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Food Narrative: Storytelling, Memories, Art Expression, and Recipes – A Community

Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Art Therapy

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Abstract

This project focuses on the topic of food and works to answer the questions: Can we learn and teach others about ourselves through the kitchen? Is there room for food as a form of art, and can it be used in an expressive way? This community engagement project focuses on people who would like to share their family recipes, memories, or information about their family's history and background. This project builds from previous literature and methods that have examined how food plays a role in the following topics: storytelling, memories, expression, and art. This project contributes to previous literature by offering an understanding of the role of food as a form of art and method for expressive therapy. Through the research and gathering participants to discuss food and their own stories around it, this thesis adds more ideas and results to this conversation. The end result of this project was creating a cookbook where each person shared recipes and artwork expressing their thoughts and feelings around the topics of food, family, and memories. The results confirm that we can learn more about others and their stories through food, and results contribute to an understanding of how food can be represented in an expressive way.

Keywords: food, storytelling, expression, memories, recipes, art therapy

**Food Narrative: Storytelling, Memories, Art Expression, and Recipes – A
Community Engagement Project**

When people think of the word food, so many different thoughts, ideas, and emotions can occur. We each have very different relationships with or understandings of food. Some ideas that come up are how food brings us together, how we learn and understand each other through food, and how food is a different way to communicate. Food is a very important part of humans' experience no matter what their relationship is to it; we all need it.

Recently I moved to Somerville, MA, in a house with four new roommates. When I first moved, I was trying to feel comfortable and bring a piece of myself into this new space. At first, it was difficult to call this new house my home. I felt I was having a hard time connecting with it. It was not until a month or so into the move I found myself in the kitchen often. I wanted to create recipes that reminded me of my family and home and that represented a piece of myself. I wanted to share with my roommates not just my skills in the kitchen but also recipes I grew up making and enjoying. I wanted to share a part of myself, and more about my background through my food, and through the memories I had in the kitchen with loved ones over the years. I was looking for that feeling of being at home and finding my place in this new location and also sharing a part of my identity with the new people I lived with. It seemed that actual food was the easiest way for me to open up and share more about myself.

Another way for me to open up is through art making. When I need to connect or feel grounded, I will make art as a way to let myself reconnect and explore different feelings and emotions. I am currently a student studying art therapy; I believe art is an important tool each person has and can be a way for people to express themselves without words. I feel this can be connected to food and how recipes are created in the kitchen. Both share a way of connecting and memory making in different ways.

Through these main ideas, I began to think about the different identities and cultures of the people around me and how these can be learned through food. Food can bring people together, and we can learn so much from each other. I started to think about friends I have met over the years and how great it was to try their family recipes and learn more about their backgrounds as well. It made me wonder how people can learn about different family histories and backgrounds through food and the kitchen. I thought about a way to get others together to talk about food, creating recipes, their background, and the memories made in the kitchen. I thought about how food has a place alongside art and the different ways art can be created out of everything that happens in the kitchen. These questions came up: Can we learn from and teach others about ourselves through the kitchen? Can creating recipes be seen as a form of art, and how does art fit together with food? I want to explore the role food could have in the therapeutic world; could food be used as a tool in art therapy?

For this project I worked with people to share their family recipes, memories, or information about their family's history and background. I wanted to receive a variety of recipes from many different backgrounds and hear different family stories. After receiving the recipes and learning more about what this means to the person, I brought all the participants together in a Zoom meeting to meet each other and come together. The research for this thesis was a two-part meeting process. In the first session, I met with participants one-on-one and talked to them about food and art, learning more about their experiences and thoughts around both these topics. During the one-on-one session I explained more about art therapy, discussed why creating art is so important, let them know my ideas for the project, and addressed any concerns they may have had. Art can be intimidating for some people, so I wanted to explain that the art portion would be anything they wanted to create, letting them know there is no right or wrong way to create art.

In the second session, I met with participants as a group, and I asked the participants to express their feelings in an art piece. Within the art piece I wanted them to be able to express how they felt when thinking about their culture and the recipe that they were sharing. My goal was for them to share the experience as well as the recipe itself. They could express any memories or family stories that came up for them in the artwork they created. The participants decided as a group the best way to show and bring different memories, backgrounds, and cultures together.

The idea of this project is to learn more about each other in a way that is different from traditional storytelling. This form of storytelling will allow us a way to use multiple senses at the same time to understand each other—learning the recipes and creating art. Dockery (2014) shares the importance of how someone can learn about another person by recreating. The act of recreating is a different way to understand someone’s background or culture. This “arts-based approach offers opportunities not afforded by the more traditional options of oral history and ethnography—opportunities for empathetic engagement and reciprocity” (p. 210). Remaking and creating a person’s family recipe is another way to take in the information and learn about their culture. This allows an individual to learn more through experiencing and recreating something—for example, a family recipe—rather than listening to someone share information about themselves and their background, bringing a way for food and art to share the same space as well. The act of sharing family recipes emphasizes the memories made in the kitchen and the art that can be created from those stories.

