



Original Research Article

Meaning as motivator to address distancing in the food systemKaren Rideout^{a*}^a Karen Rideout Consulting

Abstract

Distancing in the food system prevents people from having full knowledge and making informed choices about what and how they produce, exchange, prepare, and eat food. This becomes problematic when the dominant food system contributes to a myriad of negative human health, ecological, and social outcomes. This paper reports on findings from a study that aimed to better understand the perspectives of people who resist distancing through examining their motivations for action to inform policy approaches to improve food system health. The research, conducted in India and Canada, comprised participant observation with organizations working to connect the production and consumption of food, as well as interviews with activists, consumers, and farmers involved with those organizations. These food system actors were motivated by a conviction that food is important, which manifested as meaningful relationships built and maintained through food, as soulful connections with food, and as a sense that everything is interconnected. The findings identify connection around food as a potential source of meaning in life that encourages awareness of broader issues, a sense of value and care, and ultimately motivation for action or change. This could have implications for healthy food system governance if frameworks such as determinants of health and healthy food environments are used to inform healthy public policies that cultivate a sense of meaning and awareness of the intrinsic value embedded in food.

Keywords: Distancing; food system; India; Canada; food policy; spirituality; sacred; connectedness; motivation; meaning; health

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Introduction

Food system distancing is the physical and conceptual gap between people and food (Blay-Palmer, 2008; Clapp, 2012; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996; Kneen, 1993). Distancing prevents consumers (or eaters) from understanding where their food has come from, how it has been transformed into its current form, who has been involved in the process, and how it has ultimately reached them. Distancing is a form of deskilling whereby people lose control over their personal food system because they do not or cannot understand the system through which the food is produced (Braverman, 1974). They lack the “information, knowledge, and analytical frameworks needed to make informed decisions that reflect their own ‘fully costed’ interests” (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006, p. 143). Physical and conceptual distancing are side effects of the increased processing and global integration characteristic of the industrialized food system. While consumers have experienced distancing, the food system has become more connected through the global flows of food, workers, and eaters. As the breadth of connections expanded, depth of meaning and relationship have eroded.

A healthy food system supports physical, social, and ecological well-being. It is a system in which nutritious food is available, where people have sufficient knowledge and means to make informed choices, and that functions according to principles of sustainability (American Public Health Association, 2007; Beauman et al., 2005; Lang, Barling, & Caraher, 2009). Although global integration can increase some people’s access to certain types of food, distancing has been associated with decreased availability of healthy food choices, overconsumption of highly processed foods, unsustainable food industry practices, and widespread inequities (Beaudry & Delisle, 2005; Friel et al., 2017; Jaffe & Gertler, 2006; Lang, 2005; Lang et al., 2009; Ludwig & Nestle, 2008; O’Kane, 2012; Wilkins, 2005). Such harmful outcomes may be exacerbated by intentional anti-reflexive efforts that serve to neutralize negative health, environmental, or societal impacts of the food industry (Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Lang, 2005; Stuart & Worosz, 2012).

This paper draws on the findings from a field study conducted with individuals involved in resisting distancing in the food system in India and Canada between 2006 and 2012, a period during which India’s retail and processing sectors were undergoing rapid westernization and industrialization (Shetty, 2002; Vepa, 2004). The research aimed to better understand the phenomenon of distancing from the perspective of people actively engaged in resisting it by examining how they are resisting, their views on the health of the food system, their motivations to resist distancing, and how distancing and resistance compare between two countries at different stages of food system industrialization. This analysis focuses on their motivations to engage in food system actions that support connectedness (between different levels of the food system, between actors, and between people and food itself). The motivations of people already working to build healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable food systems offer insights for how food systems governance might create conditions for broader application.

The Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged (FLEdGE) research partnership identified six good food principles to guide sustainable food system change: farmer livelihoods, food access, Indigenous foodways, ecological resilience, food policy, and food connections (www.fledgeresearch.ca). This paper will examine each of these principles. By identifying motivations that drive people to support connections between producers and consumers, it highlights the importance of interpersonal connections through food and people's connections with food itself. These connections create opportunities to support farmer livelihoods, support traditional foodways, and raise awareness of social and environmental sustainability. The paper concludes with a discussion of how connectedness ascribes meaning to food, as well as opportunities to leverage connectedness and meaning through sensible food governance and policy.

Methods

This study used an assets approach to learn from people who were finding ways to resist distancing in the food system. Based on the idea that deficit or excessively critical approaches tend to disregard positive spaces, public health assets approaches are rooted in *salutogenesis*, asking what supports health rather than what causes illness (A. Morgan & Ziglio, 2007). Kloppenburg et al. (1996) advocate for assets approaches in food studies to identify hidden positive elements that already exist and could be scaled up. By studying resisters, I aimed to understand their motivations as a path to identify innovative approaches that might be applied more broadly. I conducted the research in Canada (an industrialized, high income country) and India (a rapidly industrializing, middle-income country) to gain insight about distancing in societies at different stages of industrialization, (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006). I selected one major hub organization in each country (headquartered in Vancouver and Delhi with extended regional and national networks) based on five inclusion criteria: (1) a focus on connections between producers and consumers, (2) a broad mandate to improve health (human, ecological, social), (3) non-governmental and non-corporate status, (4) food systems advocacy, and (4) English language operations.

