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Food and culture along the trans-Siberian railway: An ethnographic exploration with implications for Psychotherapy

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The relationship people have with food is changing. The number of people with diabetes is increasing worldwide, with a forecasted 10% of the population being diagnosed by 2035; the rate of eating disorders is growing across all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, and in countries previously considered minimally affected; the latest DSM added the diagnosis binge eating disorder, and the mounting influence of transnational food companies on local food availability, consumption patterns and nutritional outcomes is evident. The following study explored an area of the world that is currently experiencing processes of globalization—industrialization, urbanization, increased tourism, increased expatriate communities and a growing consumer culture—to observe how food culture is changing and how this affects individuals. Data were collected from interviews held with participants who live along the trans-Siberian railway in China, Mongolia and Siberia, as well as through ethnographic participant-observation. Results indicated that industrialization is impacting how people think about food, and that eating behaviors express underlying economic, social, and cultural shifts. Specific themes emerged, including (1) tension between economic growth and cultural sacrifice, and (2) conflicting desires bound within the consumer self. These results point to a need for psychologists to understand what food may embody and how it may serve to function in the minds of many of their clients..

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