Anthropology of food

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People Moving with Food from and to Northern Europe

“Meagre hospitality”. Experiences with food among asylum seekers living in Norwegian reception centres

“Une piètre hospitalité”. Expériences alimentaire des réfugiés dans les centres d’accueil norvégiens

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Résumés

EnglishFrançais

Food is a powerful form of communication: our attitudes and food related practices can be regarded as a window into our most basic beliefs about the world, ourselves, and others. Knowledge about food consumption and how food can contribute to our understanding of the social position of asylum seekers is limited. The aim of this study is to describe food experiences among asylum seekers residing in Norwegian reception centres to gain a deeper understanding of how food can shape forms of hospitality (or inhospitality) in the country of arrival. Data were gathered in five Norwegian reception centres through participant observation and qualitative interviews. The reception centres included in the study are as follows: one arrival centre, one transit centre, two ordinary reception centres, and one centre for unaccompanied minors. The findings from our study indicate that food is an important lens through which we can explore how different forms of hospitality are performed in Norwegian asylum centres. Upon their arrival, asylum seekers receive low quality and unfamiliar foods, kitchen facilities offer limited opportunities for cooking meals, and shopping for food is a challenge for many reasons: limited economic resources, long distances to stores, and for some, unfamiliarity with the Norwegian grocery shops. Meals, both those prepared by the asylum seekers themselves and those provided by the centres, often have very little variation and inadequate nutritional value. Food at asylum reception centres has an important role in producing and maintaining the condition of precariousness of asylum seekers and contributes to the creation of a “meagre” hospitality.

L’alimentation constitue une importante forme de communication : les attitudes que nous manifestons à travers nos pratiques alimentaires sont autant de fenêtres donnant à voir nos croyances les plus élémentaires concernant le monde, nous-mêmes et les autres. La connaissance des consommations alimentaires et comment l’alimentation peut contribuer à la compréhension de la position sociale des réfugiés, reste encore limitée. L’objectif de cette étude est de fournir une description de l’expérience alimentaire de réfugiés résidant dans des centres d’accueil en Norvège afin d’obtenir une compréhension plus fine de la manière dont l’alimentation peut façonner les formes d’hospitalité (ou d’inhospitalité) dans le pays d’arrivée. Les données ont été collectées dans cinq centres d’accueil en Norvège au moyen d’observation participante et d’entretiens qualitatifs. Les centres d’accueil en question sont de différentes sortes : un centre d’arrivée, un centre de transit, deux centres d’accueil ordinaires et un centre pour mineurs non accompagnés. Les résultats de notre recherche montrent que l’alimentation constitue un prisme à travers lequel on peut examiner différentes formes d’hospitalité pratiquées dans les différents centres norvégiens. Dès leur arrivée, les réfugiés reçoivent une nourriture qui leur est étrangère et de piètre qualité; les cuisines auxquelles ils ont accès leur offrent une opportunité limitée pour cuisiner et faire ses courses et constituent souvent un vrai défi : des ressources financières limitées, la distance jusqu’aux magasins et, pour certains, la méconnaissance des magasins alimentaires norvégiens. Les repas, ceux préparés par les réfugiés eux-mêmes et ceux fournis par les centres, offrent généralement très peu de variété et une valeur nutritionnelle inadaptée. L’alimentation dans les centres d’accueil joue un rôle important dans la production et le maintien de la situation de précarité des réfugiés et contribue à créer une hospitalité “frugale”.

Entrées d’index

Mots-clés : réfugiés, alimentation, hospitalité, Norvège, centres d’accueil de réfugiés, sécurité alimentaire
Keywords : asylum seekers, food, hospitality, Norway, asylum reception centres, food security

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Texte intégral

Introduction

1 Food is an important aspect in the refugees’ experience (Koc and Welsh 2001, Vandevoordt 2017). When people flew from their home country, they leave behind a word of war, poverty, repression. Despite the hope for a better future, they move their steps into an unfamiliar and uncertain environment. For asylum seekers far from their home and often separated from their families and friends, food represent a way to recreate a familiar environment restoring aspects of normality in lives otherwise shattered and rebuild confidence in what future can bring (Southcombe 2007, Kohli *et al.* 2010, Spivey and Lewis 2015). Despite the growing attention towards asylum seekers’ living conditions, food experiences have received little attention. Asylum seekers often have limited control over the food they eat (Vandevoordt 2017). Lack of economic resources, unfamiliarity with new foods, and language barriers are among the main challenges that asylum seekers encounter in a new food environment (Koc and Welsh 2001, Willis and Buck 2007,

Mannion *et a*l. 2014, Terragni *et al*. 2014). Several studies indicate that many asylum seekers do not have adequate food intake to meet their basic nutritional needs and may be at risk of being food insecure (Southcombe 2007, Hadley *e*t *al*. 2010, McKay and Dunn 2015). From a migration perspective, food and food provisioning are means for inclusion and exclusion in a new society (Koc and Welsh 2001, Vandevoordt 2017).

