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Research Report

Health, ethics and environment: A qualitative study of vegetarian motivations

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the motivations of vegetarians by means of online ethnographic research with participants in an international message board. The researcher participated in discussions on the board, gathered responses to questions from 33 participants, and conducted follow-up e-mail interviews with 18 of these participants. Respondents were predominantly from the US, Canada and the UK. Seventy per cent were females, and ages ranged from 14 to 53, with a median of 26 years. Data were analysed using a thematic approach. While this research found that health and the ethical treatment of animals were the main motivators for participants' vegetarianism, participants reported a range of commitments to environmental concerns, although in only one case was environmentalism a primary motivator for becoming a vegetarian. The data indicate that vegetarians may follow a trajectory, in which initial motivations are augmented over time by other reasons for sustaining or further restricting their diet.
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Introduction

Abstinence from the consumption of meat and animal products is an element of some religious practices including Buddhism and Seventh Day Adventism (Fraser, 2003). Others choose a secular vegetarianism, grounded in non-religious motivations (Whorton, 1994). The Vegetarian Society coined the term 'vegetarian' in the mid-nineteenth century, and this is used to cover a range of dietary choices that avoid some or all foods with animal origins (Barr & Chapman, 2002; Hoek, Pieternel, Stafleu, & de Graaf, 2004). Vegans avoid all animal products for food, clothing or other purposes, while *lacto-ovo* vegetarians consume dairy produce and eggs, and *semi-* and *pesco*-vegetarians eat poultry and fish respectively (Phillips, 2005; Willetts, 1997).

Studies of vegetarians have identified a variety of non-religious motivations for adopting a meat-free diet (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Povey, Wellens, & Conners, 2001). Personal health and animal cruelty figure high on this list (Hoek et al., 2004, p. 266; Lea & Worsley, 2001, p. 127), while disgust or repugnance with eating flesh (Kenyon & Barker, 1998; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997; Santos & Booth, 1996), association with patriarchy (Adams, 1990), food beliefs and peer or family influences (Lea & Worsley, 2001, p. 128) are also noted. Health vegetarians choose to avoid meat in order to derive certain health benefits or lose weight (Key, Appleby, & Rosell, 2006; Kim & Houser, 1999; Wilson, Weatherall, & Butler, 2004), while ethical vegetarians consider meat avoidance as a moral imperative not to harm animals for food or other reasons (Fessler, Arguello, Mekdara, & Macias, 2003, p. 31; Whorton, 1994). Health concerns are also the major reason motivating individuals who are 'partial vegetarians', who choose not to eat red meat, limit their consumption of flesh to fish, or select only organic products (American Dietetic Association, 2003; Bedford & Barr, 2005; Hoek et al., 2004, p. 266).

In addition to these commitments, vegetarianism has been linked to concerns with the environmental and ecological impact of meat (Gaard, 2002; Hoek et al.,

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2004, p. 265; Lindeman & Sirelius, 2001, p. 182). In Kalof, Dietz, Stern, and Guagnano (1999) study of influences on vegetarianism, belief that a vegetarian diet was less harmful to the environment was the only factor significantly differentiating vegetarians and non-vegetarians, while beliefs concerning the health and animal welfare benefits of vegetarianism were non-significant. A range of commercial outlets now offer 'health foods', 'wholefoods' and most recently 'organic foods' grown without additives, pesticides and artificial fertilisers that increase food productivity at the expense of the environment (Coveney, 2000, p. 141). Hoek et al. (2004) note the emergence of a 'vegetarian-oriented consumerism' that addresses ethical and environmental concerns, while Allen Fox (1999) suggests that a vegetarian economy contributes to 'ecosystem health' by reducing the impact on the environment and economies of pollution, intensive faming and land degradation by grazing, affecting both developed and less-developed countries. Awareness of their contribution to the future of the planet can also support good psychological health among vegetarians, according to Wilson et al. (2004).

