

What We Can Learn From Different Food Cultures

"You Are What You Eat", is a saying I am sure the majority of Americans have heard at some point in their lives. When this saying first emerged, it was a hippie mantra to encourage healthy eating in the States. Today with the rise of diet culture and self-branding on social media, this well known saying now has different connotations: that one's identity is associated with what they choose to consume. Understanding the saying in this way is dangerous for everyone and could not be more distant from the truth. One's overall health is not determined by the foods they eat or the numbers on labels. Health is multidimensional, and a sum of many different factors. Food also is multidimensional as there are many different cultures and values associated with it depending on where in the world you look.

In the States we are efficient and strive for convenience most of the time as "time is money". We do our shopping once a week, limit our lunch breaks to maximize productivity, and often order take-out or fast food. To add to this hustle-bustle culture of convenience and efficiency, we have our rampant diet culture. Americans are found to have an everyday food culture that associates food the most with health and as a means for nutrition/necessity (ROZIN et al., 1999) and the least with pleasure compared with many other countries. The implications of this may be tremendous and likely contributes to the unfortunate popularity of diet culture and the rising rates of eating disorders in our country. How can we expect individuals to be satisfied with their relationship with food when the mainstream culture doesn't permit the time or space to form a healthy relationship? More importantly, is it possible for us to look to other countries and food cultures in order to improve our own?

Food as Fulfillment

In numerous cultures around the world, including both European and Asian cultures, food is highly associated with pleasure rather than a means of health or necessity- this is especially true for the French. Granted, these cultures are oriented at a slower-pace which permits them to enjoy the smaller things in life but nonetheless, their food culture and practices have great benefits. Preparing and cooking are viewed more as a past-time than an obligation. Daily trips to the store for fresh and quality products is more common which can eliminate stress in several domains. The stress of accidental waste is eliminated as you use what you need when you need it and weekly planning is not as important. Our culinary associations with food is low, possibly leading many people to be dissatisfied with their relationship to food despite yearning to maintain health. In thinking of food and cooking more like a hobby or source of leisure rather than an obligation, we could eliminate some of the stress present in our own food culture and potentially become healthier because of it.

Food as Solidarity

In other countries, the key to food culture is community which is certainly something the United States is lacking. Other than our holidays, there are few occasions where individuals connect and bond with their communities. Our 30 minute lunch breaks don't allow for much besides small talk to be achieved. In the United States, close to 50% of all meals are eaten solo rather than in solidarity (Reiter,

2015). Diet culture contributes to this as how can a community all eat together when the community is divided in what diet of the month they chose/ were pressured to adopt?

In Arab and Chinese communities, regularly eating alone is uncommon. The activity of eating has nothing to do with what you are eating specifically or how much, but about being social and connecting with your loved ones. In fact, in some places, communal rather than individual plates are used for meals which emphasizes the importance of sharing as it is key to these food cultures.

In Italy, being invited for a meal is considered a gesture of warmth and love. It is not the content that is of importance but it is the conversations, memories, and connectedness these food cultures focus on.

Imagine the impact it could make for children to grow up in a culture where they didn't associate food directly with their health or body-image, but with sharing, community, and solidarity. This collectivist approach encourages a sense of belonging which plays a major role in mental health.

Food as Humanity

Our first social experience on earth is eating whether through a bottle or a breast. Not only does it permit life but the celebratory nature of food is found universally across cultures and helps us define who we are, but not in a *"You Are What You Eat"* way. Rather, our foods demonstrate where we come from, what we value, and what has happened to each of us along the way. We may have our own traditions, cultures and problems regarding food but each of our own practices can demonstrate where we have gone, what we have been through, and what we have learned along the way.

What We Can Learn

Everything is easier said than done but becoming aware of the different food cultures around the world may be beneficial for us in the United States. As social media will continue to expand, it is important to look everywhere we can for ways to improve our food culture as it currently is having detrimental effects on individuals throughout the nation. Diet culture and our food culture's emphasis on food being equivalent to health contributes greatly to the rising rates of eating disorders. As we continue to battle diet culture, erase stigmas, and increase accessibility to mental services, we should also look at other cultures to permanently change our toxic food culture in America rather than aiming to keep up with it.

Organizations such as The National Alliance for Eating Disorders are playing an important role in all of this. Hopefully through more advocacy work, awareness, and education, we can amend our systems to accommodate a healthier and more positive food culture that includes associating food with values other than nutrition or body-image, ultimately nourishing individuals across the nation. Health is not one-dimensional, food is not one-dimensional, and neither are you. You are not what you eat.

Sources

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