

## VEGETARIANISM: IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCES AS FACTORS IN FOOD SELECTION

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### ABSTRACT

Vegetarianism is increasing in worldwide popularity. While there is an abundance of literature on the nutritional aspects of vegetarianism there remains a paucity of research by social scientists on vegetarian beliefs, motives and experiences. This paper reports an exploratory study to examine how the identity and experiences of being vegetarian affected food selection. This entailed the examination of the motives for converting to vegetarianism as well as motives over time. Also examined were the social constraints and social supports present for vegetarians in terms of social relationships, availability of preferred food items, and supportive media items. Seventy-nine vegetarians responded to a self-administered questionnaire submitted to two vegetarian listservs on the internet (electronic mail). Many of the questions were open-ended to permit a qualitative approach to analysis. Findings suggest that a "Vegetarian" identity has a variety of meanings to individuals. Individuals may be motivated by a variety of causes or issues to convert to vegetarianism, but over time will likely incorporate or assimilate other motives. Vegetarians find both criticism and support for their foodways. Social constraints are present to maintain the centrality of meat in the structure of meals. Moreover, vegetarianism affects social relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

While there is recognized variability in food selection in the U.S., there remains normative consistency in other respects to meal cycles, in the structure of menus, etc. (Goode, Curtis, Theophano 1981). Although we recognize the variability in food selection, there remains a consistency in the selection of meat as central to meals in the U.S., as well as in many other countries.

Food selection is not arbitrary, but is constrained by numerous factors, including those that are social. Social constraints function in several ways. First, food selection is patterned and structured by group membership (Goode et al 1981). For example, one's ethnic group or culture operates to determine what is normative and preferred (Rozin 1981). Moreover, within one's family group it is usually the mother or adult female who determines that which is selected for the family (Devault 1991; Rozin 1981). Second, the social nature of food intake results in food choices that are constrained by social norms. Third, in our industrialized society, food availability is often determined by others in the market system (Goode et al 1981).

Vegetarianism is increasing in worldwide popularity. According to Maurer (1995), there are between 8.5 and 12.4 million self-defined vegetarians in the U.S. The number of vegetarians in the U.S. has increased by five million since 1980, and is reported to be increasing by 500,000 annually (Obis 1986a, 1986b, 1987). This may partially be due to the increasing endorsement from the scientific community (*Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 1988, 1993; Moll

1987). Britain has also witnessed an increase in vegetarianism over the past decade. According to the Vegetarian Society, there are 4 million vegetarians in Britain, with 200,000 of them members of the society (*The Economist* 1994).

Beardsworth and Keil (1992) have acknowledged the abundance of literature on the nutritional aspects of vegetarianism while at the same time recognizing the paucity of research by social scientists on vegetarian beliefs, motives and experiences. Their research addresses both the negative and positive social experiences of vegetarians, thus, providing information about the importance of food choices for social relationships as well as the normative constraints that may guide food selection.

Other research on vegetarians has addressed the motives provided for becoming vegetarian (Amato, Partridge 1989; Beardsworth, Keil 1992; Scott 1991). Except for those who are vegetarian as a result of custom or religion (Hindu), vegetarianism usually involves motivations to adopt an alternative eating pattern from that which is normative. The research focusing on motives has provided information about the factors governing food choice. A focus on motives has led to the recognition of the role played by the media in causing individuals to convert to vegetarianism (by exposing the exploitive nature of meat production, etc.). Maurer (1995) also contends that the media plays a prominent role, both in inspiring converts, but also in providing justification for decisions to change one's eating pattern. However, Maurer recognizes the inability of her research to provide a clear causal link

between justifications and motives in vegetarian literature and the reasons vegetarians give for converting.

The present study builds on previous research in several ways. First, this study does provide evidence of the link between vegetarian literature and the reasons individuals give for converting. Second, this research examines motives or causes for altering one's diet within the framework of identity construction. Food and identity have been linked in a national, symbolic context (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), but as is recognized within ethnic groups, food selection also says much about who we are as individuals and as part of groups (Falk 1994; Goode et al 1981). Furthermore, an identity construction framework provides an alternative perspective for explaining the purpose that motives serve in formulating and relating who we are, and who we want to be (Coyle 1992). Third, the identity framework also focuses on the change over time that may occur in one's motives for converting to vegetarianism. Previous research focused primarily on initial motives with little attention given to how motives may change over time. Fourth, this research taps into both support and criticism from family, friends, acquaintances, and partners. Fifth, I examine the difficulty individuals experience in altering entrenched foodways, both in terms of the speed with which one was able to make the conversion and the difficulty experienced in changing routines and cooking practices. This may provide information about other social constraints affecting food selection. Sixth, the unique methodology employed for recruitment of respondents allows for a more diverse sample than that permitted with snowball sampling techniques, due to the particular geographical limitations of using snowball sampling.