This research was approved by The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Certificate H07-00439). I embedded myself as a volunteer within each organization over a three-year period to build relationships and understand context. I used the two organizations as network hubs (Stevenson, Posner, Hall, Cunningham, & Harrison, 1994) to identify individual interviewees and added additional participants through snowball sampling. I conducted in-person, semi-structured key informant interviews using a local interpreter when needed. The responsive interview guide (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) included six broad questions about how participants understood distancing, its impacts and causes, their actions and motivations to resist distance, and the perceived or anticipated outcomes of their efforts.

I conducted thirty-seven 1-hour interviews. Participants included staff members and volunteers, farmers, consumers or members, and collaborators from related organizations. All four participant categories were similarly represented in both countries, but participants in India were more geographically widespread due to the national focus of the hub organization. Participants ranged in age from early twenties to late eighties. Men and women were evenly represented in Canada. In India, about two-thirds were female, possibly due to the hub organization's origins as a movement to protect women's traditional knowledge and because female domains in Indian culture include foodwork such as farming and cooking.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. I used ATLAS.ti version 6.2 to analyze field notes and transcriptions, moving from deductive to inductive coding. I started with six *a priori* codes based on the interview guide and hypothesized motivations based on physical, social, and ecological health. These were supplemented with emergent codes during analysis. I then grouped and sorted the codes and memos to identify themes.

This research was done between 2006 and 2009 and has not been previously published. Subsequent literature searches through October 2020 confirm that the concept of meaning as motivation for food system action has not been substantively addressed in the published research. Distancing remains an issue despite increased popular awareness of food movements (Lusk, 2017). The global food system continues to be impacted by crises affecting human, social, and ecological health (such as—but not limited to—climate change (Willett et al., 2019), the COVID-19 pandemic (Laborde, Martin, Swinnen, & Vos, 2020), obesity and undernutrition (Swinburn et al., 2019), and food worker rights (Weiler, 2018)). The principles identified by the FLEdGE partnership and the impacts of a disconnected food system on human, ecological, and social health suggested to the author that these findings remain relevant and indicate opportunities to improve food system governance by fostering and leveraging meaning.

Results: motivations to resist distancing in the food system

The participants¹ in this study expressed a variety of motivations to build a more connected food system. Some were driven by external factors such as human health, sustainability, and social justice, but these were often secondary to a deeper meaning attributed to food. Put simply, they acted because food is important and they valued it. Their descriptions about the importance of food fell into three categories: (1) food as a basis for relationships; (2) food as sacred; and (3) food as central to an interconnected world. This finding was consistent among participants from Canada and India. There were surprisingly few between-country differences in motivation, a finding that may relate to social strata and demographics.

¹ The letters used in the quote identifiers indicate country (Canada/India), role (Farmer/Staff or volunteer/Consumer or organization member).

The staff, volunteers, and consumer participants in India were predominantly educated, middle- to upper-class urban dwellers who had experienced extensive globalization and westernization of culture and food systems (Bren d'Amour et al., 2020; Ghosh, 2011; Hawkes, Harris, & Gillespie, 2017). There were, however, two key distinctions: first, participants in India used more religious terminology (a matter addressed later in this section) and second, farmers in Canada were local food system activists living close to urban centres while those in India tended to live in remote villages and focussed on preserving traditional crops. As such, country is not discussed except where between-country differences were apparent.

Soulful connections through food

Participants described food as an important medium for deep or soulful connections with others. Soulful connections are emotional connections that have inner meaning. They differ from the more distant or superficial connections characteristic of the global industrial food system, where food travels long distances and passes through many hands (Barndt, 2002). Eating, sharing food, and feeding are soulful connections, acts of care, and expressions of gratitude.

Many participants recounted childhood memories and habits that focussed on food. In some cases, people felt connected to specific family members when they ate certain foods or remembered tastes, smells, and food practices. In the present, sharing food in a meaningful social context improved the quality and experience of eating. Participants described “good” food as a tool to strengthen human connections and improve their experience of eating: “The real value of food is nourishing—not only our stomachs, but our minds, our social relationships, and nourishing the planet” (CS4). They also used food to connect with land or place. As one participant said, “agriculture is the most intimate interaction we have with the Earth.” Food from the Earth is ultimately incorporated into the body, making it one of the few things that can connect individuals, communities, and the planet (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Berry, 1977; Winson, 1993).

Some participants described feeding as an act of nurturance and love. Women in India were particularly expressive about the nurturing aspect of cooking and the joy of feeding others. Despite the realities and time constraints of modern life, feeding is commonly viewed as “care work,” regardless of whether people feel able to give it sufficient time and attention (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2010; K. Morgan, 2010; Szabo, 2011). One consumer in India told me that she chose to stay at home when her children were young so she could express care through carefully and slowly prepared meals, a belief that she continued to demonstrate later in life when preparing food for others.

Food was also valued for its role in connecting producers and consumers:

I think connecting the producers with the consumers is something essential. Because if consumers...know how that food is produced, they'll have a lot of respect for the food they are eating and for the people who are producing that food...The kind of hardships our farmers have to go through and still they remain growing food for us, is to my mind an act of total giving. (IS1)

