



“What Pushed Me over the Edge Was a Deer Hunter”: Being Vegan in North America

Christopher A. Hirschler

Monmouth University
chirschl@monmouth.edu

Abstract

Thirty-two vegans were interviewed in order to examine the reasons for becoming vegan, the sustaining motivation to persist, the interpersonal and intrapersonal impact of the diet and associated practices, and the vegans' assessment of omnivores' eating practices. Interviews were analyzed using a model that diagrams the process of becoming vegan provided by McDonald (2000). Participants reported strained professional and personal relationships as a result of their diet and beliefs. Vegan diets were associated with an increase in physical, eudaemonic, and spiritual well-being.

Keywords

critical methods, education, health and well-being, nutrition, stigma, vegan, vegetarian, violence

Introduction

Vegans are a group of individuals who abstain from the dietary consumption or other use of any animal product. Vegans tend to embrace the philosophy of *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit word representing a concept of dynamic harmlessness, which guides them not only to do the least harm, but to do the most good (Stepaniak, 2000).

Veganism as a dietary practice is rare among those living in developed countries. In the United States about 1 percent of adults are vegan (*Vegetarian Journal*, 2009), and 2 percent of youth between the ages of 8 and 18 are vegan (Stahler, 2010). A Vegan Research Panel (2003) survey of 1,249 vegans found the main reasons for becoming vegan were ethical/moral (82 percent), dietary/health (14 percent), and spiritual/religious (2 percent). Distaste for nonhuman animal flesh or products and a preference for the taste of vegetarian foods were also a factor (Larsson, Ronnlund, Johansson, & Dahlgren, 2003).

In most instances, vegans were born and raised in families that consumed animal products (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). At some point, however, they

made a decision to go against the meat-eating norm. As McDonald, Cervero, and Courtenay (1999) note, "One of the more dramatic actions that an individual can take is to make a major change to her or his diet. Eliminating all animal products for ethical reasons is an extreme dietary change" (p. 8).

Little research has been conducted that explores the process of becoming vegan (Larsson, et al., 2003; McDonald, 2000; MacNair, 1998) and remaining vegan. Utilizing the framework provided by McDonald (2000), this study examines the career path of vegans.

McDonald (2000, p. 6) describes the learning process vegans go through as one that includes "who I was" (background and experiences), a catalytic experience in which they were introduced to some feature of animal cruelty, repression and/or becoming oriented, learning, decision, and a changed worldview. Some individuals, upon learning about cruelty, repressed that knowledge until some later event triggered memories of the initial catalytic experience. Repression delayed becoming oriented. Following a catalytic experience, those who did not repress became oriented. This meant they intended to learn more and/or make a decision about becoming vegetarian or vegan. Learning involved discovering information about animal cruelty and acquiring the necessary knowledge to transition to a vegan or vegetarian diet. MacNair (2001) agrees with McDonald that the role played by one's practical knowledge (e.g., how to cook), ideological beliefs (e.g., the value of all life), instrumental learning (self-efficacy with regard to the ability to nourish oneself satisfactorily), and communicative learning ("having a commitment to the ideals of vegetarian or vegan practices") are also important factors in this conversion process (p. 67).

Understanding the experience of being vegan is important because it will assist both those contemplating adoption of this practice and those who are currently vegan, and it might help to limit the number of vegans who transition back to meat eating (Aronson, 1996). The topic of vegan diets is also relevant to a variety of dimensions of health. For example, animal products are widely consumed in the United States and are a major source of saturated fat and calories and the only source of dietary cholesterol (Walker, Rhubarb-Berg, McKenzie, Kelling, & Lawrence, 2005). Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States; the combination of heart disease, cancer, and stroke accounts for 55 percent of all annual deaths in the United States (Heron et al., 2009). Heart disease begins in childhood (Berenson & Srinivasan, 2003) and is related to a diet high in saturated fats (Hu & Willett, 2002), cognitive decline (Solfrizzi, Panza, & Capurso, 2003), and sexual dysfunction (Derby et al., 2000).

Vegan diets might reduce the epidemic of chronic diseases afflicting individuals in both developed and developing countries. According to the

American Dietetic Association, "Appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases" (Craig & Mangels, 2009, p. 1266). Studies continue to confirm the benefits of vegan diets. A recent review of the health effects of vegetarian and vegan diets showed that vegetarians and vegans have a relatively low body mass index and cholesterol levels and a moderately lower risk of death from ischemic heart disease when compared with similar meat-eating individuals (Key, Appleby, & Rosell, 2006).

In addition, there are troubling environmental problems associated with animal agriculture (Hamilton, 2002; Harrison, 2001). There is well-documented evidence that industrialized animal agriculture is contributing to large-scale environmental problems, including water, land, and air pollution and is accelerating the pace of climate change (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006; Hodges, 2005):

The livestock sector emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global. . . . The impact is so significant that it needs to be addressed with urgency. (Steinfeld et al., 2006, p. xx)

Furthermore, billions of animals suffer because of intensive agricultural practices and slaughter procedures (Marcus, 2005; Eisnitz, 1997). Ironically, North America is home to millions of self-identified companion-animal lovers,¹ yet many individuals are seemingly unaware of the apparent contradiction between their dietary habits, their professed love for animals, and their complicity in violence. It has been shown that those who eat meat are "deeply conflicted" about their decision to eat meat and employ "significant unconscious defenses to mitigate this inconsistency" (Joy, 2002, p. 142).