In this thesis, I present literature and my results from the participants’ meetings to further understand how food can be used as a way to communicate with others. Through art, memories, and re-creation, I want to further the experiences we make in the kitchen and learn more from

one another through food. I want to understand more about how food can be a helpful tool in the healing process and how this project can connect food and art into the art therapy world.

Literature Review

There are many ways we can learn through food and recipes. Food can be used as another tool when communicating with others. We can learn about each other's family history and their stories. Food could be another tool for us to communicate with when words can be difficult. Food can create memories in the kitchen and around the table—memories and stories that can be passed down through multiple generations. A family secret can be shared through the food. Food can also be seen as a way to create and be used in an artistic way as well. Food can be used to connect us to one another when we may be feeling alone or want to feel close to home when it is difficult. Below all of these different topics around food will be explored and understanding what others have found and shared about this topic will be shared as well.

Food as History

People are always moving, whether it is across the country, or even internationally; and they always take a piece of themselves with them when they leave. Part of themselves can be reflected through a recipe or certain foods. As Henderson (2015) explained, “culinary habits have changed immensely and continue to change due to transnational movements of people and goods. They are indicators of cultural, social, and economic developments within communities” (p. 183). This change reminds us that we learn about different foods and traditions from people sharing with others in their communities. Food can be another way of storytelling and can illuminate a family's history and background due to the fact that people carry recipes with them throughout their movement and lives. People always want to stay connected to each other, and they are always wanting to learn more. In some communities, the idea of bringing people

together and keeping history alive for many years is very important. Dockery (2014) researched a community of farmers and their heirloom seeds and how they have been passed down for generations. They mentioned, “Small-scale farmers and garden keepers choose to grow heirloom varieties for a number of reasons ranging from connections to local and family history, [and] intersections with the organic and locally grown food movements” (p. 208). Dockery found that in this community the farmers wanted to continue to grow the seeds so that they can keep the connection to the community, and to keep the history alive as well. Keeping that connection of food alive is so important.

Lohmeier (2020) talked about researching family *secrets* and how we learn about different families’ histories. This can be difficult for people to share about their families or their family history. Lohmeier talked about how memories are made and the ways they come back up for people. The article stated, “Mostly, memory works in snippets and fragments. Recollections, sensations and experiences come into our consciousness, at times activated by an external trigger—a taste, a smell, a sound” (p. 2). Memories can be made through the taste or smell of specific foods. Food could be a less intimidating way for people to share information about their family’s history and background. It can be an easier way to bring up memories, and by focusing on the food, it can be helpful to some when words may be more difficult.

Thinking about past experiences with food can also bring up different memories for people. Haider and van Oudenhoven (2018) research this idea as well. They discuss further the idea of food as a way to development, and to remember. Sutton (2001, as cited in Haider & van Oudenhoven, 2018), a food anthropologist, “argues that food’s memory power derives in part from synesthesia, which he defines as the crossing of experiences from different senses such as taste, smell, and hearing” (p. 6). It is important to think about what focusing on all the different

senses that can come into play when thinking about food, can bring up for someone. Combining all these senses that could be used at the same time can bring a lot up for someone and may help them to remember certain events or stories. When the senses kick in, we can remember a lot from the past, and this can help us to remember different things about ourselves and our families as well. This could help someone when thinking about their family's history or stories they have heard about their family's past through the senses and the food.

Food and Memory

While there are many connections between food and storytelling, there are also connections between food and the preservation of memories. Many articles highlight this idea of food and memories, such as the memories made by relatives coming together in the kitchen. Sotomayor (2015) shared her personal experience within an art-based research article, focusing on memories she made with her Abuela making coffee from beans in Columbia. Sotomayor mentioned, "collective psychological, geographical, and nostalgic memories haunt our human experiences and shape our connections to each other" (p. 87). Sotomayor discussed how the experience of making memories together will keep people connected to each other even when they may be apart, or after their loved ones are no longer with them. The memories made can become stories kept in a family for years to come. Memories can become a way to explain the history of food of culture for many more generations.

Memories can be made in many different ways; they can be made from images, stories, or even by the food we have eaten in the past. Abarca and Colby (2016) explored this idea that memories are made from the food we eat. They highlighted that "Memories about food simultaneously place us in the past and the present and often can create situations for recollections in the future, which David Sutton calls 'prospective memory'" (p. 2). This concept

is important to focus on because many people want to create recipes passed down in the family because of the memories that were formed while enjoying or creating the meal. People want to feel close to home and memories that they have made with loved ones, and sometimes eating or making certain dishes can bring us back to a special time in our lives—a time we want to remember forever.

Von Essen and Martensson (2017) designed a study that focused on young adults and the use of food memories to help build resilience in their lives. The article focused on what can happen when we learn to create and cook together in the kitchen, when children are taught from family members at an early age, and how it can affect their lives. Von Essen and Martensson wrote, “Preparing, cooking and serving food is described as an ‘unexpressed intimacy’ in which good and memorable meals become associated with family and friends” (p. 210). The interaction with each other in the kitchen can leave young children with great memories for them to look back on for years to come, producing memories they have with the food, even after some of the family members or friends have passed on. The study found importance in “early food memories and the potential role of food for human development, through the experience of stable but dynamic relations related to food and food practices and of a positive atmosphere surrounding eating and mealtimes in everyday life” (p. 216). This means that the importance of these memories can help children’s development in a positive way. They have seen experiences to look back on, and it can help them in the future with processing emotions around food and to create healthy practices with food as well. Learning memorable cooking experiences from a young age can give them a positive experience when gathering with others around food.