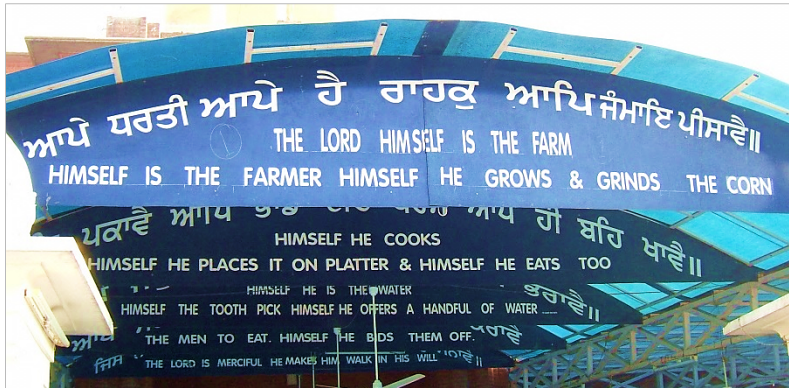
Many participants felt that the food system could be improved by fostering respect for relationships between people in different roles. Respect begets gratitude for the food and the effort that created and prepared it and can transcend ego-centric desires for personal gain or profit to support more meaningful relationships. One Canadian farmer who attended farmers' markets said,

People will come up to me, and they'll say, "Thanks. Thanks for being our farmer." And I just take out my wallet and fill it with all this great big fat satisfaction and go home. It doesn't matter if I made a nickel or not, you know? (CF2)

The need to earn a viable living notwithstanding, this farmer was highly motivated by the respect and gratitude of the people he helped to feed.

Participants also used food for sacred or spiritual connection, often referencing an intangible relationship with something greater than themselves. They described food in terms of deep bonds to other people (e.g., sharing food in religious ceremonies), to nature (e.g., growing food), or to God (e.g., prayer or the divine) (fig. 1). In India, people were more explicit with spiritual and religious language, but people in both countries evoked reverence. Canadian comments about spirituality or soulfulness were reminiscent of William James' ([1902] 2004) concept of personal religion—"the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (p. 36) which does not suppose institutions or the existence of a god.

Figure 1: Signs over the entrance to the langar (communal kitchen) at the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, India. Free meals are offered to anyone who enters the temple complex. The words describe a connection between the divine and food as well as providing food as a sacred offering. (Photo: Karen Rideout)



People expressed a sacred ethic of sharing and abundance that opposed the individualization typified by the industrial food system.

If you go to any traditional household, they will not let you go away without eating because that's part of a spiritual duty... To me, all the problems in food began with reducing food to a commodity... To the extent that food is considered sacred, your duty with respect to food is sharing it, giving it... In a strange, interesting kind of way it creates abundance. The minute it's a commodity, it creates scarcity. (IS3)

This participant is referring to the ancient Indian concept of *annadaana* described in Hindu texts such as the Taittiriya Upanishad. Annadaana means the giving of food: one should always give to the hungry and one should not eat while there are still hungry people nearby (Shiva, 2002). Traditional Hindu culture values feeding or giving food and frowns upon eating to excess (Moreno, 1992). This spiritual duty to share shifts focus away from individual consumption toward commensality and a practical application of sacred connections as a form of decommodification.

The ethic of sharing was also expressed metaphorically. One activist described his first effort at growing food as a 2×4-metre plot of wheat. He wanted to sow, nurture, harvest, grind, and bake the wheat into two loaves of Eucharistic bread² that could be shared by many people.

² Eucharistic bread is used in the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion, a symbolic re-enactment of the Last Supper of Jesus, in which he broke bread and shared with his disciples, instructing them to break and share bread in remembrance of him (Luke 22:19).

The idea of feeding many people from the same loaf suggests spiritual abundance and is reminiscent of the Bible story in which Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes (Matthew 14:13–21).

Food has previously been identified as a vehicle for connection. Friedmann (1999) recognized the shift toward more, but less meaningful, connections as a function of industrialization and globalization. “The most intimate daily practices of people around the world who are unknown to one another are connected—and disconnected—through growing, processing, transporting, selling, buying, cooking and eating food” (p. 36). This suggests that industrial food system connections are more superficial or less soulful. In response, there is a growing literature on reconnection in the food system (e.g., Dowler, Kneafsey, Cox, & Holloway, 2009; Gerber, 2017; Gliessman, 2016; Hinrichs, 2000; Kneafsey et al., 2009; Sage, 2003). People seek out more connected food system alternatives for a range of reasons that are not always easy for them to articulate but that center around an ethic of care (Dowler et al., 2009; Kneafsey et al., 2009). Not surprisingly, food charity continues to be a visible activity of Christian organizations amid declining church attendance, and the *langar* tradition of feeding anyone who comes to the gurdwara (temple) is strongly held by Sikh communities in India and Canada (Desjardins & Desjardins, 2009; Lindsay, 2008). Such practices do not require religion per se, but are based in values of connection, care, and responsibility for fellow humans.

Sacred connections through food

The intrinsic value of food often went deeper than the relationships or connections participants had with or through food. They regarded food and food-related activities with reverence. More than a medium to connect with other people, places, or times, food itself was sacred. They celebrated nourishing food yet raised concerns about trends toward conspicuous consumption and gourmet eating.

Conscious eating nourishes the soul (Nhat Hanh & Cheung, 2010). Study participants described nourishing food as fulfilling, in contrast to food products consumed simply as fuel:

We have...products that...basically aren't food. They're for us to consume because there is something that we're wanting to fill up, and we're wanting that experience of food. It's like an addiction that's trying to fill that hole that is more properly addressed through relationships and culture and celebration and slowing down and spending time together.
(CS1)

Others similarly described how highly processed or ‘junk’ food may be an attempt to fill a spiritual void (see Morrison, Burke, & Greene, 2007).

