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## Managing vegetarianism: Identities, norms and interactions

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# MANAGING VEGETARIANISM: IDENTITIES, NORMS AND INTERACTIONS

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Vegetarians exclude various forms of animal-derived foods from consumption, and consequently must use special strategies to make food choices and present their food decisions to others. This study investigated the ways people following vegetarian diets managed their food choices and negotiated their interactions with others. Qualitative methods were used to interview 19 self-identified vegetarians recruited by snowball sampling. Many respondents followed vegan diets, but the majority consumed some form of animal foods. The vegetarians in this sample self-consciously labeled themselves "vegetarians," and adopted and used a vegetarian identity that included normative behavioral expectations. To manage social interactions, vegetarians sometimes ate animal-derived foods not in their usual diets in particular situations and used explanations in the form of accounts and discounting in constructing justifications for those behaviors. Understanding management of vegetarianism as a process reveals barriers and enabling factors for dietary practices that differ from those of the predominant society.

**KEY WORDS:** Vegetarianism, vegetarian, vegan, self-concept, identity, interactions, norms, accounts, discounting

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## INTRODUCTION

Food and eating practices are a complex system influenced by both the culture and society in which people are situated, as well as their individual perspectives about food and eating. Vegetarianism is an interesting case because the food choices people make in following a vegetarian diet challenge the dietary principles of the dominant meat-eating culture in which many of them were raised. Investigating the conscious decision to adopt and maintain a vegetarian diet can contribute to a larger understanding of food choices (Falk, Bisogni and Sobal, 1996; Furst *et al.*, 1996) and management of food and eating identities (Fischler, 1988).

Surprisingly little research has examined vegetarianism using social science perspectives. We located only 94 citations in searches using the keywords "vegetarianism, vegetarian and vegan" of the major computerized bibliographic databases in the social sciences: psychology (PsycINFO), sociology (sociological abstracts), anthropology (anthropological literature), political science (political science journals and PAIS), economics (EconLit), and History (historical journals). In contrast to the limited social science research on vegetarianism, a search of the major biomedical bibliographic database (Medline) identified 1,383 citations which focus on nutritional adequacies of vegetarian diets (for example, Dwyer and Loew, 1994; Hardinge and Stare, 1954; Havala and Dwyer, 1988; Nieman *et al.*, 1989). The limited literature on vegetarianism available in the social sciences provides relatively few models of disciplinary resources.

Most social science investigations of vegetarianism focused on motivations for adopting vegetarian diets (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991b, 1992b, 1993; Freeland-Graves, Greninger and Young, 1986; Dietz *et al.*, 1995; Dwyer *et al.*, 1973, 1974; Kenyon and Barker, 1998; Richardson, 1994; Santos and Booth, 1996; Sims, 1978; Wicks, 1999; Worsley and Skrzypiec 1997, 1998a, 1998b). Several analyses locate vegetarianism in relationship to larger social patterns. Adams (1990) approaches vegetarianism from a feminist perspective, identifying meat as a symbol of patriarchy and vegetarianism as an assertion of female autonomy. Twigg (1979, 1983) viewed vegetarianism as an inversion of the conventional food hierarchy that

places red meat at the top as the most desired form of nutrition. For a vegetarian, however, meat as a pinnacle food was rejected as unacceptable and even repulsive. Richardson, Shepherd, and Elliman (1993, 1994) reported that vegetarians ranked animal-derived food from most to least deleterious to their health and/or the environment in a hierarchical order of red-meat, poultry and fish. Many vegetarians did not rank dairy products or eggs in this hierarchy, allowing them to rationalize including those products in their diets.

There are interpersonal ramifications of adopting a diet such as vegetarianism that deviates from the diet of the majority (Amato and Partridge 1989). Beardsworth and Keil's (1991a, 1991b, 1992b, 1993, 1997) qualitative research examined the impact of vegetarian diets on people's relationships in the U.K. They reported that most vegetarians' parents accepted vegetarianism, but did not support or encourage their child's vegetarian diet and were concerned about nutritional issues. Mothers were usually more sympathetic than fathers to new dietary practices of a vegetarian child. Beardsworth and Keil hypothesized that parental opposition to vegetarianism may be due to parents' interpretation of their child's food rejection as rejection of them. This leads to resentment and pressure on a child to conform to parental food choices.

