Food, community and social change:
Understanding the impact of taking part in community food actions on participants’ engagement with ideas of social change

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Abstract
This dissertation is premised on the need for transformative social change and investigates a proposed mechanism through which support for such change could develop. Specifically, it looks at the potential for participation in community food activities to impact on the social critiques of participants and inspire in them a belief in the need for transformative change. Politicisation and prefiguration are two proposed ways in which such impact could take place. Within the category of community food activities, sub-categories of ‘emergency food provision’ and ‘alternative food provision’ are investigated. The research design was qualitative, using thematic analysis of data collected through qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the data revealed the presence of keys themes of values, critiques and visions, reflecting on the participants understandings of the world, its problems and how things could and should change. A variety of social critiques were identified within the data, as well as evidence of politicised and prefigurative ideas amongst the participants. There were indications that participation in the community food activities had impacted and developed these perspectives. Comparison of participants in the emergency and alternative food provision categories revealed a stronger indication of the hypothesised perspectives within the alternative food provision participants. The dissertation concludes that a potential link between participation in such activities and beliefs in the need for social change has been indicated by this data. However, the sample size is small and therefore not broadly generalisable to populations beyond the study participants. Research in larger groups of participants and using more in-depth methods would be recommended to establish more clearly the existence of any trends and the strength of any connection between the development of perspectives focused on the need for change and the act of participation in community food activities.

Keywords: social change, politicisation, prefiguration, community, food, participation

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Introduction
The impetus for this research is rooted in my belief that many of the critical issues faced by our society today, such as the climate crisis, poverty and inequality, are structural in nature – that is, they are perpetuated by the way in which society is organised. Therefore, progress towards a more sustainable and socially just world necessitates a radical shift in this social organisation. In this introduction I will first discuss the structural nature of injustice and the need for transformative social change to address it. Then, I will consider the potential for commitment to such change to manifest within collective actions at the community level. Finally, I will discuss my reasons for investigating this area through the lens of local food action.

Structural injustice and the need for transformative change
I use the term structural injustice to describe the unjust and unequal outcomes which people experience due to the systems (social, economic, political, cultural) within which they exist. For example, the UK is currently in the grip of a housing crisis (Shelter, 2021). The system in place for determining the distribution of houses functions to ensure that some people have more than they need and others none at all. This is driven in part by the commodification of houses as safe ‘assets’ in which the wealthy are incentivised to invest their money on the promise that their value will continue to increase; those without wealth must pay to rent the shelter they need; this money accrues to the already wealthy who then use it to buy more property assets, pushing prices further out of reach of those without wealth, who are stuck paying ever-increasing costs to continue to maintain a roof over their heads (Lund, 2019). This represents a structural tendency towards ever-increasing inequality, with the resulting injustices of homelessness and poverty.

The discourse around such examples of inequality has been shaped for several decades by the dominant ideology of neoliberalism, characterised by “privatization of state-run assets… liberalization of trade… monetarist focus… deregulation of labour and product markets… and the marketization of society” (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010, p. 5). At the core of the ideology is a focus on individual responsibility – each person is an ‘entrepreneur’ in charge of their own success, and the evident economic disparities within our society are the result of choices (to work hard or be lazy, to take opportunities or ignore them, to contribute productively to society or to shirk responsibility) which are freely made, and anyone could have chosen differently and had a different outcome (Bröckling, 2016). A more critical approach however, turns its focus instead to the way in which the material circumstances of the individual’s life are established, maintained and restricted by the overarching systems
within which they must operate, and how this limits the choices available to them – meaning that each person is not necessarily free to choose differently and thus exert complete control over their fate. Such a shift in perspective reconfigures the potential solutions to the problem, from multiple individual transformations to a transformation of the system as a whole. Such change will not be voluntarily implemented by those with the power to do so. It will require widespread public recognition of the problem and its structural causes, and then buy-in and commitment from the majority to make the demand for change undeniable. How might this be achieved? Wright states that “to be a radical critic of existing institutions and social structures is to identify harms that are generated by existing arrangements, to formulate alternatives which mitigate those harms, and to propose transformative strategies for realising those alternatives.” (2007, p.26 (emphasis in original)). I aim to investigate whether community actions can be sites to inspire and nurture such critics.

**Why focus on community action?**

At present in the UK multiple crises are overlapping, with rising economic hardship caused by the escalating cost of living crisis (Earwaker and Johnson-Hunter, 2023) and a decade of stagnating wages (Giupponi, Joyce and Machin, 2022), crumbling public services and infrastructure in the wake of years of austerity (Hernandez, 2021), and a crisis of inequality (Bourquin, Brewer and Wernham, 2022). These injustices are becoming ever more visible to the public as a whole, with a growing wave of public anger manifesting as protests (Pitkin, 2022; AlJazeera, 2022; Morris and agencies, 2022), industrial action (Martin, 2023) and campaigns of resistance (Lawson, 2022). In addition there is a growing climate movement (e.g. Limb, 2023), whose analysis of the issue is explicitly structural, as evidenced in the common demand: ‘System change, not climate change’.

It is in this context that I have chosen to focus this project around community actions, by which I mean collective actions undertaken voluntarily by residents of a local area for community benefit.

There are two main ways in which I propose that community action could theoretically be a site for galvanising commitment to transformative change:

1. **Politicisation** – creating the recognition that change is needed at a societal level rather than an individual level. Through direct engagement with the effects of structurally caused problems, collating and collectivising experiences of injustice rather than seeing or experiencing them as individual cases, a systemic critique could
develop. In the realm of what Mouffe calls ‘politics’ – “the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created” (2005, p. 9) – such injustices are often presented as being unavoidable, or even necessary for the common good. A structural analysis brings the perception of the issue into the realm of what Mouffe calls ‘the political’ – “the antagonistic dimension which is inherent to all human societies” (2013, pp. 12-13). This shift transforms the structural impact from an inevitability to be mitigated into a contestable outcome. Following such a shift within an individual or group, subsequent continued confrontation with injustices they now perceive to be avoidable could catalyse a commitment to change. This process of becoming aware of the reality of oppressive systems and the imperative to take transformative action is described by Freire as ‘conscientisation’: “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (2005, p. 47).

2. **Prefiguration** – the envisioning and enacting of alternative social structures and relations, in contrast to those that currently dominate. Those engaged in prefiguration are attempting “to embody… the kind of radical change that they aspire to bring about on a much grander scale in the future” (Van de Sande, 2019, p. 227). It represents a direct challenge to the idea that things must be as they are, asserting that this is how things could (and should) be. Community actions could offer a prefigurative space in which the failures of the current system “can be openly debated, deconstructed and sabotaged” (Monticelli, 2022, p. 2), stimulating the desire and motivation to create something new. Alternative forms of democracy (deliberative democracy, horizontal structures), economics (contributing via skills, time and labour, rather than money; cooperative enterprises) and resource provision and sharing (libraries for everything from tools to seeds to clothes; mutual aid groups), can be made a reality on a small scale and provide an embodied vision of their potentially transformative impacts if enacted more broadly. As Wright observes, “the actual limits of what is achievable depend in part on the beliefs people hold about what sorts of alternatives are viable” (2007, p. 32), and prefigurative actions can provide “proof that such a transformation, at least on a small scale, is imaginable and realizable” (Monticelli, 2022, p. 2).
Politicisation reflects a belief in the *need for* change; Prefiguration reflects a belief in the *possibility of* change. In this way I propose that community action could have the potential to start people on the way to becoming the ‘radical critics’ described by Wright.

**Why food-related community action?**

In order to investigate this potential within community actions, I chose to look at activities with a focus around food. There are several reasons for this:

1. There are increasingly evident food-related problems in the UK. Food insecurity was estimated to affect up to 17% of UK households in June 2023 (The Food Foundation, 2023), a situation exacerbated by years of austerity (Jenkins *et al*, 2021), the Covid-19 pandemic (Pautz and Dempsey, 2022) and the ongoing cost of living crisis (Gorb, 2022). Food bank use has increased massively over recent years, with emergency food parcels given out by the Trussell Trust increasing from 61,000 in 2010/2011 (Loopstra, 2018) to nearly 3 million in 2022/2023 (The Trussell Trust, 2023). Those who are generally food secure have also experienced food-related disruptions over the last few years due to a variety of supply chain shocks (e.g. Evans, 2020; Lawrence, 2021; Andrews, 2021) and high food inflation, reaching 19.1% in March 2023 (Day, Goudie and Gurung, 2023). All of this makes visible the structural flaws and weaknesses in our system of food production, distribution and access.

2. These issues are part of a broader structural critique of the food system. The failure to ensure equal access to healthy, affordable food has long-term impacts on people’s health (Gundersen and Ziliak, 2015). The food system as it currently functions is a key driver of the climate crisis (Crippa *et al*, 2021). The drive to make food cheaper for consumers and more profitable to produce can lead to environmental damage (Benton *et al*, 2021) and labour exploitation (Willoughby and Gore, 2018). The focus on food as a commodity to be purchased rather than a right to be guaranteed means that significant food poverty exists alongside massive food waste, with up to a quarter of food produced for consumption in the UK not being eaten (Jeswani, Figueroa-Torres and Azapagic, 2021).

Many of these critiques – of globalised free trade, profit-driven exploitation of people and nature, the negative impacts of inequality, a failure to meet the basic needs of all people – can be applied beyond the food system to society more broadly. This raises the possibility that a focus on the issues within the food system could
open the door to examining the structural underpinning of many of society’s problems.

3. There is an abundance of local food action in the UK, encompassing a wide range of activities including provision of food aid, community cooking, distribution of surplus food, community gardening, urban farming, gleaning and co-operative retailers. This provides a wealth of groups and participants to engage with for this research.

Many such activities are aimed at facilitating access to food to address urgent need (a category I will refer to as ‘emergency food provision’), whilst others involve approaches that facilitate a change in our relationship to food and each other (a category I will refer to as ‘alternative food provision’). Those taking part in the former category of action will potentially be in a position to expand their direct experience of the impacts of food-related injustice, identify a wider pattern of suffering beyond isolated individuals and gain a broader understanding of the underlying causes – this represents an opportunity for politicisation. Those taking part in the latter will be in a position to expand their understanding of different approaches that could improve food-related outcomes and have the opportunity to put these possibilities into practice – this represents an opportunity for prefiguration.

**Main research question:**
Can participation in community food actions inspire a belief in the need for transformative social change?

**Sub-questions:**
Can participation in community food activities:
- Impact on participants’ social critiques?
- Politicise participants?
- Inspire prefigurative ideas in participants?

