Appetite 112 (2017) 78–95

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Appetite

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/appet

The unified model of vegetarian identity: A conceptual framework for understanding plant-based food choices

Daniel L. Rosenfeld*, Anthony L. Burrow

Department of Human Development, Cornell University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 September 2016
Received in revised form
15 January 2017
Accepted 17 January 2017
Available online 18 January 2017

Keywords:
Vegetarianism
Veganism
Identity
Food choice
Plant-based

ABSTRACT

By departing from social norms regarding food behaviors, vegetarians acquire membership in a distinct social group and can develop a salient vegetarian identity. However, vegetarian identities are diverse, multidimensional, and unique to each individual. Much research has identified fundamental psychological aspects of vegetarianism, and an identity framework that unifies these findings into common constructs and conceptually defines variables is needed. Integrating psychological theories of identity with research on food choices and vegetarianism, this paper proposes a conceptual model for studying vegetarianism: The Unified Model of Vegetarian Identity (UMVI). The UMVI encompasses ten dimensions—organized into three levels (contextual, internalized, and externalized)—that capture the role of vegetarianism in an individual's self-concept. Contextual dimensions situate vegetarianism within contexts; internalized dimensions outline self-evaluations; and externalized dimensions describe enactments of identity through behavior. Together, these dimensions form a coherent vegetarian identity, characterizing one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding being vegetarian. By unifying dimensions that capture psychological constructs universally, the UMVI can prevent discrepancies in operationalization, capture the inherent diversity of vegetarian identities, and enable future research to generate greater insight into how people understand themselves and their food choices.

Imagine yourself at a steakhouse, listening to your friends debate which cut of meat is the best. One friend orders the sirloin. Another friend decides on the prime rib. After raving about its tenderness all evening, a third friend goes with the filet mignon. You, having not consumed meat in a while, order the grilled tofu. As your friends look at one another and giggle, you realize that your food choice distinguishes you categorically from them, shapes how they see you, and possibly even shapes how you see yourself, leading you to wonder: Am I a vegetarian?

A vegetarian is most commonly defined as an individual who does not eat meat (Ruby, 2012). As a conscious decision on whether or not to eat meat, vegetarianism exemplifies a pattern of food choice that challenges widely held assumptions about eating behaviors. Eating meat is typically viewed as fundamental to human nature (Joy, 2011), and being vegetarian entails violating this perceived dietary obligation. Violating such a social norm may associate an individual with other norm-violators, known collectively as vegetarians. By these means, a vegetarian food-choice pattern can yield a distinct social category.

Self-categorization can lead a particular attribute to become a meaningful part of an individual's social identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000). After experiencing other situations similar to that in the introductory vignette, an individual can come to internalize being vegetarian as more than merely following a diet; it can become a defining characteristic of his or her social identity. First introduced by Tajfel (1972, pp. 272–302), social identity encompasses various memberships within larger social categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For vegetarians, self-categorization by food choices may situate an individual within a larger group and answer part of the iconic identity question: “Who am I?” In this sense, an individual can develop a salient vegetarian identity, thus enabling the answer: I am a vegetarian.

Discrepancies between surveys suggest that eating a vegetarian diet and having a salient vegetarian identity are distinct constructs. In 2012, 5% of adults in the United States, for example, considered themselves vegetarian (Newport, 2012), yet only 3% actually ate a vegetarian diet (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2012). This discrepancy may have been even greater in the past. A survey in

* Corresponding author. Department of Human Development, Cornell University, Martha Van Rensselaer Hall, Ithaca, NY, 14853, United States.
E-mail address: dlr248@cornell.edu (D.L. Rosenfeld).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.01.017
0195-6663/

1993 found that while 7.2% of Eastern U.S. participants indicated that they were vegetarian, only 1.5% ate a vegetarian diet (Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995). Indeed, the majority of self-identified vegetarians may eat meat occasionally (Ruby, 2012). Some individuals, however, may show the opposite trend: They eat vegetarian diets but do not consider themselves vegetarians. While self-categorization can induce social identity development (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), categorization may not *necessitate* identity development. Studying the dimensions of vegetarian identity in order to measure the ways in which vegetarians internalize their food choices can help explain these discrepancies and clarify what it means to be a vegetarian.

Despite an extensive body of literature on the psychological aspects of vegetarianism (see Ruby, 2012 for review), discrepancies remain in how a number of similar variables have been operationalized. Integrating this literature on vegetarianism with the psychological literature on identity would enable existing psychological constructs to characterize a range of common experiences for vegetarians and to conceptually define these constructs accordingly. Doing so would enable future research to utilize findings from the identity literature in order to make scientifically sound predictions in the realms of vegetarianism.