The goal of this research is to describe the process of becoming vegan. This paper outlines the motivations underlying the conversion to veganism and the ways that relationships are impacted by the change in diet and paradigm.

Method

In-depth, semistructured interviews were analyzed using McDonald's "process of becoming vegan" (2000, p. 5). Purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques were utilized. About half the participants were interviewed because I considered them to be leaders or exemplars (purposive); 15 participants were recruited via personal contact at the Annual Conference of the

North American Vegetarian Society or Veggedate.com, an Internet dating website (convenience), and 2 interviews were the result of referral (snowball).

The 32 participants were living in 11 states (California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin) and Canada ($n = 2$). The mean age of participants was 41, with a range from 22 to 68. Twenty-one males and 11 females participated. The ethnicities represented were Caucasian ($n = 27$), African-American ($n = 2$), Puerto Rican ($n = 1$), and Native American ($n = 1$). One participant chose not to disclose ethnicity. The highest level of education obtained was: high school diploma ($n = 2$), some college ($n = 1$), associate's degree ($n = 2$), bachelor's degree ($n = 9$), master's degree ($n = 8$), doctor of philosophy ($n = 7$), and medical degree ($n = 3$). One participant earned both a PhD and an MD degree; only the medical degree was counted. Participants were employed in the following professions: dietitian ($n = 8$), animal activist ($n = 6$), philosophy professor ($n = 6$), medical doctor ($n = 3$), and other ($n = 9$).

Data collection

Seventeen participants were interviewed between November 2003 and August 2004. Fifteen participants were interviewed between June 2007 and February 2008. Semistructured interviews were used to explore the experience of being vegan. Interviews lasted between 18 and 70 minutes. A digital voice recorder was used to record each session. Emergent themes were noted during the transcription process.

Shadowed data (Morse, 2001) was collected; participants were asked how their experiences compared with that of other vegans they knew. In addition, 15 vegans were e-mailed "narratives of experience" (Caelli, 2001)—the story derived from their interview, which included researcher commentary, along with the narratives from two other participants. They were asked to reflect on all three narratives. Participants' editorial and substantive remarks helped ensure that what was written matched their experience and intention.

Results

Participants, on average, had spent the first 23 years of their lives eating an omnivorous diet and 12 years as vegans. Twenty-seven ate a vegetarian diet, for an average of six years, before transitioning to a vegan diet. The total numbers of years spent as an omnivore, vegetarian, and vegan were 743, 158, and 390, respectively.

Who I was

All the participants grew up eating meat in omnivorous households. Many stated that their family ate a typical “meat and potatoes” diet, and all the participants described their household diet as being centered on meat.

About his passion for meat, Phillip, 49, an African-American medical doctor, said, “Growing up I was a big meat eater. I loved it! I couldn’t imagine living without it! In fact, there were rare occasions when my parents would fix a meal without meat, and I would cry and sulk.” Jon, 37, a philosophy professor whose family “ate a ton of meat . . . it was about as meat-heavy as a diet could be,” said, “If you had known me as a 13-year-old, you would never in a million years have guessed that I would become a vegan!”

In addition to the common experience of a childhood involving meat eating, a clear majority of participants recalled exhibiting animal-oriented empathy (Pallotta, 2008). Many reported being less concerned about fitting in. As children, however, they were highly dependent upon their parents.

Rob, 50, a social worker who adopted a vegetarian diet at 22, recalled sitting down for a chicken dinner as a child and thinking, “It’s a pile of bones. Oh my God—it’s like bones! Everybody is gnawing on bones!” Although he felt an impulse to become vegetarian, he, like many others, did not receive the support of his family. He repressed his thoughts about meat, and this acted to delay the onset of change.

Catalytic experience

Twenty-seven of the 32 participants transitioned from omnivorous diets to vegetarian diets to vegan diets, a gradual process that involved education, experimentation, and mentoring and social support from other vegetarians and vegans. The initial motivation mainly involved ethical (animal welfare/animal rights) and health concerns and involved a catalytic experience (McDonald, 2000).

Allen, 51, a philosophy professor, recounted a tale of a fast-food encounter. He was 24 years old in 1982 when he had a “primordial experience of connecting the food to an animal and not being able to eat it.” Allen’s catalytic experience follows:

I went into a White Castle restaurant, it was about 2:30 a.m., and I was half drunk. For some reason I was really hungry, and I ordered a double cheeseburger; usually, just a single was fine. When I started eating it, it was so grotesque and hideous, dripping and gooey, and so over the top, that it just made me recognize what it really was. Then that experience with the steak came back in a much bigger way, such that I vividly saw this hamburger not as slab of “food” but as the remaining evidence of blood, tendons,

and muscles of a being that was once alive but was killed to be served to me in a bag. I was eating another animal! With a powerful sense of disgust and loathing, I put it down and threw it away. In fact, hoping the experience was a short-lived anomaly, rather than a potent and permanent harbinger of change, I tried to eat hamburgers a couple times after that fateful night, and I spit out each one.

