food was common among all his participants and it was directly connected to their identity. To cook and share Indian food in a “transnational social field” is to be:

“attached to the emotions of care, it brings the sensory experience of being at home in India, it symbolises the efforts made by family back home to connect with the mother...The value of the food in the transitional domestic space is heightened in terms of the emotional value attached to it”

Bailey, 2017:58

But commensality does not only function in terms of recreating and defining one national identity, it also works to share values across different groups. It is important in generating bonds that constitute a sense of community – these communities can be a mix of a multitude of identities (Ayora-Diaz, 2012:33). As Ayora-Diaz (ibid.) contends, “food continues to be a form of social cement that validates the natural membership of individuals in a group”. The sharing of food is an act of bonding. Individuals ascertain the food they choose to make and
who they wish to share it with, in turn, forging new connections and beginning new conversations.

It is of note that commensality brings people into the same space, thus ensuring that the sharing of food creates new conversations, fundamentally creating new or reinforcing existing community structures. The following final section seeks to assess how these community structures can facilitate a sense of belonging.

3.4.4 The Relationship Between Commensality and Belonging

Commensality may have the ability to bring people into one space, thus creating a community structure, but does eating a meal at the table constitute a sense of belonging? It must first be noted that, when discussing the notion of community, this thesis refers to any social group where food is shared between others and the bonds this can create. Research has been undertaken in terms of the importance of the family meal, with Sutton (2001:81) claiming that direct connections with the family are established through food. Yet, the main group of people concerned in this thesis are refugees, who for the most part have had their personal family structures shattered. Consequently, the focus here is upon how new community structures can be formed, and, in turn, the new families that are created as a result. Commensality has the ability to strengthen community relations and these relations are certainly not always tied by blood. Hence, this thesis, when referring to family, speaks instead of a close societal unit of kinship where individuals feel close and bonded to others within it (Sharma, 2013). Indeed, Keyes and Kane (2004) argue that a sense of belonging is developed within any type of social boundaries. Thus, it is crucial to consider spaces where these boundaries are consolidated.

Bailey (2017:52-3) argues in his study of Indian migrants in the Netherlands that food practices and commensality are able to create a sense of belonging: “Practices such as fasting, food avoidance and ceremonial consumption of foods in the transnational family space or in the communal space with co-ethnic migrants creates this sense of belonging to the country or even to specific regions.” He acknowledges that whilst people had different senses of belonging, the food that was chosen to be prepared, cooked and shared all helped “conjure a sense of home” (Bailey, 2017:54). Similarly, with the study of international students in England, Brown found food was “a vehicle for socialising, giving students a feeling of belonging and security” (Brown, 2009:49). Yet, both scholars focus on homogenous groups. It is not particularly
startling that making and sharing food with people from the same culture facilitates a sense of belonging. Indeed, it has been suggested in other studies that re-creating community structures and the creation of “safe spaces” for refugees generates a collective sense of resilience (Fielding & Anderson, 2008; Harris et al, 2014).

But what about those communities that are not homogenous but are instead a mix of people from different backgrounds? Bailey (2017:57) noticed in his study, for instance, that commensality with “Dutch friends and colleagues were rare as both groups had different ideas of socialising and norms on what food could be eaten or shared”. This would thence suggest that the sense of belonging associated with commensality does not apply to non-homogenous groups.

There is certainly a gap in the research when attempting to assess contemporary eating practices with a cross-cultural approach (Danesi, 2018). Research has generally looked to the effect of commensality on specific groups. Danesi is one scholar who has attempted to fill this gap by focusing on commensality for young people from France, Germany and Spain. But Danesi, too, focuses on the differences between the groups’ commensality instead of addressing how they may be similar, concluding that “national contexts continue to provide a wide range of references to citizens” in terms of eating (ibid:115). Wise (2011:82) did research specifically upon commensality and multiculturalism in Australia focusing on an “embrace of diverse foodways”. Wise contends that eating “ethnic food” manifests as a form of celebratory multiculturalism, yet her research taps into the idea of otherness, comparing the national to the ethnic (ibid.). What about those groups that are from different backgrounds but nevertheless co-exist? Danesi (2018:117) calls for further research to observe “a more diversified population inside a country”. This thesis contends that family can be constructed and thus, by conducting fieldwork with a group of cross-cultural refugees, I seek to bridge this gap in research.

3.5 The Relationship between Refugees, Food and Hope

Much gets lost when attempting to translate lived experiences of trauma and displacement into a series of metric rankings (Fischer, 2014). There has been a general trend in politics to generalise in order to form policy recommendations and come to strong conclusions. Yet, doing so fails to consider how people’s experiences, coping mechanisms and aspirations for the future
may differ. Consequently, the third sub-question in this thesis utilises food as a lens to focus upon the individual experience of hope and wellbeing.

The relationship between food and hope has been selected as an important consideration for my research question since I believe hope to be an essential positive promoter of wellbeing (Gallagher & Lopez, 2018). The first section discusses this further in terms of hope theory, followed by a discussion of the connection between food and hope. Finally, the importance of community is cited in terms of a refugee’s general sense of wellbeing.

3.5.1 Hope Theory and Wellbeing

Wellbeing has been considered in terms of the good life, and how people themselves conceive it. A condition of hope is being concerned about the present and hoping for change for the better (Lazarus, 1999). The focus for this thesis is refugees. The discussion hence becomes how wellbeing can be improved when the current life situation is unsatisfactory: hope is absolutely essential to this process (ibid.).

Hope promotes wellbeing and thus, specifically for the context I am addressing wellbeing in regard to refugees, it is in need of conceptualisation. I employ psychologist Snyder’s (as cited in Lee & Gallagher, 2018:287) theorisation of hope as: “A cognitively based construct that consists of two components: agency, the willpower to achieve a goal, and pathways, the perceived ability to generate that goal.” This definition views hope as a resource: a way of helping individuals attain their goals, consequently influencing their wellbeing (ibid.). Hope is not being considered here as an everyday emotion but as something more powerful. As Lazarus contends (1999:654), “hope must be a vital psychological resource in our lives, without it, there would be little to sustain us”. It must be noted that despair is considered to be the opposite of hopefulness, defined in the dictionary as: “the feeling that there is no hope” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). The importance here is nevertheless to trace the journey of wellbeing for refugees from despair to hope, if indeed this relationship emerges.

Hope is a developing theme, worthy of study in its own right yet, for the purposes of this thesis, the focus is upon how it fosters wellbeing and how it can function as a coping resource (Lee & Gallagher, 2018). This study recognises that, just as there is no fixed level of well-being, neither is there a fixed level of hope (ibid.). This makes it difficult to measure, yet, Snyder’s (as cited
in Lee & Gallagher, 2018) theorisation becomes essential to how this thesis considers hope: in terms of agency and the willpower to achieve our goals. This will be considered in relation to the initiative in question.

3.5.2 How Food can Allow for an Increase in Hope

As discussed, food is more than simply what we put on our plates. It symbolises so much more, essentially a “culture act” in itself (Boutard et al, 2016:1), which is why I have sought to use it as an analytical tool in wellbeing. It is what food symbolises that becomes important in terms of the journey towards becoming hopeful. McCracken (1988) posits that when a person cannot obtain their ideals, they transfer them into consumption objects. For McCracken (ibid:110), consumer goods “give the individual a kind of access to displaced meaning that would otherwise be inaccessible to them”. Food is a readily consumable good, and he argues that the meaning of these goods can be traced back to cultural categories (ibid:75). Indeed, due to the way meals encapsulate culture, they can also embody hopes and aspirations for a better life. McCracken’s works is a critical study for this research. Firstly, it demonstrates the relationship between consumable goods, in this instance, food and one’s emotional condition, and secondly, it suggests that these foods can then function figuratively for hopes and aspirations. The individual has the ability to reflect on the meal which, in turn, enables them to contemplate their emotional condition, inherent to well-being (ibid.).