## METHODOLOGY

Beardsworth and Keil (1992) recognized that the ability to draw a simple random sample of self-defined vegetarians is highly improbable due to the inability to enumerate them. Because the internet is fast becoming a versatile tool for communication and the sharing of information (Hart 1993), it was decided that the use of the internet (electronic mail) was a more efficient method than the snowball sampling technique used by Beardsworth and Keil (1992). This method has numerous advantages. First,

electronic mail permits the gathering of information from vegetarians from diverse settings (from various countries). Second, respondents can respond at their convenience. Third, the self-administered questionnaire may enable individuals to provide more candid responses. Fourth, electronic mail enables the researcher to encourage respondents to reply in a nonthreatening, inexpensive manner through prompts, feedback, and positive reinforcement. The internet also provides an inexpensive means to get clarification when explanations are unclear, thus improving validity. A recognized limitation to using the internet is that there remain many people who do not have access. A limitation of the present sample is the low response rate of 26 percent. Although the response rate is low and thus limits the representativeness of the sample, a "lack of response bias is more important than a high response rate" (Babbie 1992). The present sample is more likely, than a sample produced through a geographically-limited snowball sample, to lack response bias due to the geographical diversity it provides.

The survey questionnaire (see Appendix) was posted to two vegetarian listservs. A listserv is an electronic mailing list used to disseminate information and/or facilitate discussion among people interested in a topic. One listserv was global and the other was local and university based. The latter primarily served faculty and students at a large southwestern university in the US. Although the number of subscribers to listservs may fluctuate, when the surveys were posted the global listserv had 259 subscribers and the regional listserv had 47 subscribers.

Although the survey was by standardized questionnaire, due to the qualitative approach the questions were primarily open-ended. To further tap into concerns and topics of interest, daily conversations were analyzed from one week prior and for one week after posting the questionnaire. Although daily discussions were not included as part of the text, this provided supportive material for that which was asked in the survey. Although posted discussions become public information once they are posted, and thus freely usable, I informed subscribers that unless anyone objected I would like to use the daily discussions to ensure that I had accurately analyzed the survey responses. No one posted any messages

opposing my usage of the posted discussions.

## RESULTS

### Sample

There were seventy-nine usable responses of which forty-six were from females and thirty-three were from males. There were sixty-four responses of a possible 259 from the global listserv. Of these, ten responses were international (non-American), from such countries as New Zealand, Australia, Finland, Norway, etc. There were fifteen respondents of a possible forty-seven from the local listserv. The age distribution of the sample is as follows: under 20 years (7 respondents); 21-25 years (16 respondents); 26-30 years (20 respondents); 31-35 years (9 respondents); 36-40 years (4 respondents); 41 and over (22 respondents). The age distribution indicates that while a larger percentage (54%) of respondents are 30 and under, the largest category of respondents is 41 and over. The majority of respondents (fifty-five) have a spouse or partner. Of those with a spouse or partner, twenty-two have a spouse or partner who is also vegetarian. Only sixteen respondents have children. Of those with children, only six have at least one child that is also vegetarian. Of the seven respondents under 20 years old, two live with parents. One of the individuals lives with parents who are also vegetarian.

### Categories of Vegetarians

"By definition, a vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat. Meat, according to traditionalists, includes poultry and fish" (Obis 1986c). Still, a vegetarian identity takes on various meanings for different individuals.

Beardsworth and Keil (1992) provided a typology of vegetarianism consisting of six categories ranging on a continuum from least restrictive vegetarian diet (some meat eaten) to most restrictive vegetarian diet (no meat or meat by-products eaten). Within the Beardsworth and Keil (1992) typology, those individuals within each of the six categories are assumed to exclude foods within the lower categories (those at a lower level of dietary strictness). Likewise, those within each category are assumed to incorporate foods within the higher categories (those at a more extreme level of dietary strictness).

Like Beardsworth and Keil (1992), the present study finds a variety of forms of vegetarianism. Unlike Beardsworth and Keil, this study does not find the same continuum typology of the purported forms of vegetarians for several reasons. First, the Beardsworth and Keil (1992) typology places those who occasionally consume meat at the least strict end of the continuum. This places those who consume fish on a regular basis in a more strict vegetarian diet category than those who only consume meat very rarely. In addition, the present study indicates that the majority of vegetarians who consume meat (or fish), do so only rarely, and all but three of these individuals consume meat as an alternative to going hungry, or when socially obliged to do so. Furthermore, this study indicates that the majority of vegetarians who feel it necessary to eat nonvegetarian food generally choose fish rather than actual "meat." The following are responses to the question asking if one occasionally eats meat. These responses are indicative of those who feel it necessary to eat nonvegetarian food as an alternative to going hungry, or when socially obliged to do so:

Not meat but fish. Sometimes I have been taken to a restaurant (usually by my father) that does not have a veggie alternative. I'll usually eat shrimp or something like that to avoid insulting him. (female, vegetarian 2 yrs.)

I occasionally eat non-veg cheese, cakes or even very occasionally fish, if I am out and it is served to me. (female, vegetarian 5 yrs.)

On very rare occasions. For instance traveling in northern California on business with a friend a couple of years ago, we stopped at a restaurant he really liked, nothing veg., so ate some seafood. Similarly, at a banquet at a German restaurant when I'd forgotten to request a veg. meal, ate fish. (male, vegetarian 5 yrs.)