There is much about food that can be made sacred, whether it be ritual feasts or daily food habits; it need only be “regarded as more significant, powerful, and extraordinary than the self” (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry Jr, 1989, p. 13). Participants described food as “a holy thing” in traditional Indian society and there was much sacred ritual and respect given to the practice of preparing food. In India, Hinduism is as much culture as religion (Klostermaier, 2007): Hindu practices and beliefs are prevalent even among non-Hindus and secular people. The Hindu Upanishads characterize food as a manifestation of both *Brahman* (God or ultimate Reality) and the self (divine nature) and therefore deserving of respect and reverence (Easwaran, 2007). We are instructed to “respect food: the body is made of food” (Taittiriya Upanishad, Part III:8.1). In Jain philosophy, foods are “fruits of the Earth” and thus deserving of respect, reverence, and gratitude because the Earth is sacred (Kumar, 2002). There are rituals from virtually all human cultures that link food with deities or religion, suggesting that it is not only fuel for the body but also feeds the soul (Desjardins, 2015; Kass, 1999; Moore, 2002).

Spirituality and sacredness were also expressed through the growing and harvesting of food. One Canadian farmer used small-scale farming to practice Christian spiritual beliefs. By participating in what he saw as the miracle of agriculture, his lived experience became more real and meaningful than a religious institution.

You have to find ways of living out your beliefs on a day-to-day basis, so I think that’s more what we’re doing. And I think that...has sort of reinforced that there’s something really incredible about the process of life and death and that interconnection in agriculture. (CF4)

Growing food was a way for this farmer to enact his spiritual convictions outside the church. Because he saw God in the miracle of growth, farming became an act of faith and worship.

Eating can also be a sacred practice. One follower of Buddhist philosophy spoke of eating as mindfulness practice, noting that one appreciates and experiences flavour by eating slowly and attentively (see also Nhat Hanh, 1991). She felt that food’s intrinsic value warranted respect. As the monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “The purpose of eating is to eat” (1991, p. 23). This philosophy encourages reverence for the food rather than limiting it to nutritional value.

Traditionally, in India, food, the eating of food was considered an act of prayer. And the grace that I grew up saying as a child was, “With every morsel of food take the name of God, because this food is the truth.” (IC1)

Many traditions say a “grace” before meals to turn the act of eating into an offering—a recognition that food connects us to a wider world, and even that we will eventually become food—and reminds eaters of the importance of gratitude (Snyder, 2002).

These ideas are in keeping with common religious ideas that food can take on the holiness of a deity (Desjardins, 2015; Desjardins & Desjardins, 2009), but to describe food as sacred is not necessarily a religious idea. Any part of life can be sacralised if viewed with deep reverence, respect, or gratitude for its intrinsic value (Belk et al., 1989; Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Kumar, 2002). To these participants, food was sacred and therefore deserving of special attention. Their thoughts and actions with respect to food and the food system signified intentionality in that they were directly *about* food (Byrne, 2006; Siewart, 2011). They were motivated by something intrinsic to food itself and by their relationship with food, rather than solely by some external effect within the food system.

Interconnectedness and oneness

The food system actors in this study were motivated not just by the way they valued food and food-related connections, but also by a sense that food was part of everything. They spoke of food in broader terms than personal choices or the food system. Food was not a microcosm *representing* larger meanings; food was the *manifestation* of something greater than all of us. Because we take nature into our bodies when we eat and create new life when we farm, food reveals the interconnections between humans and the rest of nature. Participants described food as part of the interconnected totality of human life, the natural world, and the divine. As one interviewee said, “what we’re talking about is spiritual, not material, and it is reconnecting people to themselves, which reconnects them to everything.” Several participants described food as a central tenet of human civilization.

We have the need for food, and we have built our civilization around that. And where we get disconnected from it, we also get disconnected from ourselves and each other. So, to me, health is not just only whether or not my body’s healthy. (CS1)

This quote illustrates a holistic view in which the health of the individual is interconnected with the health of the community and the environment. Wendell Berry critiques the artificial dualism imposed on body and soul (or physical and spiritual health) in industrial society by pointing out that people without food become cadavers but a machine without power is still a machine (Berry, 1994). We don’t just observe nature; we are part of nature. Physical bodies are made from elements of earth and ultimately become part of that whole when we die (Berry, 1977).

Many participants thought about the implications of their actions within the food system. They felt that production and consumption had wide-reaching impacts because of the interconnected nature of the food system.

My personal view is that we should all probably pay more attention to what and how we eat because it has implications for our health, for our local economy, for the environment, and really, at the end of the day, for the distribution of wealth and power within the international system. Something as simple as the food that we eat has implications internationally that we're responsible for. (CP3)

Food system actors from both countries were explicit about how food fit into their spiritual view that all things are interconnected.

I define spirituality...as the interconnectedness of everything... There is certainly something much larger than me as an individual that the health or the disease of the planet depends on. And so, if everything is connected, then we begin to understand that whatever we do (with respect to food)...affects other people. (CS1)

This sentiment of spiritual interconnectedness is prevalent in Indian culture and sacred texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu Vedas, the Upanishads, and in the *ayurvedic* system of medicine, all of which describe food as part of a totality that includes the divine.

One study participant noted how food affects our *prakriti* (nature). *Prakriti* is represented by three *gunas* (qualities) of *sattva* (virtue), *rajas* (excitement), and *tamas* (dullness) (Klostermaier, 2007; Kumar, 2002; Wolpert, 1991). *Sattvic* food is sacred, simple, pure, fresh, local, and unprocessed; *rajasic* food is spicy, rich, or fancy; and *tamasic* food is preserved, foul, stale, spoiled, or intoxicating (Khare, 1992; Klostermaier, 2007; Kumar, 2002). In this view, highly processed industrial foods would be considered *tamasic*, the quality that sees nature as inferior, while fetishized foods would be considered *rajasic* because of the focus on image and excess waste (Kumar, 2002). *Sattvic* or fresh, simple food has a divine quality and facilitates connection between the Self and the Universe. Both terms derive from the root “Brh”: to grow.