In the following literature review, I will explore the presence of these concepts within the existing literature on community food activities.
Literature Review

This literature review encompasses papers published on the topic of the social impact of community food-related activities, with a focus on research discussing and/or involving participants in these projects. This will investigate the extent to which my area of research focus has already been discussed within the literature and highlight the relevant findings. It covers both ‘emergency food provision’ and ‘alternative food provision’. I will discuss the themes present within the literature around the social impact of community food activities, participant perspectives (through the categories of social critique, politicisation and prefiguration), and the impact of their participation on these perspectives. I will conclude with a summary of the findings and discussion of the implications for my research.

Social impact of community food activities

Negative impacts

A key critique within the literature on emergency food provision is linked to the neoliberal context in which such activities exist, one in which systems of state support were cut dramatically to reduce state spending. This results in responsibility for the services previously provided by the state being offloaded onto the private and charitable sectors (Williams et al, 2016), which become part of the “residual welfare state” (Riches, 2002, p. 654). Food aid programmes are said to have become part of maintaining a system of inadequate state welfare provision, thus enabling and legitimising it (Riches 2002), in what Williams et al describe as essentially “a privatisation of political responsibility” (2016, p. 2294) which further embeds prevailing individualist neoliberal narratives of deservingness and dependency. As Surman, Kelemen and Rumens put it, “their existence is seen as consistent with a neoliberal ideology that places the blame primarily on the individual while dismissing the structural and social dimensions of food poverty” (2021, p. 1091). Garthwaite identifies the “shift from entitlement to charitable provision” with its “conditionality and surveillance” (2017, p. 286) as inherently stigmatising for those who must use the service, something that De Souza labels explicitly as “neoliberal stigma” (2019, p. 101). Cooks (2019) agrees, saying that the hierarchy created by those who can choose what they eat giving what is left to those who have no choice embeds unequal social statuses. Sbicca notes that “giving away food in and of itself will not transform the agrifood system in a way that prevents food inequalities to begin with” (2014, p. 826), what Cooks (2019) describes as a ‘weak’ form of food justice, addressing the consequences but not the causes of structural problems. Caplan (2016) goes further, highlighting the risk that such work depoliticises the issue of food poverty by making people feel that ‘something is being done’, reducing the
impetus to investigate and tackle the underlying causes. For Poppendieck, “defining the problem as hunger contributes to the obfuscation of the underlying problems of poverty and inequality” (2013, p. 569). Feeding people through food surpluses can also help to maintain the unjust and unsustainable food systems that create such surpluses, whether through further embedding the fact of food waste by making it integral to feeding people in need (Cooks, 2019), providing a reputationally beneficial outlet for food that no longer holds any value for food producers and retailers (Vitiello et al, 2015) or subsidising the low wages of food industry workers by using the surplus from the industry to mitigate their food poverty (Williams et al, 2016).

Many authors have also critiqued alternative food provision for what they perceive as its place in the neoliberal status quo. McClintock (2014) highlights how such projects often use the neoliberal language of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurialism, framing the solution to problems with food access around individual consumer choices, rather than political action. For Barron (2017), this is an acceptance of ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ which divests governments of their responsibility for the welfare of their citizens. Pudup (2008) views community gardens as evidence of individuals adjusting to the damaging economic effects of neoliberalism, defined not by the choices of the community but by the demands of the circumstances imposed on them. This is supported by McClintock’s (2014) observation that urban gardens tend to appear in places where market systems have failed to meet a community’s needs. Ghose and Pettygrove highlight that such a focus on voluntary action is particularly problematic when it “requires extracting material and labor resources from already resource-poor citizens” (2014, p. 1104). They also support the findings of Reynolds (2015), who reports on the replication of existing hierarchies and inequalities within community gardening and emphasises that mitigating the effects of injustice is not the same as addressing the causes. Funding is often necessary to maintain such projects, and this may limit their radical potential through the requirement to tailor projects to a funder’s agenda (McClintock, 2014). For Classens (2015) the main problem with community gardens is their common presentation as ‘natural’ havens distinct from the city, believing that this forecloses the radical possibilities inherent in envisioning a city which incorporates nature and food production as core parts of its structure.

Positive impacts

There were also some positive perspectives on the impact of emergency food provision. Buckingham and Jolley identify the potential to both meet “immediate needs and challenge injustice” (2015, p. 313). For Cloke, May and Williams (2017), food banks can be spaces in which care is provided ‘in the meantime’ before more structural changes can be made to
address the causes of food poverty, and Lee, Coulson and Hackett identify food banks as organisations “focused on change through a longitudinal approach” (2021, p. 15). Edwards discusses the “potential for transitional change” (2016, p. 292) inherent within an organisation who portray their redistribution of food ‘waste’ as a public act of revaluing “waste as a resource” (2016, p. 291), thus shifting perceptions as well as feeding those in need. Cooks (2019) highlights the potential such a framing has to undermine the capitalist logic of food having value only insofar as it can be sold for a profit. Further to this, food aid projects are also sometimes assigned a more actively political role within the literature through the utilisation of data they gather about the causes of food poverty. This is identified at both a local level, through engagement with local MPs and awareness-raising within their locality (Buckingham and Jolley, 2015)), and at a national level, calling out the damage done by austerity measures, welfare reform, low wage jobs and zero-hour contracts (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017; Williams et al, 2016). Buckingham and Jolley suggest that food banks can create a “public encounter” (2015, p. 317) with the reality of food poverty, and Caplan (2016) suggests that food poverty and food aid can be used as a prism through which to pose questions about how things are and how they could or should be. Identifying a more proactive and politicised role for emergency food provision, Sbicca (2014) discusses the use of food waste by the organisation Food Not Bombs (FNB) to cook meals for anyone to share in prominent public spaces. He acknowledges that “just feeding people is a neoliberal response” but then highlights how FNB “occupies public space to highlight hunger and its structural drivers”, revealing “a broken agrifood system” (Sbicca, 2014, p. 830). Heynen identifies the FNB principals of decommodification and sharing as “a radically different geography of survival, than that enforced through the outsourcing of welfare to charity”, one that “directly threatens policies of containment and makes poor people far less susceptible to regulation” (2010, p. 1231).

There are also many positive perspectives evidenced within the literature on alternative food provision, in particular urban agriculture, which highlight the potential for more transformative impacts. McClintock views urban agriculture projects as vital “in consolidating the radical socio-ecological motivations of individuals into a vocal and visible movement” (2014, p. 165), and Mudu and Marini (2018) identify them as a key part of the necessary work to tackle larger issues of injustice and sustainability. This can be achieved through their inherent opposition to the industrial food system (Baker, 2004), the decommodification of food into a “public good, prioritising its equitable distribution over profit” (McClintock, 2014, p. 148), their potential role in the food sovereignty movement through the saving and sharing of seeds (Classens, 2015) and the ‘de-enclosure’ of land,
reclaiming it from the capitalist concept of private property and returning it to the commons (Eizenberg, 2012). For Barron, through the creation of this new ‘commons’ “they challenge the neoliberal supposition that exchange value of land trumps use value” (2017, p. 1150). These counter the neoliberal logic that underpins most urban land use through a rejection of both privatisation and entrepreneurialism, with the land managed by and in the interests of the community rather than in service of maximising its profit-making potential for an individual owner (Barron, 2017).

Calls for nuance

In relation to emergency food provision, Cloke, May and Williams criticise the overly simplistic presentation of food banks as either part of a “neoliberal shadow state” (2017, p. 704) or as a catalyst for a public confrontation with injustice. Williams et al (2016) highlight the variety of approaches taken by food banks which do not always involve proving need, restricting repeat access or accepting corporate donations, thus limiting the potential to make broad assertions about their likely negative social impact.

In the category of alternative food provision, Barron proposes that community gardens can “bloom in ways that either promote or resist neoliberalism” (2017, p. 1154) and Ghose and Pettygrove (2014) determine that gardens can resist capitalist logics of land use whilst also reinforcing neoliberal notions of personal (rather than state) responsibility. Classens (2015) offers a critique of the two-dimensional view of urban gardens as either wholly positive expressions of nature or negative representations of neoliberalism. McClintock calls this “a potentially disabling dualism” (2014, p. 149) and argues that urban gardens must be seen as “both a form of actually existing neoliberalism and a simultaneous radical counter-movement arising in dialectical tension” (emphasis in original) (2014, p. 148).

Participant perspectives

Social critiques

There was evidence within the literature of emergency food provision participants expressing individualised explanations for food poverty. A volunteer in a food pantry study described the people who used the service as simply unlucky, that anyone could be in their place – as De Souza (2019) notes, this indicates no analysis of the racialised and class-based factors that greatly impact on such a likelihood. Some volunteers distributing food to the homeless expressed the belief that homelessness is a result of poor life choices, often drug or alcohol related, which underpinned their choice to give food rather than money due to a suspicion about what the money would be used for (Horvath, 2020). Monforte (2020) reported that some food bank volunteers recognised the problems caused by recession and
austerity, but still expressed individual causes for the situations of the people they were helping. However, there were several examples of more critical assessments from participants. Lee, Coulson and Hackett (2021) reported that some volunteers expressed a critique of the politically-created structural issues behind food poverty, although were reluctant to engage in any political activism. A volunteer interviewed by Caplan stated that “food poverty was ‘unacceptable’ in 21st century Britain… and that they felt ‘something had to be done about it’” (2016, p. 8). De Souza (2019) reported on a comment from a food bank volunteer about the need for an underclass for the country to function, evidenced by the institutionalisation of charity that should have been a temporary measure. Buckingham and Jolley (2015) found that volunteers were ‘keenly aware’ of the connection between benefit-related issues and food bank need, and felt that awareness-raising was an important part of their work. Two participants in a surplus food-sharing group from a study by Schanes and Stagl blamed the “capitalist-based food system for its focus on profit maximization, growth and an exploitation of workers and/or the environment” (2019, p. 1495). The most explicit example comes from Food Not Bombs, whose group slogans identify food as a right, poverty as violent and unnatural, and capitalism as prioritising profit over nutrition (Sbicca, 2014). Poppendieck (2013) discussed people with radical critiques of the food system that still feel the need to engage in emergency food provision to address immediate need, even though they recognise it does not tackle and may even perpetuate the underlying problems. Surman, Kelemen and Rumens (2021) report on a clear critique amongst participants of the place of food aid and re-distribution of waste food in entrenching the underlying problems of inequality and poverty, and volunteers in a study by Williams et al (2016) recognised the contradictory nature of helping those who cannot afford to buy food from the supermarkets by collecting donations and surplus from those supermarkets to re-distribute.

