

FROM CORPORATE TO CONNECTED: RESISTING FOOD SYSTEM DISTANCING IN INDIA AND CANADA



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Karen L. Rideout

This report highlights the key findings of my PhD dissertation in Integrated Studies in Land and Food Systems at the University of British Columbia. It was prepared for the organizations and individuals who participated in the research, as well as for anyone who may have an interest in this work.

For inquiries or a full version of the dissertation in PDF format, please contact me by email at klrideout@gmail.com.

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KAREN L. RIDEOUT

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SUMMARY

The mainstream western food system is built on industrial production, processing, packaging, and distribution of highly processed food products that are not healthy for people, the planet, or society. This unhealthy food system has created a physical and conceptual distance between the production and consumption of food. People often become so disconnected that industrialization can expand unnoticed, and the distancing continues to grow in a self-reinforcing cycle. Despite its ubiquitous nature, little is known about how people experience distancing from food or how best to address the problem.

I studied the perspectives and motivations of people who are resisting distancing in India and Canada in order to find ways to support healthier food systems. I conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with activists, farmers, and consumers who were involved in some way with one of two food organizations: Navdanya in India and FarmFolk/CityFolk in Canada.

Although “resisters” in India and Canada were experiencing different levels of food system industrialization, participants in both countries felt that industrialization contributes to changes in social norms and individual values that lead to further distancing. The resisters were motivated primarily by a belief that food has intrinsic or sacred value. Participants in both countries described how recognition of the intrinsic value of food provided a source of deep spiritual meaning in their lives.

Based on the interpretations and motivations of these resisters, I concluded that there is a need for a paradigm shift in how food is viewed in mainstream society. Policies and social structures can make it easier for people to recognize food’s intrinsic value and act accordingly. Such structures would support meaningful connections around food without getting caught up in ideological visions of the “right” kind of food system.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Background

Food system distancing refers to the physical and conceptual gap between people and their food. It prevents eaters from understanding where their food comes from, how it has been transformed into its current form, who has been involved in the process, and how it got to them¹⁻⁴. Distancing is a key feature of the dominant western food system; it is a symptom of and a contributing factor to many unhealthy aspects of that system. As the food system becomes more globalized, so does distancing and the health issues that go along with it.

Although food system distancing is not a new concept in academic research^{2,5,6}, little is known about distancing from the perspective of people who are resisting it. Using participant observation and interviews, I interpreted how some of these people understand distancing in the food system and asked why they resist it. In order to address the globalization of distancing, I conducted research in two countries that are at different stages of economic development—India and Canada. This comparison provided a fresh look at the industrialized food system in each country.

I approached this research within a framework of healthy food systems. I tried to integrate all parts of the food system—social, economic, ecological, biomedical, and cultural—and focus on the health of the system as a whole. Because food choices are partly up to the individual but also constrained by the environment in which they live and make decisions⁷⁻¹², I was looking for ways to make the healthiest food choices (in terms of production, consumption, or any other aspect of the food system) the easiest choices to make¹³⁻¹⁵.

Goals and major questions

The dominant western food system is defined by industrialization, convenience and fast foods, and a chasm between the production and consumption of foods. Industrial food production, processing, packaging, transport, retailing, consumption, and disposal of waste all raise health concerns for people, the planet, and society. This kind of food system is spreading around the world, particularly with changes in global trade and investment rules since the early 1990s¹⁶⁻¹⁸. This has led to changes in industrializing countries such as India, where people are eating more processed foods, fast foods, and also buying more of their food in western style supermarkets and restaurants¹⁹⁻²¹. At the same time, the Indian population is experiencing many food-related health consequences in the form of rising rates of obesity and chronic diseases²²⁻²⁴.

After reviewing published research on health and food systems, I came to believe that many of the problems in the mainstream food system could be addressed by minimizing distancing. Therefore, I set out to better understand people who were already trying to do something about distancing by resisting it in some way. I call them “resisters.” I asked four basic questions through this research: (1) What are people actually doing to resist distancing? (2) How do resisters understand the causes and consequences of distancing? (3) How do people come to be so concerned about these food issues? (4) What can I learn from talking to resisters in two different places at different points along the path to industrialization?

WHAT DID I DO?

I did this research to understand food system distancing from the perspective of resisters. I wanted to use that understanding to identify ways of addressing food system distancing based on their particular ‘insider’ knowledge. For the most part, I gathered information about resisters’ perspectives through one-on-one interviews. These were conversations that I structured around a series of broad questions based on the goals of the research. I identified potential study participants by collaborating with organizations that were doing resistance work in the form of building connections between the production and consumption of food. Although

I wasn't studying the ways these organizations operated, I could learn a lot about how people were resisting distancing by getting involved with these organizations. I met individual resisters who were staff, volunteers, or members of the organizations, consumers who purchased food from them, members of the public who attended their events, farmers they supported, and people with whom they collaborated.

