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Beyond Hippies and Rabbit Food:
The Social Effects of Vegetarianism and Veganism
An Undergraduate Senior Comparative Sociology Thesis
By Anna Lindquist

Abstract

Depending on the actors involved and the environment, vegetarians and vegans may either be met with acceptance, tolerance, or hostility when they divulge their dietary practices. By interviewing vegetarians and vegans about these social interactions, this study has sought to conceptualize the subjects' treatment as well as their feelings and actions. Throughout the study ethnographic methods have been used, as well as identity and social deviance theory, and historical information about the evolution of vegetarianism. All this has led to a better understanding of how vegetarians and vegans balance their alternative lifestyle with mainstream social norms.

Introduction

I never questioned my food choices for the first eighteen years of my life. This changed one night when I found myself cutting up some calamari to help my dad with dinner. Confronted with the tiny bodies of the squids something inside me snapped. Why, I asked myself, was I doing this? It had never occurred to me before that moment that my food choices were just that—a choice—and that I could choose what—or who—I wanted to eat. From that day on I have been vegetarian, and more recently, vegan.

Yet, I have found that this very personal choice has not only had an effect on me, but on my family and friends as well. This ethnography is therefore the product my desire to understand what happens to the social lives of individuals when they deviate from social custom. Consequently, my research has centered around two main questions: what, if any, effect does being vegetarian or vegan have on people's social interactions? And, how do people conceptualize the effects of vegetarianism and veganism on their social lives? The first question addresses what the actual effect being vegetarian or vegan has on people's lives—the way they are treated, the way they are perceived, and the social groups they make—while the second seeks to understand how people feel about these changes in their lives. The second question, for me, is the most important and interesting because how people internalize their changing social lives—either negatively or positively—can change their social life just as much as external factors.

This research is especially pertinent today because an estimated 13 percent of Americans consider themselves to be either vegetarian or vegan according to a recent poll (Jensen, 2013). This same poll found that 49 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of vegetarians while 22 percent view them negatively; and 38 percent of Americans view vegans in a favorable light, but 30 percent do not (Jensen, 2013). Despite these numbers, there is little scholarly research about the lives of vegetarians and vegans, and how they interact with those who view them either favorably and disapprovingly. Of course, the social acceptability of any trait or behavior varies depending on the actors involved and the circumstances of their interaction. On the other hand, these poll numbers indicate that, regardless of any particular individual or situation, the American public has a definitely mixed opinion about vegetarians and vegans.

Using ethnographic methods, I talked to a range of both vegetarians and vegans in the Pacific Northwest of the United States to see if they experienced these mixed opinions in their social interactions, and consequently how these interactions affected my subject's social lives and whether any social benefits or obstacles came from these experiences. As well as drawing on the experiences of others, I have pulled ideas from a number of sociological theories to help conceptualize these social effects. All this will lead to a greater understanding of how vegetarians balance their alternative lifestyle¹ with mainstream ideas of social norms. The end result of all of this, I hope, is that the unique social experiences of a few individuals finds relevance in a wider audience, both in terms of understanding how we treat those around us, and how we internalize our own social experiences.

Conceptual Framework

Vegetarianism

¹ I use the term “alternative” not to suggest that vegetarianism is inherently abnormal, but rather to suggest that it is not the norm within the United States. Within the context of other groups and countries however, vegetarianism is the norm.

The word vegetarian is commonly understood to mean a person who consumes dairy and eggs but not meat, while a vegan is someone who consumes no animal products. Abstaining from animal products is not a new phenomenon, but for the purposes of this study I have focused on vegetarianism within the context of the United States during the past few decades. Understanding the history of vegetarianism with the United States will help us be aware of how the perception of vegetarianism has evolved², and give us insight into how vegetarians conceptualize their identity.

Vegetarianism as a recognized movement and lifestyle really blossomed during the 1960s counterculture era. Warren J. Belasco (2007) has written extensively on the subject, emphasizing that the prevailing idea of the time was that by changing one's own private life one could also transform "the system." Many of these reformers hoping to change the system were vegetarians, thus explaining the continuing linkage of a "hippie" lifestyle with vegetarianism (Belasco, 2007). This era was fruitful in terms of spreading awareness about alternative lifestyles as well as creating many new activist organizations. Despite this initial boom, however, vegetarians are still a very small minority in the United States, as previously noted. The small number of practitioners is often attributed to the fact that the United States has continued to be very meat³-centric in its diet (Willard, 2002; Adams, 1990).

This meat-centricity has historical roots in the agriculture industry as a backbone of the American West. This is ironic considering that today, "the western United States features the highest concentration of people who identify themselves as vegetarians, with 4 percent of both the general population and college graduates taking that label" (Iacobbo, 2006, p. 7). Yet, meat still reigns supreme across the majority of the United States, largely due to the influence of the meat industry in American culture. Tracing the history of meat, Willard (2002) discusses the system of symbolic meaning that underpins the American culture of meat, analyzing the historical antecedents of the cowboy as land steward and provider, rugged individualism, man's dominion over animals, and gendered meat consumption. Through these symbols, the history of America has been closely tied to meat, creating a positive association with the production and consumption of meat, along with the positive values of rugged masculinity, virility, and mastery of nature. Vegetarianism, being the absence, and in fact *rejection*, of meat consumption, is therefore seen by many as suspect, un-patriotic, effeminate, and some say un-Christian (Willard, 2002; Potts, 2008; Adams, 1990). Additionally, the idea that meat is a necessary food is kept alive by the modern media with "ads for meat and other items derived from animals, and the federal government's dietary guidelines promoting meat-eating and milk-drinking" (Iacobbo, 2006, p. 57). Thus, this historical background gives us insight into one reason why vegetarianism might be thought of in a negative way even today.