Regardless of families' acceptance, family gatherings that center on food were often a time of tension for vegetarians (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991a, 1997). Holiday observances were often connected to symbolic foods and were central to a family's identity and feelings of connectedness to traditions and society (Broderick, 1993). People following a vegetarian diet rejected many of these symbolic foods which challenge a family's identity and may create tension (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991b).

Following a vegetarian diet challenges the traditional beliefs and practices of the dominant meat eating culture (Dietz *et al.*, 1995; Maurer 1995; McKenzie, 1971). In the 1960s, people who were labeled "deviant" for participating in practices opposing the values and beliefs of the dominant culture often also followed vegetarian diets, resulting in a two-fold greater labeling as "deviant" (Belasco, 1993). More information is needed to understand how being labeled "deviant" may affect not only how others view vegetarians, but also how vegetarians view themselves and manage their identity.

The present study was conducted to investigate how adopting a vegetarian diet affects people's identities, interactions with others and behaviors with regard to societal norms. This study extends the qualitative work of Beardsworth and Keil (1991a, 1991b, 1992a, 1992b, 1993) in the U.K. with an analysis of vegetarianism in the U.S.

## METHODS

This research was part of a larger qualitative study that examined people's experience with vegetarianism and the psychosocial consequences of adopting a vegetarian diet (Jabs, 1997; Jabs, Devine and Sobal, 1998a, 1998b). The research was based on a constructionist approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to data collection and analysis. This approach allowed the investigators to study the topic from the point of view of the participants in order to gain insight into the complex ways that they constructed vegetarianism (Lincoln and Guba *loc. cit.*). These methods give the investigators flexibility in individualizing each interview (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### *Sample Selection*

Sampling for this study was purposeful and stratified (Patton, 1990) to achieve maximum variation with regards to age, sex, type and duration of vegetarian diet, characteristics chosen to assess possible differences in respondents' experiences with a vegetarian diet. Vegetarian participants were recruited via snowball sampling, which has been previously used to study people following a vegetarian diet (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991a, 1992b; Maurer, 1989, 1997). In snowball sampling, current participants are asked to contribute names of others who may be interested in participating in the study. This is an effective way to identify "invisible" groups (such as vegetarians) in general populations (Coleman, 1970), but risks recruitment of homogeneous samples.

### *Recruitment Process*

Nineteen vegetarian respondents were recruited by formal and informal referral. Initially the primary investigator announced the

purpose of the study at a group meeting of vegetarians in a city in western New York State. Nine people were recruited from this meeting, two responded to a recruitment card placed in the member newsletter, six were referrals from previous participants, and two replied to recruitment cards left with earlier participants.

### *Data Collection*

One in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interview (Spradley, 1979) was conducted with each participant at locations convenient for respondents such as their homes, food shops and local parks. One investigator conducted all the interviews, informing respondents she was interested in learning about their experiences following a vegetarian diet. The interviews followed an interview guide developed by the investigators with a semi-structured format that provided an outline for the interview, but allowed flexibility to probe emergent themes and issues (Jabs, 1997). It was designed to elicit respondents' experiences with vegetarianism, specifically with regard to the process of adoption and maintenance of a vegetarian diet, interactions with others that dealt with vegetarianism and issues of self-identification. A pilot interview guide was pre-tested with two respondents and revised to improve clarity. The guide was later modified to include questions about issues emerging from responses in the first three interviews. Interviews with vegetarian respondents ranged from 45 minutes to three hours in length and were audiotape-recorded. Immediately after each interview, the setting of the interview was described in writing together with the interviewer's perception of trustworthiness of responses and other pertinent information. Recruitment was discontinued when interviews provided little new information regarding respondents' experiences with vegetarianism (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was guided by the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lofland and Lofland, 1984). Following verbatim transcription of ten interviews, the primary investigator reviewed interviews and field notes to

develop an initial coding scheme, and reviewed this with the other investigators. Codes represented concepts that the majority of respondents expressed throughout the interview. *Ethnograph Software v4.0* (Seidel, Friese, and Leonard, 1995) was used to sort concepts and extract major ideas used in subsequent data analysis. Data analysis was continued and codes were modified throughout the investigative process.

To enhance data trustworthiness, the primary investigator used peer debriefing (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) the discussion of research findings with faculty, students, and peers. Member checks (Guba and Lincoln, *loc. cit.*) were conducted 3–6 months after the initial interviews to further validate the findings by recontacting three vegetarian participants to discuss developing theories and elicit their responses about interpretations of the data.