There were also a variety of social critiques amongst alternative food provision participants. Edwards (2016) reported that some participants were motivated by concern over the sustainability of the capitalist food system. One respondent in the study by Ghose and Pettygrove stated that their work with a community garden was “an act of justice” because organic food “should be a common right of all” (2014, p. 1100). Another research participant talked about educating children at an urban gardening project about “food justice and the structural inequities of the system” (Reynolds, 2015, p. 249). Participants in urban growing identified various environmental critiques, including around animal welfare (Edwards, 2016), sustainable food production (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014) and access to local rather than imported fresh food, grown in a climate-friendly way (Bitušiková, 2016). There were critiques of government evident, with McClintock finding an uneasiness about “the burden
placed on non-profits to provide food security and other services that [participants] believe the government should provide” (2014, p. 164), and Bitušiková identifying critical assessments of “governmental and municipal neoliberal policies” (2016, p. 38). Follmann and Viehoff (2015) described a critique of local democratic structures, with gardening chosen as an explicit method of highlighting participants’ concerns about local land use and generating greater political power for the community. For others, gardens have become a focal point for resisting the gentrification of their area, with participants demonstrating against the relationship between local government and real estate speculators (Mudu and Marini, 2018).

**Politisation**

In relation to emergency food provision, Williams *et al* (2016) conducted a study that had a specific focus on the ‘political dynamics’ within food banks and found that for some participants their previous political perspectives remained unchanged, but for others participation “seemed to act as a catalyst for a transformation in their ethical and political sensibilities” (Williams *et al*, 2016, p. 2306). They do caution that there is the potential for a shift towards more neoliberal and conservative understandings of poverty, as well as more structural, progressive understandings. However, they emphasise the agency of service users re-shape the narrative around food bank use away from perceptions of scrounging and dependency towards experiences of institutional failure and the underlying causes of poverty – these directly experienced first person accounts can problematise existing understandings that volunteers may have around the reasons for food bank use. In addition to this study, Monforte (2020) reported on conversations with volunteers in which ‘political subjectivities’ appeared despite their self-identification as apolitical, and Surman, Kelemen and Rumens (2021) outlined how personal reflections lead volunteers to a more political understanding of the underlying causes of food poverty and the problematic aspects of food banks as a resolution.

As an example of political action amongst alternative food provision participants, Ghose and Pettygrove discuss a group whose right to garden was revoked by the local authority and the land was then designated for development – when development never took place and the lot was just abandoned, the gardeners reclaimed it, in an “act of civil disobedience” (2014, p. 1098). Along similar lines, Eizenberg reports on gardeners who had to fight for the preservation of their gardens against authorities and developers seeking to use the land for the extraction of profit, which he identifies as a process of “dis-naivetee” (2012, p. 777), transforming the gardeners into activists.
Prefiguration

Whilst the literature did not present widespread evidence of prefiguration in emergency food provision settings, there were some clear examples in one of the studies of participation catalysing in participants new ways of thinking about social relations, structures and values. Monforte (2020) interviewed food bank volunteers, many of whom had lost their jobs following the 2007/8 recession. He viewed their engagements within the food bank as reactions against the logic of work and austerity, enabling them to view unpaid work as more personally valuable than paid work and to choose a different kind of duty and connection to society. One participant expressed the “emotional relief” of “doing things differently” (p. 118), and there was a general belief that rather than demanding future change they view “their engagement as the performance and embodiment of social change ‘here and now’” (p. 117).

There were a few examples of prefigurative perspectives in alternative food provision. Edwards (2016) found that community growers had a clear vision of a sustainable, non-capitalist food future. One urban gardener interviewed by Mudu and Marini emphasised “the importance of a vision of soil opposed to a betrayed concept of soil as a land to be exploited for building” (2018, p. 565). Ghose and Pettygrove (2014) reported on community members who took control of otherwise unused local land and enacted their vision, challenging the value assigned to the land by the authorities and prefiguring a world in which community members make decisions about their land based on their needs and values. In a study by McVey, Nash and Stansbie, a community gardener asserted that the garden is “a symbol of what can be achieved if land is given to the people who are on it” (2018, p. 52). For Hagelman, Mast and Hiner, community gardens can be a place for “people to enact alternative political visions” (2016, p. 149).

Impacts of participation

The literature contained several discussions of the potential for participation in emergency food provision to limit engagement with the need for more radical change. For example, Cloke, May and Williams (2017), suggested that participation allows volunteers to feel better about themselves for helping others without having to challenge the status quo that ensures they do not need such help themselves. Horvath proposes that participation may lead to a confusion of the work done to address emergency need with “efforts that might address its underlying structural and systemic causes” (2020, p. 992). However, Dennis, Scanlon and Sellon (2017), looking at the practice of gleaning food left in fields after harvest, identify participation as a potential ‘springboard’ towards greater understanding of the connection
between food poverty and the systems within which it arises. **Politicisation.** Cloke, May and Williams (2017) highlight the possibility of encounters within food banks creating a sense of community between those that would otherwise not interact, finding things ‘in-common’ and broadening their ethical and political understandings. Williams et al highlight the potential for food banks to create ‘spaces of encounter’ that can “rework existing, or generate new, political and ethical subjectivities and mobilisations” (2016, p. 2292), potentially acting as “an incubator for conscientized and ethically aware activism” (2016, p. 2311). However, they also caution that the “highly restrictive, and stigmatising, welfare technologies” within which food banks operate “work to reinforce constructions of the deserving and undeserving welfare claimant” (Williams et al, 2016, p. 2292). Surman, Kelemen and Rumens identify a variety of forms of compassion existing within the food bank setting, with both the potential for reinforcement of the status quo and the potential for developing a social critique around the existence of food banks – they identify that compassion can “activate affective, ethical and political responses to food poverty” (2021, p. 1090).

**Prefiguration.** The only discussion around the potential impact of ideas of a prefigurative nature on food bank participants came from Cloke, May and Williams (2017). They conveyed the possibility of food banks as “sites for the incubation of social practices, values, and subjectivities that both deviate from, but also challenge, their capitalist counterparts” (p. 705), creating spaces for “ethical talk and performance that connect to wider transformative politics and praxis” (p. 705). They posit that even small acts outside of the neoliberal capitalist market framework can have out-sized effects in demonstrating that an alternative is possible (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017).

Much of the discussion around **alternative food provision** was optimistic about its potential transformative impact on those taking part. Baker highlighted how it can enable marginalised groups to “produce and contest space through the assertion of their cultural identity” (2004, p. 323), and Eizenberg (2012) notes the importance of the opportunity to do this collectively and publicly. Firth, Maye and Pearson (2011) suggest that it can help connect people within a community, across cultures, ages and socio-economic groups, and can lead to further work to address other community needs. For McClintock (2014), it represents a ‘de-alienation’ from the processes of food production. **Politicisation.** There is an inherently political aspect of urban agriculture identified within the literature, embedded in the fact that many such projects take place on land controlled by non-garden members (whether local authorities or private owners). Engaging with this reality can be a politicising experience. As Eizenberg notes, “gardeners develop new representations of space that rely on critical examinations of notions of neighborhoods, communities, the city, uncovering their unjust and uneven development” (2012, p. 775). For some gardeners it can be their opportunity to take some
control over their environment (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014). Mudu and Marini (2018) identify an inherent struggle between the right to access space and its enclosure for private profit. More broadly, Barron identifies the potential for participation in community gardening to initiate an “awakening political consciousness” (2017, p. 1149), and Eizenberg describes an experience of space in which local knowledge that is unique to members of the community “surfaces and becomes conscious and voiced” (2012, p. 773) helping to develop a new consciousness. All this can facilitate the process of conscientisation (Barron, 2017).

**Prefiguration.** There was significant discussion of the potential for prefiguration to be an impacting concept on participants of alternative food activities. Much of this revolved around new perspectives on social relations and organisation. Milbourne (2012) sees such activities as creating spaces for organising towards different, more sustainable ways of urban living. They can demonstrate ‘non-institutional’ frameworks for action, with “no waiting time for bureaucratical decisions… no subordination to administrative procedures” (Mudu and Marini, 2018, p. 559). Alternative approaches to decision-making can be practised, both deliberative and collaborative, allowing participants to engage with alternative political conceptions and structures (Follmann and Viehoff, 2015). Whilst Barron (2017) believes that gardens can achieve a kind of prefiguration if gardeners begin with a clear idea of their intended transformative goals and work backwards, Guerlain and Campbell (2016) argue that prefiguration can exist within such projects without prior explicit intention, evolving simply from the action itself. Follmann and Viehoff portray such spaces as having utopian potential through “fighting for a radically different, socially just and ecologically sustainable city” (2015, p. 1149). Putting the land to use in such a way allows gardeners to “reclaim lived space from the abstract realm of modern capitalism” (Barron, 2017, p. 1144), ‘taking the city’ to reclaim unjustly enclosed space and return it to the commons (Mudu and Marini, 2018). Barron highlights community gardens as de-commodifying, non-capitalist “alternatives to the market” (2017, p. 1144), demonstrating to authorities and the wider public the effectiveness of such alternatives. Similarly, Edwards proposes that “non-capitalist food economies contribute to socio-ecological change by providing alternative understandings and values embedded within the procurement of food” (2016, p. 294). For Eizenberg, such projects represent an “actually existing commons” (2012, p. 765), providing an opportunity to see a way forward to a different world. Follmann and Viehoff (2015) highlight the potential for such new ‘commons’ to contrast with the dominant dichotomous view of land ownership as either private or state.
Summary and critique

The literature summarised here offers a varied picture of the potential impacts of local food actions on the overall likelihood of transformative social change. Whilst many authors have addressed this subject, the types of activity discussed were rather limited, with the literature on emergency food provision representing mostly food banks, and for alternative food provision covering almost exclusively community gardens. Some authors definitely represented the activities as having a significantly negative potential impact (e.g. Poppendieck (2013), Pudup (2008)), others focused mostly on the positive potential (e.g. Buckingham and Jolley (2015), Guerlain and Campbell (2016)), and several offered a more nuanced picture (e.g. Monforte (2020), McClintock (2014)). There were some common themes across the emergency and alternative food provision categories, such as the unintended complicity with the neoliberal roll-back of the state (e.g. Riches (2002), Barron (2017)), the ability and intention to challenge the systems that create food insecurity (e.g. Buckingham and Jolley (2015), McClintock (2014)), and an emphasis on the power that individual agency can have over the ultimate form and impact of such activities (e.g. Williams et al (2016), Classens (2015)). Thus, the literature suggests that there is a wide range of possible impacts of these community actions.