This was demonstrated in a study of Salvadoran women in the United States. Sharon Stowers (2012:376) argues that food is central to the Salvadoran immigrant experience. They crave foods from their home and, through a process of “food grooming” these meals become symbolic, evoking “a past, romanticised life” (ibid.). Salvadoran immigrants are thus able to create greater meaning out of the meals they make. Stowers argues that these meanings are in terms of ‘an imagined past and hopes for the future’ (ibid:374). This demonstrates how food can function as a vehicle for hope (ibid.) when these hopes cannot be actualised in reality. It will be interesting to assess this in terms of refugees who work in the initiative ABM in the following analysis: what does food encapsulate for them and what does this mean in terms of the facilitation of hope?
3.5.3 How the Community can Facilitate Hope

Finally, it is critical to reinforce that ABM is a community: a diverse group of people from a host of different backgrounds. The premise of the initiative is food and so it is interesting to utilise food as a lens when considering the importance of the community structure.

The importance of community has been considered in terms of cooking and eating together. Becut and Lurbe (2017:2) too, discuss community in reference to food, arguing that making and eating food expresses meanings of social bounds, reinforcing the strength of the kinship group. The authors contend that all human societies aim for “a shared sense of community membership” (ibid.). This suggests that becoming a part of a group with common interests is a human necessity, a concern critical to survival, development and growth (Kohut, 1977 as cited in Keyes & Kane, 2004). Indeed, Keyes’ 1998 model of social wellbeing is ultimately concerned with the comfort and wellbeing derived from being a part of a community (Gallagher & Lopez, 2018:292).

Community is considered in this research to facilitate a sense of belonging, providing emotional and practical support for refugees (Fielding & Anderson, 2008). Certainly, community is essential to the process of refugees resettling and adjusting to their new environment (ibid.), yet it is also interlinked with the notion of traumatic communities. Dereification denotes a process of recovery where individuals can regain a sense of trust and safety (Hutchinson, 2018:62). Sitting at a table as part of a community creates a safe space and hence, it is within these boundaries that refugees can begin to feel secure. Commensality is a vital practice which consolidates the community, critical for those whose social boundaries have previously been destroyed. Feeling well adjusted, alongside feelings of belonging can lead to the beginning of aspirations and hopes (see Wise, 2011 & Fielding & Anderson, 2008). Thus, there is a critical link between commensality and community: utilising food as a lens provides a crucial insight into this relationship. The next chapter outlines the methodology used to undertake this research.
4 Methodology

This thesis seeks to answer the research question: *Does cooking and eating food together improve the wellbeing of refugees in the Netherlands?* My research took a qualitative approach, and this chapter focuses on the methods used to conduct this research. Section 4.1 will layout the research design and approach taken. Section 4.2 will discuss the procedure including both the interview schedule and coding framework. Finally, section 4.3 will discuss limitations to the study as well as other ethical considerations such as anonymity.

4.1 Research Design

I sought to use personal narratives rooted in local meanings and experience (Pugach, 2001) to form the base of my research. It has not been the intention to generalise the individual experience in line with political theories. Rather, I took a constructivist perspective from the outset, considering the ways social reality is a series of endeavours by social actors (Bryman, 2012:34). I take a bottom-up approach by considering ABM, an independent initiative, in terms of what it can teach the State about refugee wellbeing. The Dutch government has marginalised refugees two-fold. Firstly, from society by putting them in reception centres and, secondly, from any conversation regarding their own wellbeing. Their individual stories are submerged into one narrative – this is detrimental to welfare policy. Consequently, my approach allows space to be opened up for the refugees’ individual perspective regarding their own wellbeing.

My thesis is a case study research, investigating A Beautiful Mess, a refugee restaurant initiative in the Bijlmerbajes, a former prison complex in Amsterdam. This initiative was selected since it has been understudied as an initiative with great potential to assist in the wellbeing of refugees. Its goal is “to contribute to [refugees’] search for a meaningful life” (RC, 2019), supporting them throughout the process of restarting their lives in the Netherlands. Secondly, ABM is premised upon refugees and the role of cooking and eating, as is central to my research question.
4.2 Qualitative Procedure

Refugees were the subject of research and initially the strategy was to conduct ethnographic research by working with them in the kitchen. However, the initiative is a mix of individuals from across the globe, and thus a vast multitude of languages were spoken. Consequently, due to the language barrier, which would have needed an array of translators to solve, I changed my method to in-depth interviews.

I undertook a total of thirteen interviews with refugees from the ages of 20 to 58, alongside interviews with the head chef and the CEO of Refugee Company. Respondents were seeking refuge from a host of countries, predominantly Syria and Eritrea, but also from: Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uganda and Nigeria. Initially, due to the language barrier, the general manager drew up a list of names of those I could speak with based on their English proficiency level. This limited the pool of refugees I could speak to, only including those who had language experience. However, I was able to circumvent this in agreement by setting up my own interviews and organising translators for others.

Since my premise is that food is a form of non-verbal communication which can connect persons from different cultures, it seemed nonsensical to only speak to those who could speak English. Indeed, it would have drastically limited the findings of my research. I therefore sought to find ways to widen my pool of respondents. For instance, I asked refugees directly if they could translate for their colleagues who were from the same country. I held three interviews in this manner, the benefit being that the respondents could speak freely in their native language with no limitations. In addition, the translator was someone they knew and trusted with their responses. In another instance, I translated my questions into Farsi so my respondent could respond in their native language. I then had the transcription translated by a friend. It would not have been possible to hire one translator who spoke and understood the array of languages spoken at ABM and, additionally, having many translators would have come with its own challenges. Nevertheless, I was able to work my way around the initial suggested list, speaking to a range of refugees who had either previously worked at ABM, had worked there for a time or were newcomers. This meant I was able to widen my data set, elucidating the experiences of a variety of respondents.
I used an in-depth interview guide (Appendix 2) with twelve open-questions based upon my three sub-questions. Interviews lasted around 30 minutes each. I found that, often, my respondents were able to discuss themes that were important to them in response to the questions asked. I chose open-questions for this reason, allowing for unusual answers (Bryman, 2012:246). The in-depth guide can be found in attachment 1. Chairs were positioned at a right angle to one another and I made sure the chairs were of the same height, so my respondents were never at a lower level to me. This ensured that they were never put in a subordinate position (Adams, 2009). All respondents gave permission to be audio recorded, apart from two whereby we agreed I would take notes instead.

I also took fieldnotes when participating in a benefit held at ABM on the 16th of April 2019. The benefit was for the 150th issue of the magazine, JAN. JAN chose ABM to host their benefit in order to spread awareness of “socially relevant” initiatives that show “the need for connection” (JAN, 2019). On this occasion, I wore the same uniform as refugees and worked with them in the kitchen and on the floor. Doing so altered the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. I was told on several occasions by the manager, as well as some of my respondents: “you’re actually one of us now, you’re a part of the team”. Working with the team enabled my respondents to trust me. This was acknowledged in all of the interviews conducted afterwards: they hugged me and were generally more enthused to speak with me. This was important since my research is centered on refugees and wellbeing: the data collected was only possible due to the rapport I built with the refugees in question.