In stark contrast to this predominant perspective, there are some positive opinions about vegetarianism currently cropping up, translating into potentially positive social effects of being vegetarian. The normalization of people's conversion to vegetarianism for health reasons has sky-rocketed in recent years, "exploding through health-conscious consumers" (Iacobbo, 2006, p. 39). Through the pathway of health, the diet has become more popularized, giving the appearance that:

² My study does not seek to explain *why* people have a certain opinion about vegetarians or vegans, but rather *how* these opinions affect individual's social lives. However, a review of the literature about vegetarianism does give us some clues as to why people might view vegetarianism either positively or negatively, but further research is necessary.

³ "Meat" in this study is understood to include such animal products as pork, beef, and chicken.

vegetarianism appears not to be a subculture, as meat-free cuisine is a trend, cookbooks clog the bookstore shelves, and fast-food restaurants advertise meat-free burgers. But [this] belies the reality that not eating meat still sets people apart from the dominant culture, and as a result vegetarians [create] culture: customs, products, media, arts, events, businesses, and social and activist groups (Iacobbo, 2006, p. 57).

Thus, in the end, while more visible than ever, vegetarianism is still a counterculture movement and its practitioners are a minority within the United States.

With this background information, the question now becomes, how does the conscious choice⁴ to be vegetarian in the United States influence vegetarians' experiences, and therefore their perceptions of themselves, the opinions of others, and as a result their social interactions?

Identity

To answer these questions we must consider what part being vegetarian plays in identity and social interaction. Food has long been a facilitator of social interaction and cultural identity; and at the very root of vegetarian identity is the absence of meat or animal products. Thus, vegetarianism often informs one's social identity because it has a tendency to become visible. The fact that vegetarianism often arises in social situations is important because identity is not created only by oneself, but is also informed by the perceptions and actions of others. Identity is therefore a relational concept—it does not exist on its own but rather comes into being through relations with others (Hall, 1991; Oyserman 2004; Goffman 1963). Vegetarianism can therefore become a large part of one's identity because, as I said, it can become apparent at mealtimes, as can any other facet of one's identity that has to do with food. However, vegetarianism is unique in that, as previously mentioned, most practitioners are converts because the social norm in the United States is to include meat and other animal products in one's diet. Consequently, vegetarianism, as a facet of one's identity is often thrown into relief by the fact that the practitioner is standing in opposition to the mainstream. Indeed, identity is also about declaring what you are *not*, and we often seek out an "other" against which to compare ourselves (Hall, 1991). For vegetarians in the United States this "other" is the rest of society which consumes meat and other animal products. Thus, this deviant part of one's identity can have a drastic influence on one's sense of self and social relations.

However, it should also be noted that because identity is contextual, it fluctuates, and we all therefore have a multiplicity of identities (Hall, 1991; Goffman, 1963; Oyserman, 2004). As a result, in other facets of a vegetarian's life they might belong to the mainstream. For example, an individual might be a White Protestant male as well as vegetarian; he would therefore align with the American mainstream in many facets of his identity. This example illustrates the ability of individuals to contain more than one identity. For the purposes of my study, however, I will focus on vegetarian and vegan identity and its influence on social interactions. Social interactions are a main focus of this study simply because vegetarianism is unique in the fact that:

...eating is a lifelong physical necessity that is often done in the company of others. Vegetarians naturally engage in communication when they cook, dine or otherwise socialize with family, friends, and colleagues. ... Consequently, living a meat-free life may entail some meaningful social and communicative challenges (Romo, 2012, p. 407).

⁴ The majority of vegetarians and vegans within the United States are converts, not having been born into a family practicing vegetarianism (Iacobbo, 2006).

Accordingly, it is the social obstacles and benefits that come from the emergence of one's vegetarian identity in social situations that this study will center.

Social Identity and Social Norms

Conceptually, identity and social interactions go hand in hand because identity is partially created and conceptualized by us, but it is also informed by the perceptions and reactions of others (Goffman, 1963). To further understand the role of identity in collective interactions, we can break it down into two parts: the virtual social identity and the actual social identity (Goffman, 1963). The actual social identity is informed by an individual's actual physical behavior. Conversely, the virtual social identity is how the viewer thinks the individual is going to act based on assumptions. These assumptions come from the social norms of our society, which guide us through our everyday interactions. Routines, "allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes" (Goffman, 1963, p.2). When there is a gap between the virtual social identity—what we are expected to do—and the actual social identity—what we actually do—tension can occur. In general, people try to limit this tension by adhering to social norms. However, it often happens that people are unable or do not wish to follow social norms; these individuals are then labeled as "deviant".

Deviance and Stigma

For the purposes of my study, I have adopted the societal reaction perspective of deviance, which states that deviance is defined by people—by society—and that an act or a trait is never inherently deviant, but rather is labeled as such (this parallels nicely the concept of identity as relational). When an individual purposefully chooses to go against the social norms of a group, they are therefore known as social deviants (Goffman, 1963). Vegetarianism falls into this category in the United States because in choosing to reject American dietary norms, vegetarians and vegans go against mainstream social protocol.