2 This paper discusses how food shapes forms of hospitality in Norwegian asylum reception centres. The term "food" is used here to refer not only to what is actually eaten but also to practices of food purchasing and food preparation.

3 Food is a powerful form of communication: our attitudes and food related practices can be regarded as a window into our most basic beliefs about the world, ourselves, and others (Coveney 2006). As suggested by Abbots, 'food is a productive lens through which to explore broader social and political relations' (Abbots 2017: 2). Coveney, states that subjects are constructed through relations of power and that power is productive (Coveney 2006). These relations of power become particularly evident in the context of food consumption in institutions. Institutions, such as asylum reception centres, through their organization of practices of food consumption, represent important platforms for the socio-cultural reproduction of values (Forero *et al*. 2009) .

4 A useful concept for understanding food-mediated relationships is *hospitality* (Lynch *et al*. 2011). As explained by Olesen, hospitality can be interpreted as a "social form useful to explore more deeply the intriguing questions of stasis and dynamics posed in hospitality and how that experience came about in a specific material context" (Olesen 1994:188).

5 In the following section, definitions and approaches to the term "hospitality" will be explained in order to clarify the framework used for further analysis of the forms of hospitality and how it relates to food arrangements in asylum reception centres.

Hospitality definitions and meaning

6 Hospitality can be understood as a cultural expression that regulates social relationships among persons not belonging to the same household (Telfer 2000). Hospitality has been regarded as an ambivalent concept: similarly to words such as hotel, hospital and hospice, hospitality also derives from the Latin *hospes*, formed from *hostis*, meaning host, guest, stranger, or enemy all in the same word (Komter and Van Leer 2012).

7 Hospitality has been framed as a concept moving on either end of a spectrum: on the one side, there is unconditional or altruistic hospitality, while on the other side there is conditional hospitality (Justesen and Overgaard 2017; Lashley 2008, 2015). Telfer suggests that truly hospitable behaviour includes the desire to please others and derives from friendliness and benevolence or from affection, concern, or compassion for particular people (Telfer 2013). On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is conditional hospitality in which the stranger has the juridical and political right to visit but also the obligation, as a guest, to obey rules of reciprocity defined by the host (Justesen and Overgaard 2017). These conditions are often reflected in traditional hospitality encounters via a fixed and asymmetrical host-guest relationship where the host has the sovereign authority of

their house and defines the conditions of hospitality (Justesen and Overgaard 2017). As such, hospitality can be a tool for the "management of strangers" (Brotherton and Wood 2007)

8 To understand hospitality, Lashley (2015) suggests a framework consisting of three domains: the "cultural", the "domestic", and the "commercial" ones. Each domain represents a feature or aspect of hospitality, which is both independent and overlapping with the others. The cultural domain of hospitality consists of the social settings in which acts of hospitality take place. The domestic domain consists of the range of issues associated with the provision of food, drink and accommodation in the home. The commercial domain consists of the provisioning of hospitality as an economic activity. In each domain we can find different values and practices of hospitality. The interaction between these three domains shapes different forms of hospitality and hospitality relationships (Lashley 2015).

Hospitality and asylum seekers

9 In recent years hospitality has been increasingly used as a metaphor to describe the (in)hospitable treatment of unwanted strangers such as refugees and asylum seekers (Lynch *et al.* 2011; Darling 2009; Vandevoordt 2017). Asylum seekers are a particularly vulnerable group due to their precarious juridical status and the uncertainty of their future (Brekke, Vevstad and Sveass 2010; Valenta 2012; Lidén *et a*l. 2013; Jonzon *et al.* 2015). The definition of asylum seekers states that an asylum seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary has *yet* to be processed[1]. The asylum seeker's situation has been defined as "a state of limbo": a condition of transition characterized by fear, ambiguity, exclusion, and by the inability to make plans for the future (Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Jonzon *et a*l. 2015). To capture the particularity of the asylum seekers' condition, Jonzon *et al.* (2015) used the notion of liminality developed by Turner (1969). Liminal people are people "in between", suspended in a social space. They are at the threshold, outside the boundaries of society: "They have been declassified but are not yet reclassified" (Jonzon *et al.* 2015: 556). In this liminal situation, the acts of "hospitality" that asylum seekers receive may include confinement, refusal, rejection, or a conditional temporary refuge; this "hospitality" offered by the host country is often centred on the desire to not appear "too welcoming'" (Darling 2009).

