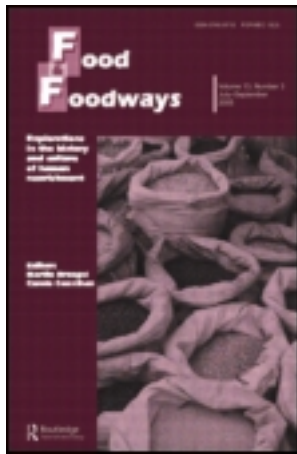


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Becoming Vegetarian: The Eating Patterns and Accounts of Newly Practicing Vegetarians

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Becoming Vegetarian: The Eating Patterns and Accounts of Newly Practicing Vegetarians

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Vegetarianism is a dynamic and fluid lifestyle that can be described as unique for each person who practices. Vegetarianism traditionally falls outside of the accepted eating patterns in Western nations; furthermore, the meat-free lifestyle can be classified as a form of positive deviance. Semistructured interviews were conducted with self-described vegetarians regarding eating patterns and motivations within the initial adoption of the lifestyle. Vegetarian vocabularies of motive were categorized according to established deviance theory referred to as accounts. This newly practicing, or developmental, stage of vegetarianism was more likely to fall on the less strict side of the vegetarian continuum for eating patterns and the motives had a propensity to be monothematic.

Vegetarians are often asked why they have decided to stop eating animal products. In reality, very few people eat the same type of diet over the course of their lives. General dietary practices can shift for several reasons such as medical recommendations, religious conversion, and seasonal availability of food. Vegetarians are no different in this regard because few vegetarians maintain the same dietary practices and motivations over the course of their meatless “career” (Boyle 2007). There have been several studies looking at the reasons or motives one becomes vegetarian (Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Dietz et al. 1995; Stiles 1998; Hamilton 2000; Roth 2005). As research into the social science of food grows, this study combining the eating patterns of vegetarians with the rationalizations of new vegetarians will attempt to add to this important field. Vegetarianism is a fluid and very flexible category that can be described as self-imposed. The individual must make a conscious decision to self-identify as vegetarian in order for the construct of vegetarian to apply. Many questions arise on why a person becomes vegetarian: Does

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the person abstain from red meat, poultry, seafood, or all of the above? Does the primary reason (or reasons) a person chooses to eliminate animal products from his or her diet relate to the choice of what is eliminated?

Vegetarians must be separated though from those who are new and those who have an established and comfortable eating pattern. Vegetarianism at a basic level is viewed by many as black or white: Do you eat meat or not? The problem with this view is that vegetarianism is complex and can cause as much difficulty to define as the popular term “organic” (Pollan 2006). Vegetarians can be partially practicing, abstain from one type of animal product, be vegan, or be fruitarian. This study will attempt to present the eating patterns and vocabularies of motive for newly practicing, or developmental, vegetarians. Vocabularies of motive, or accounts, have been used primarily in the study of deviance (Scott and Lyman 1968; Nichols 1990). Studying vegetarianism as a form of norm violation may glean insight into a subculture with an alternative value system and how that value system is presented to others.

In discussing the eating and reasoning of developmental vegetarians, I will present eating patterns based on the report provided by the National Council on Science and Health and the reasoning within classic deviance theory. The purpose here is not to label vegetarianism as deviant even though vegetarianism does violate the foodways of traditional American culture. The intent is to provide understanding into the early decisions to adopt a complex and often mischaracterized diet of vegetarians.

METHODS AND SAMPLING

Deviance research always poses challenges for sociologists, the same holds true for studying vegetarianism. It is difficult to create an objective design to locate vegetarians using mathematical sampling techniques. Systematic samples of vegetarians do not currently exist as the status of vegetarianism is self-identified and quite flexible. Because of the pliability of this dietary choice and its motives, a qualitative design using a snowball sampling technique was employed. Snowball sampling, or chain reference sampling, begins with a key subject then ask the key subject for other people to interview and so on. The sample ends up “snowballing” into a larger group. This type of sampling is quite common to study groups holding alternative views or living lifestyles outside of the norm (Esterberg 2002). The resulting interviews were conducted with practicing vegetarians using the interview guide method as outlined by Michael Patton (1990). The interview guide serves as a checklist to make sure all of the designed research topics are covered while simultaneously keeping a relaxed feel to the flow of the conversation. The interview guide provided a framework for keeping the interviews organized in order to respect the time given by the subjects.

The semistructured interviews were conducted with 45 individuals who self-identified as practicing vegetarians. The interview itself attempted to bring forth the circumstances that led to the vegetarian conversion while also gathering data on the current realities of their dietary practices. Another purpose of the open-ended, semi-structured interview was to allow the participants to describe both their initial eating patterns as well as the accounts provided originally when their behavior was questioned. The interviews concluded with each subject filling out a short information sheet in order to collect demographic data. After the interviews and transcriptions were completed, several of the participants were asked to clarify and/or expand on answers. Follow-up interactions transpired through e-mail.