Accordingly, deviance theory contributes to this study by illustrating how people respond to acts of social deviance and how deviants feel about the treatment they receive from others. Specifically, I believe that deviance theory can be used to conceptualize and understand the social experiences of vegetarians and vegans in my study. I use Erving Goffman's work heavily to make sense of how people respond to acts of social deviance, especially responses of stigmatization. Goffman has been used before, albeit sparsely, by others studying vegetarianism and veganism (Janda, 2001), but in my research I was struck by the overlap between the similarities in terms of stigma felt by those Goffman (1963) studied, and vegetarian and vegan individual's responses in more recent studies (Romo, 2012; Jabs, 2000; Janda, 2001; Iacobbo, 2006). Stigma is a reaction to a perceived deviation from the social norm; it is therefore not a trait, but is a perspective that is created in a social situation where an individual is perceived as deviant, and then is treated based on that perception. Of course, people do not always respond to deviance with stigmatization. Indeed, in any social encounter it is difficult to predict how others will react until we are already in the situation. To an extent, social norms allow us to establish routines in that help us predict how social interactions might go; but as previously established, social deviants defy one or more social norms, making social interactions for them more tenuous. For this reason, often stigmatized individuals have developed a number of ways to appear more "normal" and hence eliminate or limit the tension in a social situation that might be caused by their deviance. These techniques are especially useful to individuals, like vegetarians, whose

difference is invisible unless the individual wishes the difference to be known, or until a certain social situation. Erving Goffman best conceptualized these techniques in his book, *Stigma*. Although Goffman never mentions vegetarianism explicitly, there are many similarities between the social experiences of those deviants he studied and the typical emotions felt and actions taken by vegetarians and vegans in a social context as evidenced by newer research. For example, Goffman finds that, “during mixed contacts, the stigmatized individual is likely to feel that he is “on,” having to be self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making, to a degree and in areas of conduct which he assumes others are not” (1963, p. 14). This is similar to the findings of L.K. Romo’s study of vegetarians which found that:

[just] as disabled people feel a responsibility to reduce the discomfort of so-called normals during conversations about their disability (Braithwaite, 1991), the current study’s participants often felt a responsibility to smooth over communication about vegetarianism so as not to offend meat eaters” (2012, p. 417).

Additionally, Goffman found that stigmatized individuals sometimes respond to social situations by “defensive cowering,” or downplaying their identity (1963, p. 63). This correlates to the findings of numerous studies on vegetarianism which uncover that respondents often tried to avoid drawing attention to their diet (Romo, 2012; Jabs, 2000; Janda, 2001; Barr, 2002). However sometimes the stigmatized individual will take the opposite approach by being upfront with others, yet this can cause problems as well (Goffman, 1963; Romo, 2012). Many vegetarians report that in social situations in which they speak up about their identity, they are confronted with hostility (Romo, 2012; Jabs, 2000; Janda, 2001; Potts, 2008). The respondents in Romo’s study specifically stated that, “being forthright about their eating habits to meat eaters could result in mockery and stereotyping, yielding unwanted attention and making them feel like they did not belong” (2012, p. 410). Hence, vegetarians clearly fit the pattern of stigmatized individuals in Goffman’s terms, especially when we consider his assertion that these individuals are likely to become accustomed to social tensions because of their identity and develop coping strategies (1963). These strategies are something we find vegetarians and vegans doing as well, most often in the form of devising a communication plan for talking to people about their diet (Romo, 2012; Janda, 2001; Jabs, 2000).

The previous examples illustrate only a small portion of the negative social effects people have faced after choosing a vegetarian diet. This begs the question, are there any positive social effects of being vegetarian that counteract these negative feelings of stigmatization and isolation? It seems that the answer must be yes; otherwise it would be very difficult for vegetarians to maintain their lifestyle, surrounded as they are by these negative social effects, and the constant effort of having to smooth over social interactions.

While there has not been as much study about the positive effects of social deviance on social relations, the literature seems to suggest the main benefit is a sense of belonging to a new social group. Goffman’s study found that stigmatized deviants will occasionally seek out “sympathetic others who are ready to adopt his standpoint in the world and to share with him the feeling that he is human and “essentially” normal” (1963, p. 64). We see this happening in the formation of new vegetarian and vegan societies popping up across the United States all the time, as well as the incredible growth of the online vegetarian community (Iacobbo, 2006). This new social group can help sustain stigmatized individuals, supporting them even when they feel isolated from the mainstream (Goffman, 1963; Romo, 2012; Jabs, 2000; Janda, 2001). While it is

unclear if these new groups always form out of vegetarian individual's desire to find solidarity, or whether there is some other impetus, it seems apparent that within these new groups vegetarians and vegans will have different social interactions from those they have outside them.

Of course, more research needs to be done on other potential social benefits of deviance. Especially today with the diversity of alternative lifestyles, I suspect that deviant identity may in some instances be a form of social capital—setting one apart from the mainstream—in terms of making one seem more independent and critical thinking, especially if the deviant behavior is seen as positive. Evidence that this might be happening is found in Janda's (2001) study of vegetarianism. Specifically talking about motivations for becoming vegetarian, the researchers found that:

Some individuals may adopt vegetarian life-styles in order to emulate those they admire. Vegetarians may be viewed as more health-conscious, self-disciplined, attractive, and empathetic than nonvegetarians (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). Thus, they may serve as a form of aspirational reference group for some individuals (p. 1214).