The concept of using food to connect with “self/Brahman” comes from the pantheistic belief that everything is interconnected and thus the sacred or divine resides in all things. The hymn *In Praise of Food* from the Rigveda explains, “In thee, O Food, is set the spirit of great Gods” (Rigveda, Hymn 187:6; Griffith, [1896] 2006, p. 251). Perhaps the most familiar references to the totality of food appear in the Taittiriya Upanishad, which explains that bodies are made of food. Food forms the first of five *kosas* (sheaths) that eventually lead to a state of bliss or oneness, meaning that food is God and therefore is sacred:

Bhrigu went to his father, Varuna, and asked respectfully: “What is Brahman?”
Varuna replied: “First learn about food, ...That is Brahman.” (Taittiriya Upanishad, Part III: 1.1 Easwaran, 2007, p. 257)

Several participants described seeds in terms of our connection to the rest of the world:

When you see a child plant a seed, and they see the seed grow, it's a miracle, and it changes them. It changes their relationship to the Earth and nature. And I think that's true for all of us—I think inherently people know about their connectivity. (CS4)

The interconnectedness of the food system includes spiritual relationships between people that were mediated by food. Several people in India spoke about energetic bonds and a belief that energy is transferred through food, so the people involved in producing it should be treated with respect or it will carry the negativity of their experience.

There's a Tibetan idea that even in the processing of the food and the packaging of it, there's an energy that goes with it. . . . Even if it's organic food and grown very properly but...the farmers are really not getting an input back from it, then it becomes tainted... Spiritually, there is an exploitation factor. (IC9)

Likewise, food was described as a host for positive energy:

And to work for the biodiverse farm you have to have a lot of patience and a real love for that act of producing food, for the soil. So when food is produced with so much positive energy and you are aware of that positive energy, then naturally that connection will work for the well-being of your own body [as an eater] but also for the well-being of people who are producing. (IS1)

Desjardins and Desjardins (2009) have similarly found that many Sikhs feel that communal meals offered at the *gurdwara* (temple) tastes better.

Feeding as an expression of care was discussed in the section about connecting through food, but feeding was also discussed in terms of spiritual intention:

In Ayurveda, they say...don't ever cook with the idea that it's just one person. That is why traditionally in India they have this business of feeding the cow, the crow, the dog, and a poor person passing by. So you actually cook for four other people. Not maybe in terms of quantity, but definitely in terms of attitude. (IC9)

This participant was referring to a tradition of giving the first few morsels of food to nearby animals and sharing with the hungry before consuming food oneself. This spiritual duty to share food can be carried out even when alone if the intention is present.

These stories show how food can serve as a medium for connection and how it represents, or is, everything from the most mundane to the divine. Concepts of interconnectedness and oneness highlight the intrinsic value of food described above.

Through the integration of nature with the body through eating, humans solidify a connection with the world. If nature is everything, and nature is incorporated into the physical body as food, then eating connects people with all of nature. Whether one recognizes that all actions related to food have implications elsewhere or sees the divine on her plate, the reality that food is connected to everything makes it deserving of attention.

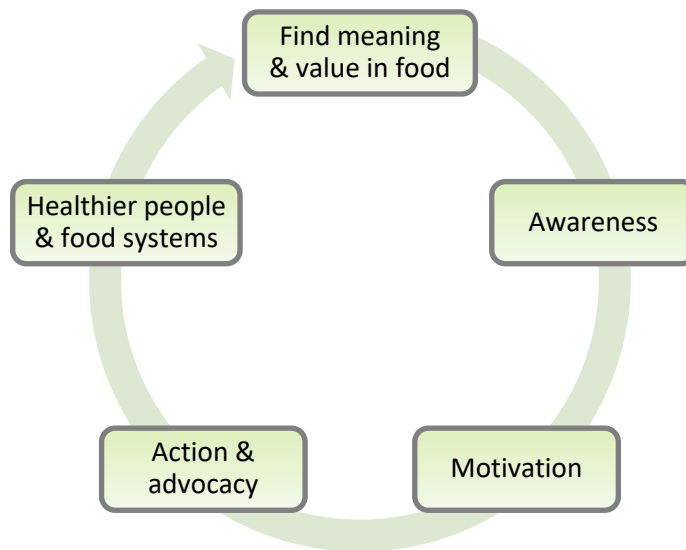
Discussion: Food's intrinsic value as a driver of change

These results show how farmers, activists, and consumers resisted food system distancing because of how they valued food. Intrinsic value implies that people are motivated to seek that which has value (Taylor, 1978). The participants in this study were motivated by their perception of the intrinsic value of food, which they saw as a connector, as worthy of reverence and respect, and as representative of the oneness of all life. In an industrialized food system that masks the value of food, cultivating population-level recognition that food is deeply important could be a path toward positive change. As one participant pointed out, “Basically, we have stopped paying attention to the importance of food” (IS9). This implies a need for a public ethic and politics of care for food as ways to care for others (Morgan, 2010).