Food/Storytelling

Another way we can stay connected is through the storytelling itself. The way we tell others about our history, or history in general, is all through telling stories about the past. This is one of the best practices to learn about others. When people hear family stories, it is easier for them to remember and focus on what they are hearing rather than watching something on television or reading about it. Bietti et al. (2019) focused on this idea through their research about interactive learning and students' ability to prepare food from memory. They learned "storytelling plays a central role in our everyday lives. It is one of the most widespread social activities through which people in different cultures share cultural information" (p. 16). Their research went on to explore the different ways we learn and take in information. They discovered through their study that "teachers transmitted more information to learners due to interactivity. That is, they transmitted more information about the task to co-present learners compared to a video camera" (p. 15). This indicated that when students were taught something and they could interact with it like a story, it was easier for them to receive and understand the information. Interacting with their teachers made it easier for them to understand information than when they learned it from a recording. In this study, the students focused on doing a food preparation task after learning about it through the use of interactivity and storytelling.

Through food and stories, people find connection to each other as well. Koike (2020) explored this idea of food and storytelling. The idea in the research is focused on humor and food storytelling, and how using humor through the food storytelling is a way to keep one's attention. For example, when enjoying a meal with friends and learning about the food and family history behind the food is combined with humor, the story is easier told and remembered by the listener. Koike explained this further, stating, "We often find humor in our mundane food experiences, as

demonstrated in this study. However, the food itself examined in this study is not humorous. What makes it humorous is our fixed views and values about food” (p. 317). Through the humor and learning more about the food, we come up with our ideas about each other and the importance of the meal. The use of humor is a different way of telling a story to someone and having them retain the information about oneself or a family’s history.

Food as Performance

Over the years, food has become more popular in the performance world. Focusing on television, food has become a topic of interest for many viewers over the years. This interest has evolved to the point that many networks have their own channels dedicated to food and cooking. It is a topic many people want to learn about and find new dishes to create. On many of the shows, chefs are sharing recipes, and many of them share stories about the recipes and why they are important to them. Matwick and Matwick (2014) wrote about cooking shows and the importance of how the chefs or hosts could reach the audience. The article stated, “Storytelling adds to the artistic and theatrical quality of cooking shows by adding a layer of performative language and emotion” (p. 157). In their article they focus on the food, the personalization, and the stories they are telling in the show. It talks about how the viewer wants to be able to relate to the host. Through the storytelling of the recipe, the viewer may feel a connection to the food, or the person, making them seem more relatable. There needs to be a performance side to the story being told so the audience can connect with it.

Herakova and Cooks (2017) wrote an article that focused on making dough and the importance of the performance side of making the recipe. The authors pointed out that “food is one possible entry point into articulations and narratives of identity and community” (p. 244). Through the dough making process that one may experience themselves, they are understanding

a different narrative than if they were just told about the dough. Using hands is a different way to communicate through the making of the food and sharing that with others. Herakova and Cooks went on to explain how “culture, identity, and food are often essentialized, presumed to be static containers for the memories created and stored in dis/placed smells, tastes, contexts, and relationships” (p. 244). The focus is on the different memories and learned experiences about one's identity and culture which come through making food.

Food and Art/Expressive Art Therapy

There are many different types of art and performance. There are different kinds of art that focus on food. People find ways to tell their family history through art and food. Sotomayor (2015) shared some artwork she created using coffee to express her feelings about these memories. When explaining this experience, she said, “Coffee is to taste, smell, and share. My paintings are to see, imagine, and share. Both processes culminate in an experience of collective actions, history, and wisdom” (p. 82). She combined these art pieces and the coffee together to create something unique. Bringing two things she loves together taught her about herself and her history. For Sotomayor, the process brought the art and food together. Using art to tell stories and share experiences about family history with others, especially through food, can be a creative way to express oneself. Thinking of this idea, one can focus on how food can be used in an expressive way or as a form of art. While Sotomayor used the coffee as a material for painting, food has been used in other ways to create as well.

Sotomayor (2015) mentioned an important idea about creating and the space where the individual is able to create. She wrote, “The studio can be a place of meditation and connecting with the collective unconscious, churning with passion, inspiration, and remembrance” (p. 88). The kitchen can be seen as the studio when making and creating recipes. Throughout this article,

Sotomayor worked with coffee, which is a food-based product, and created within the studio, using the food as an art material. She went on to talk about what this experience was like for her. She was able to connect to the art, through making. She said, “In lending voice to my individual experiences through a creative arts process paralleled to my research about my ancestry and heritage, my perception of my experiences evolves” (p. 84). Through creating and making her own piece of art, Sotomayor was able to have a different experience and learn more about herself and her history and give her own thoughts about this experience.