Hospitality and Food

10 Food and hospitality are inherently bound together. Ultimately, all forms of hospitality include some form of food provision. From the classical works of Simmel (in Featherstone and Frisby 1997) and Douglas (1972) to the work on food related practices in contemporary migrant families (Halkier and Jensen 2011; Himmelgreen *et al.* 2007), the study of food and meals indicates that what is served, where, when and with whom, are essential aspects for denoting kinship, friendship, social position, and power relations. Food that is served to guests often underlines community, commensality, consideration, and personal care (Holm 2013). Alternatively, food can be used as a way of inflicting punishment or for disciplining the guest (Coveney 2006; Ugelvik 2011). Food is also a component of

personal identity and social belonging (Gasparetti 2012; Weller and Turkon 2015) and eating food that is familiar can have a positive impact on the psychological challenges that many asylum seekers struggle with (Spivey and Lewis 2015). Food is often an important way to express hospitality, particularly in the cultures of the home countries of asylum seekers (Harbottle 2000; Nicolau *et al*. 2009). In his study on asylum seekers living in Belgian reception centres, Vandervoordt uncovers the importance and various forms of hospitalities taking place between the residents. These forms of hospitality are critical to the development of a sense of home, autonomy, and dignity, which can transform the role of "guest" into one of "host" (Vandervoordt 2017).

11 Inspired by Olesen's understanding of hospitality as a social expression (Olesen 1994) and using the domains of hospitality proposed by Lashley (2015), the aim of this study is to understand how food contributes to specifically defined forms of hospitality offered to residents living in asylum reception centres.

Methods

12 The data presented in this article are part of a larger study aimed at investigating food security in Norwegian asylum reception centres. The data derived from fieldwork consisting of participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in five asylum reception centres between 2012 and 2016. Participant observation offers an opportunity to study people in their natural setting, to participate in everyday activities, and to engage in conversations with participants (Miller and Deutsch 2009). It allows the researchers to adopt a cautious approach to progressively build up relations of trust between themselves and the respondents (Fangen 2010). Interviews were conducted focusing on experiences during the migration process, encounters with food at the asylum reception centres, and possible barriers to food consumption.

13 The asylum centres included in the study were chosen based on the typology of the centres and the organization of food provisioning. They included: one arrival centre, one transit centre, one centralized ordinary reception centre, one decentralized reception centre, and one housing collective for unaccompanied minors[2]. These centres are representative of typical housing arrangements for asylum seekers in Norway.

14 The study of the arrival centre and transit centre took place in Oslo in 2013. At both centres, food was catered and meals were served in a common cafeteria. At the transit centre, participant observation was conducted over a several days during the same month. The objective was to gain insight about what happened before, during, and after the main meals were served in the common areas. Attention was given to the food that was served, how the provisioning of food was organized, the physical place where the meals were consumed and the social interactions during meals. Four semi-structured interviews with employees and six semi-structured interviews with residents in the arrival and transit centre (four men and two women) were conducted.

15 The fieldwork in the ordinary centralized centre was conducted between 2012 and 2013. The centre was located in the countryside, a few kilometres from a store, and consisted of a main building with a common kitchen facility. At the ordinary centralized centre, participant observation was conducted during meal

preparation, the purchase of food in the local grocery store and in Oslo, and special occasions (such as the "international food evening" the "Christmas food evening" and the "farewell meal preparation"). During the fieldwork, we had informal conversations with both residents and employees and conducted twelve interviews with residents and two interviews with employees.

16 The data collection in the decentralized reception centre took place in 2016. The centre was located in a small town in the vicinity of Oslo and consisted of small apartments equipped with personal kitchens. Data were collected through qualitative interviews with six women.

17 Finally, we conducted interviews with six young boys (17-23), who experienced coming to Norway as unaccompanied minors. The housing community for minors was also located in Oslo and was equipped with personal kitchens. The minors could also choose to eat warm meals provided by a youth centre, a few times a week.

18 Ethical considerations are of particular importance when conducting field work with vulnerable subjects, as is the case of asylum seekers (Dunbar *et al.* 2003). We tried, as often as possible, to approach our informants in a respectful manner by not intruding in their private lives. All of the interviews were conducted in English with the exception of the interviews in the decentralized centre where a resident speaking both Syrian and English helped with the translations of our interviews with the six women. After receiving consent from the respondents, interviews were recorded. They were orally informed of the purpose of the study and assured that the study would not interfere with nor have an impact on their asylum process. All the different sub-studies have been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

19 The data collection originally had the descriptive aim of investigating experiences of food security in different typologies of reception centres. For the purpose of this article, the data from all the sub-studies, including pictures of kitchens and meals in the reception centres, have been gathered together and re-analysed using the concept of hospitality as a theoretical lens. Throughout the analysis, we have tried to understand which values of hospitality (unconditional, conditional, and controlling) tend to emerge. The three domains of hospitality (cultural, domestic, and commercial) described by Lashley (2015) have been used to frame the findings. Additional investigation based on secondary literature has been used to provide contextual elements in order to clarify the living conditions of asylum seekers in the Norwegian context.