Second, the present study finds that many vegetarians consume both eggs and dairy (milk and/or butter, etc.). This is often referred to as a "lacto/ovo" vegetarian. However, other vegetarians are either ovo (consume eggs, but not dairy), or are lacto (those who consume dairy products, but not eggs). According to the Beardsworth and Keil continuum typology, egg eaters and

Table 1: Categories of Vegetarians

Types of Vegetarians	Total
Vegan	12
Pesco	5
Lacto/Ovo	41
Lacto	18
Ovo	3

dairy eaters are in separate categories rather than placed in one category. Thus, by virtue of their place in the ranking, those who are in the category of egg consumers are assumed to consume dairy while those who consume dairy are assumed to avoid egg consumption. Furthermore, one may argue that it is incorrect to assume, as Beardsworth and Keil suggest, that consuming dairy products, but not eggs, should be considered a stricter vegetarian diet than the diet in which eggs are consumed, but dairy is avoided.

While this study does not recognize the Beardsworth and Keil continuum typology for types of vegetarians, within the present study there remain several different types of vegetarians.

Moreover, while no continuum of least strict to most strict diet is recognized as incorporating all types of vegetarians, "vegans" (those who do not consume meat or meat by-products) are commonly recognized as the strictest of vegetarians. Similarly, many individuals do not consider those who eat fish as actual vegetarians (Obis 1986c).

The present study relies on self-definition of a vegetarian identity. This seems most useful in understanding motives for food selection and how they may change over time. Furthermore, it seems somewhat counterintuitive to place individuals in a category other than that which they have placed themselves. Furthermore, according to Deaux (1992), social identities are meaningless unless one understands the personal meanings attached to them. Like all social categories (vegetarian) there is much variation in personal meaning associated with them. Table 1 presents the number of respondents in each vegetarian category identified by those in the present sample.

The following definitions delineate the degree to which individuals follow a vegetarian diet:

*Vegan vegetarian* - The defining characteristic of vegan vegetarians is that their diet includes only vegetable products. They avoid meat, fish, or animal by-products such as milk, eggs, or cheese. Many even remove such products as wool, honey, etc.

*Pesco vegetarian* - The defining characteristic of pesco vegetarians is that they permit the consumption of fish, and typically do not avoid eggs or dairy products. Thus, essentially they avoid only actual meat.

*Lacto/Ovo vegetarian* - The defining characteristic of Lacto/Ovo vegetarians is that they permit the consumption of both dairy products and eggs in their diet, but avoid the consumption of meat and fish.

*Lacto vegetarian* - The defining characteristic of Lacto vegetarians is that they permit the consumption of some or all dairy products in their diet, but avoid the consumption of meat, fish and eggs.

*Ovo vegetarian* - The defining characteristic of an Ovo vegetarian is that they permit the consumption of eggs in their diet, but avoid the consumption of meat, fish and dairy.

As previously discussed, many vegetarians indicate that they may consume meat/fish on rare occasions. The present sample consists of fifteen individuals who, on rare occasions, acknowledge the consumption of meat. This includes fish also, which is consumed on rare occasions by vegetarians, other than those vegetarians who already identify themselves as Pesco vegetarians. This does not warrant a separate category as a "vegetarian form," as specified by Beardsworth and Keil. The separate category is avoided as this is not normative or routine behavior for this sample (nor was it for the Beardsworth and Keil sample). Moreover, these individuals do not identify themselves as "vegetarians who occasionally eat meat/fish." It is only after inquiry, that the consumption of meat is addressed. However, it must be recognized that some individuals, although none in the present sample, do call themselves "semi-vegetarians." Usually these are individuals who perhaps avoid the consumption of all meat except, for example, chicken.

Although only a small number of the present sample of vegetarians identify

Table 2: Motivations for Vegetarianism

Motivations	Total
Health	28
Animal Rights	11
Ethics	12
Environment	4
Religion	8
Other	9
No Ranking/tie	7
Total	79

themselves as vegan vegetarians, a number of the other vegetarians claim to aspire to the vegan ideal of not only eliminating meat from their diets, but also that of eliminating meat by-products. Whit (1995) recognized the tendency to move toward a more strict vegetarian identity than one's initial commitment.

## MOTIVES

Identities are the self-categories people use to define who they are (Burke, Tully 1977; Stryker 1968). Individuals and groups have a need to specify who they are and to locate who they are relative to other individuals. Individuals are motivated to plan and to perform roles or behaviors that will confirm and reinforce the identities one claims as their own (Foote 1951; Hull, Levy 1979). The varying motives for converting to vegetarianism indicate the significance of one's vegetarian identity. While Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) examines rice as a food symbol of national character for Japan, it should be a given that food can become a symbol for individuals as well. Declaring oneself to be a vegetarian provides a significant distinctive identity for the individual. However, according to Gattner (1995) "identity is never just about itself". People engage in activities that support their identities to the degree of their commitment to the identity (Burke, Reitzes 1991). This is evident in the vegetarian responses and in posted messages. A vegetarian identity for some is more a private aspect of their identity, but for others it is a means to assert the legitimacy of their claims against the exploits of meat production in society, exploitation of the environment and waste of its resources, as well as to declare one's health consciousness. Perhaps this gives new meaning to "you are what you eat."

The survey requested that respondents provide their motivation for converting to

vegetarianism: "Of the following, what motivated you to convert to vegetarianism?" Response categories were "health", "animal rights," "ethics," "environment," "religion," or "other." Table 2 indicates the number of respondents within each category of reasons for conversion to a vegetarian diet.