I used grounded theory in this research: theory that was derived from the data and analysed through the research process (Bryman, 2012:387). This approach was recursive since my data collection and analysis referred to each other throughout (ibid.). Hence, this research took an inductive approach, focused on exploring new themes and ideas to come from the data. I used line-by-line coding to ensure that I did not lose or overlook any of my data and went on to create more abstract codes from this process (Charmaz, 2004 in Bryman, 2012). I used a thematic analysis and opted to use CAQDAS through use of the software Nvivo. I initially developed codes with pen and paper but utilised them in conjunction with Nvivo. Working with the computer ensured that I worked methodically and attentively, allowing me to solidify

5 See coverage of the event at: https://www.jan-magazine.nl/lifestyle/g27178653/jan-jubileum-diner-refugee-company/ (2019)
the themes generated (Hilal & Saleh, 2013; Bryman, 2012). Taking a reflexive approach ultimately allowed me to consider unexposed issues (Collien, 2018) in line with the constructivist perspective taken.

4.3 Limitations

A key limitation was that due to its function as a working restaurant, time was limited and occasionally there were interruptions during interviewing. Initially, I was asked to come on weekdays between the hours of 3-5pm, meaning that timeframes were being externally decided for me. Yet, I would sometimes arrive when respondents had their language classes or there were events going on and so I would have to leave. As a result, in agreement, I went around the schedule, coming at various times on different days in order to widen my pool of respondents. Often, when holding an interview, others would see and become interested and then come over to me as well. I was aware that their responses may be influenced because I was holding interviews in their place of work. Consequently, I sought to go to quieter parts of the building and if this was not possible, I conducted them outside.

Another limitation to the study is the restricted timeframe I had. Since my topic is new in terms of research, it would have been helpful to conduct piloting for my interviews. This would have highlighted any improvements that needed to be made and it would have given me practice in terms of holding the interviews themselves (Majid et al, 2017). Due to the time frame, however, this was not feasible. Consequently, I adjusted my interview guide accordingly throughout my fieldwork. However, my guide was not completely rigid since my respondents often introduced new topics and veered off into anecdotes. It was important to allow them the freedom to do this since it enabled me to establish the topics they considered to be most central to their wellbeing.

A final limitation I encountered was that the majority of the interviews I held were in English, which is not the first language of my respondents. This may have resulted in narrow responses if they could not articulate all of their thoughts. Additionally, sometimes respondents did not understand my line of questioning. Giving prompts and re-articulating the question may have influenced the response given. If I had longer to conduct my study I could have located and trained translators for each of the languages required. But whilst this would have resulted in more comprehensive responses, there are also challenges that come with using translators.
Nevertheless, language was a challenge which I sought to overcome, and I believe the data obtained shows that I was successful in doing so.

### 4.3.1 Ethical Considerations

I wished to safeguard the welfare of my respondents throughout my fieldwork, as is central to a study concerning their wellbeing. As such, I took a universalist ethical stance ensuring that ethical precepts were not broken throughout the entirety of my research (Bryman, 2012:133).

I obtained both verbal and written permission from respondents for the interview and for the audio recording. I assured my respondents of anonymity, therefore pseudonyms are used and ages have been put by decades. The list of respondents can be viewed in the Appendix 1. A group photo was taken of us which I have permission to include. However, I have decided not to in order to ensure that the anonymity of my respondents is not jeopardised. Anonymity has been crucial for this study since some respondents are still going through the asylum process, making them uncomfortable with putting their name to an interview. As Gerver (2013) notes, the exposure of a name with a story can be incredibly risky for those who are not yet status-holders. But notably, several gave permission to be audio-recorded based on the assumption that they would remain anonymous. Regardless of their personal reasoning for this, as a vulnerable group in society, it was my ethical duty to respect this decision (European Commission, 2019). My aim has been to make their stories and opinions visible, but not to the detriment of their welfare here in the Netherlands.

Now the research framework and methodology have been discussed, the following three chapters analyse the data obtained. Chapter 5 focuses on the data concerned with the first sub-question on cooking, chapter 6 upon the second sub-question of eating and, finally, chapter 7 is concerned with the final sub-question: hopefulness and wellbeing.
5 Cooking for an Enhanced Wellbeing

This chapter explores the data concerned with the first sub-question: How does cooking together affect the sense of wellbeing of refugees in A Beautiful Mess? Certain themes consistently came up in the data and are explored in the ensuing. Through analysis, I found that the kitchen in ABM does function as a cultural site, in that making specific foods is a way for refugees to stay connected to their culture. Moreover, the kitchen functions as a social site with data highlighting that even when refugees could not ordinarily communicate with each other due to a language barrier, they were able to connect through food. Interestingly, gender also emerged as a prominent theme, which had not been previously considered in the framework. The following sections explore these emergent themes in relation to wellbeing.

5.1 A Cultural Site

A relationship between food, culture and diaspora was established in the theoretical framework and it was corroborated in the data collected. It was important to decipher whether food meant anything of cultural value to the refugees I spoke with and, notably, culture weaved itself into almost every conversation I had. I found the relationship between culture and food to be particularly visible during participant observation when I worked directly alongside my respondents.

Although ABM is run by RC, the meals made in the restaurant are not planned by them. Rather, the menu changes often and is planned by the refugees themselves. The head chef, for instance, who is Dutch, previously explained to me that he rarely chooses what is made:

“I don’t even have to teach since they teach me most of the food we make. It’s really fun because we get to know so many of their dishes from their home country...Here it’s special because each week someone can make their own recipe.” Max

This implies that ABM embraces the differing cultures, encouraging its employees to use food as a way to express themselves. This was evident to me whilst working in the kitchen. The main meal had been planned by John for the JAN Benefit. John was particularly excited about
what he had made, taking me to a giant pot of a dish he had been working on for the last five hours (Figure 3). He told me how happy he was to “share his culture” with everyone. Hence, for him, food is valuable since it epitomises his culture. It is of note that, during my previous interview with him, he had declined to speak about his favourite meal, becoming increasingly emotional after explaining that his children remained in Eritrea. Yet, during the Benefit, making one meal was equivalent to putting his culture on display. In this instance, he was eager to show me and to talk about it. This directly relates to McCracken’s (1988) research which posited that when a person cannot physically obtain their ideals, they transfer them into consumption objects. In this instance, John’s meal encapsulated not only his culture but his family ideals as well.

The kitchen as a way to reconnect with cultural values is reinforced by other responses which described their favourite meals in great depth. Almost all were local foods from their respective home countries, as is evidenced below:

“(I make) Syrian local meals with rice…Things that we used to eat at home” Caasi

“I make all Iranian dishes for the people here…zeresht pollo, ghormeh sabzi and kebab koubidee…Lekker” Eve
“(Food) is important for us...We’re not living in our country anymore so food is something that we used to have at home so the food brings us back to my culture, my home and brings all these memories back.” Kay

These statements are interlinked with Adapon (2008)’s research claiming that cooking is inherently emotional since the individual is sharing a part of themselves with others. The data highlights that refugees in ABM want to share their culture with others, and the predominant way in which they can do this is through food.

Despite this, there were two instances whereby respondents described their excitement to try foods not from their home countries, usually because they were not able to obtain them ordinarily. I asked follow-up questions to gain explanations for why these foods were now their favourites. I have listed the responses given below:

“Salmon...because in Syria we don’t have like much choices when it comes to fish...it’s not a usual thing to have so it is something that I appreciate being here.” Caasi

“Pasta, I love it so much. It gives me a good feeling.” Allan

It is important to share these responses to show the diversity in answers, yet they do not contradict the general findings. When relating these excerpts to their transcripts, both respondents consistently reinforce their desire to remain connected to their culture. The responses highlighted above merely exhibit pleasure in trying foods that are new to them. It does not represent a distancing from their culture. Instead, it points to the messy and complex nature of the integration process, and how this influences their identity. Embracing certain foods in this instance is perhaps significant in terms of how they see themselves adapting to Western culture more generally.