Rose, 28, a nutritionist, became vegan at age 24 after a two-week stint as a vegetarian. During a San Francisco Vegetarian Society meeting, Rose watched an animal rights video.

I just hadn't been exposed, even growing up in Nebraska, I had no idea how the animals are treated during the production process, and it was just horrifying. I guess I thought that if I didn't need to contribute to that sort of cruelty and bad karma, then why should I?

Eighteen years ago, Linda, a 48-year-old registered dietitian, questioned the motives of her deer-hunting friend. She recalled saying, "I don't understand how you can go into the woods with a big gun and shoot such a beautiful animal." Her friend, as Linda remembered it, replied, "Just because you don't have the guts to pull the trigger does not mean you are not responsible for every animal that you buy that's camouflaged in cellophane at a grocery store." Linda reflected:

I had never really thought of myself as being responsible for the animals that I was buying out of the grocery store. I had divorced myself from that thought a long, long time ago. . . . It's funny that what pushed me over the edge was a deer hunter, but that's exactly what happened.

The catalytic experiences described above generally led participants to becoming oriented and to learning, via reading literature, watching videos, and expanding their vegetarian and vegan social networks. The exception to this pattern occurred when the individual had this catalytic experience as a child or adolescent and lived at home with unsupportive parents, in which case information was repressed until another catalytic experience reawakened dormant ideas and desires. In the early stages of their vegan careers, a major task of becoming oriented involved navigating relationships.

Becoming oriented, learning, and making decisions

Becoming oriented and deciding to eat vegetarian or vegan meals meant the vegans needed to learn more about the practical aspects of nourishment. This was generally only problematic in the beginning of their transitions, but travel

and living in an area with few vegan options at restaurants or grocery stores presented hurdles. Part of the learning process involved recognizing the need to plan ahead.

All 32 participants indicated that one of the earliest challenges they had to master was defending their dietary choice. Most mentioned that it is unfair that they were put in a position to defend their diet when the average omnivore is not expected to.

For example, Greg, a 52-year-old physician, understands and accepts that as a vegan he is a minority, but he expressed frustration at people's tendency to make sweeping generalizations. He called the parents who infamously fed their child an inadequate vegan diet (Planck, 2007) "insane" and expressed resentment that "everyone who eats a vegan diet got tarred with the same brush." About always being "under scrutiny," Greg said:

You're under this little magnifying glass because you're different from the mainstream. You know? But it's just as easy to turn it around and say, "Do you happen to know any meat eaters with diabetes who aren't thriving...?" They can barely waddle to their desk! But they don't think of it that way.

Jon's response to the question "What's it like being vegan?" reveals the greatest challenge faced by vegans. Without hesitation, Jon replied, "The first thing that comes to my mind, the social difficulty of veganism and the personal ease of veganism."

The vegans interviewed had quickly understood that their diet was a source of conflict; learning how to present themselves and their developing ideas in a manner that fostered the development of enjoyable relationships was a challenge. In terms of social challenges, family members were the most frequently cited group (among friends, coworkers, significant others, and acquaintances) and presented the most intractable problems. Interactions with family members were described as being more negative and difficult to navigate than the other social groups. Vegans indicated that the source of their discontent centered on their family members' continued disparagement of their diet and beliefs, parental concerns about the adequacy of a vegan diet, and uncomfortable and unsatisfying social interactions. Family member responses varied considerably and included disapproval, antagonism, rejection, accommodation, acceptance, encouragement, and adoption of vegetarian or vegan diets. For some vegans, their diet was still a point of contention and falling on different sides of the issue left many feeling less connected with their omnivorous family members.

Most vegans experienced a growing acceptance among nonvegetarian family members. Friends were generally accepting of participants' diets. Several

participants spoke of educating and influencing their friends to adopt plant-based diets or convincing them to choose animal products that involved less suffering, such as cage-free eggs. As part of becoming oriented, they began to gravitate toward a new set of friends who practiced vegetarian or vegan diets.

Becoming oriented also meant accepting the loss of some friendships. Dwight, 68, a 16-year vegan and a former farmer and feedlot operator said, "Well, you know, some friendships, when I did what I did, it severed the friendship. But as far as I was concerned, if that was an insurmountable problem, then they really weren't a friend in the first place." Similarly, Allen commented:

You try not to be dogmatic about it, but at some point you just have to say, "Look, I don't want to be around someone who is using nigger jokes. I don't want to be around someone who is violent toward women. And I don't want to be around someone who continues to eat meat and shows no regard for the value of animals."

In addition to learning how to negotiate relationships with family members and friends, vegans quickly realized the need to manage their emerging vegan identities. While the workplace was generally not the site of direct confrontations, it was a place where vegans managed their stigma. They attempted to deflect attention from this aspect of their identity in an effort to go undetected, sometimes by trying to "pass" (Goffman, 1963), and they encountered both prejudice and support.

Linda, a registered dietitian, said, "I was very worried that within my profession I would be looked down upon, I would be challenged, I would be thought of as a fringy person—and it never happened. I'm amazed, actually." She thinks her colleagues embraced her because she is "very science-based" and "someone who can help them when there are vegetarian clients." Several participants, however, spoke about strained social situations in the workplace.