Of the sixty-eight individuals in the present study who made a conversion to vegetarianism, as opposed to those raised vegetarian as a result of one's religion or dislike of meat from infancy, the majority of respondents report their primary motivation to convert is health related. In the Beardsworth and Keil sample, moral motivations were the primary motives for conversion to vegetarianism. However, Whit (1995) also reports that most individuals convert to vegetarianism for some health related concern. In the present study, twenty-eight respondents indicated that their primary motivation to become vegetarian was health related as opposed to only thirteen in the Beardsworth and Keil study.

While moral concerns may be embedded within either animal rights, ethics, environmental concerns, or religious motives, and, thus, cause some overlap, simply placing these concerns into a broad "moral" category provides little in delineating what differences are involved and more precise meanings attached to each category.

There were only four respondents who specifically said that they could not rank the items because "ethics" was the same for them as either "environmental," "animal rights," or motivations related to "religion." Several others stated there were similarities between ethics and one of the other categories. This was clearly dependent upon their particular stance on ethical considerations. Two individuals simply said they were unable to rank a primary motivation because several motivations were equally important in becoming vegetarian.

Those individuals whose motivation to become vegetarian was health related can be categorized into four types: 1) those who became vegetarian in response to some sort of individual health problem or concern; 2) those who became vegetarian as a measure in reducing fat intake/a preventive measure against future illnesses; 3) those who believe that a vegetarian diet is more nutritious because meat has too many added chemicals; and 4) those whose initial motivation in becoming vegetarian revolved

around athletic performance. This typology permits a thorough examination of the health related issues that motivate individuals to become vegetarian. Nonetheless, subsumed under these typologies are individuals whose vegetarian identity is based initially on declaring one's awareness and concern for their health/body.

The following are comments representative of those who were motivated to become vegetarian in response to a health problem or concern:

I have hypoglycemia, and a veggie diet seems to help me regulate my blood sugar level better. (male, vegetarian 3 yrs.)

My cholesterol level was sky high. I cut out all meat and many fats. I discovered that I felt much better without the meat. Another bonus of being a vegetarian: my iron deficiency anemia disappeared after I dropped meat. (female, vegetarian 2 yrs.)

I had a chronic post-nasal drip for most of my life; at the urging of friends in the natural foods industry, I tried giving up dairy products to cut down on mucus production in the body. What a difference!...First, I gave up dairy, then beef then chicken, still eat fish. (male, vegetarian 2 1/2 yrs.)

I have had endometriosis since I was 10. While I was in college a few years ago, it reached a turning point in the rupture of a cyst and several tumors, giving me peritonitis...Following a very tough surgery and during an even tougher recovery, I realized I could no longer keep down any meal containing meat. The vomiting became a serious problem. At about the same time I came across an article...on the effects of animal protein on the accelerated growth of uterine cysts/tumors...I was majoring in Pathophysiology at the time, so I had one of those "thunderclap" moments and knew I would be a vegetarian for the rest of my life. (female, vegetarian 5 yrs.)

The following are comments representative of those who were motivated to become vegetarian as means to reduce their fat intake/a preventive measure against future illnesses:

Cutting out meat right away reduced the amount of fat in my diet. I lost weight, and I

feel better. After having done some research, I also discovered that being a vegetarian reduced my risk for developing serious medical problems, such as cancer or heart disease. (male, vegetarian 1 year)

[I'm] trying to reduce my chances of cancer (colon especially), and heart disease. I want to live to be 120 or at least extend my productive years so that I can accomplish more things. (male, vegetarian 4 months)

Concerns over breast cancer...I felt it was something I needed to do for myself. (female, vegetarian 4 1/2 yrs.)

It's easier to eat a healthy, low-fat diet as a vegetarian. (male, vegetarian 3 yrs.)

The following are comments from the two individuals who were motivated to become vegetarian due to the health concern that meat has too many added chemicals:

In terms of health, I feel our health can be improved by eliminating the hormones (consumed through injections in the meat). (female, vegetarian 4 yrs.)

Concerns about nutrition, amounts of added chemicals in meats. (female, vegetarian 13 years)

The following are comments from the two individuals who were motivated to become vegetarian for reasons due to athletic performance:

As a competitive cyclist, the high carbohydrate diet that vegetarianism provided helped my performance and provided a more stable form of energy for competition. (male, vegetarian 1 yr.)

Health was a motivation—I was involved in Triathlons at the national level. (male, vegetarian 5 yrs.)

Those who indicated that animal rights issues motivated them to become vegetarian focused on the inability to be responsible for the killing of animals to feed themselves, and an awareness that animals feel pain just as humans do. A focus strictly on the killing of animals and the pain inflicted to slaughter another living creature, may explain why these individuals are concerned

primarily with omitting meat and fish from their diet, but are not concerned with following a vegan diet which, in addition to the exclusion of meat/fish, forbids the intake or use of meat by-products such as milk, eggs, honey or wool. Still, several individuals who are vegetarian because of animal rights issues have omitted eggs or eat them only when dining out. In addition, one individual includes fish in her diet. The following are comments representative of the eleven individuals who were initially motivated to become vegetarian as a result of animal rights issues:

I was motivated strictly because of the animals. I couldn't be responsible for the killing of animals for my "dining pleasure." (female, vegetarian 6 yrs.)

I feel that animal rights is believing that animals should be treated the same as humans. You wouldn't eat or harm another human, so you wouldn't eat animals either. (Male, vegetarian 2 yrs.)