The sample demographics were consistent to those previously collected on vegetarianism (Maurer 2002, Vegetarian Times 2002, Stahler 2006, Active Interest Media 2009). The sample tended to be made up of white, European-American females with an age range of 18 to 61. Many were attending college ($n = 17$) while a slight majority ($n = 25$) held a bachelor's degree or higher. The category with the largest grouping was race. Of the 45 vegetarians interviewed, 86.7% identified themselves as white, European-American. The remaining participants were Hispanic (6.7%), Native American (4.4%), and Asian (2.2%).

INITIAL EATING PATTERNS IN DEVELOPMENTAL VEGETARIANISM

Converting to vegetarianism requires more than just the common sense rejection of meat. How do you define this rejection of meat? Clearly, the avoidance of red meats such as pork and beef has been well accepted by those unfamiliar with the specifics of the diet. Most vegetarian groups will undoubtedly agree that poultry should be excluded from the vegetarian's plate. The real questioning begins with seafood. Are fish and shellfish truly sentient beings? This line of questioning is part of the argument from such important animal rights philosophers such as Peter Singer (1976) and Tom Regan (1983). In addition, where do animal products fall on the continuum in regards to use of animals for human survival? If one believes all life has the right to exist, then what about plant life? The combination of the ideology with the possible eating patterns complicates the decision to become vegetarian. The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) organized a simple typology that classified different forms of "vegetarianism" (Meister 1997). The ACSH types are based on what kind of food is eliminated. Other types of vegetarians based on personal philosophies are freegans (Gross 2009), raw foodists (Russo 2008), and the separation of total vegans from dietary vegans (International Vegetarian Union 2008). Freegans attempt to live a vegan lifestyle but will depart from the philosophy when a food item will go to waste. The freegan philosophy will permit even meat eating if the food

containing meat will end up just being wasted or placed in the garbage. Raw foodists are another strict kind of vegan that requires all of the food to be prepared in its raw, uncooked form. Cooking food tends to reduce the health benefits of the vegetable as well as changes the natural flavor. Finally, total vegans differ from dietary vegans in that a total vegan will attempt to avoid all animal products whatsoever. This includes any clothing or household product that contains any animal byproduct. Total vegans exemplify this by really trying to avoid purchasing any item made of leather. The dietary vegan applies the vegan lifestyle only to his or her own eating habits. However, all these vegetarian variations still conform to the categories outlined by the American Council on Science and Health.

They are organized as follows:

1. *Semi-vegetarian*. This is a person who eats vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, grains, dairy products, eggs, seafood, and poultry. The only types of meat that are avoided are red meats such as beef and pork.
2. *Pollo-vegetarian*. This is a person who eats vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, grains, dairy products, eggs, and poultry. The person here has eliminated red meat and seafood.
3. *Pesco-vegetarian*. This is a person who consumes vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, grains, dairy products, eggs, and seafood. The individual abstains from poultry and red meat.
4. *Ovo-lacto-vegetarian*. This is the stereotypical vegetarian. A person who follows this kind of diet consumes vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, grains, dairy products, and eggs. All red meat, poultry, and seafood are refrained from eating.
5. *Lacto-vegetarian*. This person enjoys vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, grains, and dairy products. Eggs, red meat, poultry and seafood are eliminated.
6. *Ovo-vegetarian*. The individual will eat vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, grains, and eggs, but will abstain from dairy, red meat, seafood, and poultry.
7. *Vegan*. This person will attempt to eliminate all animal products. He or she will only consume vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, and grains. All meat, dairy, eggs, fur, and leather will be avoided as best as possible.
8. *Fruitarian*. This type of vegetarian is considered the strictest. This individual will only consume the fruit portion of the plant. Any food that would injure the plant such as root and leaf vegetables will be avoided.

These different types of vegetarians are essentially operationally defined based on the food consumed. The eating patterns of the initial vegetarians interviewed rest on the less strict end of the continuum of the vegetarian types as outlined by Meister (1997). Of the 45 vegetarians in the sample, five of the types listed above were represented in the early stages of

vegetarianism. No one claimed to have begun his or her vegetarianism as a vegan or a fruitarian. This is quite logical because the vegan and fruitarian status are very vigorous. Initially, 8.9 percent of the vegetarians fell into the logical semi-vegetarian category initially. Another 17.8 percent claimed to be pesco- or pollo-vegetarians. Common sense would dictate that most people who became vegetarian would eliminate red meat first as it is viewed by the health and vegetarian community as the most “troublesome.” Following that common sense rationale, the next elimination would be poultry and other fowl with seafood being the final reduction until one was an ovo-lacto-vegetarian. However, the vegetarians interviewed stated the most common beginning form of vegetarianism was the ovo-lacto-vegetarian. Nearly two-thirds claimed to have eliminated all red meat, poultry, and seafood from their diets when they decided to become vegetarian. This is consistent with what Stiles (1998) found in her study of vegetarians she conducted on the internet. Her sample consisted of 51.8 percent ovo-lacto-vegetarians. However, Jabs, Devine, and Sobal (1998a and 1998b) used the same sample for two studies but had 7 of 19 respondents claim veganism as the most common type. Also, according to the Vegetarian Resource Group’s 2006 poll on vegetarianism, the most reported kind of vegetarian were people who claimed to be ovo-lacto-vegetarian (Stahler 2006). Maurer (2002) noted that the vegetarian that people “typically” think of is the ovo-lacto-vegetarian (p. 1).