However, there was little explicit focus within the reviewed literature on investigating the social critiques of volunteers and how participation had shaped these critiques, which in turn limited the information available about the extent to which politicisation and prefiguration might be taking place. This was often a reflection of the focus of the papers, which were interested in a broad range of topics from citizenship (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014) to expressions of compassion (Surman, Kelemen and Rumens, 2021). As a result, I have relied to a certain extent on extrapolating the insight I seek from data provided for a different purpose. Whilst this provided a nuanced picture of the potential impact of participation, there was clear evidence that critical and radical perspectives are present within participants of these activities.

Implications for this research

The literature provided both supportive and contradictory findings with regard to my hypothesis that participating in local food action could have transformative effects on participants’ analysis of social issues, and therefore impact on their commitment to transformative social change. My contention certainly isn’t that all, or even the majority, of those who participate in such actions will be affected as hypothesised, but rather that involvement holds this potential for some participants. In that light, there is cause within the
literature to believe that this might be the case. However, there is not adequate direct investigation of the participants’ social critiques and how participation may have affected those critiques. My research will be focusing on this aspect in order to provide an indication of whether my hypothesis holds any potential validity.
Methodology
In this chapter I will cover the following:
- The epistemological underpinning of the research
- Discussion of my chosen methods of data collection and analysis
- An exploration of validity and reliability
- Consideration of the issues of positionality and reflexivity
- Discussion of ethical concerns

Epistemology
The design of this research has been informed by two epistemological approaches: critical theory and interpretivism. Critical theory aims to “illuminate hidden sources of repression and neglected transformative possibilities” (Bronner, 2017, p. 100) that exist within a given historical and social context and are “immanent in the needs or moral experience of subjects” (Browne, 2017, p. 3). It also tends to be “directed towards achieving particular kinds of political goal: reducing or eliminating exploitation and oppression, and bringing about emancipation” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 30). This aligns with my understanding of existing societal structures as sources of injustice and the imperative of radical social change to address this, which forms the foundation on which the research was conceived and developed. Hammersley describes how critical theory developed so that “undermining the dominant ideology through critique came to be viewed as a precondition for significant change” (2013, p. 33), and I have extended this logic down to the individual – if enough people come to question the dominant ideology then the conditions for change may arise. From this perspective, individuals’ subjective concepts of truth will collectively influence whether unjust structures can be challenged and transformed through the actions they influence or constrain. As a result my approach to data gathering has been informed by interpretivism, which perceives that social reality must be understood through “the subjective experience of social action” (Clark et al, 2021, p. 24) and thus aims at “trying to understand particular people and events in specific socio-historical circumstances” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 27). This facilitates my need to gain an authentic insight into the perceptions and beliefs of participants around the desirability and necessity of social change. Once I have gathered the data, however, I will need to go beyond an individual focus in my analysis to consider its implications for the material conditions of the world – this is where I will return to a more critical approach. I feel such a hybrid approach is necessary, as each of these epistemological perspectives mitigates a key weakness of the other in relation to my research. Through its focus on “the structural relations of power, control, and discrimination
within the… foundations of society” (Bazeley, 2020, p. 38), critical theory provides the overarching framework for identifying the need for transformative social change on which this research is premised, offering a vital critique and confrontation of injustices in a way that the subjective focus of interpretivism cannot. However critical theory cannot provide an in-depth understanding of “the distinctive perspectives of the people involved” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 29) in the way that interpretivism can, which is necessary to then be able to evaluate in a more critical way the possible cumulative impact of these perspectives towards transformative social change.

Methods
Overview
I aimed to recruit participants from a variety of community food groups, representing both emergency and alternative food provision. It was my intention to gain some initial insight into the presence of themes of social change, politicisation and prefiguration in the experience of participants in these activities, to indicate the benefit of broader research into my hypothesis. Participants were initially requested to complete a qualitative questionnaire, which ended with the option for the participant to take part in an interview.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire (see appendix 4) was chosen as an effective way of gaining broad insight into the key themes of the research. It provided an easy method of participation, requiring only a small time commitment, with the hope of increasing the likelihood of engagement. This is key in a smaller research project with time and resource limits when it comes to the recruitment of participants – to this end, the questionnaires were kept short to increase the likelihood of more in-depth answers (Braun and Clarke, 2013). All questions asked were open-ended with no specified word limit, which allows for more detailed and personal exploration of the ideas, prompting the participants to consider and reflect as they respond at some length (Carey, 2016). This provides richer data for qualitative analysis, enabling deeper interpretation of individuals’ perspectives. There are limitations to the use of open-ended questionnaires. There must be a balance between asking enough questions to gain a useful amount of data and the time investment being requested of participants (Carey, 2016) – asking more questions may theoretically yield more data, but if participants are put off from engaging or lose interest part-way through then the data gathered can ultimately become very limited (Blakeslee and Fleischer, 2007). This requires restraint in the number of questions posed and precision in the wording of the questions themselves. Without well-crafted
questions it's possible that the participant will mis-interpret what is required of them and provide data that is not relevant to the research (Zipp, 2022). For these reasons the questions were limited to 5 and were targeted at the core themes of the research. With more time the questionnaire would ideally have been tested with potential participants and subsequently refined before the commencement of data gathering, but unfortunately this was not feasible. However, it was discussed with my supervisor and family members to help validate its likely effectiveness in these goals (Carey, 2016).

**Interviews**

For those who expressed an interest once they had completed the questionnaire, an interview was arranged. Interviews were semi-structured and informal, ensuring a focus on the key areas of the research whilst also allowing enough flexibility to follow interesting and unanticipated lines of enquiry, led by the contributions of participants (Blakeslee and Fleischer, 2007). In this way, the data becomes co-created, allowing both researcher and participant to explore and construct knowledge through their interaction (Mason, 2018). This allows for the detailed expression of the participant’s experiences, perceptions and understandings in the data. The time and location of interviews was arranged according to the participants’ preferences, to ensure that they were as comfortable as possible and minimise any inconvenience for them (Karatsareas, 2022). Participants were offered the option of face-to-face or online interviews – in the end all interviews were conducted online. Interviews were comprised of open-ended questions which expanded on the themes in the questionnaires, allowing the participants the freedom to explore the question in their own words and at their own pace (Carey, 2016). The benefit of an interview in addition to a questionnaire is the potential for more expansive answers which can be actively probed, allowing further depth of detail to be revealed than might occur on paper. The looser nature of a semi-structured interview could potentially dilute focus on the key topics and result in an irrelevant conversation in relation to the research priorities. This risk was mitigated against through the use of an interview schedule (see appendix 5) to ensure that the key research priorities were covered, whilst still allowing for a freer-flowing discussion than a more rigid structure would permit (Karatsareas, 2022). The questionnaire gave participants the chance to reflect on key themes prior to the interview, as well as allowing me to pick up on relevant points raised by the participants as a starting point for further discussions in the interview (Blakeslee and Fleischer, 2007). Interviews were planned to last up to 30 minutes. The aim was to balance the need to encourage expansive answers with the need to respect the participants’ time and not put them off taking part.
**Sampling**

I used purposive sampling to approach the majority of research participants, an approach in which potential participants are strategically selected “precisely because they will allow the researchers to answer the research questions in a way that is as meaningful and informative as possible” (Clark *et al.*, 2021, p. 379). This was necessary to ensure that I was recruiting participants who matched the criteria of the research: a) volunteers, b) in community activities, c) with a focus on food. I also employed snowball sampling, facilitating the expansion of the sample size through existing participants (Flick, 2022), with both contacted organisations and research participants passing along details of the research to other potential participants on my behalf. I reached out to a wide variety of food-related community groups to request that they share the details of the research with their volunteers. In total I researched over 100 groups and ultimately made contact with 60 that matched the criteria for inclusion. Reasons for excluding organisations from contact included: a lack of clear focus on food (e.g. community gardens that did not mention growing food), a lack of clarity over whether or not the organisation was still in existence and no traceable contact details. I had a very low response rate, although I was able to recruit 15 participants from a variety of types of group (see appendix 1). With more time and resource I could have attempted to boost responses by reaching out in person to some of these groups, but it was not feasible to commit to such an approach given the breadth of groups I would need to have engaged with, the restraints of fulltime work and the limited timeframe I had to collect data.

**Data analysis**

My approach to the analysis of the data was thematic – this is a flexible method of analysis which enables the focusing down of large amounts of qualitative data into core themes relevant to the research focus, enabling the identification of “the concepts and ideas that underpin the explicit data content, or the assumptions and meanings in the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 178). This enables analysis to be focused around the most relevant and resonant parts of the data. Whilst there is no single agreed upon method for conducting thematic analysis, there are key elements from which I formulated the following approach:

1. Gain familiarity with the data – this was done through reading through the questionnaires and transcribing the interviews.
2. Conduct open coding – this involved reading through the entire dataset and coding any data item that was relevant to the core concepts of the research questions, namely social critiques, politicisation and prefiguration. Codes “are essentially
issues, topics or concepts that are present in the data” (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020, p. 218).

3. Review coding – this required reading through the codes to clarify meaning, refine naming, consolidate equivalent codes into one and reconsider the relevancy of each code.

4. Identify themes – this was done by identifying “similarity and overlap” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 225) within the codes to develop higher level groupings indicating the key concepts in the dataset of relevance to answering the research questions.

5. Analysis and interpretation – this entailed returning to the data to gather evidence in support of the themes and interpret the implications for the research questions.

A key benefit of thematic analysis is its “methodological transparency” (Clark et al, 2021, p. 538), providing a clear account of the process by which data is selected as relevant for study and categorised as relevant to the research question at hand. At each point I remained reflexive about the ways in which my personal social analysis and understanding affected my interpretation of the data and the meaning I was inferring or assigning. This is a complex process in any qualitative data analysis, and one which is effectively facilitated by the open nature of the thematic approach. Thematic analysis also allows a researcher to be guided by the research question whilst picking up on related concepts that were not initially anticipated, and therefore enables a responsive approach to the data. However, I recognise the risk for a thematic approach to result in nothing more than “descriptive writing about a few substantive ideas” (Bazeley, 2020, p. 242). I therefore ensured that the discussion of the data was focused clearly around their relationship to the theoretical concepts at the heart of the research in order “to build a comprehensive, contextualised, and integrated understanding” (Bazeley, 2020, p. 243) of the implications of the data for the research questions.