Kim et al. (2020) conducted a study focusing on food art therapy in Korea. They talked about how not many other countries use food as art therapy; however, their results showed it could be very helpful. They found that “children who participate in a food art therapy program significantly improve their self-expression and sociality more than children who do not participate” (p. 1). The goal of the study was to focus on improving social skills and self-expression for people with mental illness. The researchers mentioned how their findings matched other studies they had read about this topic before. They stated that the “finding was consistent with that of a previous study in which persons with mental problems participate in a group cooking program, and those who have difficulty connecting with others participate comfortably, and their social skills improve” (p. 8). The authors focused on how food has a place in the therapeutic setting and can be helpful for many to express themselves and even improve their social skills. The article shared this information but talked about how much research is not done on this topic. It seems this would be an important study for other countries to try and see what results they find.

The topic of food and its place in the expressive art therapies has been explored before. Clarke’s (2013) thesis explored an art-based project alongside the therapeutic experience of

cooking. Clarke's thesis reviewed different literature exploring the therapeutic benefits of cooking and its place in art therapy. Clarke went on to talk about their own personal experience with this project, creating their own art in response to making different meals. Clarke mentioned, "From this research process I began to understand more deeply the therapeutic process and realized that informative cognitive content also surfaces while cooking, enjoying a meal, and taking time to make response art and reflecting afterwards" (p. 33). It is important to understand what may come up when people are working with food in the therapeutic setting. It has its place in therapy but understanding that this experience could bring up a lot for a person is important to note. Some people may not have a positive response to cooking and creating art around this topic.

Nickrand and Brock (2016) wrote about a program that was designed to help people who are grieving. The program offers workshops to help individuals continue their life after their loved ones are gone. They created a program called the *Cooking for One Series*. The goal is to help participants through the grieving process with tasks, such as meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking for one. Nickrand and Brock explained, "Before the workshop, individuals are encouraged to submit recipes with memories in honor of their loved ones as a memoir writing exercise to be worked into the planning of the demonstrations" (p. 182). Through this program they work with the idea of using recipes to help the participants heal, and to express their memories and feelings about the recipes and their loved one. The recipes are used as a tool to process the loss in a positive way.

Focusing on the literature mentioned above, there are some great resources around the topic of food, storytelling, memory making, and food as art. For this project, I wanted to learn more about the ideas and studies that have been mentioned above. I created a community project

that could focus more on the topic of food to tell stories and explore memories and food's place in the art therapy world. I explored these topics to hear from others about their experiences with cooking and memories made in the kitchen. Learning about families' secrets and background stories and finding a way to connect with others were some goals of my project. This project looked to connect many different people and bring them together through the topic of food.

Method

For this project I sought to gather people together to talk about a topic or idea I was passionate about. I came up with the idea to focus on food and memories. I started to think about how people think about food, how people can learn from each other through food, and the idea of food and art. I wondered, can creating recipes be seen as a form of art, and how does art fit together with food? I had the idea to explore how people can come together and learn about one another through food. I decided to do a community engagement project because I felt it was important to use this thesis to learn more about others. I knew this would look different than it might in some other year because of COVID-19 and the social distancing rules. Despite the challenges that may have come up as a result of COVID-19, I was very determined to find a way to gather with others and talk about this topic.

Through these ideas, I came up with the topic for this project and thought about how I could gather others together to talk about and learn about each other through food—through the recipes we have learned from generations before us and what memories we can make and share in the kitchen. I wanted to use food and art together and to create a space where the participants could reach a consensus on how these concepts should be brought together. They could share recipes, memories, stories, and art. It was important to take time and focus on the art side of this

project and explain this to the participants. I wanted to explain more about art therapy and how we would use art to reflect on this experience and memories from the past.

For the art portion, I wanted to leave this up to the participants—let them decide what type of art they wanted to create. The only requirement I made was if they decided to make a three-dimensional art piece, I would need a photograph of the actual artwork. I wanted them to reflect on the experiences and thoughts that came up when thinking about the recipe. I explained that the art should represent their feelings about this recipe, their background, and the memories they have with it. I mentioned taking some time to think about these elements before creating artwork. I explained the idea of focusing on the art making process rather than what the final art piece was or how it looked.

I decided it would be important to set up a meeting with just myself and each participant, explaining what they would be doing and sharing, and explaining that this would be a group project as well. I wanted to take this time to share with them more about art therapy, and how art can be used to express oneself and to heal or to grow. Art has an important role in storytelling and sharing experiences with others. Relating this to food, art does not need words and neither does food. They express themselves in different ways through the creation and process. Art can heal and help us see things we had not before. Through using art and thinking about this experience, the participants would be helping to understand foods' place not only in the healing process but in the art therapy world. Combining these experiences and using art to express this was especially important to share and make the participants aware of before they decided to join the project.

Figure 1*Flyer Inviting Participants*

Note. This is an image of a flyer that I created that includes relevant information about the study to invite participants.