These facts about the types of vegetarianism lead one to surmise that the change to vegetarianism is an absolute decision. For example, Katie discussed the final decision to eliminate meat once and for all:

I saw a special on TV about chicken, and how, I know this is funny, but they are treated in the trucks and how they’re all chained up and all that. And, I don’t know but something inside of me said, “That’s it. I’m never eating meat again.” (Katie 02)

This response was quite typical of a “final” decision regarding meat. The problem with a quick and decisive position is that all of the potential hazards have not been analyzed. Since vegetarians claim health-related benefits of vegetarianism, many of the vegetarians do not understand the ramifications of shifting to a diet without proper education regarding vegetarianism.

Of the 45 vegetarians who participated in this research, 19 claimed to have had medical problems that could be traced back to the improper implementation of the vegetarian diet. The problems ranged from not feeling well, which led to a doctor’s visit, to headaches and passing out to the most serious condition of the beginning of an eating disorder. However, the most common complaint was iron-deficiency anemia. Ten vegetarians in the sample reported being diagnosed by a physician with iron-deficiency anemia. One other was diagnosed with the other vegetarian-related anemia, B12-deficiency anemia. According to Grayson (2002), vegetarians are

extremely susceptible to anemia due to the low iron content of most vegetables. One interviewee, Edie, exemplifies the anemia problem among newly converted vegetarians:

[I was diagnosed with] anemia, which is the lack of iron in the blood. That has a lot to do with diet if you are not eating enough iron. Red meat is so full of it. If you really concentrated on eating the vegetables that have iron in it, then that would be OK. There have been times when I have been vegetarian that I have not been eating enough vegetables or the right vegetables as I could, so I have to take supplements. (Edie 105)

The surprising finding that 42.2 percent of the sample had some kind of physical ailment interpreted as being connected to a vegetarian diet underscores the reality that many who switch to a vegetarian diet do not do so in a healthy manner when looking at the change retrospectively. With all the health benefits that vegetarianism promotes, people who convert do not do the intended research that a strict vegetarian diet requires to remain healthy. These “junk food vegetarians” replace meat with high calorie, easily prepared or purchased alternatives such as French fries and grilled cheese sandwiches (Maurer 1997: 151). The tensions and reasons behind vegetarianism have to be put in perspective. A large minority of the respondents chose to adopt vegetarianism for one particular reason and practiced strictly without thinking of the potential physical consequences. However, this is consistent with the majority of all dietary choices. Michael Pollan (2006) notes how difficult it is to really track the path food takes from farm to fork and to know exactly the content of each and every morsel of food. As a society, we trust the labels “organic,” “low-fat,” and “natural” because we assume it is an apolitical endeavor regulated for society’s overall health (Nestle 2007). These terms are susceptible to the same political, business, and lobbying forces as with any governmental endeavor.

INITIAL ACCOUNTS OF VEGETARIANISM

An eating pattern is not the only barometer of whether or not someone has become vegetarian. Vegetarians must justify or rationalize their behavior to others when they are questioned. Vegetarians utilize what C. Wright Mills (1940) referred to as a vocabulary of motive. Vocabularies of motive are justifications presented by those in an attempt to redefine the behavior in question in a positive light. Mills states that motives are “strategies of action” (1940: 907) that validate the self and sell the behavior to others. A popular application of the vocabulary of motive is the conceptualization of accounts outlined by Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1968). The necessity of legitimacy in the life of the vegetarian forces the vegetarian to offer accounts for

his or her deviance. Scott and Lyman note that every person engages in some form of deviance at some time, and individuals need verbal mechanisms to rationalize their deviance. These accounts help people maintain a positive self-image. However, Scott and Lyman's 1968 version of accounts is not the only version of accounting that has been outlined by other sociologists who study deviance.