Validity and Reliability

Questions of validity aim to assess the effectiveness and accuracy of the chosen methods in acquiring data able to answer the research question. Neuman equates validity in qualitative research to the concept of ‘authenticity’: “offering a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of the people who live it every day” (2014, p. 218). I have aimed to maximise the validity of my data by closely aligning my methods with my research focus and epistemological approach, enabling the gathering of data that can provide an ‘authentic’ insight into the relevant experiences and perspectives of the participants.
I acknowledge that my results will lack strong external validity (enabling broad generalisations from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013)) due to the very small sample size, and I do not intend for these results to be broadly generalisable to larger groups. However, the research design aims to achieve a high degree of internal validity (concerning the ability to accurately measure the effect of the variable of study (Braun and Clarke, 2013)), using a strong focus on participants within their specific context. The intended outcome is to indicate the potential benefit of investigating the research question further in larger, more generalisable sample sizes. As Lewis et al note: “studies which cannot support generalisation may still generate hypotheses which can inform and be tested in further research” (2014, p. 364).

Reliability of research refers to the ability to achieve consistent results with the research methods chosen, closely tied to the idea of replicability. For qualitative research, Lewis et al highlight the importance of “the likely recurrence of key features of the raw data and the integrity with which they have been classified” (2014, p. 356). In order to maximise the reliability of my results I have chosen established qualitative research methods to collect and analyse my data (qualitative questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis).

However, I recognise that the specific results of further similar research would almost certainly differ from my own to some extent. The value of focusing on the concept of reliability in qualitative research is disputed (Lewis et al, 2014), and in any research focused on the collection and interpretation of qualitative data from individuals replicability will be a challenge, and perhaps a misleading goal when the question being investigated does not have an ultimate objective answer. As Neuman states, “diverse measures and interactions with different researchers are beneficial because they can illuminate different facets or dimensions of a subject matter” (2014, p. 218). I propose that this research not be taken as attempting to discover a consistently replicable truth, but rather as contributing to an understanding which can be expanded upon by other researchers providing their own interpretations using similar research methods.

Ultimately, the findings of this research are the result of an act of interpretation which is inherently open to bias and variability. Mason emphasises the importance of “critical and reflexive practice” (emphasis in original) (2018, p. 36) in the task of achieving valid and reliable findings, and I have aimed for this by pursuing transparent and self-reflective analysis of the data, aiming to demonstrate “excellent, well-grounded links between the concepts and conclusions” with “examples drawn from the data from which these have been derived” (Lewis et al, 2014, p. 357). Flick states that: “the production of the data becomes one starting point for judging their validity; the presentation of phenomena and of the
inferences drawn from them, becomes another” (2022, p. 493) – my choice of methods, approach to data analysis and commitment to reflexivity are geared towards addressing these criteria.

**Positionality and Reflexivity**

Clark *et al* state that “positionality means acknowledging that experience captured by research is subjective, power-imbued, and relational” (2021, p. 132). I acknowledge the subjectivity created by my positionality, including my personal characteristics, social position and life experience: I am female, cis-gender, white, British, middle class and university educated, and all of those things inform my interactions with and understandings of the world. As part of this, I must also acknowledge my partisan position on the area of research focus: I believe that transformative social change is necessary to address structurally embedded injustices, and I acknowledge that this belief is what has led me to pursue this research. All of these aspects, along with my role as the researcher, feed into the power and relational dynamics that exist within the research setting. As such, I recognise, as Clark *et al* conclude, that “values, biases, and politics cannot be ignored” (2021, p. 132). I have aimed to address the potential for my positionality to undermine the validity and reliability of the research through the practice of reflexivity, “the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (emphasis in original) (England, 1994, p. 82). I recognise the potential for researcher bias and worldview to skew the final dataset through the use of questions which are leading, suggestive or contain implicit assumptions (Carey, 2016). This informed my process of drafting the questionnaire and preparing for and delivering the interviews, to ensure I avoided manipulation of the data (conscious or otherwise) towards answers that suited my expected outcomes (Blakeslee and Fleischer, 2007). Overall, I aimed to use language that was free of value judgements or jargon, keep questions open, and make no assumptions about the beliefs and understandings of participants. I sought to allow topics which could reflect my own perspectives (such as the need for social change) to flow naturally out of the discussion as far as possible, always aiming to investigate them through points and ideas raised by the participants themselves rather than through my own framings. However, it is impossible for an interviewer to be an entirely neutral presence in an interview, and it is necessary to recognise that interviews are “inherently interactional events” (Rapley, 2007, p. 16). Thus, the knowledge they create is constructed through the interview setting and the interviewer-interviewee dialogue, and the same knowledge most likely would not be produced in another context or social relationship. This interaction is necessary to enable reflection and dialogue to surface understandings, connections and
perspectives that would not be reached otherwise. This is particularly important in the context of this research, interested in beliefs about the way things are and should be, because such beliefs are often based on unquestioned assumptions, rooted in ideas of ‘common sense’ which seem self-evidently true to the individual who holds them – as such, without encouragement to reflect and explain they may not be expressed fully or at all. In order to mitigate against the power imbalance inherent in the researcher-researched interaction, I aimed to communicate clearly about the research and its purpose, offered the opportunity to ask questions before completing the questionnaires or interviews, began the interviews by making it clear that the participant could query what I was saying or refrain from answering if they wished, and approached my questioning reflexively, always considering how my language or tone could manipulate or coerce the participant into providing inauthentic answers.

In acknowledging my positionality and its potential to bias the research, I cannot make a claim to value neutrality. However, I reject the positivist notion that “impersonal, neutral detachment” (England, 1994, p. 81) is imperative in order to conduct valid research. Acknowledging my ‘subjectivity’ as a researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013) obligates me to be reflexive and transparent, much more so than if I were to make claims of absolute objectivity. I explicitly seek to mitigate the potentially biasing impact of my positionality through scrutiny of the choices and interpretations I am making. In this way “the reflexive “I” of the researcher… subverts the idea of the observer as an impersonal machine” (England, 1994, p. 82) and makes “the research process more transparent and ethical” (Clark et al, 2021, p. 131).

Ethics

Research ethics can be defined as “the principles that guide the relationship between researchers… and those who are being researched” (Clark et al, 2021, p. 108). Clark et al highlight four key ethical issues to be considered when undertaking qualitative research: “harm to participants or researchers; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception” (2021, p. 136).

Harm: Hennink, Hutter and Bailey clarify that “minimization of harm… refers not only to physical harm but also to mental, social or economic harm” (2020, p. 81). In the case of my research the only potential physical harm identified was the risk posed by Covid-19, which was only applicable in the context of in-person interviews. Precautionary measures were offered to participants to minimise this risk, but ultimately no in-person interviews were conducted. The research topic was not sensitive, was unlikely to create distress in the
participants or researcher, and did not require any sacrifice or expense on the part of
participants other than time. As such no further potential for harm was identified.

**Informed consent**: this requires “that subjects know and understand the risks and benefits of participating in the research… [and] that their participation is completely voluntary” (Flynn and Goldsmith, 2013, p. 10). All participants were provided with an information sheet when first approached, detailing the research scope, focus and data collection methods (see appendix 2), which acknowledged that there would likely be no direct benefit to them from taking part and highlighted the potential risk from Covid-19. I provided my contact details for any questions, as well as clear guidance on what would be expected from participants. Written consent (see appendix 3) was sought prior to any data gathering, and participants were made aware of their right to refuse or withdraw consent at any time. At the beginning of the interviews consent for recording was re-confirmed and participants were advised that they were free to refuse to answer at any point. The use of a ‘gatekeeper’ during recruitment can introduce the risk of coercion into the consent process (Miller and Bell, 2012) – my approach aimed to mitigate against this by only requiring the gatekeeper to pass information to potential participants, who could then make contact with me themselves to express interest. From that point on the gatekeeper was not involved and all communication was direct with the participants.

**Privacy**: this is closely linked to the important ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity. In research, confidentiality refers to ensuring that “identifiable information about individuals collected during the process of research will not be disclosed and that the identity of research participants will be protected through various processes designed to anonymise them” (Wiles, 2013, p. 42). Steps taken to achieve anonymisation included referring to participants using pseudonyms, removing all references to individuals, their organisations and their locations, and carefully selecting quotes to avoid the inclusion of any indirectly identifying information. I ensured confidentiality by avoiding the collection of unnecessary data (Flick, 2022) and ensuring that data is stored “in a secure manner” (British Sociological Association, 2017, p. 7) in a protected digital location only accessible by myself and not shared with anyone else.

**Deception**: Clark et al advise that “deception occurs when researchers represent their work as something other than what it is” (2021, p. 125). At no point did I require any deceptive methods to achieve my research aims, and as noted above I provided clear information about the focus and methods of the research to all prospective participants.

A final key ethical issue I have considered is that of **representation** – as Braun and Clarke state, analysis of participant data by researchers “transforms data from the words participants
tell us, into a story about those words. That story is *our story* about the data, not the participants’ story” (2013, p. 64). Such an act of interpretation is necessary to enable insight and conclusions to be drawn from the data, but it is important to recognise the ways in which my personal perspectives and agendas could unduly colour that interpretation. Flick refers to this as “doing justice to participants in analysing data” (2022, p. 130) and emphasises the need to ensure that “interpretations are really grounded in the data” (2022, p. 130). This is part of the reflexive practice and transparent approach to data analysis I have discussed earlier in this chapter.
Findings
In this section I will present the results of my data analysis, through which I identified key themes and sub-themes relating to the research questions. Themes were identified through a close analysis of the data, with a focus on exploring the presence of the core concepts contained within the research questions: social critiques, politicisation and prefiguration.

Three strong themes developed out of this process:

Values – those things, both tangible and intangible, that participants find valuable.

Critiques – the participants’ critical analysis of society.

Visions – the possibilities, aspirations and imaginings expressed by participants.

These are all interlinked, and connected to the research questions through the way in which they reveal participants’ perspectives on the world, its problems and what should change. Each also contains sub-themes, detailed below.

Throughout, I will identify participants as part of either emergency food provision (EF) or alternative food provision (AF), and one participant as both (mix).

Theme 1: Values
This theme was broken down into 3 types of relationships – with others, food and the planet.

a. Relationships with others
Multiple participants expressed the belief that collaboration improved outcomes. P14 (AF) reported that in his community garden “we all pulled together and the increased… productivity help everybody”. P12 (AF) expressed a similar sentiment: “collectively… it's absolutely extraordinary how much you can get done”. For P3 (EF), everyone connected to her gleaning project, from volunteers to farmers to recipients of gleaned food, was a beneficiary of the work: “it's a very circular way of doing it. So everyone gets something from it”. There was also a sense that shared decision-making was important. P1 (AF) highlighted a group focus on a “non-hierarchical” and “collective approach to decision making and priorities”, echoed by P6 (AF) who felt that “as a group we have to agree on what we're gonna do”. When discussing the future direction of her community growing project, P9 (AF) stated “it just depends on… what the people who actually come and do the work want their vision to be”. A focus on community was clear. P8 (mix) stated that her community growing project is “much more sort of community than just ‘oh, you know, have some carrots and some strawberries when they come out’”. P12 (AF) described group food events as “a vital means of community connection”. This was highlighted by the pandemic: for example, P14 (AF) described his community garden as “a Godsend, big enough for
everybody to attend and keep social distance” and P9 (AF) felt that community growing “was such a lifeline for so many people… it helped them from going crazy”.