I don't believe that animals should be tortured and murdered in order for me to eat and survive, when it's perfectly realistic to live on a meat free diet. I felt like a better person after I became a veggie. It was like a burden was lifted off my shoulders. I felt bad about eating animals since I was a young child. (female, vegetarian 6 1/2 yrs.)

I rehab wild animals and cannot say no to strays. I don't eat what I cuddle and care for. (female, vegetarian 1 yr.)

While in some instances individuals discussed similar ideas within the "ethical" category as others discussed in either the "animal rights," or "religion" category, the importance lies in the distinctions made between these categories by other respondents. Although most of the individuals claiming "ethics" as their motivating force for conversion also mentioned their opposition to killing animals, as did those claiming "animal rights," a distinguishing characteristic is that "ethical" considerations more often promoted the notion of the "immorality" of killing. Nonetheless, it is apparent that there is considerable overlap in individual definitions/motivations for converting to vegetarianism. The following are comments representative of the twelve individuals who

reported their initial motivation for becoming vegetarian was due to ethical concerns:

By ethics, I mean that I considered it immoral to kill an animal and eat it. (male, vegetarian 25 yrs.)

Motivated by ethics. What motivated us was the wastefulness of resources in producing meat and our concern for world hunger. (male, vegetarian 8-10 yrs.)

Ethics--the belief that sentient creatures should not have to live out their lives in constant pain, discomfort, fear and ultimate death in the way the meat/chicken/fish industries figure is best for their bottom line. (female, vegetarian 1 1/2 yrs.)

Two and a half years ago my younger stepson was reading aloud to me...On this occasion it was an SAS-style survival manual [Special Air Service survival manual for the British Royal Air-Force], and he read me the section on foods for survival in the wild. Not all about the roots, berries etc. that you might find, but how to snare and prepare various animals, and which bits were the best eating. The list of internal organs of these animals sounded very much like a list of my own internal organs, and I started to wonder where you draw the line between animals you eat and animals you don't eat. I still wonder about that one, and frequently ask my son and husband what the difference is between eating the chickens, ducks and geese we raise, and our pet dog and cat. Their answers still don't satisfy me. I'm not vociferously animal rights, because I don't believe animals have rights like we do. But I see us in a role of stewardship. My definition of ethics in terms of vegetarianism is a question: "where do you draw the line between friends you eat and friends you don't eat?" (female, vegetarian 2 1/2 yrs.)

The following are the responses of the four individuals who reported their initial motivation for becoming vegetarian was due to environmental concerns:

I try to be Green and I hate waste. (female, vegetarian over 10 yrs.)

I believe in eating as low on the food chain as possible to conserve food resources for everyone. (female, vegetarian 3 yrs.)

Specifically world hunger and the allocation of the world's physical resources. (male, vegetarian over 18 yrs.)

The environmental arguments I was exposed to through coworkers when working with an NGO (non-governmental organization in Canada), things like vegetable protein availability also my own experimentation with a plant based diet to see if I would suffer any serious side effects, of which I have experienced none. (male, vegetarian 11 mos.)

Seven of the eight individuals who indicated that they were vegetarian due to religion were raised vegetarian. The only individual that was actually motivated to "convert" to vegetarian within this category became vegetarian through involvement with Yogis and Zen Buddhists. She stated the following motivation for becoming vegetarian:

Initially I became vegetarian through practicing the regimens set forth by various Yogis and Zen Buddhist teachers (tassajara) which prescribed a vegetarian diet as part of the path for spiritual growth, enlightenment. This is still part of my commitment. (female, vegetarian 12 to 15 yrs.)

Similar to the findings of Beardsworth and Keil, the present sample evidenced individuals who were repulsed by meat. This was a primary motivation for becoming vegetarian for those who were in the "other" category. Three of the individuals reported a dislike of the taste and or texture of meat since infancy/childhood. One individual simply never liked the handling of meat. Two individuals stated that they never really ate much meat anyway. One said it simply seemed so gross to her that she hadn't eaten it for a long time. She finally decided to officially identify herself as a vegetarian. The other individual said that she woke up one morning and knew she would never eat any meat again. Another individual felt a severe revulsion after reading of the unsanitary meat processing conditions.

Of the seven individuals who did not provide a primary motivation for becoming vegetarian, four of them stated that several of the categories were of equal motivational importance in their conversion to vegetarianism. Clearly, the specified categories have different meanings for individuals.

Ethics seems to have overlapping meanings for many individuals. Three individuals believed that ethics was synonymous with another category. The individual that believed ethics to be synonymous with religion stated the following:

Ethics and religion are pretty much the same. Although I do not belong to any particular religion, I have been strongly influenced by Buddhist/Hindu thought, particularly in regards to the need for a respect for all life. (male, vegetarian 3 1/2 yrs.)

One of the two individuals who believed ethics to be synonymous with religious and/or environmental concerns expressed how she perceives the interrelationships:

My motivation was economic justice, and a concern for the environment - and that is a faith, religion, ethics reason. (female, vegetarian 2 yrs.)

