



Vegetarian on purpose: Understanding the motivations of plant-based dieters



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 March 2017

Received in revised form

3 May 2017

Accepted 22 May 2017

Available online 25 May 2017

Keywords:

Vegetarianism

Veganism

Identity

Food choice

Plant-based

Motivation

ABSTRACT

Much recent research has explored vegetarians' dietary motivations, recurrently highlighting the significant influence they exert on how people view themselves and others. For vegetarians and other plant-based dieters, dietary motivations have been theorized to be a central aspect of identity. Yet not all plant-based dieters are motivated to follow their diets; rather, some face aversions and constraints. In this paper, we propose that motivations, aversions, and constraints constitute three distinct reasons for consuming a plant-based diet. After conceptually distinguishing motivations from aversions and constraints, we critically evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of two conceptual frameworks that exist for studying these motivations systematically: the ethical-health framework and the Unified Model of Vegetarian Identity (UMVI) motivational orientations framework. Importantly, these frameworks serve different purposes, and their suitability often depends on the research question at hand. Particularly given an increasing prevalence of plant-based dieting, cultivating a more holistic understanding of these two frameworks is necessary for advancing this discipline. Directions for future research are discussed.

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A shift toward plant-based dieting has become increasingly evident in recent years. According to a 2013 survey in the United Kingdom, 25% of the public had reduced its meat consumption in the past year and 34% indicated a willingness to eat less meat (Vegetarian Society, 2013). In the United States, 37% of adults order vegetarian meals always or sometimes when eating out (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016). These figures amount to more than one hundred million people, in just the U.K. and U.S. alone, who exhibit some degree of plant-based dieting. At the same time, these figures represent a diverse entity of people who may draw upon very different motivations in making the same food choices. By deviating from food norms in Western cultures, plant-based dieters are more likely to view their food choices as a defining feature of their identity, and wide variety of dietary motivations can be central to this self-understanding (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017). The aim of this paper is to enhance future investigations of plant-based dietary motivations by reconceptualizing a framework for studying them.

It is important to be mindful, however, that not all plant-based dieters are personally motivated to avoid animal products; rather,

some dieters do so due to certain aversions and constraints. When asked why they make plant-based food choices, people report a variety of reasons. Commonly reported reasons include concerns for animals, personal health, and the environment; disgust toward meat; and religious beliefs (Ruby, 2012). Reported reasons also include desire for weight loss, taste preferences, saving money, and political matters (Hoffman, Stallings, Bessinger, & Brooks, 2013). This list of reasons includes examples of motivations, aversions, and constraints, and each of these types of reasons can be defined by distinct characteristics. In this paper, we outline which characteristics are inherent to these constructs and propose conceptual definitions accordingly.

Redefining plant-based dietary reasons into these three categories can increase the precision with which investigators label psychological constructs. Progressions in other fields of psychology illustrate the benefits of applying novel terminological specificities to characterize constructs once thought of as one-dimensional. Research on stress, for example, has generated an increasingly nuanced view of the various forms stress may take (Hobfoll, 1989). In one framework, Elliot and Eisdorfer (1982) propose four distinguishable types of stressors (e.g., acute, time-limited stressors; stressor sequences; chronic, intermittent stressors; and chronic stressors) and outline each type's defining features. Inspired by this framework, subsequent research (e.g., Mensch & Kandel, 1988;

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Norris & Murrell, 1987) asked novel questions that ultimately revealed deeper insights into stress processes and psychological outcomes. Similar attempts to gainfully distill scientific nomenclature have been undertaken in work on memory (Craig & Lockhart, 1972), racial identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), and food choice (Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996). Just as these investigators have expanded constructs previously thought of less intricately, it can be similarly advantageous for research on plant-based dieting to use differentiated terminology in labeling dietary reasons.

Relative to aversions and constraints, dietary motivations have garnered a great deal of attention in psychological investigations of vegetarianism. To understand varying types of motivations coherently, investigators can draw upon conceptual frameworks. Throughout the past two decades, research has predominantly categorized specific motivations as being either ethical or health motivations (Ruby, 2012). For example, while an individual who reports eating a vegetarian diet for animal welfare or religious beliefs would be categorized as ethically motivated, an individual concerned about personal health or weight loss would be considered health-motivated (Hoffman et al., 2013). Using this system, several studies (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2013; Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998; Radnitz, Beezhold, & DiMatteo, 2015) have found that ethically motivated and health-motivated vegetarians vary on many outcome variables, such as diet duration, dietary restrictiveness, and disgust toward meat.