Finally, the data reinforced Boutard et al’s (2016) conceptualisation of food as a culture act in terms of the narrative level. Bonds can form between people in the kitchen because food also functions as a social act. Most respondents emphasised food as an introduction to their culture, as Leah explains:
“If you make me English food and I make you Iranian food, we talk about that and the background of that food and in doing so, we become closer.” Leah

Food has been reinforced as a non-verbal language, and, in ABM, it has been critical in connecting people from a host of different backgrounds.

5.2 A Social Site

The benefits of cooking together, as exhibited in the theoretical framework, have been supported by the data collected. Studies discussed have claimed that cooking can create, and strengthen, social bonds in turn building a community. This has been critical to explore since positive relationships are directly linked to wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). This section assesses the data in terms of social benefits and whether respondents felt as though they were able to bond with others from different cultures through the act of cooking.

Three themes consistently came up in responses: communication, community and the notion of family. This is evidenced in the following responses:

“We are now one family...If I come with Eritrean dishes, some prepare Netherlands dishes, one prepares Syrian dishes, we are learning each other through food. We all work as one open team so we have good communication.” John

“There’s a mix of cultures in the kitchen... and we’re all getting on really well here, it brings us together. It’s good to have different cultures here.” Eve

Both responses highlight the mix of cultures within the kitchen and they embrace it. The mix of languages and other cultural barriers could have hindered community formation but, instead, the kitchen was able to bridge the gaps between them. Moreover, they reinforce how meals can be used as an introduction to culture. In John’s words: “we are learning each other through food”. This suggests that cooking not only creates bonds in terms of literally being in the same space to cook, but that it enables individuals to share more of their culture through the food they make.
Another respondent described his initial discomfort of working in the restaurant due to the language barrier, since he “didn’t have the language to talk”. Consequently, he decided to change roles:

“I changed my career to the kitchen to help avoid me feeling like this” Abel

This is a significant statement since it reinforces the importance of the kitchen as a space where people can connect with others. For Abel, the kitchen became a safe space where connections to others could be facilitated. Cooking functions as a form of non-verbal communication able to accelerate and strengthen the process of community formation itself.

The theory also emphasised the individual benefits associated with cooking. It claimed that it has the ability to “relax and engage” the individual (Cooking Art Therapy, 2019). Respondents considered their own use of cooking and below are some of the responses given:

“Cooking helps me really a lot, it’s kind of therapeutic for me like the preparing of vegetables and things is really nice to do. It also gives me great satisfaction when I finish the meal at the end. I think it’s been really good for me.” Tristan

“It calms me and makes me focus on just the food, I find it relaxing and stress-free.”

Lucy

These responses are a mix from those who work in the kitchen to those who prefer cooking at home. These statements support the research claiming that cooking can aid an individual’s wellbeing. They validate cooking as a form of rehabilitation in that it is therapeutic, forcing the individual to take their mind off all other anxieties and focus specifically on what they are doing in that moment.

5.3 Improving Self-Esteem

Cooking together for refugees at ABM has been a way for them to regain a sense of agency, thereby boosting their self-esteem. Research has proven the importance of autonomy for human development (Deci et al, 2005). The data has emphasised that there is a relationship between
the two. One respondent, for instance, explained how cooking aided his recovery from severe PTSD:

“My psychologist recommended me to cook because you need to have control over your food… it really helped me with the problems I had” Che

Further conversation underlined the lack of control that Che felt in other aspects of his life, particularly since he was unable to return to his home country to pursue the career he had envisioned. Cooking was one aspect that he could readily take control of. Thus, cooking fulfilled a need for self-sufficiency, which facilitated empowerment. Even if it is considered a small example of autonomous behaviour, it is easier to begin with these instances, since they are more readily accessible. In other words, food autonomy can begin the journey to regain control in other aspects of life.

Similarly, as respondent Kwame from Uganda attests to, making local foods from his home country is a crucial part of this autonomy:

“I like cooking my local foods… Going to the market is meaningful for me which is why I travel to go to it, and I get things like matoke. Making things from my culture is important to me.” Kwame

It is interesting that rather than simply describing a mealtime, he chose to emphasise the travelling he undertakes to find foodstuffs to cook with. This suggests that agency is not only in terms of the act of cooking, or in terms of providing structure to an individual’s day but so too having agency in terms of choosing what to make. Being able to find Ugandan local foods enabled him to build confidence, since he can use ingredients he knows and feels comfortable with. He does not have to relearn another new aspect in his daily life. In this way, local foods become a common thread between the land he stands on now and the land he once did.

This was applicable to the majority of respondents spoken to, in that a level of autonomy was facilitated by their ability to make local foods. Local foods give refugees an element of continuity and familiarity in an otherwise new and uncertain environment. It improves their self-confidence as a result, as John explains:
Cooking boosts John’s self-esteem since he is acquiring knowledge which he can then share. He felt self-assured that he had knowledge in this area, knowledge that he could pass on to others. It gives him a level of assurance that is a good cook and he knows how to make his dishes. After a period of such uncertainty, to be assured in something, in this instance cooking, is instrumental to his self-worth.

5.3.1 Pride

Pride was also a common theme that emerged in narratives of cooking, particularly when cooking local recipes. As aforementioned, it is the refugees themselves who plan the menu at ABM. Yet, the data has shown a level of competitiveness when it comes to who is chosen to make their recipes. As Allan explains:

“It’s sometimes like a competition to make food. If there’s a day when the chef asks somebody to make something, they’re going to be so happy and will text the chef to make sure all the ingredients are there. They are taking pictures of the meal and sending it to family and friends.” Allan

For Allan, to be selected to make a dish made the individual feel seen. This was reinforced by the head chef who provided an anecdote:

“There was this guy from Tibet, very warm guy, a beautiful person and he was overly excited to make his Momos and now he’s known as Momo…we really saw him glowing of happiness when people were eating his food. It brings people together in an amazing way.” Max

I have deemed these quotes central due to their detail, particularly in emphasising the positive feelings associated with making a meal. They were particularly enthusiastic when relaying these stories to me. This is reinforced by the action of taking photographs, particularly when sending them to people. Doing so embodies a level of pride, suggesting respondents are fulfilled by creating something of cultural value to them. The competitiveness described in the selection process demonstrates the value inherent in being able to cook a family recipe.
Something so seemingly small has had a great impact upon refugees’ wellbeing and their colleagues have clearly taken note of its importance as well.

5.4 Gender

Cooking at ABM is a gendered experience. Even though it was not my primary focus, particularly since the kitchen was evenly divided between men and women, on several occasions my respondents made remarks concerning gender. My initial impression was that ABM did not enforce any traditional gender roles; however, this does not mean that they do not exist. Food, historically, has always involved a tangible division of labour. Indeed, the gendered nature of domesticity is particularly prevalent in the MENA region where the majority of my respondents are from. But my focus therein has been upon the kitchen as a contested space for power dynamics. For me, the complexities of this would have been undermined if my focus became solely about gender. However, the data has consistently established that gender is an important theme, one that is in need of exploration within this data analysis.

Two strong themes emerged almost simultaneously. Firstly, men learning to cook for the first time in the Netherlands, and, secondly, the need to ask female family members still in their respective home countries for cooking instructions. There are numerous examples addressing the first theme and the following quotes are but a few:

“\textit{At first I didn’t know anything about cooking...I didn’t think about how my mother made it... but coming here helped me learn so much.}” Alen

“I don’t cook very much and most of the time my girlfriend does it.” Caasi

“When I was there, I was not cooking, my wife was.” John

“I never cooked there, no males did.” Abel

This demonstrates that cooking is a relatively new concept for many of the male refugees who work at ABM. Previously, due to patriarchal social norms, they relied upon the women in their lives and, for some, as seen with Caasi, they still do. It is interesting to consider this in terms of autonomy since it suggests that the male refugees spoken with used to be dependent upon women in a domestic context. Does it thence follow that cooking for themselves results in an increase of autonomy? Whilst the respondents quoted above acknowledged their prior lack of
cooking skills, they went on to explain the dishes that they can cook now and how good this made them feel. It also suggests that cooking is deemed a way out of their current situation. Whilst they had not previously embraced the kitchen, traditionally considered to be a woman’s space, it has been a way of finding employment. Moreover, it is one of the few ways in which they can be reconnected to their home.