20 The data from this qualitative study have been used to develop a larger quantitative study on food security, which explores the dietary intake of asylum seekers residing in asylum reception centres. This broader study and affiliated data collection was carried out during the winter of 2016-2017 (Henjum *et al.* forthcoming).

Findings

21 The presentation of the findings is divided into three sections based on the domains indicated by Lashley (2015). The first section presents a background for Norwegian asylum policy and the organization of the reception centres, therefore describing the cultural domain as outlined by Lashley (2015). This section is based

on secondary literature. The second section is based on the fieldwork conducted in the reception centres and provides a description of the food provision and consumption, providing insight into the domestic domain. The third section combines secondary literature and our findings from our fieldwork to explore the commercial domain.

The cultural/social domain of hospitality

22 In the early 1980s, there were few asylum seekers in Norway and the term asylum seeker was unknown to most people (NOU 2011). Starting in the mid-1980s, the number of asylum seekers increased from 800 in 1985 to over 8600 in 1987 and the number of individual asylum seekers outnumbered the refugees who came through the United Nations (NOU 2011). This sudden increase generated a wave of concern and initiatives aimed at regulating the flow of asylum seekers were set in place (NOU 2011).

23 The Norwegian asylum system was developed in 1987, when the first asylum reception centre was established in Trondheim (Berg 2012). In 1988, The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) was established. The UDI is responsible for processing asylum applications, supervising asylum reception centres, and deciding which cases will be dismissed. UDI is an agency under the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, responsible for matters pertaining to refugee, immigration, and integration policy.

24 In Norway, asylum seekers first reside in arrival and transit centres where they will have their first interview with UDI concerning their asylum application (Berg 2012). The length of stay at transit centres is designed to be short, ranging from a few days to a few weeks. As mentioned previously, they receive catered meals in these facilities. After they have had their first asylum interview, asylum seekers are transferred to ordinary reception centres. Ordinary reception centres are either “centralized” or “decentralized”. In the former, asylum seekers and refugees often live in buildings that were formerly hotels, hostels, or other institutions. The residents usually have their own room but share the kitchen, living room, and bathroom with other residents. In decentralized reception centres, asylum seekers and refugees live in apartments or houses that are located in various municipalities (NOU, 2011). Upon arrival, unaccompanied minors (aged 15-18) live in centres supervised by adults but are later relocated to collective households where they prepare their own meals (Weiss *et al*. 2017). While waiting for residence permits, asylum seekers are not allowed to work so they receive a public subsidy, or allowance, from Norwegian authorities. This is intended to cover all expenses outside of accommodation costs (Seeberg 2017). This allowance is reduced for people who have been denied asylum but have appealed their case. It is not compulsory to live in asylum centres but asylum seekers lose their allowance if they decide to live elsewhere (Seeberg 2017). On average, asylum seekers (including those designated as refugees) spend 625 days in reception centres (Weiss *et al*. 2017). Centres can be run by municipalities, private actors, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), all of which must comply with UDI’s directives specifying the criteria for proper management of the centres (NOU 2011). In the white paper on migration policy from 1988[3], it was stated that reception centres were required to provide asylum seekers with “basic but

acceptable”[4] living conditions. The same statement is reiterated in subsequent political documents (Brochmann and Hagelund 2010; Seeberg 2017). Previous studies have indicated that reception centres, particularly those that are centralized, are of a low standard and are not necessarily equipped to host people for long periods of time (Hauge *et al.* 2017).

The domestic/private domain of hospitality

25 The second domain of hospitality developed by Lashley (2015) is the domestic/private domain. This domain consists of the provisioning of food, drink, and accommodation. As described above, asylum seekers reside in transit centres during their first few days after arrival. In these centres, the food is catered. In the centres that we visited, three meals were provided each day in the common cafeteria. Breakfast was served between 08.00-09.00, lunch was served between 12.00-13.00 and dinner was served between 17.00-18.00. Since people were supposed to stay at the transit centre only for a few days, the same menu was repeated each week (we received however information that people may be spending several weeks in those centres). According to a woman who was responsible for one of the centres, UDI did not provide guidelines on what food should be served other than recommending that pork should be avoided. We asked whether she accounted for the preferences of the residents. She answered that the menu was not typical Norwegian: “*we serve boreg*[5]*. This is not Norwegian. But is also important that the food is as much Norwegian as possible*”. She also added that “religion [such in the case of Ramadan] was a private matter and should not be taken into consideration while people were living in reception centres”. Table 1 provides an example of a weekly menu at a transit centre.