Particularly in today's health conscious society, the health benefits of being vegetarian might translate into added social benefits as well. Added evidence of this is suggested by L.K. Romo's idea of "healthy deviants," people who violate society's norms in relatively healthy ways" (2012, p. 405). While the term "deviant" has a generally negative connotation, in the academic world deviance is actually conceptualized along a scale, from positive (such as a straight-A student) to negative (an alcoholic) (Romo, 2012, p. 418). Thus, although vegetarianism might often be perceived in a stigmatized way—at least by about one-third of the country—the act itself can be fairly positive. Health wise, vegetarians are generally fitter than meat-eaters, and are more likely to be socially conscious, leading to further activism and awareness (Romo, 2012; Craig, 2009; Huang, 2012; Sabaté, 2003; Janda, 2001). However, these benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle, while being touted by some vegetarian practitioners and activists, have yet to be assessed from an academic perspective in terms of their affect on social relationships; this is one gap in the literature that my study has attempted to address.

Description of Methods

There is very little research about vegetarians and vegans in general, especially about their social lives; accordingly, as an exploratory study, I choose to focus only on vegetarians and vegans themselves. While there are vegetarians across the United States, I narrowed my scope to individuals in the Pacific Northwest area. The vegetarian community in this area of the country is especially dense and provides a rich array of subjects considering that more individuals in the Western United States identify as vegetarian or vegan than in any other part of the country (Iaccobo, 2006). Specifically, my research site included Washington and Oregon. The reason for only talking to vegetarians and vegans in this area is due to the limits of time and resources of this undergraduate study. In addition, the basis for only talking to vegetarians and vegans rather than meat-eaters, was to garner a more emic (insider's) perspective of this minority group. However, future studies of the perceptions of meat-eaters about vegetarians and vegans, their social interactions with them, as well as their reasoning for actively not becoming vegetarian could warrant specific attention with interesting results.

Despite vegetarianism and veganism not being an immediately apparent trait, it was relatively easy to gain a sample of this population using snowball sampling. As a member of the vegetarian community on the University of Puget Sound campus for the past three years, as well as in the Pacific Northwest region in general, personal connections with other vegetarians and vegans had been established and recruitment was facilitated by the relatively strong presence of the vegetarian and vegan community in the Northwest, as previously mentioned. My ties with two groups in particular proved fruitful, one on the university campus and the other in the Puget Sound region. To begin with I reached out to those within my social group who I knew already self-identified as vegetarian or vegan. From these contacts I was able to establish more connections with other self-identified vegetarians and vegans both in Washington and in Oregon. Additionally, I sent out an email explaining my project and requesting participants to the larger of the two groups, the one representing the greater Tacoma area, to increase my sample size. Identifying and contacting participants was therefore straightforward and twenty-two participants were recruited.

Due to the time constraints and limited resources of this study, I did not turn any participants away—I therefore did not seek to limit my population to a certain demographic. Thus, in my final results, there are a number of different variables that were not controlled for, including age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, race and reason for becoming vegetarian or vegan. My only requirement for participation in this study was that the individual self-identified as vegetarian or vegan. Yet, despite not controlling for these variables, my sample population fulfilled my expectations in that it generally fit the main demographic characteristics of many vegetarians and vegans in the United States today—that is, white, middle-class and upper-class individuals, possibly more liberal leaning in their lifestyle, with the majority being females (Iacobbo, 2006). Accordingly, the homogeneity in my sample population should not be construed as a research design problem. My sample seems to confirm these demographic trends, especially in the gender category as 18 participants were female, and only 4 male. While I did not directly question any of my participants about their race, age, or class, those that I interviewed face-to-face were primarily white, and all over twenty years of age. I cannot make any claims however about the demographics of those participants who were interviewed via email.

I used semi-structured interviews as the main form of data collection in order to facilitate analysis from the perspective of vegetarians and vegans. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility while also providing some guidance to the conversation. I created an interview guide to assist me in the process, outlining some general questions that I thought would prompt the interviewee to speak about areas of interest to me. I did edit this guide after the first few interviews, adding more questions about social interactions, the perceived rewards and obstacles of being vegan or vegetarian, and taking out other questions. Fortunately, I was able to send follow-up questions to those first few interviewees, so their answers to the questions that had developed later could also be included. A copy of the final interview guide is attached in the index, but some of the questions include:

- *How long have you been vegetarian or vegan and what sparked your decision?*
- *Are any members of your family or any friends vegetarian or vegan?*
- *Are you a member of any vegetarian or vegan groups and why?*
- *What has been the greatest benefit of being vegetarian or vegan?*
- *What has been the biggest challenge?*

I conducted thirteen of these interviews face-to-face, primarily in cafes. I was pleasantly surprised to find that all of these interviews flowed easily and that many participants seemed eager to talk about their personal experiences of vegetarianism or veganism. On average the interviews lasted forty-five minutes to an hour, but some lasted for almost two hours—usually with those individuals who were particularly excited about my topic. I also conducted email interviews because not everyone who wished to participate could meet in person. After establishing that there was no way to meet in person, I sent each of these individuals my interview guide and consent form via email, with specific instructions to please try to complete the questions in one sitting, so as to emulate a face-to-face interview. Similar to the face-to-face interviews, the length of the email interviews I received back ranged in depth of response, from one word answers, to pages of text.

To interpret these interviews I used grounded theory, coding and memoing on my transcripts. From this method, certain themes emerged from the research, similarities as well as differences among my interviewees' experiences.

In order to avoid problems with validity I also had to reflect upon my own identity over the course of this research. Being vegan allows me a unique perspective, as well as a personal interest in this research; yet, I believe that in this particular study it has proved to be an asset rather than an obstacle. Often in my interviews I was asked by the participant whether or not I was in fact vegetarian or vegan. If they did not ask, I did not tell them, but many did and afterwards seemed more inclined to talk to me, possibly because they recognized a sympathetic individual and thus felt more comfortable. This feeling of comfortable solidarity was particularly evident in one interview where the subject lowered her voice and leaned towards me so that other café patrons could not hear her frustration about the lack of vegan options at cafes and other restaurants.