## RESULTS

### *Sample Description*

The majority of vegetarian respondents were female, middle-aged, married, middle to upper-middle class, and well educated (Table I). A variety of dietary practices were represented, although at the time of the interviews a vegan diet (in which no animal-derived food was consumed) was the most common among these respondents. Most had adopted vegetarian diets as adults, had followed them for more than four years, and belonged to a vegetarian group.

### *Use of the Term Vegetarian*

Everyone in the sample recognized and used the term “vegetarian,” although the boundaries of what they considered vegetarian varied. Some consumed dairy or egg products, while others ate fish or occasionally other animal-derived food. A 57-year-old semi-vegetarian did not consider himself a vegetarian because he had “only” eliminated red meat from his diet. He expressed some of the uncertainty surrounding the term “vegetarian”.

Am I a vegetarian? It goes back to what is a vegetarian, a true vegetarian? A vegetarian is someone who dabbles in it once in awhile or if they don't do it all the time they are not? ... A lot of times my friends will introduce me as a vegetarian and I qualify it by saying, well I'm not really, I've given up red-meat, which I don't think really qualifies me to be a vegetarian.

Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian respondents expressed frustration over the general use of the term "vegetarian" since there were no clear-cut definitions.

TABLE I  
Characteristics of vegetarian respondents studied ( $n = 19$ )

<i>Sex</i>		<i>Type of vegetarian diet</i>	
Female	13	Semi-	1
Male	6	Pesco-	1
<i>Age (years)</i>		Lacto-ovo-	3
25-29	1	Pesco-ovo-	1
30-39	5	Ovo-	1
40-49	5	Lacto-	5
50-59	6	Vegan	7
60-69	1	<i>Age adopted vegetarian diet (years)</i>	
70-74	1	Under 25	4
<i>Marital status</i>		25-29	2
Divorced	5	30-39	5
Married	8	40-49	3
Never Married	5	50-59	4
Separated	1	Over 60	1
<i>Annual household income (\$)</i>		<i>Duration of vegetarian diet (years)</i>	
10,000-19,999	3	Under 1	1
20,000-49,999	8	1-3	2
50,000-99,999	4	4-6	5
Over 100,000	3	7-9	5
Unreported	1	10-15	1
<i>Education</i>		Over 15	5
High school	1	<i>Type of group membership</i>	
Under 2 years college	2	Vegetarian	12
2 years college-Bachelors	7	Animal rights	4
Over Bachelors-Masters	5	Environmental	3
Masters or higher	4	Health	4
		Other	11
		None	1



### *Identity as a Vegetarian*

For many vegetarians, the practice of not eating meat or other animal-derived food encompassed more than just a physical behavior; it often became an identity for themselves. The majority of vegetarian respondents reported that they “were” vegetarian, be it, for example, lacto-ovo, “modified” vegetarian, or vegan. They used some form of the term vegetarian to describe themselves. A 44-year-old vegan mother described how her elementary school aged-children, who were raised vegetarian, had “absorbed [being vegetarian] as part of their identity.” A 45-year-old, twenty year lacto-ovo vegetarian stated that as a vegetarian:

It becomes part of your identity. . . . My daughter wrote to her [minister], “I am vegetarian.” You know it becomes part of your identity because it is so pervasive in your life, but it is also second nature too.

Adopting a vegetarian diet led participants to develop a different view of themselves and a new relationship with the community in general and other vegetarians in particular. A 44-year-old vegan discussed her five years of following a vegan diet:

It’s become sort of a religion for me . . . it’s a way of looking at all living things . . . of being a world citizen.

A 45-year-old lacto-vegetarian described a spiritual transformation that occurred when she adopted a vegetarian diet:

I’m happier that I became a vegetarian. . . . When I became a vegetarian . . . there was this certain, a certain lightness, that’s the only way that I can explain it . . . there was a profound mental, spiritual, physical difference.

One 57-year-old respondent avoided labeling himself “vegetarian” because such a name was not acceptable in his social network, yet he did call himself an “Ornish Follower” (Ornish, 1990). He felt that a vegetarian:

. . . tends to be very intellectual, very intelligent and people don’t think of vegetarians as mainstream. I don’t think vegetarians see themselves as mainstream.

Identifying himself as an “Ornish Follower” conveyed that his diet was an imposed prescription to treat his heart disease and he did not have much choice in the matter.