Jeff, 35, a philosophy professor and vegan since 18, finds interactions with his academic colleagues disconcerting. He stated, "I get it from where most people would least expect it—I get most of the prejudice and stereotypes from academics." Allen also expressed frustration with the perceptions that his coworkers have of him because of his diet:

It can be a real problem. However you try to finesse it, they see you as an outsider. "You're not one of us. You're a weirdo, and we don't want to be with you." It can affect your career! You're not one of the boys. You're not in the club. You don't go out with them on Friday night and eat chicken wings and beer. . . . It's like you don't want to fit in, and it can be seen as an insult or a threat or challenge. . . . It doesn't matter whether you're talking about a truck driver or your dean who has a PhD and so-called educated people! They all think the same way!

Changed worldview

McDonald (2000, p. 6) describes the changed worldview as “the new perspective that guides the vegan’s new lifestyle.”² Several themes emerged from an analysis of the vegans’ new perspective. Vegans were more cognizant of the suffering in the world and the need to make more deliberate and informed choices. This responsibility was viewed as both a burden and a blessing. In their actions and the acts of other activists they saw the promise of a better future, yet their altered view of those who continue to use products derived from animals sometimes led to disappointment. They understood, however, that they had once consumed animal products and attempted to be understanding.

A common theme in nearly every interview was the psychological comfort associated with the synchronization of values and actions, and being vegan allowed them to be proactive in this realm. This notion is illustrated by Al, a 68-year-old author and retired philosophy professor, who stated that one benefit of veganism is that it provides “people a better sense of being self-directed rather than being the creation of the culture in which you happen to be born.” Al said:

Tolstoy speculates that if someone is trying to disengage themselves from the needless violence there is in the world, there is a first step, there is a natural step to take and that is just to stop eating animals. It is within everyone’s grasp. In the world with which I’m most familiar [the academic world] there are all these liberals that sit around and complain about the present administration and denounce the rulings of the Supreme Court. There’s a steady diet of this stuff. But the point is, there is nothing that they personally can do about it, and, in fact, they don’t do anything about it. They just sit around and complain. It’s what I call ethics at a distance; it’s ethics in the third person. “He, she, or it is doing something wrong, and I don’t like it.” By contrast, living life as a vegan or vegetarian is ethics in the first person—it’s ethics up close and personal.

Living “ethics in the first person” involves questioning assumptions and making numerous, well-thought-out decisions. William, 51, a former farmer and slaughterhouse employee who “came from a darker place than many people do” and considers himself a different sort of farmer, one who plants seeds of compassion, spoke about the responsibility we all have for making choices that address the problems of the world. William said:

If we could all just cruise along and nobody rocks our boat, life’s okay. Unfortunately, you can be part of a problem if you do that. Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” I think that’s what we need to do. We need to wake up and live an examined life. Step out of line. The vast majority of people in this country are like

cattle, walking nose-to-tail, walking single file, and following the leader. Unfortunately, the view ahead of you isn't that great.

One vegan who did step out of line is Dwight. He is a man who admits to being responsible for the death of thousands of animals, yet today he reports that his commitment to animals is unwavering. He relayed a recent, vivid dream: "A man was holding a gun to my head, and he was holding a burger in his other hand. He said, 'Eat it, or I'll pull the trigger!'" Dwight demonstrated how he picked up the burger in his dream and brought it to his mouth, only to lift it a few inches higher, steadying it at eye level. Fixated on the burger a foot from his face, he told the gunman, "You better pull the trigger" and woke up in a cold sweat.

A component of a vegan's altered world view is a sense of enlightenment and of being out of step with mainstream society. The transformation is often referred to in spiritual or even religious terms (Jamison, Wenk, & Parker, 2000). As Allen said, "My epiphany at White Castle restaurant was something akin to a religious experience that transformed me amidst the most profane of spaces." He went on:

And yet, being a vegan is a little bit like the epiphany in the climax of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. You don't want to be dogmatic. You don't want to come off as a Christian. You don't want to pretend you have the truth, but you're not a relativist, either. You know what your realities are, and you know what's good for you, and you know that other people don't know, and you want to share that with them. . . . You've come back from the heart of darkness, and you're not the same person anymore. You're with these other people, and you're walking around in their culture, and you know that they don't know, or they don't care, or both. And you just wonder, "Who are these people?"

Recognition of one's new place in the culture, as an exemplar who acts to lessen suffering, is exemplified by Linda:

Don't ever underestimate the power of your personal example. . . . Don't think they won't notice. If you're sickly, they will use it to justify their meat eating. It's the worst thing you can do. If you want to push people miles away from being vegan, be unhealthy, be overweight, or be underweight. Whatever we do that contributes to poor health, they will use to justify killing animals.

Why aren't others vegan?

During their tenure as vegans, the participants had devoted considerable effort to understanding why the majority of the population essentially rejects

vegetarian and vegan diets. Despite being perplexed, they provided multiple explanations that ranged from lack of practical knowledge of what to eat or how to prepare it, lack of information about the benefits of plant-based diets and the suffering involved in animal production, intentional ignorance, religious beliefs that condone meat eating, and belief in the physical and psychological necessity of animal products. Additional explanations include marketing/educational campaigns by food companies and organizations that provide nutrition education; the hidden nature of food production; issues related to identity, conformity, cravings, and laziness; lack of empathy; and fear of negative social repercussions.