Still, I do recognize that it is inevitable for my own personal biases to be completely separated from this study, thus, I have tried to be as objective as any ethnographer can. Grounded theory helps with this in that I did not start out with any hypothesis other than thinking that vegetarians and vegans social lives might be different in some way, allowing me to work inductively.

Findings and Analysis:

Demographics

I conducted a total of 22 interviews with self-identified vegetarians, vegans, and one individual who described herself as plant-based⁵. Thirteen of the interviews were done face-to-face and the other nine were done via email. Eighteen of the interviewees were female, the other four were male, and all were at least twenty years of age. Four of the subjects currently reside in Oregon, while the other eighteen live in Washington State. Of the subjects, four identified as vegetarian, seventeen as vegan, and one as plant-based. The average number of years being vegan for these seventeen individuals was 5.6, with the highest number of years being 27 and the lowest being half a year. The average number of years being vegetarian of the current vegetarians was 14.6, with the highest number of years being 35 and the lowest being 1 and a half years. However, it should be noted that of the 17 vegans I interviewed, 12 said they were vegetarian for a time before becoming vegan. The average number of years being vegetarian before becoming vegan for this group was 10.3 years, with the longest period of time being 30

⁵ Subject defined plant base as being close to vegetarianism, but not fully abstaining from meat.

years and the least amount of time being half a year. The one individual who identified as plant-based had been so for 8 years at the time of the interview. Animal welfare and health were the two main reasons given for choosing to become vegetarian or vegan; other reasons cited were religion or spiritual beliefs and the environment.

Conceptualization of Vegetarianism

After asking why and how long they had been vegetarian or vegan, I asked my subjects how they defined vegetarianism and veganism. All of the subjects illustrated a similar understanding of these terms, with the most basic definition being that vegetarians do not eat meat and vegans do not consume any animal products. As one subject put it: “Vegan is abstaining from animal products in day to day life, whether that be directly eating or wearing animals or their byproducts. Vegetarian is abstaining from animal products in a similar way, but not abstaining from their byproducts.”

My one participant who identified as plant-based described herself as close to vegetarian, but not fully abstaining from meat, however she had the same definition for vegetarianism and veganism as the rest of the subjects. Unfortunately, I did not ask any of my other participants for their definition of “plant-based”, but it would have been interesting to have asked because my definition of “plant-based” was different from this one subject’s definition.

Mixed Reactions from Family and Friends

Initially I had anticipated that all of my subjects would have some individual in their life that shared their diet, but this was not the case. My third interview question asked my participants if any members of their family or any close friends were vegetarian or vegan. Three respondents said that no members of their family or any of their close friends were vegetarian or vegan. Only four subjects said that they had both a family member and a friend who was vegetarian or vegan, while twelve said that they had a friend but not a family member, and three said they had a family member but not a friend that was either vegetarian or vegan.

The reason so few of my subjects had both close family members and friends who shared their lifestyle was partially answered by the next question in which I asked: What was the reaction from your family and friends when you told them you had decided to become vegetarian/vegan? The answers to this question varied greatly, from complete acceptance in their lifestyle change from family and friends, to complete alienation. One woman said about her experiences growing up:

My parents did not encourage me. They went so far as to tell me that it was unhealthy and they refused to make different food for me. I didn’t eat lunch at school for three years because my Mom did not want to make a separate lunch for me. I was bullied at school, friends would “moo” while eating, throw hot dogs at me and try to put their leather coats on me. It was not a very pleasant time.

And another:

“[There were] strong negative reactions and anger from family [when I told them I was vegetarian] even though the decision was for myself, it was seen as a judgment on their diet.”

However, a younger, college-aged subject told me that she had only received full support from her family, and they all became vegan soon after she did. Still others told me that their family

and friends did not care one way or the other. The mixed reaction from family and friends thus partially explains why only seven of the people I interviewed had a family member who was vegetarian or vegan—not everyone in their family was necessarily interested in the subject’s transition or simply did not have a favorable view of vegetarianism or veganism. This leads to the question, why? Why did my subjects have such a diversity of experiences, and why especially is vegetarianism and veganism still viewed negatively by some people? It is difficult to explain exactly why each respondent’s family and friends reacted the way they did without talking to their families directly, however many of my subjects did speculate, and the literature suggests, that there is still a great deal of confusion and in a smaller measure, an open dislike of vegetarianism. One participant said: “[Vegetarianism] attacks a source of pleasure for many people. Even more so than that, it attacks a societal custom which they’ve reinforced as a belief.” This example illustrates the depth to which this one participant sees the standard American diet as an entrenched part of our culture. Another subject corroborated this by conceptualizing the hostility to their dietary practice as coming from a place of fear of alternative lifestyles, as well as the stereotype that vegetarians and vegans are “judgmental” and “angry”:

I found that a lot of people automatically assume that you’re preaching to them, even if you haven’t said anything other than, oh I’m vegan. So I try to not come off telling them that their way is bad...I think maybe they feel threatened by people with a different lifestyle.