### *Vegetarian Norms and Rules*

Vegetarian respondents reported that specific norms and unwritten codes or rules accompanied adopting a vegetarian identity or label. Each person’s definition of vegetarian was used to construct a particular type of vegetarian identity to establish the norms and rules they would set and enforce for themselves. Like many respondents, one 53-year-old vegetarian described the behavioral norms inherent in her identity as a vegetarian:

I guess it’s modified vegetarian or modified vegan because I still use some dairy products, although I would prefer not to. I keep relapsing or backsliding like an alcoholic who keeps falling off the wagon.

She located her own place within the hierarchy of being less or more completely vegetarian, using a metaphor of abstention. When she ate “given up” or “forbidden” foods, she felt she was breaching the code or rules of what constituted more or less acceptable vegetarian practices. Within the label of vegetarianism, respondents reported a hierarchical stratification of vegetarian practices. Many but not all saw a vegan diet as the pinnacle goal towards which to strive.

### *Managing Interactions with Others*

Adopting a vegetarian diet had numerous consequences for respondents’ interactions with other people. Managing relationships with family and friends involved issues different from dealing with other non-vegetarians.

Parents were often confrontational and antagonistic toward vegetarian children by teasing and making jokes about their dietary practices. Fathers were quite skeptical about vegetarianism, and questioned the nutritional adequacy of vegetarian diets. One respondent, who initially adopted a vegetarian diet at 13 years of age, described his father’s skepticism towards vegetarian diets:

My dad had concerns. . . . My dad you know is scientific . . . and he'd look at it [a vegetarian diet] and say, you know, there's . . . this vital protein which is necessary and you have to eat four cups of rice. . . . Can you eat four cups of rice? . . . He didn't think . . . it [a vegetarian diet] was practical.

Respondents reported that mothers tended to express concern about their overall health, regardless of the type of diet they followed.

When respondents with adult non-vegetarian children adopted a vegetarian diet later in life, tension occurred between them and the adult children. For some respondents, adoption of a vegetarian diet resulted in decreased interactions with family members, especially in events involving food. Many adult children of vegetarian parents coped with parental dietary changes by withdrawing and interacting less with them. The symbolic foods of holidays were particular sources of tension between vegetarian and non-vegetarian family members. Despite these tensions, these vegetarian respondents maintained their diets.

Respondents used various strategies to manage social tensions. Initially after becoming vegetarian, many felt restricted in social situations because of their dietary practices. Vegetarian respondents reported that food events became challenging undertakings, especially if they were the only vegetarians present. The only time many vegetarian respondents ate food outside their usual dietary patterns was when they were eating with non-vegetarians. When invited to another's house for a meal, vegetarian respondents took steps to avoid upsetting the host and the others present. Most respondents anticipated potential difficulties by telling a host that they "were vegetarian" upon invitation to a meal and often offered to bring food.

When vegan respondents informed a host they excluded all animal-derived foods from their diets, the host often attempted to accommodate the vegan's diet. However, the "vegetarian meal" prepared by the host often was not defined as such by a vegan visitor. Most often, this was due to inclusion of eggs or cheese in food items the host thought were acceptable to a vegan, a disjuncture that reflects definitional differences about vegetari-

anism between the vegetarian and non-vegetarian communities. A 44-year-old vegan described how she adapted her diet when she visited her sister:

When I go to her house there's very little that I can eat. She just doesn't seem to know how to make anything without animal products in it.... So I run into this problem where I don't want to make a big issue and so I kind of try to eat something that's there. I'm more likely to eat something like say the potato salad and avoid the eggs or whatever, but eat the mayonnaise on it because I know that she doesn't register that I'm violating any of my beliefs... she's just not that much aware of those products... whereas other people in the family might know and with them I would not cheat. I wouldn't want them to see me cheat.

Respondents who were able to conceal a violation of their dietary practices from others often did not feel their identity as a vegetarian was threatened. The following statement by a 46-year-old, five-year vegan illustrates an excuse that many respondents used to justify unknowing violations of their beliefs:

If I don't know what the ingredients are, in a cookie or something, I won't ask. I'll just eat it.

On the other hand, respondents felt especially guilty if they ate non-vegetarian foods in the presence of people who knew they were vegetarian. A 31-year-old described the challenge of following a vegan diet when he was really hungry and there were no vegan options available in the store:

I'd like look around to make sure there are no vegetarian society people around.... I'd feel like the cashier knew who I was.