Rob said, “It has to do with the fact that when you go to the store, you’re not part of that process—it’s already been done. You’re seeing things, and it’s hard to even conceive that that brown hamburger comes from an animal.” Edward, a 30-year-old veterinarian’s assistant, said, “I guess if I had to sum it up . . . I think that a lot of people think that it’s too big of a change to make it worthwhile.” Sue, founder and executive director of a charter school that focuses on environmental sustainability and global awareness, said, “Some people want to be ignorant because if they do know too much they might have to make a change in their life.”

Lance, 43, a fasting-retreat owner/operator thinks that “we’ve been led to believe—we are brainwashed every day—that we need animal products.” Fear of criticism and harassment and a reaction to prejudice (Swim & Stangor, 1998) might also lead to the tendency toward conformity. Lance continued:

Well, I can tell you, again, from working one-on-one with more than 2,000 people over the last 14 to 15 years, that many people are extremely self-conscious and unwilling to make lifestyle changes that they believe will have others deem them strange. . . . They have fears come up, as we all do, but it often stops them.

The vegans thought that omnivores disregard vegan diets because it is a rare practice. Informational social influence—taking cues from others—has been found to play a “significant role in conformity effects” (Pendry & Carrick, 2001, p. 84) and is considered a reliable method for making many decisions:

If we are unsure of ourselves, we are more likely to look around at what other people are doing and imitate the most common behavior. From this perspective the directive “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” can be seen as an adaptive shortcut. (Coultas, 2004, p. 330)

John, 49, provided an example of what Henrich and Boyd (1998) describe as conformist transmission that “implies that individuals possess a propensity to

preferentially adopt the cultural traits that are most frequent in the population” (p. 219). In other words, meat eating begets more meat eating. John was perplexed that it took his niece until her midtwenties to become vegetarian. John recalls asking her, “Lisa, all those years that you were growing up, did you just think that I was a nut case?” She replied, “Yeah, I did. I thought, how could you be right and everybody else be wrong?”

Tom, a philosophy professor, stated that eating meat is “a matter of preferring the taste of animal bodies to other foods.” He continued:

It’s hard to see why you’d justify killing them just to satisfy such a trivial preference. I mean, there is something about food, the long precedent about eating animals in this way that interferes with people’s rationality. Suppose there was a form of exercise you enjoyed a lot. Suppose drowning animals was much more exhilarating than swimming with a floatation device or something like that, or swinging a club against an animal’s head felt a lot better than a bag for you. People would be appalled if you exercised in this way. They would say, “Look, just use a bag or swim with the vegan floatation device—you don’t have to kill an animal for this trivial reason.” But if you said to them, “I just prefer the taste of their body as opposed to vegetable foods,” then it’s acceptable. It’s weird. It’s hard to understand why there is this intellectual barrier to seeing the moral case.

Although vegans recognize that omnivores face social pressures to conform, they tended to place more emphasis on omnivores’ lack of knowledge, apathy, desire for convenience, and appetite for animal products as reasons for continued animal product consumption. Vegans might have slightly discounted the role played by conformity effects in maintaining omnivorous diets because they were able to deal effectively with the social challenges. They also might have thought that a person must at least attempt to change his or her diet to experience social repercussions.

Discussion

This study reaffirms McDonald’s description of how one becomes a vegan and is helpful in understanding this phenomenon. Vegans were intimately familiar with the cultural mores associated with omnivorism. However, as the ultimate “reflexively defiant” consumer (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 524), they chose to boycott the system. “Practical vegans, symbolic vegans”³ (Vegan Outreach, n.d.), ethical vegans, and vegans primarily motivated by health concerns are all proxies for animals. Their choice not to eat meat-derived products is, in essence, a struggle against a dominant, and widely unquestioned, ideology called carnism, which “rests upon the anthropocentric assumption

that the killing of other animals for the human palate is ethical and legitimate” (Joy, 2002, p. 7).

A common catalytic experience that led to change was the realization that meat is the flesh of another, formerly living being, what Adams (2000) refers to as the “absent referent.” The vegans were able to connect the food with the individuality of the animal and, instead of thinking of meat as food, they recognized it as the remains of a recently living, sentient being who had a personality, desires, and life history that came to a violent end.

A participant in McDonald’s (2000) study said, “The curtain was pulled back. The truth was made known” (p. 9). Similarly, vegans in this present study were surprised that they previously did not see what now seemed so clear: that humans and animals suffer unnecessarily from the production of animal-product-containing meals (Striffler, 2005).

Becoming oriented meant learning how to cook vegan meals and understanding animal rights arguments as well as common factory farming practices. Education, primarily in the form of self-directed learning and discussions, was often sought as a means of providing the ability to defend against attacks on their beliefs and to become more effective advocates for the animals. An essential task of becoming vegan is learning how to handle social situations that arise primarily because of dietary issues or associated beliefs.

As with the vegans in McDonald’s study, the vegans in this study “never became completely free of the normative ideology of speciesism” (McDonald, 2000, p. 21). Although those who had earned advanced degrees and held respected professional positions and those who had more years of experience admitted to being less affected by this dominant ideology, they were still unable to extricate themselves from it.