From these examples it can be seen that even close family and friends of my subjects were susceptible to the stereotype that vegans and vegetarians are radical and that questioning of the status quo can be threatening or seen as a judgment. This confusion and hostility, as seen through Goffman’s theory of stigmatization, could also be a reaction to the tension created by the individual altering their actual social identity from the previously established identity. By altering their actions, individuals create a gap between their family and friend’s expectations of them and their actual social behavior. Changing one’s actions after having previously establishing rapport with another, can throw off social relations; for that reason, it makes sense that some subject’s family and friends might be startled, and even react angrily, when they discover that the subject upset the previously established social habits. This gap between virtual and actual social identity might also explain why subjects also faced mixed reactions from strangers in their everyday lives when they discuss their vegetarianism or veganism.

Reactions from Strangers

Most participants said they had experienced both positive and negative reactions as a result of “coming out” to strangers. One respondent, the same one whose school friends moored at her, encapsulated this well when she replied that she had experienced, “the entire spectrum. All the way from trying to find flaws in what [she] does and saying that [she’s] anti-American because [she does not] support cow and dairy farmers, to wow, [she] is such a giving person.” A few individuals even expressed that they encountered people who were unaware of what vegan, and sometimes vegetarian, even meant. On the other hand, interestingly, I had a few respondents say that they had no experience telling strangers about their vegetarianism or veganism because it either did not come up in conversation, or they *purposefully* do not bring it up because they do not want to start an altercation. Thus, it became clear to me that my subjects were aware that vegetarianism and veganism might be a hot topic for some, given their past experiences. Even

the individual, who described herself as following a plant-based diet, said that people responded positively to the label “plant-based” but remarked that they saw vegetarianism or veganism as depriving oneself. The respondent herself even referred to veganism as “extreme” a few times even though she was a member of a vegan group, and despite being basic strangers she knew that I myself am vegan.

Adapting Social Behavior

As the interviews progressed I began asking people about their social interactions, and found that many respondents said they did alter their behavior in anticipation of people’s reactions; these responses lead me to believe that my subject’s past mixed experiences caused a number of them to engage in a variety of Goffman’s information management techniques in their social lives—meaning that being vegetarian or vegan directly influenced their social behavior.

When I asked interviewees how they represented themselves in social situations, specifically had they ever hidden or downplayed their vegetarian or vegan identity, only three said that they had never done this. The other seventeen to whom I asked the question answered that they did sometimes downplay or hide this part of themselves, while at the same time assuring me that they are proud of who they are and are not afraid to admit this part of their identity. This seeming contradiction—feeling unashamed of oneself, while at the same time hiding a part of oneself—is corroborated by Goffman who found that the paradox of our society is that stigmatized individuals are forced to, “cheerfully and unselfconsciously [accept] himself as essentially the same as normals, while at the same time [voluntarily withholding] himself from those situations in which normals would find it difficult to give lip service to their similar acceptance of him” (1963, p. 121). It is therefore difficult to tell from my interviews whether my subjects were telling me that they did not talk about vegetarianism or veganism because they did not feel like bringing it up, or because they felt that society frowned upon them bringing it up; indeed both of those dynamics might have been at work! Whatever the answer to this question, from the interviews, it became evident that many subjects did feel that the vegetarian or vegan label was stigmatized—whether they believed it to be actually deviant or not—and that they therefore downplayed it.

This technique of actively downplaying a potentially stigmatized trait is what Goffman calls passing (1963). Three participants told me they actively engaged in passing—although they did not call it this directly—in the workplace when they hide their veganism or vegetarianism specifically because they are afraid of possible prejudice. This was especially a concern of one individual, a recent college graduate, who at the time worked at a candy store and was afraid that if her boss knew that she could not give an honest opinion of all their products, then that might make things difficult for her. However, most respondents said that they never brought it up first in conversation. If someone directly asked them then they never lied, they said, however they told me that it is definitely never the first thing they say. The most common reason people cited for this evasion was that they wanted to avoid being labeled, and again, they did not want to get into a confrontation with people. One individual admitted that she used to be a lot more upfront about her veganism, but that it eventually just became exhausting discussing it and explaining it all the time to people. This information management is what Goffman calls “covering”, wherein individuals,

admit possession of a stigma (in many case because it is known about or immediately apparent) [yet] may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming

large. The individual's object is to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier for himself and the others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma, and to sustain spontaneous involvement in the official content of the interaction (Goffman, 1963, p.102).

I engaged in a version of covering myself when I talking with my one subject who identified as plant-based. When she mentioned that she and others considered vegetarianism and veganism extreme, I had the urge to ask her why. However, I felt that I could not ask her why without possibly getting into a debate with her. Looking back, I wish I had asked for her reasoning why she felt that way, and she did give me an answer in part, saying that others around her viewed vegetarianism and veganism as depriving oneself of life's pleasures. At the time I convinced myself I was satisfied with this half answer, but upon reflection I realize that I was afraid to get into a debate with her, only partially because I wanted to keep interviewing her, but mostly because I did not want things to get heated. My own example shows how social interactions are all about reducing tension, and for vegetarian and vegan individuals this means information management, namely withholding or downplaying their vegetarian or vegan identity so as to alter their social identity and therefore alter the way they are treated.

However, while it is often easy for vegetarian and vegan individuals to pass as "normals", at mealtimes their usually invisible difference becomes visible. Four individuals explicitly said that they avoid bringing up being vegetarian or vegan during mealtimes and do not engage in a discussion if the topic should arise. This was interesting to me because it suggests a kind of mealtime etiquette of not wanting the people they were eating with to feel judged and wanting to avoid any confrontation. While other interviewees did not express this explicitly, the fact that the majority of them brought up the difficulties of communal eating suggests that the social space of the meal can be tense for many vegetarians and vegans.