In addition, our recently introduced Unified Model of Vegetarian Identity (UMVI) offers a novel framework for conceiving plant-based dietary motivations as oriented toward three types of goals: prosocial, personal, and moral (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017). Instead of categorizing specific motivations into overarching categories as the ethical-health framework does, we recommend measuring the extent to which an individual perceives his or her plant-based food choices as oriented toward these three goal types, either discretely or in some combination.

Much research on vegetarianism suggests that people's self-understandings derive from not only *what* they eat but also *why* they eat that way. In some cases, one's motivations may be even more influential than one's dietary pattern in shaping how one perceives oneself in relation to others (Rothgerber, 2014b). Motivations may furthermore affect interpersonal exchanges, as revealing one's moral motivation for following a plant-based diet to omnivores would be likely to instigate moral comparisons and can lead omnivores to anticipate moral reproach from the plant-based dieter (Monin, 2007). Such anticipated reproach can prompt omnivores to derogate plant-based dieters in order to defend their self-image from the perceived moral threat (Minson & Monin, 2012). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that an individual's motivations may reciprocally shape how other people perceive him or her. For example, MacInnis and Hodson (2015) found that omnivores evaluate vegetarians motivated by animal rights more negatively than vegetarians motivated by personal health. Being the target of more negative attitudes, animal-motivated vegetarians may consequently have more conflicting interactions with omnivores and perhaps seek to conceal their true self by instead stating they are motivated by health (Wilson, Weatherall, & Butler, 2004). As such, investigations into vegetarian motivations are critical to understanding the social implications of food choices.

In the sections that follow, we examine strategies for capturing why people follow plant-based diets. The scope of this work ultimately extends beyond self-identified vegetarians and pertains to all individuals who exercise some degree of animal product avoidance. First, we evaluate three types of reasons—motivations, aversions, and constraints—and their defining features. In doing so, we distinguish motivations as particularly relevant for future

research. Then, we review and critique existing research that has classified motivations into ethical and health categories. Next, we evaluate the UMVI's framework of prosocial, personal, and moral motivations and its role in the literature. Lastly, we suggest how investigators can integrate these perspectives appropriately into their work, depending on the research question at hand. With this reconceptualization, we hope to work toward a more coherent understanding of the various reasons behind plant-based food choices.

1. Distinguishing motivations from aversions and constraints

We postulate that three types of reported reasons for following a plant-based diet exist: motivations, aversions, and constraints. While the preponderance of existing research has used the terms, “reasons” and “motivations,” interchangeably, we argue that aversions and constraints constitute distinct types of reasons whose properties prevent them from qualifying as motivations.

1.1. Motivations

We view motivations as satisfying a tripartite set of criteria: motivations entail prospective goal attainment, underlie voluntary food choices, and have pervasive ideological impact. Accordingly, vegetarian motivations can be defined as goal-oriented ambitions that not only shape one's food choices, when given the control to make food choices freely, but also influence one's self-concept irrespective of food salience. We apply this definition to distinguish motivations from aversions and constraints.

Psychologists have widely conceived motivation as an energizing force underlying goal pursuit and achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Accordingly, we postulate vegetarian motivations as goal-oriented drives that encompass prospective aims toward attainment. Most vegetarians view their food choices as a means of benefitting animals' lives, improving their own health, combating environmental degradation, or upholding their religious principles (Ruby, 2012). We assert that these examples, and others like them, satisfy our first defining feature of motivations because they represent distinct prospective goals that stimulate food behaviors.

Also important to our conceptualization of vegetarian motivations is that their significance is contingent upon a sufficient degree of perceived control over one's food choices. Acting upon one's vegetarian dietary pattern—“the typical food choices an individual makes regarding the consumption of certain animal foods, given sufficient control over his or her food choices”—necessitates a certain degree of food choice (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017, p. 87). People whose reasons for eating a plant-based diet involve lacking the opportunity to consume animal products should not be characterized as motivated but as constrained. Rejecting a present opportunity to eat animal products underlies the motivated nature of plant-based dieting.

A third facet of vegetarian motivations is their greater significance in one's life beyond food-related situations. The motivations that prompt people to follow a plant-based diet encompass values for which food is merely an outlet for expression. Concerns for animals, health, the environment, and spirituality denote larger ideologies with which people engage outside of food contexts (Lindeman & Sirelius, 2001). The development of these ideological principles typically precedes transitions to plant-based dieting, highlighting that plant-based dieting is not an ultimate goal in itself but a means of achieving some larger goal. People seeking to benefit any of the aforementioned causes can engage in other behaviors too that align with these principles. For example, whereas a desire to benefit personal health can inspire physical activity,

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