The value of helping others was also a strong theme. There were expressions of empathy, such as P5 (EF) saying “it's just a human issue… you are a human, you are cold and hungry, so I need to make you not cold and hungry”, or P2’s (AF) belief in supporting “the right of everybody to a decent and dignified existence”.

Diversity was a common theme, summed up in a comment from P12 (AF): “the most important thing is that everybody brings different experiences, different knowledge, different skills… that's much more… empowering than just trying to do something on your own”. P6 (AF) felt that as a result “there's more opportunities for [members] to fit in with what they're interested in”. According to P2 (AF), even those without green fingers can contribute to community growing: “if you’re slug-phobic and you don't like getting dirty… make the tea!”

This ties in with an emphasis on inclusivity, ensuring that groups “can be opened up and made welcome to lots of different people” (P1, AF). P9 (AF) highlighted the value of all contributions: “it doesn't matter if they only do 2 hours or if they do 50 hours, they take a part in the harvest”. P14 (AF) feels his community garden is a place where “anybody that gets on with people, regardless of his/her age, religion, colour etc, is very welcome”. Sharing knowledge was highlighted as valuable. P9 (AF) noted “a lot of people don't have the skills necessary to take up an allotment on their own, so it's quite good having a community where they can come and learn and get experience”. P6 (AF) commented on community garden members who “learn and then graduate” to private allotment growing, and P14 (AF) highlighted the “new ideas, new suggestions, new products” that come with new members. Shared responsibility was also highlighted as important so that “no-one is taking on… more than they need to” (P10, AF) and growing food can be “a little less stress” (P6, AF). This is emphasised by P12 (AF), who stated “I don't want to be running… my own allotment. I couldn't possibly do it… But collectively, you can do so much”.

b. Relationship with food

Participants expressed appreciation for feeling more connected to the food production process. P3 (EF) valued a greater understanding of these systems and the connection to “the bigger picture”, and P10 (AF) valued gaining “some perspective about the realities of food production”. For P9 (AF) local growing reveals usually hidden realities such as “what is seasonal, what can be grown locally… and not all food is perfect”. Our economic relationship with food was also highlighted, in particular an alternative way of judging the value of food. P8 (mix) summed up the concept when she said “you pay with your time and you can have whatever food is available when it's available”. P10 (AF) highlights what a
good deal she finds this arrangement to be: “I give [my community garden] 4 hours of my time every week and I get so much food, and it’s free, and it's organic and it's super healthy”. P15 (AF) finds value in “that aspect, where I work directly to grow the food, not only buy it”.

**c. Relationship to the planet**

Several participants discussed issues relating to environmental protection and sustainability. P6 (AF) highlighted the importance of showing people “how to grow food in a… sustainable way”, and P10 (AF) valued her participation in “a local sustainability movement”. P5 (EF) commented that her food aid group tries to “think about our footprint that we leave and… the waste that we create”. P8 (mix) reports that both the AF and EF groups she participates in are “waste conscious”. P3 (EF) reports that many volunteers, when confronted with the scale of food left in fields, “have this kind of half an hour of total panic: ‘Oh my God, oh my God, I need to pick it up’”, motivated just like her by a desire to “save food”. Other participants reported wanting to prevent food from “being thrown away” (P4, EF), keeping it “out of landfill” (P8, mix) or stopping “perfectly good food” from “going to waste” (P11, EF). P1 (AF) reports starting the community activity to prevent waste as a private grower when you might end up with “20,000 lettuces, you couldn't eat it if you tried”.

**Theme 2: Critiques**

Critiques fell into several main categories: food system, charity, economy, poverty and government.

**a. Food system**

There was a clear critique of the wastefulness of the food system. P8 (mix) described the waste she had seen as “shocking” and P3 (EF) commented that “the amount of stuff we sometimes collect [when gleaning], it's just crazy”, stating “if anyone tells you that we are starving, this is just not true”. There were a variety of analyses of why the system is so wasteful. P3 (EF) commented on the “very crazy limitations” imposed on farmers by “the market system”. P2 (AF) expressed her frustration that “the amount of effort and crop produced to create 1 meal of beef could feed 14 people as grain”. P8 (mix) feels that “the ridiculous amount of waste that supermarkets build into the system” exists “in order to give people who can afford the supermarket a sense of choice and agency”. The cost of food was also mentioned. P4 (EF) felt that “food networks have been set up in such a way that many nutritious fruits and vegetables are largely unaffordable”. P12 (AF) commented that “it's cheaper to buy a bag of carrots from Lidl's than it is to buy… veg boxes”. P10 (AF) feels that wealthy people “tokenise farmers markets” whilst “most people are not wealthy enough… to
spend... £5 on a loaf of bread”. Environmental damage was another issue identified. P2 (AF) commented “if we keep treating the soil like we do now, the Earth has sixty harvests left”. P10 (AF) critiqued the use of “high amounts of agrochemical inputs”, the “numerous stages of transport along the supply chain” and the “high amounts of downstream pollution”. The dangers of corporate power were also discussed. P15 (AF) commented that “the supermarkets seem to control the pricing, and it’s hard for farmers to make a good living”. P10 (AF) reported on “the market dominance of supermarkets” who have been able “to drive down the prices of food through economies of scale”, forcing local, independent food retailers out of business. P8 (mix) speculated that “supermarkets ‘hoard’ food in order to control prices and competition”, and P13 (AF) lamented that “seed is controlled by a very few big companies now”. There was also unhappiness about the way in which the food system alienates people from the production of their food. P4 (EF) linked food waste to “the invisibility of food chains”, saying “we do not know what it takes to grow produce... so why should we care to preserve it?” P10 (AF) detailed how “consumers being detached from the provenance of their food”, creates a public “blindness” to the “major negative social and environmental externalities” associated with its production.

b. Charity
Many participants discussed the problems with relying on charity for meeting certain social needs. P5 (EF) commented on the limits of charity aid, saying “I feel like we plug the problem with sandwiches”. An issue noted by P7 (EF) was the variability food bank donations, saying that “it's an affluent area... but... they donate stuff that isn't really useful”. P8 (mix) took this critique further, expressing discomfort with “people who are in food poverty not... being allowed to have any agency... about what food they have”. P11 (EF) described the “unintended dependency” that had been developed at a community fridge project initially focused on reducing food waste but now with “an awareness that they're helping a big tranche of the community”. She feels that charity has now become a way for society to feel better about its wastefulness: “saying ‘oh, these poor people are gonna save our problems with wasting food’ just is all wrong”. P9 (AF) accused supermarkets specifically, saying their donations are just “trying to make them look good, ‘We give so many tonnes to the Food Bank’, but what condition is it really in when they give it to them?” P5 (EF) observed that “there's a lot of people trying to plug the problem and not a lot of people trying to solve the problem”.

c. Economy
There were a variety of critiques of the way our economic system functions. P3 (EF) described the problematic nature of the economy as a system of “managing scarcity in a
place where scarcity does not exist”, in her view denying the fact that “everything in nature is actually abundance”. P8 (mix) discussed the anxiety of choosing between “15 types of butter”, an example of built-in waste because “the market isn't necessarily about what's actually practical and useful, but about hiving off people to make money out of them”. There was a critique of the focus on profits above everything else, with P4 (EF) stating “in order to drive down their prices production is often shifted abroad or less nutritious substitutes are added” and P2 (AF) commenting “there are so many things wrong with the system that bring short term rewards for spraying nitrogen on the soil and fouling up the environment”. For P10 (AF), “the priorities of people who have… financial power are skewed… and don't actually align with… the best outcomes for people and the planet”. For P15 (AF), our “passive consumer culture” means we “are alienated by having too much stuff around us, but not enough time or community and social connection”.

d. Poverty

The issue of poverty was raised multiple times by participants. P5 (EF) described those accessing her food aid as “now struggling between… having their electricity and having food and toiletries”. P7 (EF) echoed the increasing reach of poverty, saying “I think originally [the food bank] was there to support… people that were struggling as a temporary fix… it’s now a regular, relied upon service… the transition is mind-blowing”. P8 (mix) agreed, saying “it's a bit mind-boggling really, that we have so many people in that situation in what is essentially an extremely wealthy country”. P13 (AF) stated “we should not have Food Banks in this country”, and P4 (EF) described how “it does slightly emotionally affect me that there is this need in society… I guess during the act of gleaning I'm always quite aware of where the food is going”.

e. Government

There was significant criticism of the government amongst participants. The inadequacy of the benefits system was highlighted by P7 (EF), stating that “the weekly living allowance is not realistic” and the transition to Universal Credit resulted in people going “months without benefit payments”. P8 (mix) reported that when the Universal Credit covid uplift was removed “people were often in absolute desperate need”. Several participants felt that their voluntary work was addressing a need that should be provided for by government. P14 (AF) commented “we do the things that the Social Services should do but that due to the lack of funding they can’t”. P8 (mix) was very critical of the reliance on volunteers and charity: “I just think we should be taxed more… and these things should be standardly provided”. In her assessment, “the big society… involves [government] chums getting lots of money, and everybody else doing lots of work for nothing because of their conscience”. P7 (EF)
commented on the willingness of the government to rely on her service “but there is no pot of cash that is there to buy these things… That's all relied on the community spirit”. She feels that local politicians are quite happy to unfairly “take the glory” of the “community-based project which is filling a gap that the government should be”. P9 (AF) critiqued the short-term agenda of politicians, who care only about how to “stay in office” and don’t “really think about the future much”. As a result, she feels “we can't wait for the government to do something because they're not going to”. For P13 (AF), the government are too beholden to those “with money and status”. There was also a critique of the quality of education around food, with P12 (AF) highlighting that “schools don't really do basic cooking anymore” and P10 (AF) commenting on the need to improve “public education around food and food systems”. P2 (AF) feels we should expect more, stating “the government would love you to think there's no alternative – there is!”

**Theme 3: Visions**

The sub-themes identified in this category related to proposed alternatives and the potential power of community action.