Devine, Connors, Bisogni, and Sobal (1998) have described the feelings, strategies and actions in relation to food choices that people adopt over their life course as 'trajectories' that demonstrate persistence and continuity as circumstances alter. These trajectories are underpinned by values that determine what foods are chosen (Sobal, Bisogni, Devine, & Jastran, 2006, p. 9). Jabs, Devine, and Sobal (1998) examined life-course trajectories and the impact of life events on vegetarians' food choices, finding different patterns of adoption among health and ethical vegetarians. Health vegetarians tended to make gradual 'trial adoptions' of food choices, while 'ethical vegetarians' made more sudden changes in their diet to support beliefs such as animal welfare, and create consistency in their lives (see also Hamilton, 1993). Both groups may graduate from semi- or ovo-lacto vegetarianism to a vegan diet over time.

Our research among vegetarian participants in an online forum (Fox & Ward, submitted for publication) has found a distinct fault-line between these two perspectives. Health vegetarians emphasised personal reasons for their diet above concern for animals, and were accused by some ethical vegetarians of being selfish and interested only in improving their own quality of life. Ethical vegetarians considered that their own practices were fundamentally altruistic, and involved personal sacrifice in order to prevent cruelty to animals. Lindeman and Sirelius (2001, p. 182) have suggested these perspectives have different ideological bases, with ethical vegetarianism broadly associated with humanistic commitments and health vegetarianism with conservative and normative values.

While initial motivation to adopt a vegetarian diet may thus be divergent, resulting in animosity between health and ethical vegetarians on occasions (Fox & Ward, submitted for publication), there may also be convergence among those who have adopted a vegetarian diet, possibly to provide further cognitive support for a difficult life choice (Santos & Booth, 1996, p. 204), or as a consequence of exposure to other vegetarians' motivations, beliefs and practices (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). In this paper, we report data that explore this convergence, and specifically the emergence of environmentalist concerns among vegetarians whose motivations initially derived from personal health or animal welfare. We examine, by means of online ethnographic methods, vegetarians' own perspectives on how health, ethical and environmental beliefs motivate their food choices, to investigate the interactions between beliefs over health, animal cruelty and the environment, and how these may contribute to food choice trajectory.

Methods

Design and setting

The data reported here are drawn from 'online ethnographic' research carried out in a web-based forum concerned with secular vegetarianism, which will be referred to here as the *VegForum*. The forum was selected because it attracted a high volume of users who posted regularly to the message boards, creating a lively website with a heavy flow of 'traffic'. The forum had a number of message boards, which included the provision of advice to new vegetarians, health, animal rights and ecology. Participants were an eclectic mix, from vegans who avoided all animal products for food or clothing, to those who ate dairy products or even fish. The language of communication was English, and participants were predominantly from North America, the UK and Australasia. Our research was largely confined to one discussion board that was intended to provide support to new vegetarians.

There is a growing body of research using Internet-mediated ethnographic methods, and there are various advantages and limitations. Internet interviewing is appropriate for sensitive subjects not amenable to face-to-face interviews (Illingworth, 2001), and Glaser, Dixit, and Green (2002, pp. 189–190) suggest that the anonymity of the Internet permits research into marginal groups for whom self-disclosure may have costs, and where participants may be suspicious of researchers and outsiders. The Internet provides a cost-effective way to access small or hard to find groups who interact in specialist fora (Illingworth, 2001; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).

On the other hand, there are issues of validity in Internet-based research. Anonymity increases the potential for intentional or unintentional deception (Glaser et al., 2002, P.191) and for identity manipulation (Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003, p. 115; Nosek et al., 2002, p. 172). Internet samples will under-represent poor and minority groups (Nosek et al., 2002, p. 168). Hewson et al. (2003, p. 32) consider that this bias is disappearing with the rapid spread of Internet access, although research (Henning, 2005) indicates that Internet-based social networking is a

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