Ensuing responses led to the second theme: asking female family members for recipes and cooking advice. They felt that doing so would not only enable them to cook for themselves but to make dishes in the same way as they were used to. The emotional attachment inherent in this can be exemplified below:

“She [my mother] teaches me because in my previous life I didn’t cook...when I make something similar here, something like we used to have in Iraq, I send her pictures. She gets emotional about it.” Allan

“I did some mail with my mother via skype so she told me how to make things.” Abel

This demonstrates how interconnected food is with the family and, the importance placed on reconnecting with their homeland. Allan describes how speaking to his mother about meals made her (and him) particularly emotional. Whilst he did not expand upon this, it is noteworthy that he sent her pictures of the meals he had made. This emphasises the importance of his cooking and, as I would argue, taking a picture has a level of pride inherent in it as well.

Generally, the field of wellbeing has not taken a gendered lens, but this analysis has highlighted the importance of it, specifically pertaining to food. Whilst the kitchen in ABM is a shared, diverse space, traditional gender roles are nevertheless recognised. But, in fact, cooking functions as a way out for men and hence, they embrace it, particularly since it forms a cathartic path back to their home.
6 Eating Together in the Facilitation of Belonging

This chapter explores the second sub-question: does eating together at ABM allow for a sense of belonging? The importance of eating together has been conceptualised in the framework, particularly in consideration of the familiar whereby eating together can bring back fond memories. This chapter assesses the data concerning eating together in two ways. Firstly, in respect to the act of commensality and foods selected. Secondly, in relation to memories and an assessment as to whether the data supports a relationship between eating together and belonging. Both sections look to assess a key dimension of wellbeing: a growth in positive relationships. The final chapter will assess wellbeing and hope theory explicitly, in order to answer the final sub-question.

6.1 Commensality

Does it follow that the same benefits associated with cooking transfer to the act of commensality? This section seeks to address the sub-question directly in terms of the connection between mealtimes and belonging. As mentioned before, it has been recognised that a sense of belonging stems from being a part of a community, a community that is developed within these internal boundaries (Keyes & Kane, 2004). This section assesses how refugees consider being a part of this social structure, through the practice of mealtimes. This study finds that just as the space of the kitchen allows refugees to open up, so too does the act of sitting at the table.

Refugees place a great deal of meaning upon sharing food at ABM. As aforementioned, dereification refers to a process of recovery whereby individuals can regain a sense of safety (Hutchinson, 2018:62). The data underlines that the practice of mealtimes has been critical in this process particularly in terms of belonging, as indicated in the following quotes:

“In every culture it’s always the food that brings family and friends together. Here it’s a very good excuse for these people to work together in this friendly environment.” Max

“For some, it may be just like we have these meals because we need to eat but here it’s different. We really like it because all people come, and we socialise with each other.” Kay
“I’m still in the beginning phase and always it’s a lot of pressure to actually be open to people and talk. Eating is great since it’s the best opportunity so far we have to do so and to connect with people. Food is good at doing that.” Tristan

The three quotes, although lengthy, are important since they highlight three core aspects. Firstly, how food physically brings people into the same space, in turn starting the conversation. Secondly, the meaning that refugees assign to these meals. Lastly, Tristan explains the difficulty in moving to a new place, highlighting the role that eating together has in making him feel more comfortable. When he sits at the table, he feels as though he finally belongs. This is a critical statement when considering an increase in positive relationships. Tristan explicitly looks to eating at the table as a way for him to connect with others around him. This suggests that mealtimes create a safe space, which allows him to connect with others, in turn facilitating belonging.

The data corroborates the benefits of shared meals, as discussed in the theoretical section of this thesis. However, the responses emphasise just how important sharing meals are, particularly in terms of belonging. Figure 4 depicts one of the dinners I shared with the team in ABM. It shows how the team all gather in one space, with a mix of dips, salads and dishes. No one eats alone and part of the importance of the meal is passing the plates around: sharing the same food with one another.

Figure 4: A Shared Meal in ABM, photo taken by the researcher
As one respondent claimed:

“sitting on the table and sharing food is not only about eating, it goes very deep actually because sitting next to someone to eat with them can open really deep doors” Allan

The responses demonstrate that sharing food reinforces the community structure, bolstering the bonds formed between refugees. They recognise this and, consequently, sharing food is of great importance to them in their everyday. It enables them to regain a sense of safety and trust by developing positive relationships with others and, through doing so, find a sense of belonging.

6.2 The Family

6.2.1 ABM as a family

ABM refers to itself as a family and this was repeated to me by members of management throughout my fieldwork. Indeed, the theme of family also arose within my conversations with respondents. As previously discussed, to be a part of a family provides a feeling of belonging and mealtimes function as a “social cement” which validates the membership of individuals in that group (Ayora-Diaz, 2012:33). The data emphasised that refugees feel as though they have become a part of a new family at ABM, one that is strengthened by the meals they share together.

Several of my respondents drew parallels with shared meals at ABM and the meals they shared with their families in their respective home countries. For instance:

“In our culture we eat in groups so when we do it here, it’s nice, I’m reminded of my past life.” Kwame

“It’s a circle dish so everyone comes together. Here reminds me of that.” Kay

Mealtimes are often a large, social practice in the MENA region. It is interesting that eating together in ABM generated memories concerning their “past life”. It suggests that they feel comfortable and safe in ABM since they can draw parallels with meals in their respective home countries. They really feel at home. This was reinforced by Caasi:
“It does feel like a family gathering thing every time.” Caasi

This contentment allows them to compare mealtimes at ABM to meals they had in their respective home countries before they were forced to flee. Allan also described the mealtimes as “gezellig”.6 This reinforces the importance of the community structure at ABM and the role of eating together within this.

However, two responses contradicted the general findings and I sought to investigate them further. I was informed by the head chef that the language barrier was an issue for some, and that this had led to a form of segregation during meals:

“It’s their break moment so you always see Eritreans sit with Eritreans and Syrians sit with Syrians and then everyone speaks their own languages which is really bad because it’s difficult to mix.” Max

One of the newer members also spoke about their unease during these meals:

“It’s difficult here sometimes but that might be because we’re new, we can’t really communicate because my language isn’t so good.” John

Yet, other respondents who were particularly enthusiastic about shared meals opposed this divide in follow-up questions, reinforcing that everyone sat together and spoke Dutch. Due to the palpable contradiction I opted to have dinners with the team on three different occasions to decipher the reality. The only physical separation I observed was that because the team was large, we were split across two tables. It was not just Dutch being spoken, but a mix of languages. Also, some of the newer participants were more reserved at the table but would speak up when sat with someone who shared their language. Nevertheless, the seating appeared random; my respondents would simply speak with whoever was around them. I acknowledge that sitting for a meal three times, however, may not be representative of the general meal time experience. Yet, it nevertheless provides an insight into the family experience, one that I felt too, as shown below in an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

6 Referring to a deep cosiness.
“It’s becoming increasingly clear to me that whilst the food has meaning in its own right, what is important are the interactions and relationships being formed as a result.”