Table 1: Weekly Meal Plan at a Transit Centre

	Breakfast	**Lunch**	**Dinner**
Monday	Bread, cheese, jam, butter, milk, tea and coffee	Meat, vegetable soup, bread	Tuna fish, salad, tomatoes, cucumber, bread
Tuesday	*	Rice, chicken, salad, vegetable soup, bread	Eggs, salad, bread, fruit, cornflakes
Wednesday	*	Rice, lamb, salad vegetable soup, bread	Lentil soup, bread
Thursday	*	Lamb, potatoes soup, vegetables, salad, bread	Hamburger, tomatoes, cucumber, salad, bread
Friday	*	Rice, salmon, salad, vegetable soup, bread	Lamb, vegetable soup, bread, fruit
Saturday	*	Meat, pasta, vegetable soup, salad, bread	Potato soup, sausages, salad, cucumber, tomatoes

Sunday	*	Meat, salad, vegetable soup, bread	Bean soup, bread

26 During our observation of the meals, we noticed that residents queued to receive their meal and employees distributed the food in order to make sure that everything proceeded smoothly. We were told that disagreements sometimes arise in the queue because some people did not respect the queuing rules: “*They do not have a culture for queuing*” – explained an employee. There were also complaints about people taking two servings. Those who arrived later could have experienced that there was not enough food for them. As there was not enough room for everyone to eat their meal at once, residents were asked to leave the table as they finished eating.

27 The leader of the centre lamented that a lot of food was wasted and that they often found food in the garbage. The asylum seekers we talked to repeatedly said that the food at the arrival and transit centres was awful. During fieldwork, a man approached us and screamed: “*this is fucking shit food*”. Residents complained that they were served food that was unfamiliar to them: “*[this] is not our system of food*” one resident said. A Syrian mother interviewed in the ordinary reception centre told us that food at the transit centre was inedible: “*It smelled and tasted bad*”. She was worried for her children; they did not like the food but there was nothing else to eat. Informants told us that they tended to get hungry during the evening, as the last meal was in the late afternoon and food was not served again until the next day. The leader of the arrival reception centre was aware of the fact that the food did not always meet the expected quality and that she repeatedly complained to the catering firm that replied: “*They are just asylum seekers*”.

28 At ordinary reception centres, people prepared instead their own food. Upon their arrival, residents received a kitchen kit with essential utensils. In the centre we visited, the kitchen was in the basement. It was outfitted with old stoves, some damaged benchtops, and a few sinks. There were no cupboards to store pans or other kitchen tools nor were there any chairs or tables for people to sit at to eat their meals. Residents tended to make their food in the kitchen and then took it up to their rooms to eat. A resident told us that making food in the common kitchen and having to take it up in the room was cumbersome so he made very simple meals that did not require much time to prepare.

29 Residents had access to the kitchen between 07.00 and 23.00. Often, there was little activity in the common kitchen before noon. Several informants mentioned that they preferred to sleep late or just remained in their rooms. Their day lacks routines and meals were often consumed without regularity. A resident explained that “*I make food according to my mood…sometimes I just eat once a day, sometimes I eat the same at lunch and dinner. At breakfast I just take a glass of milk*”. Another resident said that he ate when he was hungry and sometimes this meant that he ate his first and only meal at four or five o’clock in the afternoon. A woman said: “*when you are alone, you do not want to make food. I do not want to eat alone, but if my daughters [two younger women she shares the apartment with] are there, then I make food for them.”*

30 Based on our observations, preparing meals and eating together was more common among the families who lived in the apartments of the decentralized asylum centre. A woman said:

> *"We are a big family living together [three couples with children] and we eat together. We use to eat three meals. As a breakfast, we can eat egg and milk and cheese, or pizza with cheese that we make self. The children like that. For lunch we have sometimes a soup. It is mostly for the kids. We adults do not eat much at lunch. We have dinner around six, we eat often rice with chicken, or another kind of meat, yogurt and a salad."*

31 Men who live alone said that they ate a rather monotonous diet. Many had never made food before their arrival to Norway. Ali, who arrived in Norway as an unaccompanied minor, seldom cooked food and most of the time had just one meal per day. Another man told us that he made food once a week and that he ate the same meal every day. One day, we were in the kitchen around 11.30 and there was a man named Nasir making breakfast. He was cooking noodles with water, sugar, and milk. Nasir learned how to cook an egg while he was at the centre for unaccompanied minors. He ate a lot of bread and eggs when he first arrived. Another young man, Ali, said he never uses the kitchen. Omar, another minor, ate salad with tuna fish. He eats the tuna directly from the can. Otherwise, he spends most of his money on kebab or other fast food: "*I tend to use all my money before the month is over and then I am starving*".