The two organizations involved in this study shared their visions and approaches to resisting distancing and introduced me to potential participants. In Delhi, India I worked with Navdanya (www.navdanya.org). In Vancouver, Canada I worked with the FarmFolk/CityFolk Society (FFCF) (www.ffcf.bc.ca). I participated in their work so that I could better understand how and why people resist distancing and so that I could support their work as they supported mine. I volunteered with both organizations and spent time with staff members and at events. In doing so, I was able to learn about the resistance to distancing and find opportunities to network with individual resisters. I also met representatives of numerous organizations that collaborated with Navdanya or FFCF, some of whom I also interviewed for the research.

Navdanya

In India, I conducted 22 interviews with Navdanya staff, members, farmers, and staff from several collaborating organizations. Interviews were conducted in Delhi, Mumbai, and other urban and rural areas in the states of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, and Kerala.

Dr. Vandana Shiva started Navdanya to support traditional farmers, and quickly realized that consumers needed to be involved in order to preserve farming traditions in a modern world. Navdanya's aim is to help "producers and consumers shap[e] their food cultures through participation and partnerships through cooperation and caring," and to "create another food culture, which respects diversity, local production and food quality"²⁵. They work on a wide range of food-related issues, including links between seed and table, traditional foods and food culture, food retail, corporate involvement in the food system, trade issues, primary agronomic research, seed patents, and genetically modified seeds.

Navdanya has six main program areas (as of 2008): (1) Bija Vidyapeeth (Earth University), a farm-based school near Dehradun, where agronomic research and education programs take place; (2) Diverse Women for Diversity, to promote grassroots women's movements such as traditional knowledge in food processing; (3) Seed Sovereignty, to support seed saving and sharing; (4) Food Sovereignty, to mobilize, train, and advocate for farmers' issues; (5) Fair Trade, including building connections between producers and consumers; and (6) Slow Food Café, where Navdanya represents the Slow Food movement and provides a space to share food and ideas.

FarmFolk/CityFolk

In Canada, I conducted 15 interviews with FFCF staff, volunteers, farmers with whom they work, and collaborators from other organizations in southwestern British Columbia.

FarmFolk/CityFolk (FFCF) began as a farming co-operative trying to build alternatives to a fast food culture. They work with food communities to create a sustainable local food system that promotes human and ecological health, social justice, and vibrant local economies. They base their work on the belief that "it is the connection between farm and city, producer and consumer, grower and eater that creates sustainable communities"²⁶. FFCF supports seed saving and protection of agricultural lands, researches traditional crop varieties, advises policy makers from the municipal to provincial level, finds new and innovative ways for new farmers to access land, organizes public education events, and celebrates food with producers, chefs, and consumers.

FFCF's work focusses on farm communities, city communities, and farm–city connections. As of 2008, farm programming involves a Community Farms Program to address the dual challenges of high land costs and an aging farm workforce and a Grain Chain project geared to reviving local production of grains. City projects include participation in the Vancouver Food Policy Council and the Agricultural Land Reserve Protection and Enhancement Committee. Farm–city links are created through awareness-raising events (such as Seasonal Sustainability speakers and film series, Incredible Edible farm tours, and farm photography calendars); annual Feast of Fields fundraisers at which the public enjoys food from farm–chef pairings prepared at a local farm; and the Get Local networking program for food producers, retailers, processors, and restaurants. FFCF is also active in the Slow Food movement and sends a community of food producers to the international Terra Madre gatherings in Italy.

WHAT DOES DISTANCING MEAN TO PARTICIPANTS?

Cyclical relationship with industrialization

The participants of this research study described a close relationship between distancing and industrialization in the food system. As western societies industrialized, people began to move into cities and buy food that had been produced by other people. Once they were no longer involved in or even saw how food was produced, it was possible to stop thinking about it. As one participant put it, food became “out of sight, out of mind.” Changes that happened in Canada throughout the 1900s are now happening in India as more people move to cities and western style fast food and packaged foods become widely available.

Participants described how power shifted away from producers and consumers and concentrated among large industry players as the food system industrialized. They felt that the food industry had too much influence over government policies. Participants told me that health regulations, in particular, were being coopted by the food industry to promote their own interests rather than the health of the public. They were concerned about the aggressive marketing of highly processed food products by processors, restaurant chains, and retailers because such products separate people from an experience of “real” food. As the food industry controls more of the food system, it is able to dictate the food choices available to people by controlling what options are offered in the mainstream marketplace.

