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To eat or not to eat. A comparison of current and former animal product limiters

Katie Haverstock, Deborah Kirby Forgays *

Western Washington University, United States

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, we compared current and former pescatarians, vegetarians and vegans on a number of variables including the motivations for their food choices. Participants were recruited via online message boards as well as through snowball sampling. Of the 247 participants, 196 were currently limiting animal products and 51 were former animal product limiters. Current limiters were more likely to have made a gradual rather than abrupt transition to animal product limitation and were more likely to have joined a vegetarian or vegan group than former limiters. Furthermore, current limiters indicated that their eating pattern was a part of their self identity. These findings shed light on the differences among current and former vegans and vegetarians and can inform individuals interested in promoting animal product limitation for health or ethical reasons.

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Introduction

To eat or not to eat: a comparison of current and former animal product limiters

The food choices of animal product limiters challenge the dietary principles of the dominant meat-eating culture (Jabs, Sobal, & Devine, 2000). Adopting a diet that deviates from the diet of the majority can have significant psychosocial consequences, positive as well as negative (Jabs et al., 2000). There has been considerable research on factors associated with limiting animal products, including culture, gender, stress, health, animal rights, and environmental concerns (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; MacNair, 1998; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997; Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995). Often, these reasons are overlapping rather than mutually exclusive (Fox & Ward, 2008). However, given the paucity of research comparing current and former animal product limiters, it is not clear what factors contribute to cessation or maintenance of animal product limitation. A literature search yielded a single study investigating current and former animal product limiters (Barr & Chapman, 2002) as the majority of researchers have focused more broadly on reasons for food choices.

There is a substantial literature on the role of social environment on food choices. Culture and religious backgrounds may dictate some food choices or avoidances. The ahimsa concept (noninjury to living creatures) is a basic tenet of religions such as Buddhism; milk is considered an unclean fluid among some Asian and African groups (Lau, Krondl, & Coleman, 1984). Family history plays a role in that the foods one eats in childhood are also the preferred adult foods choices (Nicklaus, Boggio, Chabanet, & Issanchou, 2005). In addition, by early adulthood, individuals adopt a culturally based set of beliefs and attitudes about the edibility of objects (Rozin, 1984; Rozin, Fallon, & Mandell, 1984). In a family study, despite a relatively weak link between parent-adolescent food preferences, Rozin and colleagues found a stronger relationship between parent-adolescent "disgust" responses to certain foods. Thus, it is possible that parents may be more influential on what their offspring choose not to eat.

Social influence becomes a particularly important factor when one changes dietary habits. Steptoe and colleagues found that social support was a key contributor to an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption in a low-income population (Steptoe, Perkins-Porras, Rink, Hilton, & Cappuccio, 2004). In a qualitative study of persons who had begun limiting animal products, researchers note the important role of significant others in supporting such changes (Paisley, Beanlands, Goldman, Evers, & Chappell, 2008).

Some researchers have identified gender as a factor in animal product limitation. Mooney and Walbourn (2001) investigated food avoidance among college students and found that meat was the most commonly rejected food followed by vegetables. The types of food rejected were different for men and women. Half of the women reported avoiding meat most frequently while vegetables were the most commonly avoided food among men. In addition to vegetables, men consumed fewer fruits, high fiber foods, low fat foods, and more soft drinks than women (Steptoe et al., 2004). These findings have been attributed to women's concern about weight control and higher frequency of dieting. However, women also cited health, and animal ethics more frequently than men, and men cited taste more frequently than females (Mooney &

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Deborah.Forgays@wwu.edu (D.K. Forgays).

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Walbourn, 2001). Stress can also influence food choices. Zellner and colleagues (2006) found that stress caused changes in food choice away from a healthy food (grapes) to a less healthy high fat food (M & Ms). In addition, more females (46%) than males (17%) reported increasing food consumption when stressed, whereas more males (54%) than females (37%) reported under-eating when stressed. Thus, gender plays a role in what foods people chose to eat or reject as part of their typical diet and when under stress.

Concerns about health also play a role in individuals' motivations to reject or include certain foods. For example, some people choose to reject meat products because of health risks associated with meat. Meat consumption is associated with an increased risk of some cancers, and the levels of saturated fat found in animal products are responsible for a higher risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Walker, Rhubart-Berg, McKenzie, Kelling, & Lawrence, 2005). Health conditions may also lead to an increase of certain foods. In one study, rheumatoid arthritis patients added fish in their diet to reduce the number and severity of symptoms (Mannage, Hermann, & Schauenstein, 1999).

Personal goals such as weight loss can affect what people choose to eat at certain points in their lives (Steptoe et al., 1995). Americans are concerned with dieting and spend 40 billion dollars a year in an attempt to lose weight (Frontline, 2004). This attempt to lose weight affects food choices. Individuals may limit high fat foods or carbohydrates as a weight loss strategy. They may also increase their fruit and vegetable intake or choose plant-based proteins. Maintenance of such dietary changes has measurable benefits. In a health-conscious sample in the UK, those who maintained an animal product limiting diet gained less weight than meat eaters and maintained the lowest weight gain across the 5 years of the study (Rosell, Appleby, Spencer, & Key, 2006).