32 Many people reported that it was difficult for them to buy food in the shops. Ken said that it was difficult to find what he needed. Others found it difficult to determine whether the food was halal or not and therefore avoided buying food they were not familiar with. Eshe, from Sudan, was uncomfortable with large grocery stores. She was accustomed to buying food at an open market. She always wanted to shop with other women living at the centre because she was afraid to go alone. Shani and her son have lived in the reception centre for three and half years. Her son wanted to have Norwegian food. She did not know very much about it and he helped her to buy food in the supermarket. Close proximity to an ethnic food shop seemed to make grocery shopping easier for some residents. The families living in the decentralized centre had a Turkish grocery shop within walking distance. They said that they often found some familiar food items there but could not always find products they needed, as *dolmas* mentioned by a Syrian woman, or *cassava* mentioned by a woman from Ethiopia.

33 The ordinary reception centre we studied was located in the countryside, two and half kilometres from the closest supermarket. The reception centre only offered transport to the elderly, the sick, and to pregnant women. Others had to walk or use a bike. Public transport was not an option because it would cost as much as their daily allowance. Once a month, a bus drove the residents to a district in Oslo. This was something residents looked forward to since there were ethnic grocery shops selling more affordable and familiar food. One day during our fieldwork, we saw residents returning to the bus with plastic bags full of fruit, vegetables, olive oil and spices. Residents, particularly women, enjoyed shopping in Oslo. They talked at length about their own food and how some of them missed the tastes and smells of their home country: "I miss the food my mother used to make. I miss the taste and smell that makes me connect to my family."

34 The importance of eating familiar food was particularly visible during special events. During the "international day", which was organized at the centralized reception centre, residents could make food from their homeland and they were given extra money to buy the food they needed. The meal was served in a large meeting room and there was an abundance of food on the table. Many people

participated in the common dinner, sharing and tasting each other's traditional food dishes. There was music and people danced. On another day, we saw unusual activity in the kitchen. Several women were gathered together and worked with alacrity. They were making *kibbeh*, a Middle Eastern version of deep-fried dumplings with meat, while others were making a cake. They had been saving for this special occasion. Their friend, Leela had finally received an apartment from the municipality and was moving out of the reception centre. This needed to be celebrated with proper food. During our fieldwork, we were often offered food by the residents. People invited us to their rooms and shared their food with us. One time, a Palestinian woman made us pita bread and lentil soup. On another occasion, two Afghani sisters welcomed us in their room and offered us cake that was "hidden" in the cupboard. They said that they tried to save money in order to make food, such as this cake, that they could exchange with others.

The commercial domain of hospitality

35 The third domain identified by Lashley is the commercial domain (2015). The commercial domain examines hospitality as an economic activity, providing food, drink, and accommodation for the express purpose of making money and creating surplus value. As discussed by Lashley, the commercial domain can provide a better understanding of the tensions that can emerge between commercial imperatives, cultural values, and domestic practices. As previously mentioned, the Norwegian asylum policy requires "basic but acceptable" living conditions. The economic sustainability of the asylum policies is a recurrent discussion in the Norwegian political debate and policies and measures to regulate the expenditures are repeatedly adjusted. One of the measures is the UDI's guideline that states that the centres must be used at a high capacity (NOU 2011). If this requirement is not fulfilled, the centres have to close down. For this reason, the contracts with the municipalities or the NGOs running the centres are renewed every three months. This results in drastic fluctuations in the number of reception centres. For instance, in 2014 there were 134 asylum reception centres and in 2015, during the "crisis" caused by the Syrian war, there were 299 centres. In January 2017, the number of centres had diminished to 156, shrinking further to 56 centres at the beginning of 2018[6]. This unpredictability has consequences: the residents have to be relocated to other parts of the country (some may experience this more than once) and centres do not have the means nor the incentive to refurbish or renovate. Another "commercial" aspect related to the management of centres for asylum seekers is the allowance that asylum seekers receive each month. In 2017, an adult living alone received 2404 Norwegian crowns (NOK) each month which equates approximately 270 Euros. A couple received 4564 NOK, and a family consisting of two adults and two children could receive 8140 NOK (Seeberg 2017). Asylum seekers that have been denied asylum receive a reduced allowance of 1830 crowns. The allowance is meant to cover all expenses other than accommodation. These expenses include food, clothing, toiletries and any other necessities. To give an indication of the purchasing power of the allowance, according to the Consumption Research Norway, one adult living in Norway would need 2500 crowns to cover their food costs[7]. It is therefore not surprising that one of the recurring statements we heard during our interviews was that "almost all the money we get [is spent] on