#### ASSIMILATION OF MOTIVATIONS

While previous research on vegetarian foodways primarily examined motives for conversion, there has been little attention to how individual motives change or broaden over time. The importance of being a vegetarian has not been sufficiently addressed in terms of changing motives, only initial motives. Yet, the process whereby individual's gradually incorporate other motives for maintaining behaviors (such as foodways) is important for understanding the factors that govern food selection. In addition, this lends some understanding of how social constraints that govern food choices may be weakened or strengthened over time. Furthermore, a focus only on initial motives for acquisition of a vegetarian identity denies the full process involved in the development of identities. In response to the question concerning a change in motives over time, respondents suggest that motives for acquiring and maintaining a vegetarian identity are likely to change over time. Findings indicate that seldom are one's initial motivations for conversion to vegetarianism totally replaced by the acquisition of more important motivations, but instead are incorporated as other issues of which one was previously unaware. The incorporation of other motivations did not differ according to type of vegetarian. Incorporating these other motives seems to serve to strengthen one's

identity as a "vegetarian." Findings suggest that often motivations for converting to vegetarianism broaden over time to incorporate other motivations for maintaining and broadening one's identity as a vegetarian.

Whit (1995) contends that individuals incorporate more and more reasons for becoming vegetarian into their value system as one progresses along the continuum of least strict to a more strict vegetarian diet. That is, on the road to becoming vegan. My findings suggest that it is not necessary to be a strict vegetarian or to be in the process of becoming one to have incorporated other reasons or motivations for maintaining a vegetarian identity. Thirty-eight individuals indicated that their motivations for being vegetarian had changed over time. For 37 of the 38 individuals this change in motivations consisted of incorporating additional motivations. Only two individuals indicated that an earlier motivation had decreased in importance. One individual, who since infancy had never liked the taste of meat, said that animal rights had at one time been more important than it was at the present time. Another individual stated that the order of importance of motivations had changed in that animal rights issues had become more important than the health issues that initially had been of prime importance in the conversion to vegetarianism.

While it is true that a number of individuals did indicate the desire to one day be a vegan vegetarian, the majority of the 37 individuals who indicated that they had incorporated other reasons for maintaining a vegetarian identity to those initial motivations, did not express any desire to progress to a stricter level of vegetarianism or to become any other type of vegetarian than the type of vegetarian with which they presently identified themselves. The following are representative comments of those who acknowledged that over time their reasons for declaring a vegetarian identity had broadened:

First, I was motivated by the desire to feel better and eat healthier. I am now motivated by concern over resources as well as health. (male, pesco vegetarian for 1 year)

Initially I simply didn't like handling meat though I didn't know why. All of the above, except religion, became issues as I explored the topic. (male, vegan vegetarian for 2 1/2 years)

Environment was the initial motivator. When I learned of the enormous waste inherent in our food production system that motivated me to pursue vegetarianism seriously. [Now] I have learned much more about both the environmental issues of our way of eating, and of the brutality of modern animal husbandry. This has deepened my commitment to eating low on the food chain. Also, I have become interested in the health issues related to a vegetarian diet, and in diet and nutrition in general. This had no influence on my original decision, but is a factor now. (male, lacto-ovo vegetarian for 15 years.)

In addition to the 37 individuals who acknowledged that they had incorporated other motivations or reasons for maintaining their vegetarian identity, 7 individuals stated that although they had not incorporated other motivations, their motivations had strengthened over time. In addition, several of these individuals stated that although their motives had not changed over time, they were happy to enjoy the added benefits to health, the environment, their soul, etc. that came along with being a vegetarian. Thus, while there were other recognized positive aspects to being vegetarian than those that these individuals found personally motivating, these other aspects were apparently not central to their vegetarian identity.

According to Breakwell (1986) identity formation involves a process of "assimilation-accommodation." This provides some understanding for the process of change that occurs with the personal meanings attached to identities. Breakwell contends that new situations may be assimilated as a component of one's identity because they are considered relevant to one's identity, they enhance one's self-esteem, or because they are perceived as a logical continuation of an identity and thus provide for a sense of continuity. Perhaps all three account for the incorporation of other motivations or reasons for maintaining an individual's vegetarian identity. Indeed, an assimilation of other pertinent reasons for one's vegetarian identity does provide for a logical continuation or even an enhancement of an identity already in place. Moreover, the incorporation of these additional reasons/motivations serves to strengthen or broaden the personal meanings attached to one's vegetarian identity. In addition, the incorporation or assimilation of additional motives may serve to

increase the situations in which one can engage in role performances to sustain and support one's identity. According to Stryker and Serpe (1982), commitment is related to the salience of one's identities and to the frequency with which one seeks to perform roles congruent with one's identity.

In terms of assimilating "situations," many individuals acknowledged that reading vegetarian literature (Lappe's 1991 *Diet For A Small Planet*) and watching television programming extolling the virtues of a vegetarian lifestyle and/or lambasting the waste inherent in the production of meat, were factors that either inspired them to convert to vegetarianism or furthered their awareness and provided additional reasons/motivations for maintaining a vegetarian identity. This provides support for Maurer's (1995) contention that the media plays a prominent role in inspiring converts as well as providing justification for decisions to change one's eating patterns. The media's role in inspiring converts may be the influence it has as a "transformative experience" that impacts individuals to the point of changing one's concept of self (Pestello 1995). Denzin (1989) terms these transformative experiences as "epiphany" experiences. The following is an exemplary transformative experience:

I have always loved animals, and have always felt guilty for consuming and wearing them. I always figured that eventually I would become a vegetarian and then I could feel better about it....later. But I was watching a documentary, on preparation. I was driven to tears by the treatment the furry little creatures were getting. Just as I was sitting there, glad that I had never consumed cat flesh, the program showed how cattle, pigs, chickens, and other animals were slaughtered in the good old USA. I was stunned, and extremely saddened. I had prepared for myself, and was eating a tuna salad sandwich. I felt suddenly sickened. I threw the tuna away, and vowed never to eat or wear or otherwise utilize anything that was once a living, breathing creature. I will never touch animal flesh again, unless I am petting the animal (male, ovo-lacto vegetarian, 3 mos.)