Necessary but not sufficient

Many participants felt that positive food system change would follow if people had more opportunities to develop deep relationships around food. They talked about how the values expressed through the food system impact the environment, producers, and the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness of eaters. Although individual consumers should not be held responsible for the impacts of unhealthy food environments (Black, Moon, & Baird, 2014; Frieden, 2010), awareness can be a starting point. Recognition of food's intrinsic value is a potential first step toward system change in face of widespread distancing. Value is a form of respect, which leads to care, which may (though not necessarily) in turn lead to action (fig. 2). People are unlikely to be motivated to enact change unless they appreciate food, “because it's only when they really have a sense of oneness with the land, they will respect the land and the food” (IS3). Disconnection hides the real value of food in our lives, thus rebuilding those connections could encourage people to become aware of—and care more about—issues such as sustainability, equity, and health (Bennett, 2014; Finn, 2014).

Figure 2: Conceptual model of meaning and value as a pathway to food system change. Governance approaches that foster recognition of food’s intrinsic value and encourage connection to meaning through food can build awareness and motivate care-based actions and politics. Such approaches offer a path toward healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable food systems. Healthier people and food systems that facilitate the ability to find meaning and value in food reinforce the cycle.



Most of the critical literature on food systems focuses on one or more issues or side effects associated with food, such as health (e.g., Lang, 2009; Stuckler & Nestle, 2012), the environment (e.g., Kloppenburg, Lezberg, De Master, Stevenson, & Hendrickson, 2000; Svenfelt & Carlsson-Kanyama, 2010), or social factors (e.g., Hinrichs, 2000). However, Kloppenburg et al. (2000) noted that people involved with alternative food systems valued food for reasons beyond its extrinsic functions. They described food as a source of soulful connections or spiritual nourishment and felt that recognizing the sacred in food was a way to resist commodification. Beingessner and Fletcher (2019) found that some Canadian prairie farmers who resisted the dominant export-oriented commodity system were driven by a desire for meaningful connections and personal relationships with consumers. Dowler et al. (2009) found that people who engaged in alternative food systems were motivated by care about things such as local food producers, holistic concepts of health, or the well-being of future generations. This analysis extends the notion of care to suggest that care for food itself can motivate people to act (when they have choices available) or to support policies rooted in care.

Searching for the elusive “right” food system issue to address and a “proper” way to address it is not likely to be effective in managing food systems. Normative ideology assumes there is a “right” way to eat or an “ideal” food system and problematizes some issues at the expense of others (Halkier, 2001).

Messages take a moralistic tone and are subject to changing norms (Nathoo & Ostry, 2009). Valuing food itself (versus some specific feature or impact of the food system) also reduces the risk of moral superiority and exclusionary attitudes for which some alternative food systems movements have been criticized (e.g., Allen, 1999; Ankeny, 2016; DeLind, 2011; Desrochers & Shimizu, 2012; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2007a, 2007b; McCann & Bechsgaard, 2018; McWilliams, 2009; Szabo, 2011). Heldke (2012) also warns of the dangers of dualisms—local versus cosmopolitan, individualism versus communalism, urban versus rural, industrialism versus agrarian—which are essentially debates between opposing ideologies. Similarly, Born and Purcell (2006) advise against slipping into the “local trap,” whereby the focus is on a particular means (e.g., localization) rather than the broader goal of a healthier, more just, or more sustainable food system. Such dichotomies “erase nuance” and reinforce divisive mentalities whereby people become entrenched in their position, often ignoring contextual factors and new ideas (Heldke, 2012; Hinrichs, 2003).

While dogmatic approaches ignore the interconnected realities of food and food systems, a focus on intrinsic value could direct efforts toward broad goals that can be sustained regardless of social norms, politics, or science. By definition, that which has intrinsic value is desired for its own sake, as an end rather than a means (although this does not preclude the existence of other external values) (Taylor, 1978). In the case of food, recognition of intrinsic value means desire for a healthier food system rather than a single path toward some “best way” to produce or eat food (see K. Morgan, 2010; Nathoo & Ostry, 2009).

Meaning, value and motivation

If that which is valued holds meaning, then food’s intrinsic value offers a basis for meaningful action within the food system. Meaning is an important aspect of the human condition (Frankl, [1959]2006) that refers to “the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (Reker & Wong, 1988, p. 221). It helps people adapt and make sense of the world and their place in it (Park, 2005). The meaning of food in people’s lives could therefore help shift society toward food system governance models that support values such as equity, sustainability, or health.

Need for meaning in life

Humans have an innate need for and desire to find meaning (Epstein, 1985; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Heine et al. (2006) describe meaning in relational terms as an existential need to connect with people or things beyond the self. They contend that humans have an essential drive to find a coherent framework with which to make sense of life, without which people feel disrupted and disconnected.

As a result, we are driven to find meaning in our lives (Frankl, [1959]2006; Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger et al., 2008). While failed searches for meaning have been associated with psychopathologies or “existential sickness” (Elkins et al., 1988; Frankl, [1959]2006; Morrison et al., 2007; Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger et al., 2008), finding or having meaning is fulfilling (Reker & Wong, 1988). Life events become more coherent and everyday occurrences more significant (Frankl, [1959]2006; George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002; Park, 2005; Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger et al., 2006). This research shows how growing, selling, or eating food in meaningful, connected contexts supports a greater sense of fulfillment and highlights the larger purpose of mundane food-related activities.