6.2.2 Reconnecting with Home

Since food is a culture act (Boutard et al, 2016), people are often excited by particular foodstuffs. Refugees can choose what to make in ABM, thus it follows that the ingredients themselves are of importance during mealtimes. As aforementioned, refugees recreate their national dishes, yet this is also important in terms of how it reconnects them to their respective home country. Brown (2009:47) found in her study that food was a “love object” of which students “derived emotional sustenance”. My study corroborated this with many refugees explaining how having foods from their home country made them feel. For instance, as Kay states:

“Sometimes they make really nice dishes that I haven’t had since I left home and then I’m like ‘ah my god this is great, I haven’t had this since like 3 years or something.” Kay

This statement evidences how the dish in question can facilitate conversation at the table based upon the foods that have been made. Kay was given a meal that he had not had since leaving Syria and he initiated a dialogue based on that. This would have brought him closer to others at the table by discussing his culture, which is shared with those who made the meal. This is in line with the discussion in 5.3 about how cultural conversations can be facilitated through the meals made.

Sitting together at the table is a cultural act in itself. It allows refugees to share a part of their culture through the food being served. Several individuals I spoke with emphasised their pleasure when their Dutch friends sat with them to try their food:

“I love Pulao, it’s an Afghan dish… I invited my Dutch friends here to introduce my food to them and they really liked it.” Che

“I have invited friends and colleagues to come and eat in my house. They always ask me to make something from Iraq” Allan
The lack of studies concerning commensality for non-homogenous groups has been discussed in the framework but these statements shed some light upon this focus. Firstly, Che shows that refugees have a desire for those from other cultures to sit with them to try their foods. Secondly, Allan emphasises that his friends want to understand his culture through the act of sharing a meal together. Both aspects reinforce the relationship between food, culture and diaspora but, added to this, it suggests that eating together can foster understanding and belonging between different cultures as well.

However, it must be noted that the refugees spoken with did not consider themselves to be a part of a non-homogenous group. A statement from Eve embodied the rhetoric I heard from the others:

“We’re all asylum seekers so we all get along because we have very similar problems and are from similar backgrounds, so we understand each other.” Eve

My initial consideration, as discussed in the framework, was in taking a cross-cultural approach when assessing eating practices. Yet, even though the refugees sat at the table are from a host of different cultures, they do not consider themselves to be that different. In fact, they focus specifically upon what makes them similar: the common thread being their circumstances. Eating together enables them to open up and share their culture with others. Thus, the family unit has been strengthened through the practice of commensality.

6.3 Memories

This section focuses upon memory, as considered in terms of Sutton’s (2001) anthropological work. Sutton (2001:101-2) focused on the sensory experience inherent in the kitchen, particularly through synaesthesia and how the cooking experience can result in the recreation of past experiences. Yet, in the data, memories were not referred to in terms of cooking, but rather in relation to shared meals.

The meals at ABM have the innate ability to elicit memories, as detailed below:
“The food gives me energy and brings back memories of my mother, father and other family who I’ve lost during the war. I can connect to her [my mother] again. It makes me happy.”

Che

This statement was particularly poignant, forming an emotional and moving part of the interview. Che describes how food has become a vehicle for the maintenance of family connections, when the family in question are no longer here. This shows that eating together not only aids in the creation of new communities, but it can sustain the memory of former relations as well. This data is unique in that this topic was not previously recognised in the theoretical section. It emphasises the individual experience, and for Che, reconnecting with his mother through food directly connects to his happiness, and therefore, his wellbeing. I sought to conceive wellbeing in terms of how refugees themselves consider it. For Che, food is of fundamental importance to his recovery process. The next chapter assesses how ABM has contributed to feelings of hopefulness and influenced aspirations for the future.
7 Hope and Wellbeing

This chapter addresses the final sub-question: Does the A Beautiful Mess initiative allow for an increase in hope and wellbeing as it aspires for? It considers whether refugees feel more hopeful after working in the initiative and whether food has played a role in this. Since the sub-question refers to the aspirations of ABM, I obtained an interview with the CEO Fleur Bakker, in order to better understand their concept and objectives. The data found that the work of ABM has led to refugees feeling more accepted externally, in turn leading to greater feelings of self-acceptance. It has also found that the initiative has influenced aspirations for the future, contributing to a greater purpose in life, as is as critical aspect for wellbeing.

7.1 Objectives of ABM

The focus of this research in terms of how food, specifically eating and cooking, fits into the goals of ABM has not been addressed directly by the initiative before. Instead, their goals are in regard to making refugees independent in order to better integrate them into Dutch society. I sought to hold an interview with the CEO in order to grasp a better understanding of how the initiative considers its role in terms of refugees’ wellbeing. Interestingly, when questioned about the concept of integration, it must be noted that the CEO also had disdain for its utilisation:

“I hate the word integration because I think why should you be integrated or what is integration” Bakker

This is important to communicate since I have noted my own criticisms of this concept. Yet, the CEO did not explain why the term integration had nevertheless been used on every platform to do with ABM. I was only allotted seven minutes for this interview with no opportunity for follow-up questions. Consequently, this could not be elaborated upon, but Bakker did contribute a further aim for ABM: for refugees to feel “a sense of belonging”. For her ABM is:

“a safe space where you can make mistakes, speak the language not very fluently and just be yourself.” Bakker
My primary aim for this interview was to elucidate how Bakker considered the role of food within the initiative. Her response was in terms of the restaurant, explaining that food is a universal form:

“…food is a good way of connecting people, it’s a perfect meeting place but it also has a big variety of jobs where we can put anyone who is highly skilled or educated or if they’re illiterate, it doesn’t matter.” Bakker

This focuses on food in terms of the jobs it can provide for refugees, not about how it can contribute to their wellbeing or assist in their adjustment to the Netherlands. Nevertheless, I found that it is an aspiration of ABM to promote refugees’ feelings of hopefulness:

“I think what is really valuable for people are that they trust us, and we give them advice... what is really important is that we don’t give false hope... we are not going to fix someone’s life. They need to fix their lives themselves and for us it’s really important to give people skills to find a job and skills to stay in a job or to feel more at ease in their community.” Bakker

This statement does not directly consider wellbeing, instead referring to, almost exclusively, practical advice in terms of finding work and establishing a skill set. Bakker’s response refers to the provision of ‘false hope’ and the notion of ‘fixing someone’s life’, both of which are in regard to integration. A follow-up question, however, could have been how Bakker considers wellbeing. Conceivably, providing a safe space and skills for the workplace could have fulfilled her own idea of what wellbeing is. Unfortunately, again due to time constraints, this could not be expanded upon further. Nevertheless, other members of management expressed their interest in my findings because they had not considered the role of food in this way in the initiative before. I hope to demonstrate the significance that the work of ABM can have on the wellbeing of refugees in terms of the seemingly smaller aspects of the initiative. The following section seeks to explore how refugees consider ABM for themselves.

7.2 How refugees consider the work of ABM

It is important to consider how refugees view ABM, and whether they conceive the initiative to facilitate their own wellbeing. It was also interesting to reflect upon their perspective in
terms of the work that ABM is doing in comparison to the official Dutch asylum procedure. A theme that continually arose was the gratitude felt, since ABM had provided refugees with a means to work, assisting in their adjustment into Dutch society:

“I want to be useful because I’m grateful that they granted me asylum here and found me work.” Eve

“ABM opened the door for me and for everyone here.” Abel

“The place is like home for me.” Alena

“Always I have a good feeling here. Everything is positive here.” Leon

Several of my respondents described how they finally felt welcome and appreciated, a feeling that they had not experienced elsewhere for a long time. I considered whether my respondents felt obliged to speak highly of ABM since they had provided them with work, an economic necessity. Yet, I do not believe this to be the case. Their responses seemed frank and heartfelt. Only two responses stated that they were at ABM for a means to an end. They were enjoying their time in the initiative but, nevertheless, they looked forward to a time when they could be reunited with their family.