#### DIFFICULTY OF CHANGING ENTRENCHED FOODWAYS

In response to the question concerning routines and cooking practices found to be

most difficult to change when converting to vegetarianism, it is clear that there are difficulties experienced in altering a meat-based diet. Findings also support the notion that there are many constraints operating to pattern food selection. Fifty-four of the seventy individuals who had at one time lived on a meat-based diet expressed some difficulties in altering entrenched foodways. Surprisingly, the number one difficulty expressed by the individuals in the present sample is not related to any difficulties in adjusting to a meatless diet, but rather the relative lack of good vegetarian fast/convenient food sources. Twenty-three of the 54 individuals mention this as their primary or sole problem in eating vegetarian meals. The emphasis on fast/convenience foods is understandable given our reliance on these quick sources for food. The second difficulty in feeding oneself is experienced when eating in the homes of others (social occasions or family dinners, especially holiday meals) who are perhaps not considerate or do not understand the foodways of the vegetarian. Sometimes, hosts simply believe that their vegetarian guest or family member can eat just "a little" meat or that "fish" is suitable. In other situations, hosts, coworkers, or family members simply do not make attempts to accommodate the vegetarian's food needs. Several vegetarians state that they often have to carry their own food along or always need to have a supply of granola bars, etc., handy.

Still others mention specific routines and cooking practices that are difficult to alter as they became vegetarian. A common complaint is that it is difficult to overcome the idea that a meal could consist of something other than that which is centered around a hunk of meat. Similarly, one individual states that initially he wanted his vegetarian foods to be "like meat." Thus, he purchased canned items that simulated roast beef, chicken, etc. He overcame this and learned to cook his own food from scratch only after moving to Israel for a year where there were none of these prepackaged wonders.

Another common difficulty for many women was that they are either partnered to men or had children who are not vegetarian and subsequently are burdened with cooking two or three separate meals to please the palates of everyone. Although Devault (1991) suggests that it is usually the mother or adult female who determines that

which the family eats, I would argue that this is most likely true only until she decides to alter that which has already become a normative eating pattern within the family. Once eating patterns are established within the family, family members exert a powerful influence that might remove or lessen the adult female's prominence in making such decisions.

Difficulties experienced by vegan vegetarians seem to center around ensuring that the food products being used did not have hidden animal products in them. Others express difficulty in giving up certain foods that they found particularly tasty (cheese).

These vegetarians have chosen to maintain their food choices and thus their vegetarian identities in spite of constraints. Still, a number of vegetarians (sixteen) do not report difficulties in routines or cooking practices. In fact, they report positive aspects to changing their cooking and eating habits. For example, many state that they enjoyed the necessity of becoming more creative in the kitchen. Others enjoy exploring ethnic vegetarian cooking (Indian, Middle Eastern, Asian, etc.). Others report that cooking vegetarian foods is simpler than cooking with meat.

Not surprisingly, given the difficulties experienced in changing the predominantly meat-based diet, the majority of the present sample state that their route to vegetarianism was gradual. Some started by first reducing the amount of meat eaten or by removing red meat from their diets first, then chicken, etc. Others report that becoming vegetarian is something they thought about doing for a long time before finally making a commitment. Several individuals who state that their route to vegetarianism was abrupt, immediately became vegetarian upon viewing television programming that exposed the exploits of the meat/dairy industry or after reading some convincing vegetarian literature (*Diet For a Small Planet, Diet For a New America*).

### SOCIAL SUPPORT AND CRITICISM

Like Beardsworth and Kell (1992) individuals in the present sample report that their social relationships are affected by their dietary choices. Response to the question concerning acceptance and/or criticism of one's vegetarian diet by friends, acquaintances and family indicates that friends and acquaintances have mixed reactions. Some

do not attempt to accommodate the vegetarian's food needs at social functions, some are critical, some are supportive, while others are merely inquisitive. Many report that others wonder how an individual can possibly live without the taste of meat. Others query the ability to be nourished and receive sufficient amounts of protein. One informant typified the feelings of many when he said:

I have heard all the standard remarks over the years: How do you get enough protein, calcium, etc.? Don't you feel weak? How can you live without hamburgers? It's un-American. What's wrong with you? (Male, vegetarian 15 yrs.)

Still, others report that their friends respect them for the ability to refrain from eating meat. Many report that although their friends often tease it is understood to be in good humor rather than hostile. For those raised vegetarian, due to cultural/religious beliefs, all report acceptance from friends and acquaintances. Thus, for these individuals vegetarianism is accepted as normative.

As expected, disruptions in family relationships are somewhat more predictable. Only a few individuals report that their families (parents) are totally accepting and supportive. However, most report that disruptions in relationships with family members (primarily parents) are only initially problematic. Most report that parents are initially skeptical/apprehensive, critical, concerned and even hostile. Many report the source of their parents' reactions are fears that their son/daughter will be malnourished and sickly without meat in their diets. However, most report that with the passage of time, they are accepted or tolerated as vegetarians and permitted to eat as they please. The following is a quote indicative of this acceptance as time passes:

My family, especially my father, was initially skeptical. They were worried that I would be malnourished and sickly...now my father will brag to me that he's tried veggie food. (female, vegetarian 3 yrs.)