These shifts to a more vegetable based diet may be more successful when cognitions support the behavior. Participants who combined positive attitudes about vegetable consumption with negative assessment of high fat food were more successful in making a recent change in their eating pattern (Ogden, Karim, Choudry, & Brown, 2007). This is consistent with the perception of some foods as more pure and hence of greater nutritional quality than others. With this conceptualization, meat is perceived as dead whereas vegetables are seen as full of life and health (Twigg as cited in Beardsworth & Keil, 1992).

Finally, ethical concerns can guide the decision to limit animal products. Some individuals choose vegetarian or vegan eating patterns to avoid harm to living creatures (MacNair, 1998); others eat only locally raised meat and locally grown produce to reduce their footprint on the environment (Roosevelt, 2006). One or a combination of these factors – culture, health, gender, stress and protection of other organisms or the planet – may be sufficient rationale to shift to an animal product limiting diet. There may be multiple rationales for engaging in animal product limitation, some of which may conflict. In Beardsworth and Keil's qualitative study (1992), a number of participants discussed the dilemma of competing reasons – protecting the environment, avoiding violence to living creatures but also avoiding a diet that is more "moral" (e.g., devoid of animal flesh) but unhealthy (e.g., overly inclusive of sugar or high fat dairy products). Further, the fluidity with which some of their participants described their diet, e.g., a self label of vegetarian who periodically ingests animal flesh, is an important point to consider and lends support for utilizing a broad umbrella descriptor such as animal product limiter.

Current scales that assess reasons for dietary choices typically focus on the initial motivation for food choices with a research derived expanding list of reasons. Steptoe and colleagues developed the food choice questionnaire (FCQ; Steptoe et al., 1995) to assess factors that influence people's dietary choices. The FCQ has nine factors: health (contains a lot of vitamins and minerals), mood (helps me cope with stress), convenience (is easy to prepare), sensory appeal (has a pleasant texture), natural content (contains no additives), price (is cheap), weight control (is low in calories), familiarity (is like the food I ate when I was a child), and ethical concern (is packaged in an environmentally friendly way). Natural content, familiarity, and ethical concern were all positively correlated with age. Since the creation of the FCQ, Lindeman and Väänänen (2000) have expanded the ethical concern scale by adding items that assess animal welfare, religion, environmental protection and political values. The authors suggest that the FCQ can more comprehensively evaluate food choice motives and thus lead to improvements in dietary modification programs.

Research investigating current and former animal product limiters

In their examination of current and former animal product limiters, Barr and Chapman (2002) investigated the range of dietary practises among vegetarian women. They explored changes in vegetarian dietary practises over time and assessed former vegetarians' motivation and rationale for resuming an omnivorous diet. Their sample included 90 vegetarians, 35 former vegetarians, and 68 non-vegetarians ranging in age from 18 to 50. Fifteen participants also agreed to participate in a qualitative interview. Current vegetarians indicated whether their vegetarian diet had changed over time and whether they anticipated changing their diet in the upcoming year. Former vegetarians responded to an open ended question about what led to their decision to resume consuming animal products. The majority of current vegetarians indicated that their diet included fewer animal products than when they first went vegetarian (63%). Of the 35 former vegetarians, the most common reason for resuming animal product consumption was health related reasons. The 15 former vegetarians who participated in the qualitative interviews identified lack of social support for vegetarianism and health concerns as the main reasons for adding meat back into their diets. Regarding health concerns, protein was mentioned most frequently but participants also raised concerns about low iron, calcium, and vitamin B-12.

While Barr and Chapman's study (2002) offers insight into the reasoning behind following or discontinuing a vegetarian diet, they did not include males in their sample and former vegetarians comprise only 18% of the sample. It is possible that there are differences between males and females on reasoning for limiting animal products. Time as an animal product limiter may also play a role in reasoning for limiting animal products. The majority of the study's current vegetarians included fewer animal products over time, and many of the those interviewed stated that as they learned more about factory farming they gradually reduced their consumption of dairy and eggs. It is further possible that the manner in which persons transitioned to limiting animal products is a factor in maintenance. If former vegetarians made the change from omnivore to animal product abruptly, such a dramatic dietary change may be more difficult to maintain.

The current study

Although most Americans are omnivorous, with three percent of the population identifying as vegetarian or vegan (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2006, the rationale for eating pattern selection warrants further study. There are many possible animal product limitation dietary patterns, including pescatarian, vegetarian, or vegan. The reasons for adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet may be related to the stability of eating pattern selection. There may be a tendency for a particular age or gender group to modify their eating pattern, and this modification may or may not endure depending on one's rationale.