After coming up with the idea of the project, I had to find a way to see if people were interested in the topic and to find my participants. Sharing my information with my class was the first step to understanding if this project was something of interest to others. I decided during this time of social distancing the best method was to get the information out there through social media. I created the flyer in Figure 1 with a few questions about the project and a small image to catch people's attention. The reason I decided to leave art off the flyer is because I wanted a chance to talk directly with the potential participants and explain to them about my project, art

therapy, and how I would need them to create an art piece. I believe sometimes art can be intimidating to people, so I wanted to get the chance to share this with them when we met one-on-one.

I asked about 10 different people to repost the information so I could reach a larger audience. Through this, I received messages from more than 20 people who were interested in learning more. I wanted to get a small group of about eight to 10 participants so the group discussion could be more personal and so that participants would feel more at ease given the group size. With each person who showed interest, I shared more information to see if they would still be interested. From there, there were fewer people who were interested, some who did not respond, and some that I thought may not be the best fit for this project. I wanted to lean towards people I knew loved and enjoyed cooking. I was able to narrow that group down to about 15 people. After this, I did focus a little more on how I wanted the group to run and took some time to see who I thought would be a good fit. Some participants decided to not take part at this point due to scheduling conflicts.

I had eight participants who were definite people for the project. One interesting part of having to do this project virtually was that I was able to get one participant who lives in California. Through the virtual space, I was able to reach a larger group. I could ask people who may have not been able to attend an in-person meeting to join this group. Each participant was someone I knew, whether through online following, a fellow student, or a relative of a friend. I decided to focus on people whose thoughts on cooking or food I had prior knowledge about. Some of the participants are chefs who have been in the industry for years, some live far away from home and make family recipes when they are feeling homesick, and others have moved out of their family homes and started their own journey in the kitchen. The only requirements were a

love for food and creating in and outside of the kitchen and that each participant did not know each other. Even though I may have known the participants before, I wanted a wide group of people who could connect with each other, who would have never met before our meeting. I wanted to gather a group who enjoyed cooking to talk about this topic with others they probably would have never crossed paths with before. As far the art making portion, they just had to be willing to give artmaking a chance; they did not need to have any prior artmaking skills. I did take time to explain the project and art therapy to each person as well. I just wanted them to be open to art making and have interest in it for this project. The main idea was to take a group of mostly strangers and talk about the connections we can make through food, memories, storytelling, and art.

I scheduled one-on-one meetings with each participant, which took about 10-15 minutes each. Here, I wanted to hear more about the recipe they chose and how this made them feel and the memories that came up for them as well. I wanted to give them each a chance to talk to me directly and see if they had any questions about the project. I mentioned that there would be an art piece, and they would need to share some information about their background, recipes, and themselves with the other participants. During these individual phone call sessions, I wanted to learn about their backgrounds, their selected recipe, and what memories were evoked from this recipe—the *why* of it being chosen. I took this time to explain what would happen during the second session and explained the art-based portion and art therapy to them so there would be an understanding going into the second meeting. I explained that the main idea for this project was to answer the question of how we can come together through food. The group would figure out a way we would share this information and talk about this topic. After each meeting, I found a

time and date that would work well for each person. All one-on-one meetings took place through phone calls.

The second meeting took place through Zoom. At the Zoom meeting, only seven participants were able to attend, and from this point it would only be seven participants, and the eighth would be myself. I had decided at that point I wanted to include a recipe of my own and my own memories in the kitchen as well. The meeting was about an hour long, where the group came together to talk about a few different topics related to food. Together, each person shared their experience, family stories, the recipe, the reason they had shared this particular recipe, and a little bit about their background. They shared their recipe by explaining and describing it to the others in an open conversation. The group decided on a project through which we could share this experience and bring recipes, art, stories, and memories all together.

The group decided the best way to bring this together was to create a cookbook. In the cookbook they would share their family recipe; an explanation, if they liked; and their art piece, which would be represented next to the recipe. The art piece would be an expressive way for the participants to share their experience with this project. They could use any medium they chose. Over the next 2 weeks, the participants would have time to write down their recipes and create their artwork. In the Zoom meeting, we discussed things to be thinking about when it came to the artwork—to keep in mind memories that could come up when thinking about this recipe, any family stories, family history that they think of, and anything else they would like to bring through the artwork. From there, the cookbook would be put together and shared with each of the group members. It was something they could have for being a part of this project but as a way to represent how food, art, and stories can bring people from different backgrounds together.

Results

This project was about understanding and learning about different families' stories and backgrounds relating to food and art. The goal was to bring people together through food. The art process was a time for the participants to reflect on how discussing these recipes and thinking about their families' stories made them feel. The group met to talk about many topics around food and family.

The Zoom meeting lasted for about an hour. It started with everyone introducing their recipes, themselves, and a little bit about their background. Then, it turned into an open conversation about why the group believes food is a way to communicate and bring people together. We discussed how food is a way to learn about each other and where we all come from. The group discussed together that they believe food itself is a form of art. The feelings and colors that can come out of creating a meal are important to recognize. By using many different senses to create beautiful recipes, everyone agreed that food and art go hand in hand.