Consumers are not forced to buy certain foods, but it is increasingly difficult to resist food industry marketing, find reliable information, or even access the kinds of food they wish to buy or eat. Farmers can theoretically grow any foods they wish in any way they like, but it is increasingly difficult for them to survive without using industrial methods to produce industrial food products. Despite these challenges, some producers and consumers are finding ways to step outside the industrial food system and exchange fresh, high quality foods through direct relationships.

Consumers don't make a lot of choices that would support healthy, environmentally responsible lifestyles because they don't have those choices available to them, or they don't know what those choices mean.

– Farmer in Canada

Social changes and individual values

There are several social norms and ongoing changes in mainstream society that participants viewed as side effects of food system distancing, contributors to distancing, or both. They felt that food was both devalued and fetishized. On the one hand, participants felt that many people aren't willing to take the time to cook from scratch or eat together, nor are they willing to spend money on high quality food, even when they can afford it. Participants felt that mindless eating while driving or watching television is less nourishing than building relationships over shared meals of good food. On the other hand, participants noted that food has also become an entertainment, that lavish meals have become a fashionable display of social status. In India, this issue is further complicated by western influences, with highly processed foods replacing healthier traditional products in the name of modernization.

People are made to give up their traditions by making them feel their traditions are inferior to modern options. That's how fresh food is replaced by processed food.
– Activist in India

Time is a special challenge in the context of distancing. Even people who *want* to spend time cooking or eating communal meals often don't have the time, especially if all the adults in a household have jobs outside the home. In India, this challenge is intensified as people move away from extended family households to nuclear families, meaning that there are fewer older relatives at home to help with cooking and food shopping.

Participants in this study blamed disconnection for the lack of value people place on food. If people do not understand where their food is coming from, they can't be expected to prioritize it. Still, participants lamented the fact that people seem so willing to spend time and money on fancy restaurant meals, fine wines, or consumer products, but not on daily essentials like quality food. They felt that any food consumed mindlessly or conspicuously is less nourishing than even the simplest food, carefully prepared and shared with others.

Health issues

Participants considered distancing to be unhealthy because it is associated with fast foods, imported foods, and highly processed food products. It is more difficult to know how such foods were produced and whether they have been adulterated. Packaged foods are more likely to contain additives and preservatives. Many packaged foods also come with false or exaggerated health claims. It is extremely difficult to see through those claims if one does not understand the food system, and understanding is a major challenge in the face of distancing. In India, the increase in packaged foods and western style diets has been linked with increased rates of obesity and chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. Most participants felt that paying closer attention to what one eats would result in a healthier, more nutritious diet.

WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO RESIST DISTANCING?

One of the goals of this research was to find out what drives people to get closely involved with food. I specifically asked people about issues related to health, the environment, and social well-being. Most agreed that they were important, but few of them spoke about these issues with the passion of an activist. They were passionate, however, when they spoke about the importance of food for its own sake.

Sacred value and spiritual connections

Food was described as an important way to connect with other people, with Nature, or with God. It was a source of deep, soulful connections for most of the participants in this study. People felt that food could transcend time and space by reconnecting them to a time or person that had passed (such as remembering a loved one by preparing a dish the way she used to make it). They considered food to be an important tool for social connection. They felt a synergy between nourishing relationships and feeling nourished by food. On the other hand, they viewed “junk” foods as an attempt to fill a void that could be met through shared meals and solid relationships. The act of feeding was considered to be an act of caring—a way to show love and nurture others. Food was, for some, a way to connect with their idea of God or with Nature, because food is a direct and intimate link between the human body and the natural world.

Traditionally, in India, the eating of food was considered an act of prayer.
— Consumer in India

In addition to connecting with others through food, many participants felt connected to food in its own right. They regarded food with reverence or respect, often seeing food as sacred. Many thought food was worthy of celebration because it was an essential aspect of a full life. Others, especially in India, spoke

about valued family rituals around cooking and taking meals. For them, cooking was a form of prayer and eating was an act of worship. Food is closely linked to the gods in Hindu cultural traditions. In Canada, some participants worked with food partly as a way to live out their religious or spiritual beliefs, because they felt that working with food was a way to directly connect with the miracle of Nature. Others saw food activities, such as growing food or visiting farmers’ markets, as fulfilling some of the social needs that religious services used to meet. Although Canada is becoming more secular, people still need meaning, direction, and social supports, and food provides a basis on which to have those experiences without following a religion.