Meaning and motivation

Meaning can inspire action because of the sense of purpose and context it provides. Research on meaning in the workplace suggests that employees are motivated more by intrinsic factors such as a sense of purpose or feeling connected to something larger (Dehler & Welsh, 1994; McKnight, 1984) than by extrinsic factors such as job perks or salary. When people enjoy their work because it has meaning for them, it allows them to enter states of flow during which performance improves (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1990; Dehler & Welsh, 1994). People are more motivated to engage in mundane tasks when they are seen to be connected to higher goals or something that is deeply valued (King, Richards, & Stemmerich, 1998; Morrison et al., 2007). There is also emerging evidence that meaning in life is associated with better physical health and positive health behaviours including healthy eating (Czekierda, Banik, Park, & Luszczynska, 2017; Roepke, Jayawickreme, & Riffle, 2014).

Meaning and spirituality

While participants in India were more inclined to use religious language, those in Canada spoke of soulful relationships, connectedness, and fulfillment. Canada is an increasingly secular nation, with rates of declared religious affiliation and attendance at religious services declining steadily since the middle of last century (Clark, 2000, 2003; Lindsay, 2008). Secularization, however, does not imply meaning is less important, rather that people are looking elsewhere to find it (Bibby, 2011, 2012). Secular people may actually engage in a greater search for meaning because they are not receiving a regular “package” of social connection and coherent teachings about meaning in life that foster a sense of well-being (Eckersley, 2007). According to religious sociologist Reginald Bibby (2011), the social and spiritual roles traditionally played by the church in Canada could potentially be met elsewhere. People find alternatives to the functions once provided by regular attendance at religious services.

Some participants, such as the farmer who replaced church with agriculture as his way to participate in the miracles of life, explicitly declared that food-related activities were a substitute for more organized religious practice. Another noticed that farmers' markets seemed to fill the role that church once played in community:

People need to reconnect with each other and their communities and the place that they live in. There are farmers' markets that are so routine now, and farmers' market goes that are so much into the sort of schedule and rhythm of a farmers' market... "If I don't see my friends there, I go home and call them and find out if there's something wrong." It's, I think, that need in peoples' lives for a regular community connection, kind of like church. (CP4)

In secular western societies, spirituality can be a reflection on "lived experience" that does not necessarily include organized religion (Crisp, 2008; Frohlich, 2001). Spirituality is a form of constructed inner meaning that relates more to authenticity and truth of one's own experience than it does to religious canon. People "create and recreate meaning, joy, and shared life from whatever materials are at hand" (Frohlich, 2001, p. 68). Thus, in a secular society like Canada, connectedness around food-related activities can and does become a form of worship.

There has been limited scholarly work on the relationship between spirituality and health (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Raeburn & Rootman, 1998; Vader, 2006), particularly with respect to food. However, religion and spirituality have been associated with better health, lower rates of diet-related chronic disease, and increased fruit and vegetable intake (Tan, Chan, & Reidpath, 2013). Among two groups of Thai farmers who adopted organic methods, those supported by a temple reported deeper eco-spiritual values as well as a stronger connection to nature, better health, and improved on-farm biodiversity than those supported by a community group (Kaufman & Mock, 2014; Michopoulou & Jauniškis, 2020). The inclusion of spirituality in definitions of health promotion (O'Donnell, 1986, 2009) and as a determinant of health (Vader, 2006; World Health Organization, 2005) suggests that the presence of an inner life is associated with healthy behaviours.

Conclusion: Meaning and value as a tool to promote healthier systems

This research suggests that finding meaning or seeing the intrinsic value in food could support healthy, sustainable, and equitable food systems. Distancing results from disconnection or breaking of the spiritual bonds we have around food and the resulting meaninglessness or spiritual void creates an "existential vacuum." In western culture, people sometimes try to fill that emptiness through superficial consumption (e.g., of junk foods) if they do not find fulfillment in more soulful ways (e.g., through deep, communal food experiences) (Morrison et al., 2007). The participants in this study valued food, saw it as sacred, or found meaning in it.

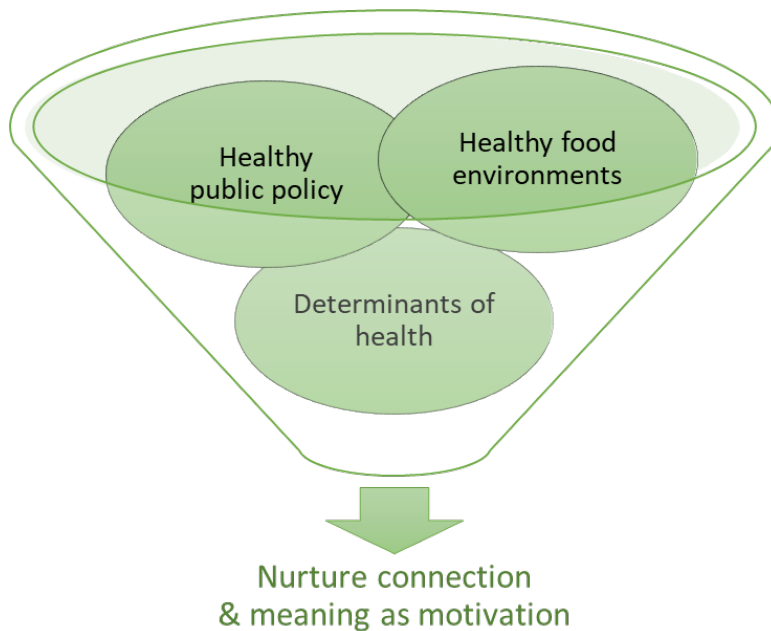
For them, eating or consuming food was transcendent; it was *about* food because they were connected *through* and *with* food. The forms of consumption participants described as “mindless,” “unfulfilling,” or “attempts to fill the void” were individualized and lacking in meaning, while those described as “nurturing,” “communal,” or “celebratory” were based on connections and relationships that went beyond the self. The focus wasn’t what food could do for them in nutritional terms; it was simply about the positive attributes of food.