One result of this exploration was the shared frustration that this project could not be done in person. Once everyone shared their recipes, the group talked about how great it would have been to meet in person and get to try the food that each individual was sharing. They discussed how it would have been great to have a potluck-style meeting, sharing the stories and recipes and trying the food together. Through this idea and thinking about the socially distanced world we are currently living in, the group had to focus on a way the recipes could be brought together without being able to taste them. Through this discussion, the group decided on a cookbook. This way, each member of the group would share the ingredients and all the recipes of how to make the food they were contributing to the cookbook.

Through this conversation, there was a lot of talk about how many of the recipes people shared did not have measurements or specific ratios—how they were recipes but also not recipes. The participants did not have any specific instructions and materials written down; instead, many of the recipes were kept in their head and with the memories they had. Through this, we discussed how important it was that recipes were stored not on paper but in their memories because these were true family recipes passed down. Many were taught from previous generations, and participants agreed on the importance of understanding the ingredients being used and how taste was important with these recipes. The participants recognized that these would be shared with each other, but they would have to work to make them their own because many of the measurements were “a pinch of this and a dash of that.” When they first realized they had to write the recipe out, they all had the same reaction: that there was no actual recipe. I let them know that this made sense to me and to use “a pinch of this or a dash of that” if that made sense to them.

The participants pointed to the importance of taste when creating the dish. Many expressed how when they learned to cook this recipe, that was the most important part of making the food—tasting and seeing if anything else needed to be added to make the dish more flavorful. They talked about how the recipes they were sharing always came out different depending on which family member made it. The participants explained that everyone has their own spin on the recipe and that it would come out differently than how their grandparent or parent originally shared. These recipes would now be shared with each participant, and they would have to use their own taste and judgement to figure out this new recipe they were receiving from the others.

The second component of the meeting that was discussed was adding the art each person had created to the cookbook. It would be shown next to the recipe so they would go with each

other and be represented together to show each participant what their response art was when thinking about the recipe. The participants were free to create any piece of art of their choice; the only requirement was that it needed to be able to be placed on the page next to their recipe. I wanted them to take their time creating the artwork outside of the meeting, spending some time thinking about how they wanted to express themselves through the art. This meant that if something was three-dimensional, a picture needed to be taken and shared so it could be placed in the cookbook. There was some conversation, and some group members were a little worried about the art portion. Once we talked about it more in detail and they understood it was not about how it looked or if the art was *good*, but instead it was about how they felt when creating the artwork, the participants felt more at ease with creating something. I wanted their art to represent how they felt about the recipes they shared, or any feelings and memories that came up. This artwork would be the participants' expressive way to share their thoughts about this project and the connection to food and each other.

Another result of this study that appeared during the discussion regarded what we do when we are cooking and how it makes us feel when we are actually going through the process of making a meal. One participant mentioned that they always have music on and have certain playlists they like to listen to while cooking. This sparked another conversation about how music is important when thinking about cooking and bringing people together. Through this discussion, the group decided they wanted to add three songs they enjoy listening to while cooking to the cookbook. This music was something they were unable to share in person, so they wanted the participants to get a feel or have that connection if they try to recreate the recipes.

The participants' excitement to have these recipes and to be able to try them on their own was another result of this study. Each person was chosen because of their interest in cooking, and

to see them get excited to have these new recipes to try was great. They were able to connect in many ways, even though they were only going to meet in this virtual space. Each person showed they were engaged in hearing about other participants' recipes. They all seemed interested in having these recipes and mentioned how they wished we all could meet in person. We discussed maybe meeting when it was safe in the future. It seemed this project got all the participants to focus on gathering and food and how important that is to each of them. Also, I noticed how each participant was inviting and open to listening to each other. Even though we were not in person and on a Zoom call, it was evident that everyone had come together to talk about food, a topic that is important to each of us.

After the group meeting, I explained that within the next few weeks I would like everyone to take some time to create some reflective art about what this experience was like, as well as what the recipes and sharing their families' backgrounds meant to them. I wanted them to find a way to express themselves, like they enjoy doing through cooking. I had wanted everyone to send me their recipe, the art, three songs they enjoy listening to while cooking, and any other information they wanted to share about this experience so that I could compile the cookbook and share it with all of the participants at the same time. I told the participants that I wanted them to send all of this information back to only me, in case it was personal.

Focusing on the artwork I received from the participants, it seemed every person wanted to show an element that either represented their background or their family. I received a variety of different kinds of art—from videos to family photos, to collages and drawings—that expressed the importance of how the recipe was important to them. One commonality I found among the artwork was that many of the participants wanted to use actual images and show their

family gathering and meeting at the table. Some of the artwork showed times when this recipe had brought them together for holidays or special events in the past.

I asked each participant to share a brief statement when sending the artwork, recipe, and some music they enjoy while cooking. I wanted this to be shared with only me so I could get an idea of what it was like thinking about the recipe and creating the artwork. I was overwhelmed and excited with the some of the responses I received. I felt that not only was this project helpful for me to learn about others' backgrounds and culture, but it was helpful for the participants as well. Many shared personal details about the experience, memories, and feelings that came up for them when they were thinking about their recipe and family. I feel, in a way, that it created a more personal experience than anyone could have predicted. The members will now all have this cookbook and shared experience of food and recipes.