A significant theme did arise, however, in regard to the work of ABM in relation to the wider existing asylum procedure. Kay was my youngest interviewee and his insight is addressed below:

“The government says that they try to empower refugees but it ends up with them doing stupid things that does not help at all... They work in organisations that don’t care as much about the people as they do about getting subsidies all in the name of ‘empowering refugees’. And they don’t really care. They don’t really care about the organisations that work, those organisations that like here are really doing work that makes me feel hopeful, but they get no support...So, I wish they would see for once organisations and things that actually work.”

This was a particularly powerful statement and I sought to include it here in its entirety to reinforce the refugee perspective. Kay argues two central points in this statement: firstly, that ABM ‘works’ and, secondly, that the initiative has made him feel hopeful. A condition of hope, as previously recognised, is being concerned about the present and hoping for change for the better (Lazarus, 1999). Kay describes exactly this. He explains his concerns with the existing
asylum procedure and how ABM has made him hopeful that change is possible, in line with the values of ABM. Indeed, I spent time in the same space and was able to witness how my respondents interacted with the space, their colleagues and members of management. It is a positive space, with individuals who feel comfortable and accepted, as is explored more thoroughly below.

7.3 Acceptance

This section addresses a critical theme that arose in my data: acceptance. I define acceptance in terms of social-acceptance (see Chen & Hamilton, 2015). I refer to a process whereby the individual feels validated and a part of something, leading to an enhanced self-acceptance. This section divides acceptance into two. Firstly, acceptance within the internal community and, secondly, acceptance by the wider community.

7.3.1 Internal Acceptance

The notion of feeling accepted, specifically feeling like a family, has been previously discussed in relation to eating together. The data also contends, however, that ABM has resulted in individuals from a range of backgrounds to feel accepted in one collective space. All respondents spoke to how being at ABM has enhanced their wellbeing:

“The moment I joined RC I felt welcome” Caasi

“I feel like perfect and loved…it’s lovely to be here” Abel

“One of the reasons why I appreciate my life is because of this place…it’s a part of my house” Allan

“This is a multi-cultural, multi-national restaurant and we embrace it” Che

The responses above refer to self-acceptance and how ABM has enhanced their individual wellbeing. A connection between improved self-acceptance and the ABM community is established, for example when Abel states that he is ‘loved’. The community around him facilitates an environment where he can feel accepted, and in turn, this empowerment begins the process of self-acceptance. Similarly, Che describes how refugees embrace the multiculturalism of ABM, thereby embracing those in it.
The majority of my respondents spoke of the importance of ABM in their own lives, and how it has benefitted them. Some even wished for more working time to help them further, as noted by John: “we want more time to work because we are family”. This evidences that being a part of a community of individuals who have so much in common is empowering. It results in an enhancement of their own feelings of worth and self-acceptance. Indeed, this suggests that there is a relationship between ABM and a greater hopefulness.

7.3.2 External Acceptance

A common theme to arise in my data was the interaction refugees had with guests at the restaurant and how this made them feel. For many of them, interactions between guests in one space changed the way they considered wider society to feel about them. This is demonstrated through the following:

“I get to explain my story sometimes to customers. It makes it nice and special [here]” Caasi

“Our customers are nice and open-minded, so it gives me a chance to see nice people...so I feel sometimes that there are good people on this Earth” Kay

“We feel like we are accepted by people here and accepted by society, it’s nice.” Lucy

The media portrayal of the refugee crisis was a damaging one. Many refugees I spoke with cited this as reasoning for feeling anxious when interacting with Dutch society. They did not feel accepted within the external community before, but these statements suggest that ABM has had a role in challenging the stigma. Indeed, the manager emphasised that the majority of guests who eat at ABM do so in order to support the initiative. However, one of my respondents described an experience when they did not feel this way:

“One sad part though is that sometimes people come here just to say, ‘oh look there are the refugees’, this is quite sad” Allan

In this moment, the respondent felt othered by society, as though they were still not accepted by the external community. However, ABM, as a refugee initiative, where refugees interact with people in wider society, may spark curiosity for those not so familiar with their work. It reinforces the role that the initiative has in educating wider society. Moreover, since food functions as an introduction into culture, it nevertheless provides refugees with the opportunity to share a part of themselves with those who are unfamiliar with their culture. Certainly, from
the majority of responses, ABM has been successful in this endeavour. On the whole, being a part of the ABM community has enabled my respondents to feel accepted, by both the internal and external communities they have become a part of.

7.4 Hopefulness

This section focuses on a final critical component of wellbeing that arose in my data analysis: purpose in life. Stowers’ (2012:374) research contended that food has greater meaning for Salvadoran immigrants in terms of “an imagined past and hopes for the future”. However, the data emphasised that for many of the refugees, their hopes are no longer simply imagined, they have the potential to become reality. This suggests that there has been a progression in terms of hopefulness: from imagined hopes to them being actualised. What has the role of ABM been in this progression?

During my fieldwork, ABM took on a number of new refugees. Since my data so far refers to refugees who were settled in the Netherlands after working at ABM for a longer period, I sought to speak to those who were new. Doing so would allow for a range in data. The contrast in answers between older workers and newer workers was only evident in terms of the final sub-question: aspirations and hopefulness. I have arranged excerpts from the data below accordingly:

0-3 months

“I don’t have this feeling [hope] right now.” Lucy

“Not right now no because we are new here and we have to learn more of the language.” Leon

“I’m only trying to be useful really, being here is something I like to do. So hopeful in terms of career, I am hopeful I will learn something from here.” Tristan

4 months-3 years

“Being here has made me feel hopeful, it gives me a positive” Caasi

“For now, I’m happy and optimistic with my life.” Allan

“I feel that I belong here with a group of people who are similar. We are in a foreign country, but this is not the end, we can start a new life here, this is not the end.” Kwame
“When I see the people here...[I am] more hopeful for my future.” Che

Thus, the data suggests that spending more time at the initiative allows for greater feelings of positivity and hopefulness. There was also a clear difference between the two groups. The more experienced workers were more confident and enthusiastic, whereas the newer workers were more apprehensive and uneasy, for instance asking not to be recorded. In terms of developing a sense of purpose, Tristan’s response shows that he is keen to learn from the initiative in order to acquire skills for his future. Indeed, the newer refugees were often still in refugee camps and adjusting to life in a new country. It is therefore understandable that they do not demonstrate as much optimism as their counterparts who have had time to adjust. Nevertheless, the responses from 0-3 months refer to not feeling hopeful “right now”, as though they hope to have this feeling in the future.

Critically, in terms of obtaining a purpose in life, the majority of respondents from the four months to three years category told me of their aspirations for the future. Whether it be opening their own businesses, joining a food truck or aiming to be more involved in social justice movements, they all had clear hopes which they articulated to me. If the time constraints had allowed, it would have been interesting to return to the initiative after a few months to speak to the newer respondents again. If their aspirations had shifted in the same way, it could follow that the ABM initiative has had a critical role in this process. Nevertheless, the data still supports this contention. The community structure has facilitated a sense of belonging, providing emotional and practical support for refugees (Fielding & Anderson, 2008). This has led to greater optimism, hopefulness, and, crucially, has resulted in aspirations for a greater purpose in life being actualised.
8 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to assess the wellbeing of refugees through emphasis of a seemingly small part of the everyday: cooking and eating together. Wellbeing remains a growing field of research (Dodge et al, 2012), yet the current field of debate is too restrictive. Wellbeing is an ongoing process determined by the individual and I have sought to consider it through the individual perspective. Food is the perfect lens into this since it is a series of moments which form our everyday and, hence, it provides a unique insight into the world as we see it.