**a. Alternative food systems**

Some participants gave examples of alternative ways in which the food system could be run, often centring a more localised approach. P10 (AF) suggested that her community growing project was an example of a different approach that could “compliment” a city’s food system as a “viable way to… get your food”. There was a focus on “more community growing spaces” (P12, AF), “more local food shops that sell locally-grown food products… at an affordable price” (P10, AF), and “ordinary folk saving seeds and growing food locally” (P13, AF). Thinking bigger, P4 (EF) proposed that “if gleaners, small-scale farms, community allotments, foodbanks, schools, homes came together across the UK, the local food networks created could be extremely powerful”, promoting “less reliance on the volatile global supply chains” and “a heightened sense of social responsibility to ensure adequate access to nutritious food for all”. P8 (mix) agreed, suggesting “more focus on local food-supply chains, community involvement, and small producers”.

**b. Alternative government/funding priorities**

There was general support for a “shift in the economic/political strategy of the British government” (P4, EF). Broad policy suggestions were made, including the need for “encouragement to organisations to increase their employees’ wages” (P7, EF), “re-joining the Single Market” (P8, mix) and possibly a “basic universal income” (P8, mix). Alternative educational priorities were suggested, including to “make growing part of formal education”
(P6, AF) and raise awareness about “how food is grown and the impacts of industrially produced food” (P10, AF). Specific suggestions for the allocation of funding included supporting young people with “grants or subsidies… to farm ecologically” (P10, AF) and allocating community groups “pump priming” money to grow on available public space (P12, AF).

c. Alternative land use
Suggestions were made about changes to the way we use and access land. There were calls for “converting unused or available public green spaces to local community gardens” (P10, AF) and creating “community spaces” for people that “don't have the access to open space to go to” (P1, AF). P2 (AF) advocated just starting to use land with no obvious owner: “if somebody turns up and says, ‘that's my land. What are you doing?’ you say ‘sorry, but actually it's in better condition now than when we started’”. In a slightly more radical approach, P13 (AF) exclaimed “we can take over the parks for growing food!” and P10 (AF) advocated for reimaging “the way that we design cities, the opportunities that we provide… to residents around… having access to food growing spaces”, to re-localise food production away from “industrial agriculture, that is… completely divorced… from where you are”. P6 (AF) supported the philosophy of the Diggers, saying “go and take control of the means of production in a very, very little sense”.

d. Alternative economies
Participants described a variety of ways in which our economic approach could be recalibrated. For P3 (EF), we should revert to seeing the economy as it used to be understood: “you give me something, I give you something”. For P15 (AF), society should focus on creating “an economy where we provide for each other’s needs within community, which is able to address the varied and complex needs that actual people have”. P2 (AF) talks about adjusting the way we understand ownership and need – she often hears the concern “if you grow nice things like that here, people’ll steal them”, and she challenges it by saying “How can you steal something that’s free to take?” She supports “anything that takes the economy out of money” and advocates “bartering half a day’s weeding for… vegetables that will keep you going for the rest of the week”. P8 (mix) is in favour of “any steps which reduce wealth inequality”.

e. Community action for change
There was strong belief in the potential of community action to facilitate social change. P15 (AF) described his belief in “community organising as a way to address more of our needs in society” and P7 (EF) stated “I think the community side of things, I've got more faith in than local government”. P9 (AF) gave quite a stark assessment of the need for community-
powered change: “the only way communities are gonna survive is if they can look after themselves”. P12 (AF) felt similarly, stating “I believe that projects like this are vital for our future, to grow more sustainably, to grow food without chemicals, to work cooperatively, to support people who are not getting enough fresh food”. P3 (EF) expressed interest in “visionary ways… in which we can all come together and share resources and opportunities”, a similar perspective to P5 (EF) who visualises collaborating with other support services to say “instead of just packing our fingers in the gaps… let’s try to create a much better system”. P10 (AF) believes that community growing opportunities are “an important part of… the culture within the food system changing”. For P13 (AF), community food projects ensure “that the next generation will see that we can grow our own healthy food”.

Discussion

In this section, I will discuss the implications of the findings, building on my interpretations of the evidence presented in the previous section in relation to the following key concepts from the research questions:

- The presence of social critiques
- Evidence for politicisation
- Evidence of prefigurative ideas

I will then discuss the evidence for the impact of participation on these concepts, and make a comparison of AF and EF participants.

Social critiques

In order to answer the research questions, it was necessary to investigate the existence of critical social analysis in the participants, and the extent to which it went beyond a description of social problems to a critique of their structural nature. Through my reading of the data, a range of critical social perspectives were identified. Much critique was related to issues with the food system, such as wasted food, environmental damage, inefficient use of resources, focus on profit and the unaffordability of healthy food. In addition, issues beyond food were raised, including wider government policy, the economy, social safety nets, the social role of charities and corporate power. There was also evidence that participants connected the food-related critiques to broader critiques of the system. One example is P8 (mix) going beyond a recognition of the existence of food waste and food insecurity to identify them both as by-products of the overall economic system, one which prioritises profit through excessive consumer choice over meeting everyone’s basic needs. In another example, P10 (AF) connected the problematic buying habits of consumers to the way in which their buying is restricted and manipulated “by governments, by the way that cities are set up, by food companies that engineer the system” and assigned responsibility to those with “financial power”. There were also references to more radical (and certainly not mainstream) critical concepts such as artificial scarcity (P3, EF), alienation (P15, AF), negative externalities (P10, AF) and seizing the means of production (P6, AF). This all indicates the presence of some level of systemic analysis of society and its problems.

Politicisation

The research also needed to gauge the extent to which participants were politicised around the social issues they were identifying. This was investigated through the overt statements of political perspectives but also through extrapolation of the implicit politics contained within
some participants identified strongly as political (with a “big P”, as P2 (AF) put it) while others shied away from it (“I don’t really deal with the political side of it all” (P5, EF)). Many stated that they felt there was a political element to the work they were doing, but that it wasn’t something they would necessarily discuss openly during the activity as not everyone would agree or be comfortable with such an approach (“actually, community… it's also not about politics in a way… so some of those political conversations have to be not had or had very carefully” (P8, mix)). Several stated that, whilst they held certain political positions related to their community activity, this was not foremost in their mind whilst they were participating (“it's not something I really want to think about when I'm volunteering on Saturdays, I guess” (P10, AF)). Despite this fairly equivocal picture of the overt political character of participation, multiple participants expressed opinions of a clearly politicised nature. This ranged from denouncing named political parties and criticising certain policy approaches, for example P7’s (EF) assessment that the government was happy to rely on voluntary services but not fund them, to questioning the lens through which our dominant political and social structures require us to view and resolve social problems, such as P3’s (EF) assertion of the manufactured nature of scarcity within the economy and P11’s (EF) condemnation of society’s re-purposing of food waste to solve the problem of food insecurity. The latter examples go beyond merely identifying issues (such as unequal and wasteful distributions of food) to confront the underlying logic of the society that creates them (such as the natural existence of scarcity or the view that we can solve systemically created social problems without the need to make any systemic changes). They bring them into Mouffe’s ‘antagonistic’ political arena by contesting their inevitability and validity, and in doing so highlight that “things could always be otherwise” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 12). In this way I contend that they represent a politicised perspective on the issues.

**Prefiguration**

The research was also investigating the presence of prefigurative ideas. Through contrasting the topics discussed in the theme of ‘critiques’ with those contained in the themes of ‘values’ and ‘vision’, it is possible to identify the ways in which participants prefigure alternative social arrangements, either actively or intellectually. Critiques of current societal structures included a lack of connection to others, environmental degradation, limited education, unmet needs, unresponsive authorities, disconnection from systems of production, prioritisation of profit, and community disempowerment. In contrast, the participants’ values and visions painted a picture of a very different social set up, centring a sharing of the responsibility and rewards of work, the decommodification of knowledge and food, equality in participation
and decision-making, prioritising the meeting of need, addressing alienation, minimising environmental impact, and community-led action. Examples of these practices can be found throughout the activities engaged in by the participants, such as non-monetary exchanges (labour for food), equal participation (democratic and welcoming groups), and free education (through open sharing of knowledge), as well as in the expressed goals of participants, such as P3 (EF) aspiring to “visionary ways” of working more collaboratively and P15 (AF) envisioning his community growing project as “a form of commons”. Several of the participants described their work as important in demonstrating what is possible, or as P2 (AF) described it showing people “glimmers of the idea that things can be different”. Such perspectives can be said to align with Brissette’s articulation of prefigurative politics, demonstrating a choice “in the here and now to enact another set of social relations, to actualize another kind of vision” (2016, p. 115) and an aim to “instantiate faith in the possibility of a transformed world” (2016, p. 117).

Impact
Examples of social critiques as well as politicised and prefigurative viewpoints have been identified in the participants’ data. Having established this, the final key question of the research regards the extent to which participation in a community food activity has impacted on those perspectives. Some participants reported that their existing perspectives were strengthened through their experience – P3 (EF) felt that participation had given her a “concrete” understanding of the issues that enhanced her previously more “abstract” conceptions, and P4 (EF) reported that participation “affirmed the belief that wider/systemic change is needed”. Some felt that their perspectives had evolved and developed over the course of their participation, such as P11’s (EF) report that “they have grown, been strengthened and been added to” and P12’s (AF) feeling that “I’ve learnt more and I’ve also put it into a wider context”. Several felt that it gave them a broader understanding of the possibilities of community actions, with P12 (AF) stating “now I believe that projects like this are vital for our future” and P4 (EF) asserting “if there is a few people who are willing to… invest in [community food activity], it could pop up all over the place”. Others have developed larger ambitions and visions for their work, including P10 (AF) wanting to “integrate more food system education into our activities” and P5 (EF) describing her “passion” to work with other groups “towards a way that we can all create a better system with less gaps in it”. These examples offer a sense that participation has certainly impacted the ways that the participants see and understand the world, its problems and potential solutions.
Emergency food provision vs Alternative food provision

The research was interested in seeing whether the impact of participation in community food activities would lead to a more critical, political and prefigurative worldview across both EF and AF activities. Whilst participants from both groups identified social problems, those from the AF groups were more likely to demonstrate a structural analysis of their origin. Likewise, they were more likely to be overtly political in their commentary and express prefigurative thinking. Whilst there were examples of politicised thinking and prefigurative ideas in EF participants (as noted above), they were notably less prevalent in this group. It is interesting to note that quite often it was the two participants from a gleaning group (P3 and P4) that represented the EF group across the areas of focus, which could perhaps indicate a meaningful distinction between this activity and the others grouped under the EF umbrella. It should also be noted that there were more AF participants in the research sample than EF participants.
Conclusion