It is important to emphasize that each vegan interviewed experienced prejudiced encounters and violations of expected “normal or ideal interaction patterns” (Swim & Stangor, 1998, p. 44). They engaged in visibility management strategies, carefully deciding whom to tell, when to tell, and what to tell (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). Like those with celiac disease (Olsson, Lyon, Hornell, Ivarsson, & Sydner, 2009) or diabetes (Ingadottir & Halldorsdottir, 2008), vegans often attempted to manage stigma by keeping their diet invisible. With experience, including successes and failures, most of the vegans learned to negotiate relationships with omnivores in such a way as to decrease the occurrence of undesirable interactions.

The challenges were greatest at the start of the vegans’ journeys. As the years passed, they became experts at navigating novel, even hostile, situations. Most are so accomplished now that it appears moving through the stream that flows against them is effortless. Yet they are still exerting effort, however imperceptible it might appear to the uninitiated observer.

Throughout their vegan careers, the learning process never ceased, and this contributed to a growing number of motivations or polythematic accounts (Boyle, 2007). This educational process added breadth and depth to their understanding, strengthened their commitment, and impacted their lived experience both positively (e.g., by increasing the effectiveness of their advocacy) and negatively (e.g., by increasing their awareness of suffering).

One of the most interesting findings is that becoming vegan did not result in a radical shift in identity, nor did a change in identity appear to play a significant role in the behavior change process. Most viewed themselves as compassionate and sensitive to human and animal suffering before their dietary makeover, and this perception continued afterward. Being vegan was seen as a functional way to put their compassion into action; it transformed their lives, but it did not revolutionize their self-image.

Being vegan is experienced as a rewarding, joyful, and affirmative practice. It endows one's life with considerable meaning. The vegans in this study indicated that their positive self-concept is fostered by choosing foods that reflect the value they place on the well-being of animals, their own body, and the earth.

Synchronizing their beliefs with their actions acted to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). The thought "I love animals" was formerly dissonant with the thought "I eat animals who have been slaughtered for food." By refraining from consuming animals, the participants gained a feeling of being more connected with nature and of living a more spiritual life. For vegans, a meal is much more than a meal; each meal is a symbolic and practical step on an experiential journey that lessens suffering and brings one closer to all living beings. Vegans' experience is similar to that of environmental activists who had, in a spiritual sense, been "called awake" and became "whole" (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003, p. 103).

Yet, in terms of their worldview, unlike welfarists who saw the world divided into "two neat categories: good for the animals and bad for the animals" (Taylor, 2004, p. 317), vegans expressed an ability to see shades of gray, admitted the impossibility of perfection, and welcomed any help provided to animals, even if that meant people fell short of practicing veganism.

According to Joy (2002), the use of denial, dissociation, justification, rationalization, and other ego defense mechanisms explains how one can care for animals, eat them, and maintain a positive self-concept. Aronson (1999) views humans as rationalizing beings who want to see themselves as being good people who do not cause harm. Dissonance-reducing behavior, such as making rationalizations, allows a person experiencing cognitive dissonance to maintain a positive image. As Scully (2002) states, "we tend to judge ourselves by motive and intention rather than by means and result" (p. 316).

Implications

The vegans suggested that omnivores might consider all the factors that have influenced their dietary choices and reevaluate whether their current diet supports their physical, psychological, and spiritual health. A few vegans indicated that educators should consider vegan diets as another form of diversity and use inclusive language and practices. The topic of nutrition provides fertile ground for the promotion of critical thinking because ethics, spirituality, environmental issues, and politics are central to this issue.

A few interviewees recommended the elimination of subsidies that support animal agriculture and the assessment of taxes for foods laden with saturated fat. Policy makers, including politicians, therefore, should consider the health care and environmental implications of animal product production and the negative effects associated with this industry (Barnard, Nicholson, & Howard, 1995) and begin to enact policies that will promote locally grown, organic vegetables, fruits, grains, and legumes.

Some vegans thought parents might begin to question why the default mode of feeding children involves animal products. Following this line of thinking, parents might allow their children to consume animal products only after a certain age of consent, since the taking of life is a serious matter and involves important moral decisions that young children are incapable of making.

Anyone considering a vegan diet should take seriously the relationship issues that often surface as a direct result of this choice and should plan to acquire the knowledge that will allow them to live as a happy and healthy vegan. As Dwight, a former farmer said, "I recommend people learn more about it before they jump into the pool." For their own sakes, for the sake of those they care about, and for the sake of animals, vegans should inform themselves about how to navigate an environment that is largely unsupportive of this decision (Adams, 2003) while also attempting to become the most effective advocates they can (Ball, 2004).

Animals stand to benefit the most from the adoption of vegan practices. Participants mentioned the power of voting with their dollars. Unfortunately, change will take time and hundreds of billions of animals will live mostly miserable lives and die violent deaths before widespread change occurs (Winders & Nibert, 2004). Yet there is something heroic about saving even one life, and on that measure vegans are making a difference.

Limitations

This study involved a small, purposeful sample that was ethnically homogeneous. Many participants were highly educated and had achieved professional

success. Therefore, this study might not be representative of vegans living throughout the United States, Canada, and elsewhere. No teenagers were interviewed, yet many younger people are adopting vegan diets.