Nichols (1990) attempted to comprehensively organize accounts and accounting techniques, but Nichols does not distinguish clearly between what is behavioral as opposed to what is verbal. Scott and Lyman presented the function of an account as a verbal mechanism to "prevent conflicts by bridging the gap between action and expectation" (1968: 46). Nichols points out that Scott and Lyman only look at two of the potential four categories of accounts. The two outlined by Scott and Lyman are excuses and justifications. Excuses are verbalizations that admit the wrongfulness of the acts but deny any personal responsibility for that acts. Justifications are statements that admit personal responsibility but deny the wrongfulness of the deviant acts. Nichols notes that these concepts, excuses and justifications, are immensely useful, but they do leave out two other possibilities. Admissions admit to both the wrongfulness of the acts as well as the acceptance of responsibility for the behavior, whereas, a denial rejects both the wrongfulness of the behavior as well as the acceptance of responsibility. The problem here is that the two additional categories, admissions and denials, must be utilized in combination with verbal excuses and justifications in some forms of deviance. Admitting and denying as Nichols defines them truly relies on the demeanor and behavior of the person under question. The admission is truly problematic in this situation as it relies on "coming clean" about a disvalued behavior. Vegetarians only need to admit their behavior at a meal where meat is being served. Admitting and apologizing for the inconvenience is more of a behavioral response to an awkward situation than a reason for justifying the choice of becoming a vegetarian.

The denial provides a behavioral response in order to mask a deviant behavior. The two types of denials are passing and deviance disavowal. Erving Goffman (1963) outlined the classic definition of passing in his book, *Stigma*. Passing can be described as the deviant's unwillingness to tell anyone about the stigma in question. Goffman argues that passing is important when some people know of a person's deviance but the deviant chooses not to tell others. However, if the information were to be known, then the person may be discredited. Vegetarianism is a type of norm violation that lends itself to passing quite nicely. All the vegetarians interviewed claimed to have used the passing mechanism to cope. The only real time vegetarianism has to be acknowledged is during the preparing and eating of a meal. Obviously, vegetarians can choose to remain "invisible" because of the questioning many receive when their diet is revealed. The other type of denial is deviance disavowal. Fred Davis (1961) defined deviance disavowal as "the refusal of

those who are viewed as deviant to concur with the verdict" (120). The purpose of the disavowal is for the deviant to normalize one's own behavior in relation to others (Adler and Adler 1997). Vegetarians attempt to disavowal their deviance by trying to show "normals" they can participate in ordinary eating activities. The development of meat analogs is the perfect example of how a vegetarian can attempt to appear ordinary, which allows others to ignore the stigma. A meat analog is a food designed to replace meat in the traditional meal, but it is made primarily out of vegetables and grain; the most recognizable being the "veggie burger." A vast majority of the vegetarians in the sample stated that they eat and rather enjoy meat analogs. Meat analogs provide a vegetarian with the ability to acknowledge the difficulties of being deviant while simultaneously participating in "regular" eating. It is a denial that the dietary choice affects the vegetarian's normalcy of life. The major problem with using denials as an "account" is that passing and deviance disavowal are behavioral, not verbal, coping mechanisms. Neither provided reasons for the adoption of vegetarianism. Passing and deviance disavowal are not vocabularies of motive; they are behavioral coping mechanisms to mask deviant behavior.

Nevertheless, all four of these types are what Nichols (1990) calls remedial accounts. Remedial accounts are vocabularies of motive that are given *after* the behavior has been completed. Vegetarians use remedial accounts when consistently defending their identity after conversion takes place. Using this premise, remedial accounts may be employed for as long as one engages in an alternative behavior such as vegetarianism. It is the defining feature of a deviant who is in the final stage of conversion (Matza 1969). The person practicing vegetarianism then becomes a vegetarian. Initially, vegetarians, as well as other deviants who are early in their careers, are still learning the how and the why of the vegetarian way. In these early experiences, vegetarians do not have complex accounting systems or coping mechanisms developed. In this study, developing vegetarians usually just offered one account to alleviate the conflict that arises between their actions and societal expectations such as claiming animal rights as a reason for abstaining from meat. When a person with a questioned behavioral pattern uses one account to defend his or her identity, then it is referred to as a monothematic account (Nichols 1990). A monothematic account is a defensive verbal scheme that is very simplistic. The majority of vegetarians in this sample had an inclination to offer simplistic monothematic accounts for their dietary choice.

Monothematic Accounts in Developing Vegetarianism

In this study, 71.1% of the 45 vegetarians interviewed offered monothematic accounts for their initial vegetarianism. Polythematic accounts that initially contained two distinct accounts were provided by 22.2% of the sample, and

6.7 percent of the subjects offered three separate accounting mechanisms. The dominance of the monothematic account in early vegetarianism is consistent with the theoretical arguments presented by Nichols (1990). Nichols states that anyone new to a particular form of deviance can distinguish and even utilize monothematic accounts within everyday interaction. However, as one becomes more experienced with the alternative behavior and with more real world interaction as a person with a contested identity, polythematic accounts of greater complexity will develop.

Initially, the monothematic account serves an important purpose. It gives one a “starting point.” These monothematic accounts arise from tensions the person experiences during the early portion of the deviant career. The initial vegetarian accounts remain primarily within the framework of Scott and Lyman’s (1968) accounting typology. Nichols’s addition of admissions and denials to Scott and Lyman’s work does not provide reasons for the violation of foodways. Vegetarians, nonetheless, do not use all of the remedial accounts listed by Scott and Lyman. As with any specific form of norm violation, certain accounts will be more prevalent within certain subcultures. Vegetarians are no different. There are essentially six major accounts vegetarians give that minimizes their behavior. The six accounts are consistent with Beardsworth and Keil’s (1997) and Stiles’s (1998) work on reasons for conversion. What is important is the retrospective reorganization of the six accounts that rationalize the violation of the major American foodway.