Social Eating and Other Social Changes

When I directly asked my interviewees if being vegetarian or vegan had created any issues in their social groups—specifically their friends— or had changed their social group in any way, only four answered that it had posed no issues thus far. The other subjects said it had raised some issues, but not drastically changed their social group. Five people expressed that a positive change had come about in that their friends were more accepting and knowledgeable about vegetarianism and veganism now. One young woman in college told me that, "if anything, I've gained more friends by being a part of the vegan community". However, although some people's groups had changed for the better, others had not changed at all, and being vegetarian or vegan within these groups caused problems. Social eating suddenly became an issue many said, harkening back to the issue of bringing up vegetarianism or veganism at meal times. A few said that they felt as if their diet were a burden for people when they went out to eat, that their friends would agonize over where they could go, and when they got there they would point things out on the menu that were vegetarian or vegan. I myself have had this experience at restaurants where my mother will point out things on the menu I can eat. Like me, the few other participants who had this happen to them said that they felt they could not say anything to the person doing this because they recognized they were only trying to be helpful. Goffman (1963) points out that this is occurs often in social situations with stigmatized individuals, and that the "stigmatized individual is...advised to act as if the efforts of normals to ease matters for him were effective and appreciated. Unsolicited offers of interest, sympathy, and help, although often perceived by the stigmatized as an encroachment on privacy and a presumption are to be tactfully accepted"

(Goffman, 1963, p.118). Thus, although participants felt that people's intentions were good they were often perceived by the vegetarian or vegan as being overly attentive, sometimes to the point of annoyance, as in the case of one individual who felt that at thirty years old, her mother should stop pointing things out on the menu that she could eat.

In addition to some tension surrounding social eating, others told me that they simply engaged in that kind of communal activity much less now that they were vegetarian or vegan; either because they did not want to be a burden to people, they did not get invited places, they knew that there would be nothing for them to eat at the restaurant the group had picked, or they did not want to see other people consuming animal products. One older individual said: "It's hard to be a guest at someone's house because you feel like you're putting them out. And it's hard for them because they don't know what to do. So I try to bring my own stuff to eat, or offer to make something." Another young woman told me that she felt ostracized by her friends because they never attempted to accommodate her at potlucks and so she did not eat with them because "...it's awkward when everyone else is eating the same thing and you're eating something different."

My respondents' difficulties in balancing their social lives with social eating also came up when I asked them what the most challenging aspect of being vegetarian or vegan was in their mind. Overwhelmingly, their answer had something to do with food, either finding food while traveling, going out to eat with people, or going to people's houses to eat; these were the main obstacles cited by thirteen out of the twenty individuals who answered this question. Many expressed a wish that it was easier for them to find places to eat with friends, or that friends and family were more knowledgeable about vegetarianism and veganism. Additionally, people also expressed that in general, finding food and preparing it for themselves can sometimes be difficult: "[The hardest thing is being] stuck in situations where I feel I have to eat the same thing over and over, mostly at work where I have an extremely limited amount of food I can eat during meal breaks". Another young man echoed this sentiment, but also expressed that he had been able to adapt: "It used to be hard to find things to eat when travelling, but this has become easier for me as I've learned how to construct more and more meals with simple ingredients". On the other hand, if people did not first list finding food as an obstacle, they said that other people were the greatest challenge they faced being vegetarian or vegan. This might be surprising to non-vegetarians who might think that food is the biggest challenge, and while some of my interviewees affirmed this challenge, almost as many noted that it was the social aspect—or other people—that was the main challenge. As one woman said, "finding food and cooking is easy. Going out to eat can be a struggle, but that is a privilege not a requirement," and that the biggest obstacle was therefore, "other people!"

Given these constraints, what are the relative benefits experienced by vegetarians and vegans? Despite the fact that finding and socializing around food could be difficult my respondents also said that a feeling of a greater connection to their food was a major gain of being vegetarian or vegan. Five individuals explicitly cited this increase in food awareness as the primary benefit they had experienced since changing their lifestyle, and a number of others listed it as a secondary reward. One college-aged woman who listed food awareness as the main advantage of being vegetarian said this:

...the process of becoming vegetarian—making the decision and then working vegetarianism into my life through cooking, etc.—has made me feel much more connected to my food. Before I was vegetarian I rarely looked at the ingredients on the

backs on food packages, and I rarely worried about getting the right vitamins and nutrition. I also know more now about how my food is produced and that's really rewarding because it lets me feel more in control of what I'm putting in my body and how I spend my money. Becoming vegetarian also seriously opened me up to trying new foods.

The most often cited reward of vegetarianism or veganism, however, was a feeling of living with integrity. Seven of my subjects said that the best thing about being vegetarian or vegan was that they felt better about themselves, and that their conscious was clearer. A few different excerpts from interviews highlight this point:

I feel like a better person (physically & mentally), more kind, I'm doing good things for the environment & for animals, I feel like I'm living a kinder life.

...knowing that even when it comes to some of the most simple aspects of day to day life, I'm doing something that is making a difference. That I'm living my values, and doing my best to avoid moral inconsistencies.

I think once you stop killing sentient creatures then you can redevelop this childlike compassion for living things. Maybe it sounds cheesy, but I've definitely experienced emotions like compassion on a much stronger level since becoming vegan. It's also nice being able to have a totally clear conscience while eating. When I ate meat it didn't bother me much, but I'm sure there were always nagging feelings of guilt on a more subconscious level.