This account of his reaction illustrates his feeling that he was "breaking the rules" and was concerned about managing this violation of his identity when observed by others. A 38-year-old, eight-year pesc[o]vo-vegetarian described how her friends supported her by "not playing cops" when she wanted to eat foods outside her vegetarian diet. Respondents established and negotiated specific rules that guided their practices in following

their definition of a vegetarian diet. In dealings with others, some (particularly those who were newer to vegetarianism or motivated to adopt a vegetarian diet for health rather than ethical reasons) violated or modified rules they had created in order to avoid upsetting the social interaction.

Vegetarian respondents felt that people who did not follow a vegetarian diet were "in the dark," that is, non-vegetarians were unaware of the definitions, personal identities and norms surrounding vegetarianism. They often reported that non-vegetarians were unaware of the ethical aspects of eating animal-derived foods. Most vegetarian respondents accepted non-vegetarians' dietary practices, though they wished non-vegetarians would change their diets.

## DISCUSSION

Adopting a vegetarian diet provides people with identities, and influences their interactions and management of social and dietary behaviors. This requires that people negotiate between acceptable dietary behaviors as members of the dominant meat-eating culture and acceptable behaviors as vegetarians.

The process of adopting a vegetarian diet involves not only a change in dietary behaviors, but also a change in identity to being "vegetarian." This act supports Fischler's (1988) thesis that people's food choices are intermeshed with their self-identities. The way people in this study identified themselves also influenced their food choices. A vegetarian diet encompassed more than simply ingestive behaviors. Accepting vegetarianism established an entire package that incorporated how a person acted and who she or he was. For some, a vegetarian identity included a spiritual transformation.

Vegetarian respondents used what may be conceptualized as self-labels (Goode, 1990) to define and differentiate a spectrum of vegetarian practices. Most labeled themselves "a vegetarian" and further distinguished themselves using terms such as lacto-vegetarian, modified vegetarian, or vegan to describe the type of vegetarian diet they followed. Exceptions to this were the semi-vegetarian respondent who felt eliminating red meat did not

qualify him for the label of vegetarian, another who labeled himself an "Ornish follower" to avoid the stigmatization of a vegetarian label (Maurer, 1999), and one who stated she avoided applying any labels to herself.

Labeling provided a way to identify and relate with others participating in similar practices. Adopting the common label of vegetarian established a unifying identity affiliating respondents with a group that followed particular types of practices, allowing them to form social networks to aid in maintaining a vegetarian diet. Even the "Ornish follower" used this label to identify with other members of a local group that supported his dietary practices.

Social stratification exists among vegetarians. People who eliminated more animal products from their diets are viewed with more respect and granted greater "vegetarian status." A vegan diet that includes no animal-derived food of any type tends to be viewed as the "purest form of vegetarianism," and "the ultimate goal" to strive towards. The further use of labels beyond vegetarian, such as vegan or lacto-ovo-vegetarian, situated respondents within the social world of vegetarians. Respondents who eliminated fewer animal products often revealed their relationships with others in the vegetarian hierarchy by expressing feelings of reverence and idolization toward people who followed a vegan diet.

Publicly adopting a label of "vegetarian" had numerous consequences for respondents. When vegetarians presented themselves to non-vegetarians they tended to say only they were "vegetarians," partly to draw upon the group unity of all vegetarians, and partly because they did not believe non-vegetarians want to know or can appreciate the differentiations made within the vegetarian community. When respondents announced they were "vegetarian" they established precedents for themselves and others and became bound to personal and social standards for "vegetarian behavior." Although there was some variation in what actually constituted "correct" vegetarian behaviors, there were unspoken rules that provided common guidance about how to be a vegetarian. In social situations some respondents who did not publicly announce being vegetarian were able to conceal that

they followed a vegetarian diet and did not have to account for violations in their eating practices. This form of identity management is similar to other types of "passing" in which people present themselves without completely revealing some key pieces of biographical information (Goffman, 1959).

In interactions with others, people seek to maintain social balance and consistency (Goffman, 1959; Rubington and Weinberg, 1987). When vegetarian respondents deviated from vegetarian diets and ate non-vegetarian food, they used impression management strategies of discounting (Pestello, 1991) and accounts (Scott and Lyman, 1968) to explain their behaviors.

Discounting is a strategy that allows people to disregard their principles without threatening their internal self-definition (Pestello, 1991). Several vegetarian respondents used the technique of concealment discounting to justify eating non-vegetarian food while still maintaining self-identifications as vegetarians. One vegan respondent stated that she would only eat non-vegetarian food when people were unaware of her dietary practices. Employment of this concealment technique allowed her to conform to non-vegetarian food behaviors assumed in a particular food event and not disrupt the social situation.