The first two monothematic accounts utilized by vegetarians fall under the category of excuses. Within his theoretical outline, excuses are made up by four distinct accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968), but two of the accounts of the four listed under this type are not relevant to vegetarians.¹ However, the other two excuses are quite relevant. An appeal to biological drives can be defined as the belief that the body and/or biological factors can determine human behavior (Scott and Lyman 1968). The first major theme for conversion to vegetarianism is the aesthetic/gustatory theme (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). The tactile properties and the taste of meat become the focus for rejection. Many vegetarians claim that they do not like the taste of meat or that they cannot handle the aesthetic qualities of meat such as the touch, the smell, or even the sight of raw meat. Twigg (1979) argues that the aesthetic properties of meat that vegetarians find repulsive are based on the association of meat with death. Vegetarianism permits the practitioner to avoid being an accomplice in the killing of animals (Hamilton 2006). The aesthetic/gustatory theme was presented by nearly a third of the sample (31.1 percent). The tactile properties of meat became the problem itself. For example, Brandi explains how she backed off meat because of the taste:

I never really ate it [meat]. I mean I'd eat it if it was on the table and my parents made me eat it. But, I remember specifically in the seventh grade I stopped. I refused to eat it anymore. . . I just didn't like the way it

tastes, and I decided I wasn't going to let my parents make me anymore.
(Brandi 03)

The second account classified as an excuse used by vegetarians was scapegoating. Scapegoating denies the responsibility of the questioned behavior by alleging that his or her deviance is in response to another's behavior. A minority of vegetarians interviewed (8.9%) employed the scapegoating account when initially converting to vegetarianism. The way vegetarians attempt to scapegoat is to place responsibility with the other people in their lives at the time of conversion. One older vegetarian stated that it was the lifestyle of the time period that led him into vegetarianism:

I was in college and it was the early seventies. It was the "in" thing to do. You know with the hippies and stuff like that...it was kind of the collective family. You know the people I was going to school with
(Charles 22).

Other vegetarians use scapegoating as a way to shift responsibility to their parents. In the case of one particular vegetarian, she was raised vegetarian by her "hippie" parents:

That would be through my parents. When I was little and if I went to people's houses and was offered meat, I didn't want to do anything because I worshipped my mom and dad, especially my dad. Whatever he did I wanted to do. I thought it was a "heroistic" [sic] thing to do.
(Autumn 24)

The final major category of remedial accounts after admissions, denials, and excuses is the justification (Nichols 1990). The justification by the typology's definition denies the wrongfulness of the behavior, but the person actually accepts responsibility for the deviance. Justifications are the primary type of remedial account used by the vegetarians in this study. Four of the six major motives for vegetarianism (Beardsworth and Keil 1997) fall under the justification argument. Justifications, like excuses, were reorganized and expanded by Scott and Lyman in 1968. The first justification employed by vegetarians is the denial of injury. Denial of injury can be described as an account that presents the deviance as acceptable because no person or thing was injured. This parallels the classic vegetarian argument for social justice. Beardsworth and Keil (1997) refer to this as "the new order theme" (228). Rejecting meat under this position is rejecting the current dominant social structure in Western societies. According to this view, vegetarianism is a form of protest that stands up against the exploitation of people under a capitalistic and patriarchal system. Hamilton (2006) points out that vegetarianism is at its core a way for modern humans to have a new relationship with nature.

Meat is a symbol of domination of animals, the environment, other people and other societies. Only two vegetarians in the sample claimed this theme in their defense of vegetarianism. The following is an example of denying injury based in the logic of social justice:

I was [working] at the U.N., and I learned the food production practices and what our privilege did to the rest of society...types of illegal practices that foreign governments practice, violations that they do, bad sanitation, poverty...how many people aren't eating because of what you are eating...in terms of the political aspects of food production (Maria 18)

Whereas social justice was one of the least popular themes among the vegetarians interviewed, animal rights was tied with the aesthetics/gustatory theme as the second most popular initial vocabulary of motive. Animal rights were claimed by a large portion (31.1%) of the sample as an initial motivation for vegetarianism. The argument for animal rights essentially can be classified as the justification known as an appeal to higher loyalties. By definition, an appeal to higher loyalties admits the responsibility for the action because it was done out of allegiance to another group (Scott and Lyman 1968). The other group in this case is the animal kingdom. This argument is tied to the concept of "speciesism" (Beardsworth and Keil 1997) originally popularized by Peter Singer (1976). From this position, it is a moral imperative to reduce the suffering of animals. Another part of the argument states that food production has become so plentiful in the West that there is no real need to eat large quantities of animal products. Below are some examples of this kind of justification given by vegetarians in the sample:

There was an organization on campus here called Students for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. They had a booth and at the same time, they were handing out fliers...but back then, they were all vegetarians...but there were a lot of fliers about animal liberation stuff and animal testing and things like that. And that's how I got interested in vegetarianism (Roger 103).