Nurturing connection to meaning (i.e., intrinsic or sacred value) through food could therefore serve as effective motivation for food systems change. The spiritual philosopher Thomas Moore (2002) refers to “disenchanted times” during which all manner of food activities have been “short-circuited” and suggests that imagination, attention, and time could restore food’s ability to serve the soul. Wendell Berry argues that the industrial food system has transformed us from eaters to “*mere* consumers,” taking away our ability to fully engage with our food and experience the true pleasure of eating (Berry, 1992, p. 378). Carlo Petrini (2007), founder of the Slow Food Movement, advocates for a “new gastronomy” distinct from the world of the gourmet. This “reasoned knowledge of everything that concerns man as he eats” (p. 55) stresses the importance of complete knowledge and real choice in *all* aspects of the food system (e.g., social, ecological, medical, cultural, political, economic, culinary) as well as pleasure in food. Industrialization has reduced our ability and desire to celebrate and appreciate food because many of the processes of industrialization, if known, would destroy any sense of pleasure in eating (Berry, 1992; Korthals, 2004). Empirical data point to many ideas about how to address problems in the food system, but meaning and spirituality might be the missing pieces needed to shift attitudes and behaviours (Bennett, 2014).

The resisters of distancing who participated in this research found a way to connect with the deeper meaning in food. This soulful connection motivated them to find ways of sidestepping the mainstream industrial food system, to find or create cracks that they could inhabit in a more connected way. These cracks are niches or alternative systems that are inhabited by a few. With time, those cracks might be co-opted by industrial forces or they may expand to create viable alternatives (Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002).

Existing tools of food system governance could be harnessed to foster the motivating types of meaning, value, and connection identified in this study. Robust public policy, health-supportive environments, and determinants of health approaches have all been applied to improving the sustainability and equity of food systems. They could also be used to support a broader recognition of food’s intrinsic value and the meaning food can bring to our lives, thus motivating and facilitating greater attention and care to how we produce, exchange, and consume food.

Figure 3: Governance approaches to leverage meaning as a motivator for healthier food systems.



Determinants of Health

Access to healthy food is now widely accepted as a determinant of health (McIntyre, 2003; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The findings from this research suggest that recognition of the sacred value of—or spiritual connections with—food could be a determinant of healthy food systems. Spirituality has been recognized as a determinant of health in the *Bangkok Charter for Health Promotion in a Globalized World* (Vader, 2006; World Health Organization, 2005) and by the editorial board of the *American Journal of Health Promotion* in its definition of health promotion (O'Donnell, 1986, 2009). Spirituality has also been included in definitions of sustainable food systems (Blay-Palmer & Koc, 2010; Hinrichs, 2010; Kloppenburg et al., 2000). Recognizing the sacredness or intrinsic value, i.e., finding meaning, in food is akin to developing a spiritual connection with food.

Healthy food environments

Food environments are made up of social, physical, and political factors that influence food access, quality, and behaviours in a community (Glanz, Sallis, Saelens, & Frank, 2005). They affect people's food options, choices, and behaviours that determine where, when, how, and with whom food is eaten (Rideout, Mah, & Minaker, 2015). There is a growing body of evidence showing how food environments impact diet and health (Black et al., 2014; Larson & Story, 2009; Story, Kaphingst, Robinson-O'Brien, & Glanz, 2008), as well as frameworks and governance tools to guide the creation of food environments that support nutritional, ecological, and community health (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2018; Story et al., 2008).

Healthy public policy

Healthy public policies support population health through positive influences on the social and environmental determinants of health (Milio, 1988; National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy, 2010). Food choices are constrained by the food system itself (Beaudry, Hamelin, & Delisle, 2004), just as individuals' health choices are impacted by factors beyond their control (Frieden, 2010). People often have to "choose the best they [can] among the miserable options available to them" (Milio, 1990, p. 45). Traditional policy frameworks without direct feedback mechanisms exacerbate distancing in the food system (MacRae, 2011) such that consumers often lack knowledge about the decisions they are making and therefore cannot exercise real choice. Even when consumers have adequate knowledge, it can be difficult to make healthy food choices because the food industry largely determines what foods are available to choose from (Lang, 2009). Food choices are the culmination of institutional arrangements, actors from multiple sectors such as government and industry, and consumer preference (Korthals, 2004). Given the power and influence of the food industry, outside intervention is needed to create an environment in which individuals can make informed decisions (Ludwig & Nestle, 2008; Parsons & Hawkes, 2019). Governance through healthy food policy can influence both the options and information available and create new norms of production, distribution, and consumption throughout the food system. Ultimately, this could create an environment in which the types of choices made by highly motivated individuals such as the resisters in this study could shift toward the norm.

This research used the perspectives and motivations of resisters to offer a new paradigm to consider healthy food systems. Without awareness of meaning, it is easy to lose respect for the sacred value and intimate nature of food. It is therefore essential to facilitate recognition of the deep, sacred meaning of food and to make it easier for people to act on that meaning. Healthy choices, or at least real choices based on complete knowledge and understanding, should be the easiest choices rather than the most challenging. Recognition of food's value and meaning in human life is vital if not sufficient to create a healthy food system.

While recognition of meaning cannot be governed, structural changes could foster environments in which individuals can engage with food in more meaningful ways.

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