My research question was: Does cooking and eating food together improve the wellbeing of refugees in the Netherlands? I consider cooking and eating to be profoundly political acts which form a frequent part of our everyday routine, thus an effective vehicle to explore my topic in question. It is a physiological necessity, making it inherently political, since it can be manipulated and contested by different power structures (Watson & Caldwell, 2005). Food also functions as a form of non-verbal communication, making it distinctive as a way of connecting people who speak different languages. As a cultural marker, it functions as a communicative practice by which deeper meanings can be shared (Cramer et al, 2011). This makes it an ideal way of considering wellbeing and using it in this way has resulted in insightful findings which have not been previously considered.

8.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis has emphasised the gap in existing research regarding food, yet it has sought to interconnect a range of studies. The kitchen has been conceptualised as a cultural, social and sensory site, whereby culture is displayed and shared with others. Food habits are cultural practices, and, in turn, these form the familiar. After facing trauma and the total upheaval of their everyday, it is understandable that refugees look to the familiar to aid in recovery. The cooking and eating of food act as prominent ways in which they can begin to form a cathartic link back to their familiar. My study has given depth to these contentions, arguing that the kitchen functions as a safe space which has enabled the process of dereification for the refugees.
I consider ABM to be a political community, one that has been shaped by the traumatic experiences of those in it. A key contribution of this thesis has been demonstrating how fundamental food has been in the consolidation of this community. Individuals use food as a bonding mechanism. Indeed, sitting at the table and sharing food is an intimate act, one that allows for them to introduce others to their culture.

My respondents felt that food was a key way in which they could connect with each other. Refugees in ABM are from a host of different backgrounds and spoke different languages, yet they found that cooking together was able to bridge this divide. I have also shown how cooking boosts senses of self-confidence, pride and self-sufficiency. I was able to see this for myself when working with respondents in the kitchen. John, for instance, lit up when telling me about the dish he had made. Consequently, I have also endeavoured to show the benefits associated with making cultural foodstuffs in an unfamiliar environment. Cooking is an inherently emotional act which strengthens bonds between group members, in turn consolidating a community structure, as is central to their wellbeing.

The data has also expressed the importance of commensality in terms of recovering memories of their former life. Memory had been previously conceptualised in terms of the function of the kitchen as a sensory site, however, the data has demonstrated its importance in terms of the second sub-question: eating together. Mealtimes are important, regular occasions in the MENA region whereby large groups of people come together to eat. Sitting at the table in ABM with a group of people they consider to be family forms a linkage between the present and the past, enabling them to reconnect with these memories. This has a critical impact upon wellbeing, and commensality has not been considered in this way before. Interestingly, my research sought to close the gap in the literature by considering ABM as a non-homogenous group. Yet, the group of refugees in ABM do not consider themselves in this way. They focus upon how their circumstances have enabled them to create a new family, their trauma functioning as a way to form a new mode of communality (Erikson, 1991). I argue that this shows the importance of the individual perspective particularly in the way they define their own wellbeing. This perspective takes precedence over traditional notions of homogeneity and family.
Cooking at ABM is a gendered experience, one that had not been previously considered. Findings consistently showed that males had not cooked prior to moving to the Netherlands, and some felt strongly that the kitchen is traditionally a female space. However, cooking in ABM forms a way out: a way into employment whilst also enabling them to reconnect with home by asking female family members for recipes and cooking advice. They also regained a sense of agency and self-confidence once they began cooking for themselves. This emphasises the power of food in this context: not only how it can directly impact wellbeing but, vitally, what it says about changes in the way they see the world. I urge policy-makers, at the very least, to consider the benefits of cooking in reception-centres in the Netherlands. For those who have just arrived in an unfamiliar place, the benefits of cooking have been evidenced.

Finally, a relationship has been deciphered between the role of ABM and an increase in hope. My respondents felt welcomed and valued, empowered by the community that they have become a part of. Refugees initially spoke about feeling stigmatised in the Netherlands, yet this had been challenged due to the interactions they had in ABM. Feeling more widely accepted in their new country of residence has a critical impact on their wellbeing in terms of the way they see themselves, ultimately leading to enhanced self-acceptance. For Stowers, (2012) food had greater meaning for immigrants since it functioned metaphorically in terms of ‘imagined’ hopes. Indeed, this relates to the meals made in ABM. However, my research proves that food plays more than just a metaphorical role in ABM. This independent initiative has made aspirations for a greater purpose in life a reality.

I suggest future researchers should consider the role of food as a medium to foster greater acceptance within societies. The interconnectedness between food, culture and diaspora has been established in this research. I have also demonstrated that food can function as an introduction into a new culture. Thus, it would be interesting to consider whether mealtimes could have an educational purpose, building greater open-mindedness and acceptance by bringing groups together. The data suggests that this could be the case, but more would need to be done to elucidate this.

This thesis has sought to take a new approach to the field of wellbeing by utilising food as a lens in the consideration of refugees’ wellbeing. The wellbeing of refugees has been enriched by the initiative A Beautiful Mess through the acts of cooking and eating together. I aimed to demonstrate through this work that definitions do not have to be rigid. The journey to wellbeing
is a complex process, one that is ongoing and never fixed (White, 2010). We should embrace the humanist, unconventional everyday parts of life since they can provide a perspective that is not ordinarily attainable. Food is political but the centrality it has to our wellbeing has not been considered until now. My research provides strong validation that food has a critical role for the wellbeing of refugees. Only by embracing the individual perspective and listening to the voices of those most marginalised can we begin to appreciate the significance of such seemingly inconsequential parts of our daily lives.
9 Bibliography


Appendix 1: Respondent Summary

A Beautiful Mess, Amsterdam

Max.
Role: Head Chef.
Nationality: Dutch
Interview Date: April 5, 2019.

Margriethe.
Role: General Manager.
Nationality: Dutch
Interview Date: personal correspondence between March 21 and June 12, 2019.

Fleur.
Role: CEO of Refugee Company.
Nationality: Dutch.
Interview Date: April 25, 2019.

Refugee Respondents

Caasi. Twenties.
Nationality: Syrian
Interview Date: March 29, 2019.

Eve. Fifties.
Nationality: Iranian.
Interview Date: April 2, 2019.

John. Forties.
Nationality: Eritrean.
Interview Date: April 2, 2019.

Abel. Thirties.
Nationality: Iraqi.
Interview Date: April 5, 2019.

Kay. Twenties.
Nationality: Syrian.
Interview Date: April 10, 2019.
Tristan. Thirties.
Nationality: Pakistani.
Interview Date: April 17, 2019.

Allan. Thirties.
Nationality: Iraqi.
Interview Date: April 18, 2019.

Ake. Thirties.
Nationality: Nigerian.
Interview Date: April 16, 2019.

Lucy. Twenties.
Nationality: Iranian.
Interview Date: April 19, 2019.

Leon. Twenties.
Nationality: Iranian.
Interview Date: April 19, 2019.

Kwame. Thirties.
Nationality: Ugandan.
Interview Date: April 19, 2019.

Che. Thirties.
Nationality: Afghan.
Interview Date: April 25, 2019.

Alena. Twenties.
Nationality: Iranian.
Interview Date: April 26, 2019.
Appendix 2: In-Depth Interview Guide.

1. Could you tell me a little about your background please so your age, native language and how you arrived in the Netherlands?

   **Cooking**

2. Do you cook and, if so, what do you enjoy making?
   a. Do you have a meal that is meaningful to you? What is it?

3. How does cooking impact your wellbeing?

   **Shared meals**

4. How do shared meals make you feel?

5. Is eating together an important part of your time?

6. Is it an important part of your time at A Beautiful Mess?

7. How does eating food from your native country make you feel?

8. How does eating affect your wellbeing?

   **The initiative**

9. What is your role here and how did you hear about A Beautiful Mess?

10. How does this space make you feel? Why?

11. How does food influence the community here?

12. Has the community here made you feel more hopeful about the future? Explain why/why not.