food". We had the opportunity to observe residents while shopping for food just before they received their monthly payments. Not much was purchased other than basic food items such as bread, margarine, and milk. People lent others small amounts of money when they needed it. One Syrian woman said: "*We cannot always buy what we want. Cheese and meat, we cannot often buy it. It is too expensive. The most important is that the children get food. For us adults it is not so important."* A woman from Afghanistan told us that sometimes, when she is in the shop, she looks at fish on the counter and then "kisses it goodbye". She and her sister eat lentils and rice almost every day. Shani, a woman from Iraq, told us that she would like to eat more fish, but that she could only afford to buy it once a week.

36 Ken's family, who were originally from Sri Lanka, had very little money due to their reduced allowance because of two asylum appeal rejections. Ken and his wife fed the children first and the two adults shared what was left over. Ken said that sometimes there was very little food and that it was difficult to get enough to eat. Bread was expensive so it was something they did not buy every day. Jamal, a young man from Iran, who has received two appeal rejections, said that he feels like he eats rice twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Amir, a man from Somalia, told us that: "*at the end of the month, when money starts to run out, I eat a lot of bulgur. Bulgur with egg, tomatoes and spices, or bulgur with tomatoes and spices. Or just bulgur with spices."*

Discussion

37 The aim of this article is to investigate how food can reflect the defined forms of hospitality in asylum reception centres. We have adopted Lashley's (2008 & 2015) three domains to provide a framework with which to analyse and discuss the data gathered during our fieldwork in different typologies of asylum reception centres. Hospitality has been conceptually framed along a continuum ranging from "unconditional hospitality" to "conditional hospitality". We have also included a short discussion on the forms of hospitality related to "uninvited strangers" and how hospitality can be understood as a form of containment and control (Lynch *et al*. 2011; Justesen *et al*. 2017).

38 Our study confirmed previous findings that discuss the dietary challenges that asylum seekers face during their resettlement in different western countries (Koc and Welsh 2001; Burns 2004; Hadley *et a*l. 2007; Southcombe 2007; Willis and Buck 2007; Gallegos *et a*l. 2008; Colby *et a*l. 2009; Dharod *et a*l. 2011; Linder 2011; Delavari *et a*l. 2012). In many of these studies, a pattern emerges. Everyday life for asylum seekers is defined by discomfort, including their relationships to food, which in many cases is characterised by an unfamiliar food environment and the struggle to feed themselves and their families.

39 Our analysis indicates that food can provide important insight on how different forms of hospitality are performed. Unconditional hospitality, which we have related to the cultural domain, stems from a general friendliness and benevolence of or affection for people (Telfer 2013). This form of hospitality may manifest as an offering of food or by creating the conditions for food procurement that meet the needs of the guests by providing opportunities for commensality and nurturing the development of friendship. Based on our fieldwork, there was very little unconditional hospitality offered to asylum seekers in Norwegian centres. With the

exception of the "international party" organized by one of the reception centres, our data show few occasions in which food has been used to cultivate hospitality in this regard.

40 Conditional hospitality implies, on the other hand, that the offer of food is based on the values and interests of the host, often with expectations of receiving something in return. For instance, after food has been given, the host may expect gratitude or compliance with the rules (Komter and Van Leer, 2012; Lashley 2008). Our study shows that food, in several instances, has been conditionally offered. This form of hospitality is exemplified by the way in which food is provisioned in arrival and transit centres – characterized by low quality standardized meals that do not meet the guest preferences, while hosts express frustration about the "ungrateful" wasting of food.

41 In forms of hospitality motivated by fear of the stranger, advocating for close monitoring and social control, food can function as a deterrent for the presence or the arrival of unwanted guests. Coveney describes how food provisioning for the institutionalized poor in 19th century England was part of an attempt to make the conditions of workhouses unattractive. This was done by regulating the pauper diet (Coveney 2006: 67). Most of the data gathered in our field study indicate that in Norwegian asylum centres, food is an expression of this form of hospitality. Asylum seekers are met, at their arrival, with food that is unfamiliar and of poor quality. Kitchens in ordinary reception centres offered little opportunity for cooking meals. Shopping for food was challenging because of limited economic resources, long distances from the shops, and, for some, unfamiliarity with the Norwegian grocery shops. At asylum centres (with some differences regarding decentralized and centralized ones), meals tended to lose their function of being a time for commensality, as meals were often eaten erratically and alone. The lack of economic resources resulted in little variation in the diet.