Future Research

Further research might focus on three distinct questions. First, how successful are brief interventions in causing individuals to adopt a vegan diet? A survey could be designed to measure attitudes and practices related to animal-product consumption. Following an educational intervention, posttesting would seek to explain why some individuals changed, why others did not, and the relative effectiveness of particular messages. Second, do omnivores hold prejudicial attitudes toward vegetarians, vegans, or animal rights activists? While it is common for vegans to believe they have been the recipient of prejudicial treatment, it would be interesting to assess whether prejudicial attitudes exist among omnivores in relation to vegans, vegetarians, and animal rights activists. Third, what are the social and psychological variables that predict a return to animal products?

Notes

1. Nearly 78 million companion dogs live in the United States and 39 percent of US households care for at least one dog. There are approximately 94 million cats being cared for in 33 percent of US households. http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/pet_overpopulation/facts/pet_ownership_statistics.html.

2. Some vegans did not like the term *lifestyle* and thought it had a stigmatizing effect. For example, a few vegans mentioned that is exceedingly uncommon to hear references to an omnivorous lifestyle or heterosexual lifestyle.

3. Matt Ball (2004) writes, "Practical vegans avoid the specific products for which animals are bred, raised, and eventually slaughtered. . . . Symbolic vegans, in addition to avoiding those products, go beyond this to some level (e.g., avoiding sugar but not water) so as to be able to make a statement (about solidarity with the animals, personal purity, etc.)."

References

- Adams, C. (2000). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist vegetarian critical theory* (10th anniversary edition). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (2003). *Living among meat eaters: The vegetarian's survival handbook*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc.
- Aronson, E. (1999). *The social animal* (8th ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Aronson, K. (1996). *To eat flesh they are willing: Are their spirits weak?* New York: Pythagorean Publishers.

- Ball, M. (2004). *A meaningful life: Making a real difference in today's world*. Retrieved January 10, 2011, from <http://www.veganoutreach.org/advocacy/AMLDec08.pdf>.
- Barnard, N., Nicholson, A., & Howard, J. (1995). The medical costs attributable to meat consumption. *Preventive Medicine*, 24(6), 646-655.
- Beardsworth, A., & Keil, E. (1992). The vegetarian option: Varieties, conversions, motives and careers. *The Sociological Review*, 40(2), 253-293. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-954x.1992.tb00889.x
- Berenson, G., & Srinivasan, S. (2003). Cholesterol as a risk factor for early atherosclerosis: The Bogalusa Heart Study. *Progress in Pediatric Cardiology*, 17(2), 113-122. doi: 10.1016/51058-9813(03)00048-1.
- Boyle, J. (2007). *Becoming vegetarian: An analysis of the vegetarian career using an integrated model of deviance*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Retrieved March 12, 2010, from http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-05012007-104133/unrestricted/Boyle_Sociology_Dissertation_May071.pdf.
- Caelli, K. (2001). Engaging with phenomenology: Is it more of a challenge than it needs to be? *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(2), 273-281. doi: 10.1177/104973201129118993.
- Coultas, J. (2004). When in Rome ... An evolutionary perspective on conformity. *Group Process & Intergroup Relations*, 7(4), 317-331. doi: 10.1177/1368430204046141.
- Craig, W. J., & Mangels, A. R. (2009). Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian diets. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109(7), 1266-1282. doi: 10.1016/j.jada.2009.05.027 Retrieved April 3, 2010, from <http://www.eatright.org/About/Content.aspx?id=8357>.
- Derby, C., Mohr, B., Goldstein, I., Feldman, H., Johannes, C., & McKinlay, J. (2000). Modifiable risk factors and erectile dysfunction: Can lifestyle changes modify risk? *Urology*, 56(2), 302-306.
- Eisnitz, G. (1997). *Slaughterhouse: The shocking story of greed, neglect, and inhumane treatment inside the US meat industry*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2006). *Livestock a major threat to environment: Remedies urgently needed*. Retrieved March 17, 2010, from <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000448/index.html>.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hamilton, D. (Producer). (2002, April 18). *Modern meat* (Television broadcast). Berkeley: Public Broadcasting Service/Frontline. Retrieved March 13, 2010, from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/>.
- Harrison, K. (2001). Too close to home: Dioxin contamination of breast milk and the political agenda. *Policy Sciences*, 34(1), 35-62. doi: 10/1016/S0045-6535(02)00140-6.
- Henrich, J., & Boyd, R. (1998). The evolution of conformist transmission and the emergence of between-group differences. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 19(4), 215-241. doi: 10.1016/S1090-5138(98)00018-4.
- Heron, M., Hoyert, D., Murphy, S., Xu, J., Kochanek, K., & Tejada-Vera, B., (2009). Deaths: Final data for 2006. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 57(14). Retrieved April 3, 2010, from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr57/nvsr57_14.pdf.
- Hodges, J. (2005). Cheap food and feeding the world sustainably. *Livestock Production Science*, 92(1), 1-16. doi: 10.1016/s.livprodsci.2005.01.001.
- Hu, F., & Willett, W. (2002). Optimal diets for prevention of coronary heart disease. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288(20), 2569-2574. doi: 10.1016/J.jacc.2007.04.027.
- Ingadottir, B., & Halldorsdottir, S. (2008). To discipline a "dog": The essential structure of mastering diabetes. *Qualitative Health Research* 18(5), 606-619. doi: 10.1177/1049732308316346.
- Jamison, W., Wenk, C., & Parker, J. (2000). Every sparrow that falls: Understanding animal rights activism as a functional religion. *Society & Animals*, 8(3), 305-330.