Another unexpected result from this meeting was that the participants thought it would be great for me to share a recipe and artwork as well. I was unsure if this was something they felt okay with, so I wanted to give them the option. They were excited to have me as part of the group and share my experience. For me, it was important to understand some of the feelings and thoughts that may have come up for the participants when I was creating my artwork and thinking about the recipe. It made me feel like I was part of this experience rather than overseeing and facilitating it. It gave me a sense of what this experience would be like as a participant, which was an additional element that I had not expected.

For my artwork, shown in Figure 2, I wanted to make a collage to represent different colors and images alongside the recipe. I wanted to add images of the process because, like collage, this recipe has many different layers. The colors were warm colors because this recipe reminds me of times spent with my grandma in the kitchen and feeling the heat from the oven.

The group wanted to show through the art that family and food can bring us together. Sometimes when people have large families, they see each other less often. Additionally, some of the participants live in different countries than their families. Thinking about when these recipes have been shared also brought many of them back to special gatherings and times they shared with loved ones. It was amazing to see this come through in the artwork and in the recipes they shared.

Figure 2

Recipe and Artwork



Note. This is an image of the recipe and artwork I created for the cookbook.

Discussion

After receiving some of the art and recipes back from the participants, the results of this project really started to hit me. Some of the participants shared some deeply personal thoughts and emotions about what it was like to think about their families and their recipes. They expressed how when they sat down and thought about it, this brought up things they had never realized before and, for some, things they needed to address. I was very thankful to have this

experience and grateful that some of the participants felt they could share this with me. It seemed that not only did this project get them to connect with others they had never met before, but it also got them to connect with themselves and some family members—some family members who are still alive and some who have passed on—similar to what Sotomayor (2015) described regarding keeping family memories alive through art and food. This is an idea that was found in some of the literature reviewed above; it is important to have healthy ways to process loss and grief (Nickrand & Brock, 2016), and food can be one to do so.

My project and results further explore the idea of food and its role outside of the kitchen. Food can be used as art, performance, storytelling, and a way for us to learn more about each other. Using food to heal when thinking about loved ones is something that has been used before (Sotomayor, 2015) and in my own project as well. Food can bring back memories around loved ones and can keep their memory alive (Abarca & Colby, 2016).

The cookbook was a way for the participants to be part of this project and have something to show for it. The cookbook was not just a way for everyone to have an end result from this experience. Instead, it meant a lot more during this time with social distancing rules. The downside to this project was that we could not meet in person and try each other's recipes, come together, and have a shared experience in the same room. However, the cookbook being a physical copy they all would receive was a way to bring us all together even though we could not be physically together. It was something that they could take with them, and participants could try these recipes on their own and create their own experiences and memories with the food. The cookbook offered a way that people who were complete strangers before this project could be connected even though they were all in different places. The cookbook gave the participants a way to process their recipes and family memories through artwork. Clarke (2013) showed how

creating the artwork is a way for the person to process whatever comes up when thinking about the recipe. I hope my project adds to this research and helps others understand the positive impact food can have in therapy.

While meeting as a group, the participants invited me to be part of the project. They thought it would be a good idea for me to share a recipe and artwork. I wanted to be able to share a recipe and be a part of the outcome because I was so passionate about this topic. The recipe I chose was one that really brought my family all together. It has been passed down from my great-grandmother and has become a recipe and an experience I have shared with my grandmother for many years. The recipe is one that was usually made together, and it usually takes a day to make; so not only am I learning the recipe from her, but I am sharing the experience and the day with her. During this time, we usually gossip about other family members or I hear stories from when she was young. The day usually ends with the rest of the family coming together and sharing this meal.

I was lucky enough to have been able to create this meal with my grandma while working on this project. In the spring, we were both vaccinated (and follow the social distancing guidelines), and I was able to visit her. *Pasties* is the name of the recipe I shared with the group. My Grandma and I usually make one for everyone in the family to come and eat together, and another for everyone to take home, which means we end up making 20 plus pasties in one sitting. Everyone always gets excited when we are having pasties. A lot of work goes into creating this recipe. In Figures 3 and 4, I have included images of the process and final product. Shown are my grandma's hands cutting the meat. This is a memory I will always keep with me. Her job is to cut all the ingredients and to mix it together; my job is to mix the crust and roll out the dough and put the pies together. For the music portion, I asked my Grandma for some of her favorite

music to listen to; she said Andy Williams was always her favorite. I included his music as something to listen to when cooking, as for myself I have some 90s music when I am in the kitchen. It brings me back to when I was young, and I always think about family when I hear those songs.

Figures 3 & 4

Food Making Process



Note. These are images after making the pasties. Figure 3 is the recipes right out of the oven. Figure 4 shows my Grandma cutting the meat and all the ingredients in the pan to be mixed together.

Many of the participants had similar stories to share about the importance of how these recipes brought their families together. Grandparents and parents were another connection that many of the participants felt when thinking about their recipes. Some of the participants learned these recipes from family members who are no longer with them and thinking back and taking time to focus on these family members was important. I got the idea that many of the participants

were sharing this not only to share information about themselves, but to share about important people in their lives as well.