Needed for more rigorous empirical investigations of vegetarianism is a unified model of vegetarian identity that measures the ways in which vegetarians internalize their food choices into their self-concept and enact this identity through behavior. After situating vegetarianism within developmental and social psychological identity perspectives, we synthesize these bodies of literature into a conceptual model that brings together common psychological constructs in order to outline the dimensions of a vegetarian identity. These dimensions can help generate a better understanding of how social categorization, identity processes, and food choices conjointly influence how people think, feel, and behave with respect to vegetarianism. While the preponderance of integrated evidence stems from research on vegetarians in the United States, we strive to build a model that is flexible to cultural differences and useful for research universally. Ultimately, this model presents a more coherent foundation upon which research can examine the role of vegetarianism in individuals' lives.

1. Contextualizing vegetarianism

By definition, vegetarians exclude meat (including red meat, poultry, and fish) from their diets (Ruby, 2012) and may or may not exclude other animal foods, such as eggs and dairy. Many self-identified vegetarians even include certain meats, such as fish. Vegans—who follow the most-restrictive dietary pattern—exclude all animal foods. Although their dietary pattern warrants a distinct label, veganism is not a separate practice from vegetarianism; rather, veganism is a type of vegetarianism. Every vegan is a vegetarian, but not every vegetarian is a vegan. Thus, unless specified otherwise, the term, "vegetarians," includes vegans as well.

Most vegetarians in Western cultures have not followed such a diet from birth; rather, they decided to eschew eating meat voluntarily at some point during their lives (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991). Furthermore, individuals who were raised as vegetarians encounter the perpetual choice of whether to maintain their diets or to depart from their dietary upbringings. Thus, vegetarianism in these societies almost exclusively exemplifies a food-choice pattern. As Spencer (1993) emphasizes, the study of vegetarianism must focus on individuals who voluntarily follow a vegetarian diet, not on those who follow such a diet involuntarily due to scarcity of animal foods or poverty, for example. Having the opportunity to eat meat—and rejecting this opportunity—is fundamental to its nature.

Vegetarianism is becoming increasingly mainstream in several nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Results from national surveys between 1997 and 2016 indicate that vegetarians represent a rapidly growing demographic in the U.S. (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 1997, 2009, 2016). Furthermore, according to recent surveys in the U.K., an increasing proportion of the public reducing its meat consumption accompanies an expanding market for vegetarian food products (Vegetarian Society, 2013). As the role of animal products in the food system evolves, research on the psychological aspects of vegetarianism can provide critical insight into widespread concerns. In particular, vegetarianism can immensely benefit public health (e.g., Tantamango-Bartley, Jaceldo-Siegl, Fan, & Fraser, 2013; Tonstad et al., 2013) and the environment (e.g., Baroni, Cenci, Tettamanti, & Berati, 2007). Social identity perspectives can elucidate the experiences of individuals who follow this diet.

2. A social identity approach to vegetarianism

Recognizing that one consumes a vegetarian diet can make vegetarianism a social identity as much as it is a social category. This identity involves both internalizations and externalizations; it not only emerges from food choices but also enables vegetarians to manage their food choices in an omnivorous society. Principles of both developmental and social psychology can explain these processes and illuminate the various components of a vegetarian identity. As such, a social identity approach grounded in developmental perspectives provides a suitable method for understanding the relationship between plant-based food choices and identity.

The social identity approach comprises self-categorization theory and social identity theory (Hornsey, 2008). A principal feature of self-categorization involves classification of the self and others into in-group and out-group, by which individuals are depersonalized and perceived as prototypes of their respective group (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The introductory vignette, for example, illustrates the contextually responsive nature of self-categorization. At a sporting event, people may categorize themselves by favorite team. At a political debate, they may categorize by political orientation. At a steakhouse, however, eating meat is more contextually relevant than either sports preference or political orientation—one individual's decision to be vegetarian can become the entire group's basis for categorization. According to social identity theory, an individual's identity has two components: personal identity and social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). While personal identity involves idiosyncratic characteristics, social identity develops from an individual's membership within salient social groups. For vegetarians, eating several times each day can make food choice a recurrent basis for categorization and consequently a salient social identity.

Emphasizing the bidirectional interactions between an individual and his or her context, developmental contextualism provides a foundation for the social identity approach in two ways: it situates the approach within a sociocultural-historical context and provides a framework for conceptualizing the ways in which an individual internalizes and externalizes identity (Lerner & Kauffman, 1985). Psychological development occurs in a multilevel context, and each level influences one another. As social factors contribute considerably to identity development (Erikson, 1968), factors such as cultural norms, media, restaurants, family, and peers can shape vegetarian identity. The natures of these factors provide contextual meaning to vegetarianism, shape the ways in which food choices can serve as a basis for self-categorization, and situate an individual within the context's social category of vegetarians. For example, scarce vegetarian options at restaurants, negative media portrayals of vegetarianism, and low familial