Accounts, which can be divided into justifications and excuses, are techniques people use to manage interactions when their actions do not coincide with what is expected (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Orbuch, 1997). A justification occurs when an actor accepts responsibility for his or her behavior, while denying the negative qualities of the behavior. Respondents used justifications when acknowledging eating non-vegetarian food was the best behavior for a situation as it avoided creating social tension and embarrassment for others. An excuse is a socially acceptable way for an actor to admit a negative behavior, yet not take full responsibility for the act. Vegetarian respondents used several types of account excuses to attribute their eating non-vegetarian food to something beyond their control. Vegetarians used accident excuses when they discovered after eating a dish that it contained a non-vegetarian item. For many vegetarians, a major dietary challenge is knowing all ingredients in foods they do not prepare themselves.

Respondents reported "cheating" by eating non-vegetarian food, most often dairy products or fish, during social situations or due to a craving. After these lapses, respondents felt guilty but continued their vegetarian diets. Continuation of dietary behaviors contrasts with other adopted dietary patterns, such as weight-loss diets, where dietary lapses often lead to return to previous eating habits (Stunkard and Penick, 1979). Respondents did not return to previous eating habits after lapses, which supports the hypothesis that vegetarian diets involve powerful, wholistic identities and relationships that constitute more than a simple dietary behavior change. This is further confirmed by the statement of most vegetarians that their diet became "a way of life—a spiritual transformation," including an identity transformation that dictated their eating practices.

Adopting a vegetarian diet affected respondents' relationships with their families. Beardsworth and Keil (1991b) proposed that parents may view a vegetarian child's rejection of their food choices as rejection of them as parents. Several vegetarian respondents in the sample believed this feeling of rejection was a reason their parents did not support their vegetarian diets. Parents construct ideal images of what they would like their children to be, and deviations from these images may cause parents to feel threatened.

Adult children whose parents adopt a vegetarian diet later in life may view this dietary change as a disruption of their childhood memories. People often resist change, especially changes in established childhood memories. Family changes may cause feelings of anger and resentment towards their parents in adult children (Minuchin, 1974). People who adopt a vegetarian diet later in life may face lack of support, or even hostility, from others in a variety of family roles, including parents, siblings and adult children. Vegetarian respondents managed their behaviors to prevent situations in which tension would occur and attempted to negotiate interactions to be acceptable to all involved. However, this management and negotiation contrasts with conflict reported by vegetarians in their interactions within nuclear families.

Vegetarian respondents tended to agree that people's dietary choices are a personal matter, expressing the value of dietary individualism widely held in contemporary culture (Warde, 1997).



Vegetarians wished others would adopt a vegetarian diet, but reported not judging people based on their dietary choices. Several vegetarians reported that their dietary practices were in opposition to foodways broadly agreed upon by most of U.S. culture. Vegetarians are sensitive to their status as a food minority, but respect for individualism in the wider society generally produced a negotiated food tolerance with some exceptions within families.

## CONCLUSION

These results are rooted within a particular time and influenced by historical events and specific experiences of the respondents, which produce limitations in the study. The nineteen vegetarian respondents were a nonrandom sample in a metropolitan area in western New York State. The majority were middle to upper-middle class, which is characteristic of U.S. vegetarians (Dietz *et al.*, 1995). All except one vegetarian respondent were connected with a group supporting vegetarianism, as well as other community groups, suggesting that this was a very socially involved sample. Although a diverse sample was recruited, due to the nature of snowball sampling respondents were socially interconnected. The higher proportion of vegans in this sample limit its generalizability to vegetarians in general. Data collection and analysis were primarily conducted by the lead author, which may limit the replicability of this study. While these specific findings may not apply to all vegetarians, the underlying processes that were elicited may have wider applicability.

Dietary practices are a complex system influenced not only by the culture and society in which people live, but also by people's individual psychological perspectives of food and eating. The application of social constructionist approaches and qualitative methods was useful in obtaining an abundance of information about psychosocial influences affecting people following a vegetarian diet.

The finding that adopting a vegetarian diet required people to realign their self-identity and relationships with others may explain why the dietary change process is difficult for many people.

The lack of support, and even hostility, from family members indicates that adopting a vegetarian diet in some way disrupts the identity of the family. The impact of dietary changes on family interactions and structure needs to be examined further. The results illustrate that dietary changes influence more than eating practices; they include complex psychosocial influences and managing identities, norms and interactions with others.

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