There was one [book] in particular. *Diet for a Small Planet* was one of the big ones out during that time. But other stuff as well, the literature PETA hands out in different articles. It [animal rights] was kind of big at that time. (Mary 04)

The most common justification for vegetarianism was the case for self-fulfillment. This account resides in the belief that the deviant behavior is actually helping the man or the woman become a better person. This can be viewed as a belief in a physical, mental, or spiritual improvement when the diet is adopted. When a vegetarian claims better overall health as a reason

for his or her vegetarianism, he or she is essentially arguing for a position of self-fulfillment. The potential for improved physical or spiritual health as the reason for becoming vegetarian was claimed by 40 percent of the sample. This health position states that eating meat is essentially opening the person up to the ill effects of meat consumption (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). Meat and meat-related products are seen as contaminated. For example, the two quotes below reveal the belief in the healthy projection of adopting the vegetarian diet:

My mom's friend decided that she was going to be a vegetarian, but she did it for health reasons. I was like, "OK, I'm going to lose some weight." That's when I became one initially. (Rosalia 17)

My body just wanted to do it. I just followed my body. I also was aware of all the steroid and injections that cows were receiving for growth hormones, and I didn't want to put that into my body. (Lily 115).

Another line of reasoning for vegetarianism described by Beardsworth and Keil (1997), food production/environmental, can also be classified as a justification. More specifically, this remedial account falls into the type known as condemnation of the condemners. As Scott and Lyman (1968) state, when a deviant uses this accounting mechanism, he or she is volleying back the negative connotation for the behavior by stating that others commit much worse acts, "and these others are either not caught, not punished, not condemned, unnoticed, or even praised" (51). Vegetarians who take this position present the facts surrounding the meat industry and the subsequent misuse of environmental resources for a more cost-effective, market-driven demand for meat. The mass production of beef, veal, pork, and poultry all have unpleasant consequences that cause many people to adopt the vegetarian lifestyle. Exemplifying this position, an older vegetarian states her initial motivation for vegetarianism:

What happened was I started out, I guess, I was in the environmental group. I had a real strong interest in environmental issues. I think that [is] what sort of led to *Diet for a Small Planet*. I would say that sort of turned the tables on what I wanted. (Debbie 21).

The next justification vegetarians employ is the sad tale. The sad tale presents the person as a victim of certain circumstances, and the deviance has now "saved" them from that dismal situation (Scott and Lyman 1968). This is very similar to the health argument, but in this case, the vegetarian says that the vegetarian lifestyle saved them from continuing down the path of sickness and disease. Malcolm Hamilton (2006) noted that vegetarians do have an underlying fear of becoming sick from eating meat once they

adopt the lifestyle. However, this is different as meat is the trigger to become vegetarian and the fear of becoming ill sustains the dietary pattern. Sandy describes her instance of suffering from consuming red meat that led her to adopt vegetarianism:

Probably the thing that triggered it [the vegetarianism] was when I got sick during my senior year in high school. I had a parasitic infection that they connected with uncooked meat. . . I also kind of made a transition to eat healthier, to get in better shape, and I thought the best way to do it would be to cut a lot of fat out of my diet. In doing so, I cut out red meat (Sandy 119).

The final justification within Nichols' typology is the denial of victim account. However, this account is not pertinent to vegetarians because it involves blaming the victim for the deviance (Scott and Lyman 1968). It has been used very successfully in other forms of deviance, especially rape (Scully and Marolla 1984). Since vegetarianism does not have a direct victim to blame, this justification becomes moot under current circumstances.

VEGETARIANISM AS POSITIVE DEVIANCE

Meat eating is a well-established tradition in Western culture (Spencer 1995), especially within the United States (Rifkin 1992; Drache 1996). The belief system that supports the barrier between meat consumption and a plant-based diet in Western civilization can be traced back to the teachings of Pythagoras (Stuart 2006; Spencer 1995). In addition, the rise of Christianity in the West justified the eating of animals as a God-given necessity because of the damage to the world's vegetation after the the Flood (Stuart 2006). The value system of Christianity as a core component in the colonization and development of the United States along with the adoption of the agricultural practices of the American Indians has routinely placed meat at the center of American cuisine. According to Drache (1996), wild game was second in dietary importance to maize among the Eastern and Coastal Native American peoples. By the mid-17th century, the European settlers had learned the importance of wild game in order to survive the tough winters, but also had produced enough domesticated livestock that it could be exported back to the European continent.