Thus, although they were often treated differently in social situations, and found it sometimes difficult to participate in activities such as social eating, the vegetarians and vegans I talked to felt that there was still some benefit to their lifestyle, albeit a more personal than social benefit. It therefore appears that although socially these individuals have to tread more carefully, that the sense of inner-peace in the form of living with integrity or feeling a greater connection and control of their food balanced out those social obstacles.

Yet, one place where my subjects said they did not have to tread as lightly was in the presence of a vegetarian or vegan club or organization. Most of my subjects were members of such clubs or organizations—since that is where my main recruitment came from—however, only one said that the main positive outcome of her veganism was becoming a member of such a group. For the other participants, being a member in vegetarian or vegan groups was a positive social effect as it gave them a place to discuss issue related to vegetarianism and a group of accepting individuals with which to interact, but it was not the primary gain as they saw it.

In conclusion, despite the growing visibility and acceptability of their lifestyle, vegetarians and vegans are often treated differently in social situations, causing them to sometimes modify their behaviors and feel some tension about social situations. Their personal vegetarian or vegan identity gives them a sense of inner-peace and control of their food, yet their social identity is often more focused on negotiating the ongoing social challenges around eating, and is as much about negotiating their perceived identity as it is about making mealtimes comfortable for others.

Implications:

In addition to adding to the limited body of literature about vegetarians and vegans in the United States, this research brings to light the fact that no matter how invisible or unobtrusive the difference, we continue to treat differently those individuals who stray from the social norms; and that often these individuals are engaged in a lot of behind the scenes work to make social situations go smoothly. Sometimes we stigmatize these individuals because of a trait or behavior they exhibit that deviates from the mainstream. On the other hand, many of my subjects believed that the perception of vegetarianism and veganism is changing for the better; so in the future deviant individuals like vegetarians and vegans might be given preferential treatment in the form of admiration for their will power or commitment to a cause. Thus, another repercussion of this study might be that it helps this change along by showing readers that there are individuals who feel that vegetarianism is worth changing their social lives and the convenient access to food for. In that same vein, this study also has applications for those considering changing their lifestyle, either to embrace vegetarianism, veganism, or any other kind of social identity based around food. Our culture is constantly becoming more and more aware of its food, and as a result individuals thinking of changing their food consumption practices might look to this study for ideas as to how their social life might be influenced by that change, as well as how to cope with those changes.

Finally, it is my hope that this study will have a practical application in the vegetarian and vegan community at large, as an example of the experiences of a few individuals, and how their conceptualization of their reception and treatment in society at large still leaves much to be desired. This is even more pressing when we consider recent publications about the psychological effects of stigmatization. Although Goffman (1963) believed that we are all made of stern stuff, research in the Netherlands looking at stigmatization in the work place might be proving otherwise. Individuals, whose deviant identity is invisible, such as homosexuals and those with mental health issues, feel stress at their workplace because of the constant information management they have to engage in to hide and downplay this part of their identity (Ellemers, 2006). The study thus found that this feeling of tension led individuals to perform at a lower level of success than others (Ellemers, 2006). The implication of research like this and my own therefore shows that despite the seemingly unobtrusive nature of these traits and lifestyle choices, a history of stigmatization as well as personal experience weighs heavy on people's minds and can impinge on their happiness. Although, my subjects did not appear to be unhappy with their lifestyle choice, an emerging question of this research is to ask what causes people to stop being vegetarian or vegan. Is it that their social lives change and the constant information management causes them stress? One subject remarked in passing that this had indeed been the case with her sister, who found social adaptation difficult after becoming vegetarian. Further work will need to be done on this topic. However, hopefully this research will not be needed as the world progresses in the direction of increased tolerance and an acceptance of all people. My subjects were optimistic on this note, believing that in general that American society is becoming increasingly accepting and supportive of vegetarianism. If this is the case, then hopefully future studies will be able to report further on the positive changes in individual's social lives that come from being vegetarian or vegan.

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Index

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How long have you been vegan/vegetarian, and what sparked your decision (books, people, other)?
2. How do you define vegan/vegetarian?
3. Are other members of your family vegan/vegetarian? Any friends?
4. What was the reaction from your family and friends when you told them you had decided to become vegetarian/vegan?
5. How has maintenance of your vegan/vegetarian lifestyle played out in your friend group? What, if any, issues has it raised?
6. What sort of reaction do strangers have when you tell them you're vegetarian/vegan?
7. Are there some places you have found are easier to be vegan/vegetarian? (For example, at college versus at home, Tacoma versus other places?) Why do you think this is?
8. Are you a member of any vegetarian/vegan social groups or organizations? Why are you a member of these groups; what is the value of these groups?
9. Has your friend group changed since you've become vegan/vegetarian? How?
10. How do you engage people in a conversation about vegetarianism or veganism? (any strategies?)
11. Have you encountered difficulties in talking to people about (your) veganism? What perceptions/issues seem to define/shape those conversations?
12. Where do you think people get their ideas about veganism/vegetarianism?

13. Have you ever tried to downplay or hide the fact that you are vegetarian/vegan? What were the circumstances?
14. Do you think the general perception/reception of vegetarianism/veganism has changed since you've become one? Has it become more positive or negative?
15. Have you ever converted anyone to vegetarianism/veganism? What was your sense of why your message was compelling to the other person?
16. Have you encountered any stereotypes about vegans or vegetarians—either directed at you personally, or that you've observed?
17. What have been the most rewarding aspects of being vegetarian/vegan?
18. What are the most challenging aspects of being vegetarian/vegan?
19. Why do you think you've stayed vegan/vegetarian?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Any suggestions for me?