42 We need however to point out that, as indicated by Olesen, forms of hospitality are not static but are the product of interaction (Olesen 1994). As in the study conducted by Vandervoordt among Syrian refugees living in Belgium (Vandervoordt 2017), the guest can find ways of altering the forms of hospitality in which they are framed by inverting the role between host and guest and by creating spaces of sociability and familiarity. In our data this process emerged, for instance, when we were offered food by the people we met in our fieldwork. Also, the presence of children, as indicated by (Southcombe 2007), appears to have an impact on the forms of hospitality experienced in asylum reception centres. While children may increase parents' feeling of vulnerability and lack of control (as when the children do not like the food at the transit centre but there is nothing else the parents can give them), they can also provide structure to days otherwise characterized by emptiness (Valenta 2012). Meals are arranged according to children's needs, thus allowing for the emotional dimension of food to maintain its significance in recreating a home.

43 Gender is also important in understanding experiences with food and hospitality. Despite the new inhospitable food environment and economic limitations, women seem more capable than men in creating forms of sociability and use food to strengthen social relations. This was the case when a group of women prepared common meals to celebrate significant events or when they made food to exchange with others. Lack of knowledge about food preparation and less experience with food as a social practice, makes men more vulnerable to both

eating poor diets and losing the important function of meals as a place of social interaction.

44 In the introduction, we referred to Coveney (2006) and his perspective that subjects are constructed through relations of power and that power is productive. It produces subjects, such as the subject of food choices; it produces objects, as bodies that require nutrients; and it produces facts or regimes of truth. In the case of asylum seekers, the food choices available, via the forms of hospitality that are offered at asylum reception centres, are largely imposed on subjects who have limited agency to make their own choices. They depend upon the food that is served at transit centres or on the monthly allowance, which limits their opportunities for buying the food they need or prefer. The objects that are produced are the refugees' bodies. The refugees' bodies are bodies that need to be sheltered and cared for, but nothing more (Turner 2016). The (in)hospitality that is extended to the residents is sustained by discourses justifying that the living conditions of asylum seekers need to be "basic but acceptable". According to Brochmann and Hagelund (2010), the "simplicity" of asylum seeker accommodation is purposefully designed to communicate the attitude of the host country towards the asylum seeker population with the intent to reduce the country's attractiveness as a destination. As Brekke *et al.* point out (Brekke *et al.* 2010), the line between how "basic" the conditions can be before they become "unacceptable" is not clear. The quantitative data gathered as part of this study seem to indicate that the interpretation of "basic but acceptable" living conditions manifests in meagre hospitality. Among the 207 asylum seekers we interviewed, 84% were in fact experiencing food insecurity with hunger (Henjum *et al.* forthcoming).

Concluding remarks

45 In our study, we have used food as a lens for understanding how asylum seekers are positioned in the host country. Our findings indicate that food reinforces a sense of precariousness in the lives of asylum seekers and that their experiences with food hardly make them feel at home or feel welcome. Food at asylum reception centres seem to have an important role in producing and maintaining the condition of "liminality" described by Jonzon *et a*l. (2015). Disconnected from their own food culture, limited by the selection of food that is familiar and affordable to them, struggling to make ends to meet, deprived of the social and cultural functions of food in terms of commensality, the meagre hospitality that asylum seekers receive remind them, every day, of their uncertain future.

46 The findings of our study have several implications. One first implication regards the importance of including food arrangements in the evaluation of reception policies. To our knowledge, there are not studies investigating and comparing organization of food provision in reception centres across Nordic countries. To know more about this topic can add new perspectives on forms of inclusion and exclusion emerging in the Northern European context. Furthermore, the data emerging from our study underlines as it emerges from our study invites the need to consider the health consequences of the precarious nutrition situation experienced by asylum seekers. Good nutrition is a determinant of physical and

mental health and conditions of food insecurity can lead to stress, depression and increase the risk of non-communicable diseases (Maynard *et al*. 2018).

47 Finally our study indicates opportunities for involvement of civil societies in food related initiatives fostering forms of altruistic hospitality.

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Notes

1 *Cf*. http://www.unhcr.org/asylum-seekers.html, italics from the authors

2 A more detailed description of the Norwegian reception system will be presented in the results' section.

3 *Cf*. Stortingsmelding nummer 39 (1987-1988)

4 In Norwegian: *nøktern med forsvarlig levekår*.

5 *Boreg*, or *börek* is a traditional Middle Eastern dish. A think flaky dough is filled with anything from cheese, meats and vegetables,

6 https://www.udi.no/statistikk-og-analyse/statistikk/?year=0&filter=6, retrieved 10/06/2018

7 More precisely 2240 crowns for women and 2790 crowns for men.

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