When considering these results in relation to the literature review findings – which revealed a strong focus on the ways in which these activities could act to embed neoliberal logics and values within society and therefore participants – the significant presence of a wide variety of social critiques, understandings and perspectives is notable. Many were related to the more structural critiques put forward by the authors of the reviewed literature (such as the role of charities in filling gaps in the state’s service provision or the problematic relationship between food waste and food aid). There were some instances of more individual-focused critiques, such as unreasonable consumer/service user expectations (P3 and P7, EF), poor spending choices (P10, AF and P5, EF), and a lack of engagement with the realities of food production (P9 and P13, AF). The clearest example of the neoliberalised perspective highlighted in the literature review was demonstrated by P7 (EF), a food bank volunteer, who alluded to ideas of ‘un-deservingness’ in her statement that “it feels as though it’s getting to a point where people will need to prove they really need support and are not abusing the system”, and her critical assessment of service users who seem to have “an expectation that society will carry you”. However, as discussed above, the prevalent themes arising from the data indicated a much stronger focus on the systemic nature of identified problems, and the structural demands and alternative visions participants offered to resolve them. Given that this research has only looked at a very small sample of participants, the variety of critiques identified does seem to provide some indication that such perspectives may be consistently present to some degree in these populations. Regarding the key question (for this research) of the impact that participation had on these critical and alternative perspectives, there is certainly some indication that this could have taken place in a variety of ways, including a deepening of existing perspectives, an expansion of the range of perspectives held and an opening up of the perspectives on possibilities. Thus, the evidence presented here could provide an initial indication that participation in community food action has the potential to inspire a belief in the need for transformative social change.

Limitations to the research and its conclusions

This research was focused on determining the presence of critical, politicised and prefigurative perspectives within participants in community food activities, and how their participation had affected these. I acknowledge that research explicitly interested in social change may well disproportionately attract participants with a similar interest. However, I do not feel this represents a strong weakness of the research, which did not propose to investigate the extent to which belief in transformative social change was prevalent within
the investigated groups, just whether it could be detected and linked to participation. In this case, the attraction of participants with a pre-disposition to the ideas being researched could be seen as a strength in increasing the likelihood that any such beliefs could be detected even in a small sample size. Within this small sample the research has indicated the presence of the hypothesised perspectives, with some potential link to the act of participation, although the findings were not spread evenly or consistently across the participants. The conclusions drawn here are purely a response to the data analysed, and I recognise that the small sample size means they are not robust enough to be generalisable beyond this study. I do not make any bold claims about broader groups of community food participants. Further research with a greater number of participants would be needed to explore whether a broader trend can be established, the depth of any relevant identified perspectives and how they might interplay with conflicted or contradictory perspectives. In particular, a stronger case could be made regarding the robustness of any causal link with participation through the use of more in-depth interview approaches, to more thoroughly trace the origins of these perspectives and how they have evolved over the course of participation. All of this was beyond the scope of this research. However, I feel the evidence provided does indicate that further research into this area may be fruitful.

**Final thoughts**

In writing the conclusion to this dissertation focused on the ‘impact of participation’, I have reflected on the ways in which my participation in the research has impacted on my own perspectives. I feel the most notable impact has been a greater tendency towards optimism. Viewing the world and its problems through a systemic lens can make the causes seem much clearer and their solutions much more difficult. Through engaging with those on the ground, both those with the compassion and will to respond to the micro impacts of these systemic issues and those envisioning and embodying a different system altogether, I have been reminded that hope as well as critique is necessary if we are to achieve any meaningful, transformative change: “Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope” (Solnit, 2016, p. 4). Thank you to my participants for their contributions, within this research and beyond.
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Appendix 1 – Breakdown of Participants

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Activity type</th>
<th>Group(s)</th>
<th>Length of volunteering</th>
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<td>AF</td>
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<td>AF</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Community growing / Food club</td>
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Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Research Information Sheet

You are being invited to participate in research on the personal impact of taking part in community-based food-related activities, such as food banks and community gardens. Hannah Stewart, a student of the University of Edinburgh, is leading this research as part of her Masters Degree in Social Justice and Community Action. This information sheet contains the relevant information for you to decide whether or not you would like to contribute.

Research title
Food, community and social change:
Understanding the impact of taking part in local food actions on participants’ engagement with ideas of social change

What is the research about?
Food insecurity* is on the rise in the UK – it was a pre-existing problem1 which has been made worse by recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic2 and the ever-increasing cost of living3. Many other issues exist within the mainstream food system, such as exploitation of workers4 and environmental damage5. People across the UK are involved in community activities related to food, such as distributing food to those in need or growing food collectively. I am interested in the connection between the people taking local actions and the broader social context of that action. In particular, this research aims to gain insight into whether or not participants feel that their engagement in local action has impacted their beliefs about whether and how society should change.

*Food insecurity: limited or uncertain access to affordable, healthy food6

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited to participate in this study because you take part in food-related community action.

Do I need to take part?
You are not required to take part in the research – any involvement is entirely voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time without the need to provide a reason. Any data already gathered can be excluded from use in the research.

What will I be asked to do?
There are two parts to this research – if you decide to participate you can choose to take part in one or both parts, it is entirely up to you. The first part of the research involves completing a short questionnaire (only 5 questions). The questions are open-ended, allowing you the freedom to write about your perspectives and beliefs in as much detail as you would like. Once you have completed the questionnaire, you will have the option of taking part in an interview with myself (the researcher) to discuss the topics in a bit more detail. This interview
could either be conducted in-person (for participants in or around the Bristol area) or online (e.g. over Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp), whichever is preferrable for you. During the interview I would ask you to discuss your work with your community group, how and why you became involved, and how you feel your work impacts your understanding of broader social issues. The interview will be recorded and could last up to 30 minutes.

**What will happen to the information collected?**

Interview recordings will be transcribed into text. The data from the questionnaires and interviews, as well as consent forms, will be stored in password protected files in secure online storage. The data will only be accessed by myself (the researcher) and will not be shared with anyone other than my supervisor.

The data will be used to inform my MSc dissertation – you will not be directly identified in the final dissertation and any references to you/your data will be carefully worded to ensure that indirect identification is not possible.

All data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. Data will be held no longer than necessary, and will be destroyed no later than 30 days after the dissertation has been formally assessed and graded.

**What are the potential risks?**

There are no risks involved in completing the questionnaires or online interviews. The only potential risk in relation to in-person interviews is the ongoing risk posed by Covid-19. Taking part in this research does not pose a specific risk of Covid-19 infection, beyond the normal risk we all experience during our everyday lives (i.e. through interaction with others). This risk can be mitigated through measures such as social distancing, ventilation, mask wearing and hand hygiene. You will be free to request any such measures (or others) during the course of the research, but they cannot eliminate the risk entirely. You are free to withdraw from participation (or alter your participation to an online interview) if you become concerned about the risk from Covid-19 infection at any point. I will be taking a test prior to every meeting with a research participant, and will rearrange any interviews if I test positive or I am feeling unwell with any Covid-19 symptoms. I would ask that anyone taking part make me aware if they are experiencing symptoms, so that we can arrange to meet when they are feeling better (see contact details below). These safety measures will be reviewed on an ongoing basis, taking into consideration any developments in the severity of the pandemic and changing government guidance/requirements.

**What are the potential benefits?**

There will be no direct benefits from taking part in the research.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research or what participation would involve, please contact me at h.m.stewart-1@sms.ed.ac.uk. My supervisor (Dr Gary Fraser) can be contacted on: gary.fraser@ed.ac.uk.

If you wish to make a complaint about the study, you can contact my Dissertation Course Organiser (Dr Andie Reynolds) on: andie.reynolds@ed.ac.uk.

For general information from the university about how data is used in research, you can visit: https://www.ed.ac.uk/data-protection/privacy-notice-research
Thank you very much for taking the time to consider participation in this study.

If you wish to take part in the study, please complete the Participant Consent Form and the questionnaire and return them to my email address above.

References
Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form

Study Title

Food, community and social change: Understanding the impact of taking part in local food actions on participants’ engagement with ideas of social change

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.

2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason

4. I understand that my data will be stored as detailed in the information sheet

5. I agree to take part in this study

6. I am aware that if I participate in an in-person interview at the current time there may be a risk of potential exposure to COVID-19, and I understand the steps that can be arranged to minimise the risks of exposure and transmission

Name of person giving consent: Date:

Signature:

Name of person taking consent: Date:

Signature:
Participant Questionnaire

Study Title

Food, community and social change: Understanding the impact of taking part in local food actions on participants’ engagement with ideas of social change

Name: 
Food-related group you are involved with: 
Type of food-related activity you participate in: 

Please ensure you have read the Participant Information Sheet and completed your consent form before completing this questionnaire.

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. The questions all relate to the food-related activity you contribute to in your community. There are 5 questions, as well as space for you to contribute any further thoughts should you wish to do so. Please provide as much detail as you can in answer to each question – the boxes will expand to fit whatever you type.

Questions

1. How would you describe your motivation(s) for taking part in the food-related activity when you first started, and how (if at all) have they changed?

2. What problems/needs do you feel your activity is addressing (if any)?
3. What do you think are the causes of those problems/needs?

4. What do you think the solutions could/should be?

5. How do you feel your participation in this activity has impacted your beliefs about these issues, and why do you think that is?

Optional: If you have any further thoughts to share, please do so on the final page.

If you have any questions about this questionnaire contact: h.m.stewart-1@sms.ed.ac.uk

I am also planning to conduct interviews with some research participants (lasting up to 30 minutes). If you would be interested in taking part in an interview, or would like to know more about what this would involve before deciding, please provide your email address (or preferred method of contact).

Email address:

Thank you again for contributing to this research
Optional

If you would like to provide any further information, please do so here:
Appendix 5 – Generic Interview Schedule

This was expanded and tailored to each interview based on the questionnaire responses of the participant.

Activity
Could you describe the work you do?
How long have you been involved?

Motivation/Engagement with the group
What drew you to taking part in this activity initially?
How do you feel your motivations might have changed over time?

Why do this activity?
What is the overall purpose of the activity?
What impact do you hope your activity might have on your community?

Do you feel that purpose reflects a broader need/issue in society?
What do you think it’s causes might be?
How do you feel that need could be resolved?

Do you think of your activity as political, or addressing a political issue?

Impact of the activity
How has taking part affected your understanding of the issue being addressed (as discussed above)?
How has taking part affected your perspectives on:
  - Your activity?
  - Your community?
  - Community action in general?
  - Society more broadly?

What impact do you hope your activity might have on your community?
And beyond?