Initially, pork was the dominant meat for the early Americans. The pig was not difficult to nurture and could be left unattended until time for slaughter (Pollan 2006; Ross 1980). Furthermore, pork is easier to process and store, especially over the winter months. Beef only came into the forefront of meat consumption with the development of the refrigerated boxcar in the late 19th century (McIntosh 1995). Beef was considered a luxury or a treat

prior to the advance in preservation technology. In 1904, at the St. Louis World's Fair, the hamburger began its evolution into the signature American food (Rifkin 1992). Over the most recent decade, poultry has become the dominant meat of choice in the United States. The combined total pounds of chicken and turkey consumed in the United States has surpassed beef as the most eaten type of meat (73.7 lbs of poultry vs. 62.2 lbs of beef) for the year 2007 (Economic Research Service USDA 2009). The consumption of chicken has grown so much that it has nearly surpassed beef by itself (59.9 lbs and 62.2 lbs, respectively).

Because meat eating is the norm in Western societies, vegetarians are at a "social disadvantage" at any special occasion that involves food (Preece 2008: 7). The ethical stance of vegetarianism places one at odds with the social order because meat eating represents success in a capitalistic society. Wealth was historically measured in the number of cattle one owned (Rifkin 1992; Rimas and Fraser 2008). Meat also provided a message of male virility as hunters were glorified as providers and considered "good" mates (Preece 2008). If meat, then, is such a dominant foodway that conveys status and power, then how deviant is vegetarian?

The diet of the 21st century has been saturated with convenience foods, the food industry's advertising strategies, and the food industry's influence on government policies through lobbying (Popkin 2009). The foundation of the modern diet consists predominantly of prepackaged foods that rely heavily on corn, soy, and meat processing (Popkin 2009). The move to being more health-conscious and consuming more vegetables should bring a more positive spotlight on vegetarianism, and in a way, it has. For example, when I approached the subjects to be interviewed, a number questioned my logic of whether I should focus on vegetarians as social deviants because vegetarianism is not socially reprehensible. However, when I framed vegetarianism as a form of norm violation that in its essence was attempting to benefit others and the society as a whole, many of the vegetarians I interviewed were outwardly proud of their rebellious behavior. Using a clear example of this kind of thought, Lily reconsidered participating in the interview after our phone conversation in which I outlined the nature of this research:

You know I almost canceled this interview. I'm still not sure whether me being a vegetarian classifies me as a deviant. I mean, I do not feel deviant. I am just me. My body just wanted to do it. I just followed my body. I became conscious of my body as more of a healthy machine that I have to keep up, and my body rejected it [meat] all. (Lily 115)

When an act violates the norms of a given society, but this act can be classified as overconforming behavior in the name of the moral, economic, or intellectual betterment of the society, the act can be classified as positive

deviance. Heckert and Heckert (2004) point out that the act is positively valued based on the context from which it is viewed. Vegetarians are positively valued within many circles focusing on nutrition, the environment, animal rights, and the feminist movement. However, vegetarians are also negatively perceived by the meat industry, hunting organizations, and religious groups among others in the general public.

According to Druann Maria Heckert (1998), the call for the study of positive deviance began with Pitrim Sorokin in 1950. Sorokin (1950) argued that the social sciences have spent an excess of time studying the negative element of human behavior instead of the more positive characteristics. There are a plethora of studies investigating negative deviance, whereas there are only a limited number of studies looking at the positive nature of deviant behavior (Heckert 1998). Heckert contends that positive deviance has been conceptualized in these limited studies from three perspectives: a norm-violating stance, a labeling/societal reaction perspective, and from a position regarding a very specific kind of action.

The norm-violating perspective suggests that human behavior can be distributed along a continuum. The continuum would look very much like that of the normal distribution or the bell curve (Wilkins 1995). Normative behaviors would constitute the majority of the continuum and would be located at the center of the distribution. Both the extremely negative and the extremely positive behaviors would occupy opposite ends of the distribution. Positive deviance can also be explained from a societal reaction perspective. This perspective is most closely associated with the labeling perspective. The reaction from society is crucial because where some behaviors need a large difference in behavior to be judged deviant, other behaviors only need a small difference (Heckert 1998). The final approach to positive deviance examines specific types of action. Specific behavior, such as excessive conformity, constitutes an original perspective in the study of positive deviance because the behavior is acceptable but may conform to the norms too much (Heckert 1998). Therefore, it is the specific action within the appropriate behavior that causes the deviance. The major problem with this position lies in the reaction. In essence, this perspective is still dependent on the reaction of the culture or society. Thus, it seems that this position could be an extension of the labeling perspective.

Heckert (1998) has developed a typology regarding positive deviance. She maintains that there are five types of positive deviance with a potential sixth classification. The established five categories, according to Heckert, are as follows: altruism, charisma, innovation, supra-conformity, and innate characteristics. The sixth potential category is the ex-deviant. The argument for the ex-deviant as a positive deviant is based on the process of exiting deviance. Exiting deviance allows the ex-deviant to transcend the negative label. This is accomplished through a process of destigmatization or purification.