Interestingly, many report that their parents believed that it's merely a phase that their son/daughter is going through. Many parents frequently ask if they are "still not

eating meat." Although several report that their parents have grown to accept their vegetarianism, many report the lack of a willingness of parents to provide vegetarian food when they visit:

My family was very much opposed to my choice at first, but now they have pretty much accepted it, although they don't like providing vegetarian food for me when I visit. (male, vegetarian 25 yrs.)

"Acceptance" often means that parents have simply stopped nagging or inquiring about their son/daughter's diet.

A few female vegetarians do not speak as positively about their in-laws. Many express the total disregard on the part of in-laws to accommodate their daughter-in-law's food preferences. Instead, women express the feeling that their in-laws act as if vegetarianism is a terrible inconvenience at meal times:

All I ask for when we go to a family members house is maybe one vegetable and a salad. I often hear 'are you still a vegetarian?' Once my mother in law, who had just asked that, said 'well then I guess you are SOL [a— out of luck]!' They all act like I am inconveniencing them. (female, vegetarian 2 yrs.)

For a very few individuals these types of sanctions as attempts to maintain social norms, serve as social constraints that do guide food selection. A few individuals adapt by occasionally eating a "little" meat/fish when they feel socially obliged to do so. Others alter the visibility of their identities by simply attempting to keep their dietary preferences hidden by quietly just avoiding eating meat at social functions, without making it an issue. For these individuals, being vegetarian is a personal matter that they feel no need to proselytize about. Others are adamant that they are vegetarian and would not succumb to eating meat at whatever the cost. One individual responded to the question of whether he ever eats meat to avoid embarrassment, "I'm a vegetarian, I would be 'embarrassed' to eat meat."

## CONCLUSION

The present study suggests that claiming "vegetarian" as an aspect of who one is, is a significant aspect of one's identity for many individuals. Findings suggest that individu-

als may be motivated by a variety of causes or issues to convert to vegetarianism, but over time will likely incorporate or assimilate other motives. This probably occurs for several reasons. First, the process of assimilation of other motives may be perceived relevant for the person's identity and thus enhances one's self-esteem. Second, these new reasons may be perceived as a logical continuation of one's present identity and thus provides for a sense of continuity for how one sees him/herself. Third, the incorporation or assimilation of additional motives may serve to increase one's commitment to one's vegetarian identity and, therefore, the salience of one's vegetarian identity. According to Stryker and Serpe (1982), commitment is related to the salience of one's identities and to the frequency with which one seeks to perform roles congruent with one's identity.

Vegetarianism is important to a sizable number of individuals, and is growing. The importance associated with being vegetarian is clearer when one considers the social constraints present to maintain the centrality of meat in the structure of meals. Vegetarian food availability in restaurants and convenience foods is a constraint. In addition, social relationships may serve as constraints; social relationships are highly affected, primarily in the initial stages of conversion to vegetarianism.

Although there are social constraints present to maintain normative or meat-based foodways, individuals report support in maintenance of their vegetarian identity. That is, the present study finds support for Maurer's (1995) contention that through the media individuals have been able to find justifications for changing their eating patterns. The media's role in inspiring converts may be the influence it has as a transformative or "epiphany" experience that impacts individuals to the point of changing their concept of self to that of one who is vegetarian and therefore unwilling to kill animals for food (Denzin 1989).

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## APPENDIX:

## QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age? (check one)
  - a) under 20
  - b) 21-25
  - c) 26-30
  - d) 31-35
  - e) 36-40
  - f) 41 and over
2. Are you male or female?
3. To what extent do you follow a vegetarian diet? (vegan vs. lacto-ovo, etc.)
4. Do you occasionally eat meat to avoid embarrassment? (explain)
5. How long have you been vegetarian?
6. Is your spouse or partner also vegetarian?
7. Are many of your friends vegetarian?
8. Did you become vegetarian through interaction or involvement with someone already committed to vegetarianism? (explain)
9. Of the following, what motivated you to convert to vegetarianism? (If you were motivated by more than one reason to convert please tell me the order of importance) (if you were raised veg. from birth, tell me about your parents decision).
  - a) health
  - b) animal rights
  - c) ethics
  - d) environment
  - e) religion
  - f) other (specify)
10. Using the above categories that you have indicated motivated you, please explain what you mean by each. (this is necessary as people differ by what they mean within each category).
11. Have your motives changed over time? (explain)
12. Was your route to vegetarianism gradual or abrupt? (explain)
13. For those of you who converted to vegetarianism (rather than those raised vegetarian), tell me about the routines and cooking practices you found most difficult to change.
14. How has your vegetarian diet been accepted and/or criticized by your FRIENDS and ACQUAINTANCES?
15. How has your vegetarian diet been accepted and/or criticized by your FAMILY?
16. For those of you with children, are they vegetarian?
17. Tell me the difficulties experienced in raising children who are vegetarian.
18. Do you have any recommendations as to how vegetarianism can become more the norm and more acceptable?
19. Anything else you wish to tell me that is important, but that I didn't ask?

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