- Joy, M. (2002). *Psychic numbing and meat consumption: The psychology of carnism*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center-San Francisco. doi: 10.1177/0022167804272628.
- Key, T., Appleby, P., & Rosell, M. (2006). Health effects of vegetarian and vegan diets. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 65(1), 35-41. doi: 10.1079/PNS 2005481.
- Kovan, J., & Dirkx, J. (2003). "Being called awake": The role of transformative learning in the lives of environmental activists. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53(2), 99-118. doi: 10.1177/0741715602238906.
- Larsson, C., Ronnlund, U., Johansson, G., & Dahlgren, L. (2003). Veganism as status passage: The process of becoming vegan among youths in Sweden. *Appetite*, 41(1), 61-67. doi: 10.1111/j.1440-172X.2006.00580.x.
- Lasser, J., & Tharinger, D. (2003). Visibility management in school and beyond: A qualitative study of gay, lesbian, bisexual youth. *Journal of Adolescence*, 26(2), 233-244. doi: 10.1016/S0140-1971(02)00132-X.
- MacNair, R. (1998). The psychology of becoming a vegetarian. *Vegetarian Nutrition: An International Journal*, 2, 96-102. doi: 10.1108/00070700410516775.
- (2001). McDonald's "Empirical look at becoming vegan." *Society & Animals*, 9(1), 63-69. doi: 10.1108/00070700410516775.
- Marcus, E. (2005). *Meat market: Animals, ethics, and money*. Ithaca, NY: Brio Press.
- McDonald, B. (2000). "Once you know something, you can't not know it": An empirical look at becoming vegan. *Society & Animals*, 8(1), 1-23. doi: 10.1163/156853000X00011.
- McDonald, B., Cervero, R., & Courtenay, B. (1999). An ecological perspective of power in transformational learning: A case study of ethical vegans. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(1), 5-23. doi: 10.1177/07417139922086885.
- Morse, J. (2001). Using shadowed data. *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(3), 291-292. doi: 10.1177/104973201129119091.
- Olsson, C., Lyon, P., Hornell, A., Ivarsson, A., Mattsson Sydner, Y. (2009). Food that makes you different: The stigma experienced by adolescents with celiac disease. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(7), 976-984. doi: 10.1177/104973209338722. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19556403>.
- Ozanne, J., & Murray, J. (1995). Uniting critical theory and public policy to create the reflexively defiant consumer. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38(4), 516-525. doi: 10.1177/0002764295038004003.
- Pallotta, N. (2008). Origin of adult animal rights lifestyle in childhood responsiveness to animal suffering. *Society & Animals*, 16(2), 149-170. doi: 10.1163/156853008X291435.
- Pendry, L., & Carrick, R. (2001). Doing what the mob do: Priming effects on conformity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31(1), 83-92. doi:10.1002/ejsp.643.
- Planck, N. (2007, May 21). Death by veganism. Retrieved November 17, 2009, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/21/opinion/21planck.html>.
- Scully, M. (2002). *Dominion: The power of man, the suffering of animals, and the call to mercy*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Solfrizzi, V., Panza, F., & Capurso, A. (2003). The role of diet in cognitive decline. *Journal of Neural Transmission*, 110(1), 95-110. doi: 10.1007/s00702-002-0766-8.
- Stahler, C. (2010). How many youth are vegetarian? The Vegetarian Resource Group asks in a 2010 national poll. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from http://www.vrg.org/press/youth_poll_2010.php.
- Steinfeld, H., Gerber, P., Wassenaar, P., Castel, V., Rosales, M., & de Hann, C. (2006). Livestock's long shadow: Environmental issues and options. *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. Retrieved November 19, 2009, from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>.

- Stepaniak, J. (2000). *Being vegan: Living with conscience, conviction, and compassion*. Los Angeles: Lowell House.
- Striffler, S. (2005). *Chicken: The dangerous transformation of America's favorite food*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Swim, J., & Stangor, C. (Eds.). (1998). *Prejudice: The target's perspective*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Taylor, N. (2004). In it for the nonhuman animals: Animal welfare, moral certainty, and disagreements. *Society & Animals*, 12(4), 317-339. doi: 10.1163/1568530043068047.
- Vegan Outreach (n.d.). *Veganism and activism*. Retrieved April 4, 2010, from <http://www.veganoutreach.org/advocacy/path.html>.
- Vegan Research Panel. (2003). Retrieved April 4, 2010, from <http://www.imaner.net/panel/details7.htm>.
- Vegetarian Journal*. (2009). How many vegetarians are there? Retrieved April 4, 2010, from <http://www.vrg.org/press/2009poll.htm>.
- Walker, P., Rhubart-Berg, P., McKenzie, S., Kelling, K., Lawrence, R. (2005). Invited paper: Public health implications of meat production and consumption. *Public Health Nutrition*, 8(4), 348-356. doi: 10.1079/PHN2005742.
- Winders, B., & Nibert, D. (2004). Consuming the surplus: Expanding "meat" consumption and animal oppression. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 24, 76-96. doi: 10.1108/01443330410790786.