People did not only connect through food or with food—they also saw food as the manifestation of something larger than themselves. To some, this meant that food, as well as Nature and all of life, was synonymous with God. Many ancient religious texts, such as the Hindu Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita make reference to food as an incarnation of God or Brahman. People in both countries noted how the miracle of all life is contained in a single seed. On a more secular note, some participants spoke about the links between civilization and the role of food, particularly agriculture, in human culture. For them, being disconnected from food implied a disconnection from ourselves as human beings. The commodification of food, in particular, was noted as a threat to our humanity because it breaks the deep, spiritual connections between people and food.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Meaning as motivation to take action

The results of this research show that people who are deeply engaged with food are driven by a sense of the meaning or value of food. Although they were concerned about many issues associated with the industrial food system—such as health problems, social justice, and ecological sustainability—they were motivated primarily by a deep respect for food itself.

Recognition of this intrinsic value in food offers a potential tool to achieve greater systemic changes. Many participants felt that if people cared about food, thought about food, or were connected to food, they would act differently in terms of how they produced, purchased, or consumed food. Although it

If it's meaningful to you, then you're going to eat better food.
— Farmer in Canada

may not be a sufficient motivation for everyone, people will surely not be driven to act if they don't respect food. The mainstream food system makes food so difficult to understand that there is a clear need to change the system in order to enable more people to recognize the value of food.

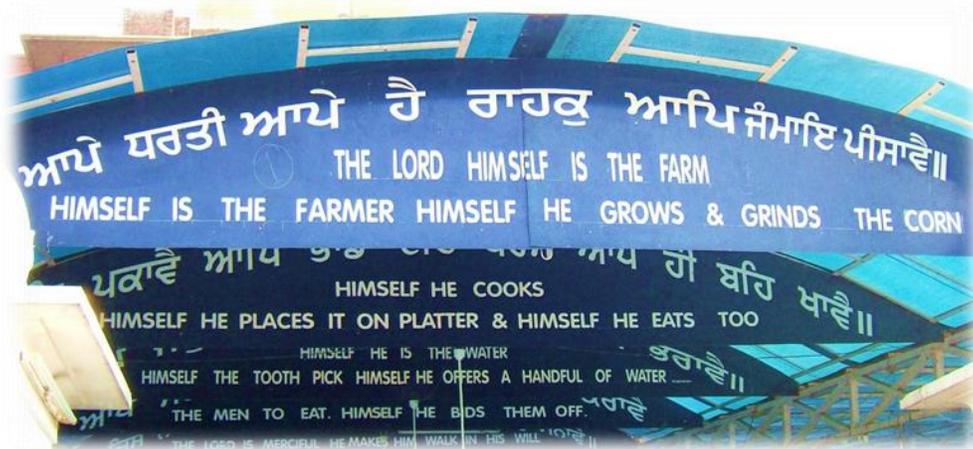
A focus on food itself, rather than the many negative impacts of the current system, makes it possible to work toward healthier food systems without getting caught up in dogmatic or inflexible definitions of an ideal. People might disagree over whether it is better to eat locally, eat vegetarian, buy fairly traded foods, grow one's own, or follow some other set of rules. However, a general respect for food and its value to humanity allows for all such ideals to co-exist while supporting a healthier food system overall. This was illustrated by the striking similarities between the perspectives of resisters in India and Canada. There were some differences in the way people viewed the issues, but for the most part, they shared similar concerns about distancing, the dangers of being disconnected from food, and a deep respect for food itself.

A new way of thinking about food systems policy

The results of this study highlighted some of the complexities in the ways the mainstream global food system plays out in everyday life. Cyclical relationships between distancing and industrialization have created tensions between the way people think, feel, and act with respect to food. Because of this complexity, it is essential to address the whole system rather than its individual parts (as current policies tend to do) in order to create healthier food systems. Distancing in the food system makes it difficult to recognize the real value of food. Removing those barriers could support people in developing a closer connection with food and make it easier for individuals to act based on the meaning food has for them. People can't be coerced into valuing food, but the environment can be structured in a way that makes it easier for people to recognize the value in food. In a more transparent and connected food system, people would be able to make decisions and take actions that are healthier, more socially conscious, and ecologically sustainable.

Organizations and resisters

The organizations and individuals who participated in this study are part of a growing movement working toward alternatives to the mainstream industrial food system. Although this movement is flourishing, these resisters represent a small minority of the population in any country. They are creating cracks in the mainstream industrial food system by stepping outside it or trying to build alternatives to it. Just as distancing became the normal state of affairs in mainstream western societies, these cracks have the potential to grow and become a new normal—one that values and respects food for its own sake.



Banners at the entrance to the communal kitchen at the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar.

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