This project was important to me in a few different ways. First, I wanted to find a way to bring people together to have a discussion and to learn more from each other through the topic of food. I wanted to find a way to learn about different cultures and people's backgrounds through the food. There were many different stories I was able to hear from the participants, and they opened up and shared how this experience helped them. Because of COVID-19, this year we had many social distancing rules we had to follow. These rules have made it harder to gather with friends and loved ones. This project brought a group of people who have never met before together to talk about many different topics around food in a virtual setting.

Additionally, in the virtual space, I was able to reach more people than if they had to attend in person. This was one positive I wanted to highlight about this project as it was frustrating that the group could not meet in person due to COVID-19. It would have been great to have the participants meet in the same room and bring their recipes. If this were a different time, I would have had everyone come together and have a potluck style meeting, so we could each taste the delicious recipes everyone was sharing. Instead, I looked at the positive and how I could reach more people in different locations because of the virtual meeting space.

This project would have played out very differently if we could meet in person. We would have been able to share the meals together and discuss the topic together. Sharing stories and ideas in person would have given everyone a much better way to get to know each other. Also, thinking about taste and the important role it plays with food, this project would have been able to provide a fuller picture of the foods we created. It could also add more to the ideas focused on in some of the literature when thinking about food, storytelling, and memories, such

as Abarca and Colby (2016) who talk about how food can create memories for the future, and the important role food has in that. It would have been great to have this deeper connection to hopefully have made memories for the future witnessing this in person, instead of online.

I do believe if it were not for the social distance rules, I could have reached a larger audience and invited more people into this project. I had to rely on social media and people who I follow to help me spread the word. We could have all shared a large space and really bonded over memories and recipes. I wanted this project to be a way where others could connect, and it would have been interesting if I could have reached participants all over the country, or the world, and learned more about people I had never met before. Some of the participants were relatives of friends, or friends I knew enjoy cooking. Although some of the participants were not born in the United States, many of them currently reside in the New England area, one participant did live on the West Coast, but even the participants were mainly from the same location. It would have been interesting to get a larger number of participants and some that I did not know before but at this time that was not an option. I think it would be great to continue this idea reaching out to a large audience or even being able to include some of the participants family members thoughts and feelings about the recipes. I think this project does have the potential to be expanded further.

Another limitation is thinking about food and its place in art therapy. This is a subject that can be hard for many people. To some, food is not a positive experience, nor are the memories behind them. I can see how some would choose to not use a food-based activity in the therapeutic world, but for this project I wanted to focus on how it could bring people together. This idea is limited to a certain client. Thinking of clients with eating disorders, food insecurities, or even sensory issues using a food-based art therapy directive may not be a helpful tool in

therapy. It is important to recognize food comes loaded with different meanings for individuals and can be successful for some, but it has with its limitation for others.

An idea that came up that I had not thought about was the fact that this project was not all happy memories for some of the participants. I learned a little bit about this idea from Clarke's (2013) thesis, but I still did not think more about it. Some of the memories that came up were hard or sad thoughts and feelings. Participants were able to express this through the art, and to me. Some had memories of loved ones who had passed on. One participant expressed that this was very healing and thanked me, stating "I know we're all helping you with this school project, but I do not think you understand how helping this is for us, it's bringing memories with my grandma and it's been nice to remember." Understanding the healing that went into some of these participants stories, artwork, and recipes was important to recognize. This project brought up a lot of emotions for some of the participants and it was great to see them explore this through their artwork.

I believe there were many successful pieces to this project as well. For all of us, we have not been able to gather with family members currently, whether they live in a different country or just down the street. This project was a way to bring us together and to learn more about each other. I was able to learn about different traditions and how important it is to taste the recipe—how we focus on letting the food tell us what it needs, instead of focusing on what measurements the recipe asks for. I learned more about each person through their art. It was a different way to learn more about each other's family and about everyone's relationship with food. Some shared about when they began cooking and others shared who taught them how to cook. It was great to hear so many different stories around the topic of food.

It was a great experience to witness and be a part of a way to connect through the food. This project taught me more about food and storytelling than I had imagined. Through the literature and my own project, I see that others feel food is an important part of the healing and creative process. I learned the importance of sharing memories made in the kitchen and the art we can create from these memories as well. Overall, I feel this project adds to the topic of food and its place in art therapy, as well as storytelling and memory making. I believe I can understand now that food can bring people together and that many see the food-making process as a form of art. Exploring these topics was helpful to learn about other cultures and family histories as well. The cookbook that was produced will be a physical reminder of this project and the information I learned, as well as something the participants can keep. I will be making physical bond copies and mailing them out to each participant to make sure they have a physical cookbook. It can be something they have and pass down to other family members if they decide, and it can be a way to continue the process of storytelling, memories, and art through food.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Kyle MacGovern

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Food Narrative: Storytelling, Memories, Art Expression, and Recipes – A Community Engagement Project

Date of Graduation: May 22, 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Donna C. Owens