Under the definition that positive deviance is behavior that can be evaluated as “superior,” vegetarianism meets Heckert’s criteria for positive deviance and, therefore, deserves a place within the typology. Vegetarianism is viewed by many as a difficult and even noble attempt at personal and/or societal benefit. The problem then becomes: Where would vegetarianism fit within the typology? On the surface, it would appear that vegetarianism would fit the category of altruism. However, vegetarianism has six major vocabularies of motive (Beardsworth and Keil 1997), and not all are altruistic. One of the major motives is the benefit of a healthy diet. Being a vegetarian for health-related reasons is personal, not altruistic. However, vegetarianism can be classified as supra-conformity. Vegetarianism represents the ideal, whether it is the drive for ideal health, an ideal society, or the ideal treatment of animals. Vegetarianism even has the potential to become overly idealistic and incredibly strict in its variations. For example, vegans and fruitarians are extreme forms of vegetarianism that require supra-conforming behavior in order to reach that goal. In the end, vegetarianism has historically been a violation of the major foodway in Western civilization (Preece 2008). In the United States today, vegetarianism has, in a very effective manner, moved away from the heretical offenses of Old World Europe to a marginal behavior that is seen as having positive value for those who practice. However, those who practice vegetarianism must negotiate their decision to participate in behavior outside the norm in similar ways to other people who engage in alternative behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Dietary practices are unique and private ventures that can reveal personal, religious, ethnic, and/or political identities. Most people who follow the dominant foodways of their culture do not deeply examine the connection between food choice and identity. Vegetarianism in the United States connects people to various ideologies and identities that, in some instances, lie outside the mainstream. Because dietary preferences can be so individualized and thought-provoking, the decision to adopt certain diets are malleable based on new knowledge, changing awareness, or different understandings of what is important to the person in question. However, a dietary pattern must begin at some basic level. Since vegetarianism is not the dominant foodway in the United States, a conversion usually takes place among the vast majority of “self-identified” vegetarians. The conversion usually begins with a dietary choice to eliminate certain kinds of animal products and a rationalization for that choice. The decision and reasons to become vegetarian places the person at odds with the dominant cultural prescription of meat eating (Preece 2008), but is vegetarianism that deviant?

Vegetarianism has technically acquired a label of deviance, but this alternative diet must be viewed through a lens of positive deviance. David Dodge (1990) argued that the study of deviant behavior focuses too closely on negative behaviors that are inconsistently categorized and researched by social scientists. The study of deviance must include those who surpass normative expectations or can be considered exceptional as compared to the average person. Exceptional behavior on the positive end does not require behavioral control. Extremely positive behavior serves as an example for others. All the 45 vegetarians interviewed for this study presented reasons for violation of the dominant Western foodway that can be classified for the betterment of society, animals, the environment, or themselves. This study focused on the eating patterns and the reasoning of newly converted vegetarians. The subjects revealed that the eating patterns they adopted when first converting to vegetarianism were on the less strict end of the vegetarian spectrum. The most common form of vegetarianism at conversion was the classic ovo-lacto-vegetarian. This type of vegetarian eliminates all meat but still consumes eggs and dairy. The second most common type, the pescovegetarian, eliminates all red meat and poultry but continues to consume fish, eggs, and dairy. The reasoning behind converting to the alternative diet was also simpler at first. Over 70 percent of the vegetarians in the sample reported one specific reason for the conversion to vegetarianism. The most common single reasons were self-fulfillment, animal rights, and taste or aesthetics. These findings were consistent with other research into the motivations for vegetarianism (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Stiles 1998). The predominance of the monothematic account is also consistent with work theorizing on the initial simplicity of reasons for adopting behavior outside of the social norm (Nichols 1990).

The resulting combination of the less strict dietary pattern with a simpler, monothematic account provides a starting point for vegetarianism but also reveals that behavior and motivation will probably coincide at similar junctures in time within the development of vegetarianism. The novice vegetarian is new and has not learned and/or processed many of the possible combinations of what constitutes vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is not just a simple choice whether or not to eat meat. It is a lifestyle change that is extremely personal. The newly converted vegetarian will lean toward less complicated forms of diet and motivations. Nonetheless, with any form of behavior, there should be a learning curve in which people will only acquire more information in order to participate in the lifestyle more effectively. Future research should potentially look at the expansion of motivations for vegetarians as well as investigate the possibility of the diet becoming stricter. In the end, vegetarianism cannot be simply defined based on the reality of eating meat or not. Vegetarianism also must be viewed as an endeavor that expands social norms for personal and social benefit. Therefore, vegetarianism becomes a complex, individualized, and even

political lifestyle choice that reveals extremely personal feelings and beliefs in which many who practice the dietary pattern may feel both liberated and marginalized.

NOTE

1. Vegetarians do not employ the accounts appeal to accidents and the appeal to defeasibility because the choice of vegetarianism is one that constitutes a lifestyle, not a result of a hazard in the environment or a mental lapse.

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