



Attitudes Towards Meat-eating in Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Teenage Girls in England—an Ethnographic Approach

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This study compared vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage English girls' attitudes towards meat. A convenience sample of 15 vegetarian (mean age 17.2 years) and 15 non-vegetarian (mean age 17.3 years) girls was recruited from a teenage health clinic. Attitudes towards meat were assessed in a single, tape-recorded, semi-structured interview. Eight themes of the cultural meaning of meat were identified; five were common to both groups: Animal (66% of vegetarians, 33% of non-vegetarians); Taste/Texture/Smell (66%, 60%); Flesh and Blood (86%, 26%); Colour (33%, 20%); Miscellaneous (60%, 46%). The theme Eating Well was unique to the non-vegetarian group (40%). The themes Life/Death and Health-related were unique to the vegetarian group (66 and 20%, respectively). The vegetarians generally abhorred killing animals for food, meat's sensory characteristics and ingesting blood. A meat-free diet was not particularly associated with health in either group. The non-vegetarians tended to characterize meat positively, both liking meat's sensory characteristics and associating meat with luxury and special occasions. We speculate on possible reasons for the current popularity of vegetarianism in teenage girls.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable research interest into vegetarianism and its place in Western society. Twigg (1983) discussed the potential meanings associated with eating meat and blood, independently of each other, in the Western dominant culture. Fiddes (1994) discussed the social aspects of meat-eating in Western society, exploring the cultural conditioning of dietary behaviour and the role of food choice in cultural identity. Richardson (1994) suggested that individual perceptions of meat determined meat consumption in a market-led economy and that cultural background—including media influences and experiences of family and peers—influenced perceptions of meat. Beardsworth and Keil (1993) argued that vegetarianism in the U.K. was a commercially exploited “deviant foodway” which was adopted by a minority in an ambivalent, modern, capitalist society, as a method of dealing with the guilt associated

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with the use of animals as food. Adams (1990), in an extensive review of the sexual politics of meat, discussed the close association of meat-eating with patriarchal culture and drew parallels between male violence towards women and the slaughter of animals for meat. The many strands of contemporary vegetarianism—moral, ethical, symbolic, health-oriented—were underlined by Beardsworth and Keil (1992) in their qualitative study of the motives underlying the beliefs and choices of vegetarians.

Recently, meat avoidance amongst teenage girls in the U.K. has gained in popularity and there have been concerns about the nutritional adequacy of a meat-free diet in this population group (British Nutrition Foundation, 1995; Nelson *et al.*, 1994). However, the reasons for teenage girls adopting vegetarian diets are not well understood. The aim of this study was to increase our understanding of the reasons for British teenage girls adopting vegetarian diets. This study investigated the cultural meaning of meat by the ethnographic approach of obtaining descriptions of meat from vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls, and documenting the differences in meanings the two groups attributed to meat.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were recruited between June and August 1996 from a city centre teenage health clinic held in Nottingham, England. Males and females between the ages of 13 and 20 years attend the clinic, anonymously and without appointments if they wish, for advice on health issues ranging from contraception and pregnancy to eating disorders and drug abuse. Clients using this service are predominantly female. The service is part of Nottingham Community Health NHS Trust.

Vegetarian subjects were defined as those who reported not including meat in their diet. The sample was a convenience sample of females only, who were not being treated for, and had no history of, an eating disorder. Clinic nurses helped in the recruitment process by identifying potential subjects and inviting them to take part in the study before introducing them to the researcher. Therefore, the sample was not random because only those subjects who were approached while the researcher visited the clinic could take part. Nevertheless, all those approached agreed to take part in the study. Two groups of subjects (30 in total) between the ages of 13 and 19 years participated; 15 vegetarians and 15 non-vegetarians.

Procedure

A 30-min, tape-recorded, semi-structured interview was used to investigate attitudes towards meat-eating. The questions allowed interviewees to talk freely in the language of their own subculture. The questions were generally designed to provoke answers describing meat, meat-eating or abstinence from meat. The questions that the vegetarian group were asked are as follows.

- (1) Could you describe the things that you usually like to eat and what it is about them that you like?
- (2) Could you describe the things that you usually don't like to eat and what it is about them that you don't like?

- (3) Would you describe meat for me?
- (4) Were there any particular experiences you had which made you decide to become vegetarian? If so, please describe them for me.
- (5) Could you describe what you think you would do if you were in a situation where you are hungry, and getting hungrier, and the only thing to eat was meat?
- (6) Do you talk about eating meat or not eating meat or being vegetarian with other people like friends or family? If I were to listen-in to such a conversation could you tell me some of the things I may hear said?
- (7) Consider the term “vegetarian”. Could you give me a sentence or two in which you may use or hear this term?
- (8) Consider the phrase “meat-eating”. Could you give me a sentence or two in which you may use or hear this phrase?

Questions 1 and 2 were included to prompt subjects to think and talk about food, eating and likes and dislikes. The non-vegetarian group were asked the same questions as the vegetarian group, apart from question 5, and question 4 was adapted slightly to be more appropriate for non-vegetarians.

The interviewee’s age and the length of time she had followed a vegetarian diet were also recorded.

This study was approved by the ethical committee of the Northern General Hospital NHS Trust, Sheffield.

Interview Analysis

The 30 tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and the information was analysed according to methods described by Spradley (1979). Spradley lists nine semantic relationships which are most useful in the analysis of domains of meaning. One of these, attribution [X is an attribute (characteristic) of Y], was chosen to explore meat as a symbol (cover term) and other terms attributed to meat (included terms). A domain analysis was carried out to identify the attributes of meat described by the two groups, explore the meaning of meat and thus the reasons for eating or not eating meat. An example of this may help to clarify the method. Where *Int.* and *Resp.* are included in the quotes they refer to Interviewer and Respondent, respectively.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Unhealthy. Unclean. Dirty. It’s bad for you, isn’t it? All that fat and everything.

In the above example unhealthy, unclean, dirty, bad for you and fat are attributed to meat. A further example demonstrates how the same question can elicit many different included terms. “Great”, “like it a lot”, “tasty beefburgers”, “chewy”, “a great thing to eat” and “Sunday joint” are all attributed to meat.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Great. I like it a lot. Erm, describe it, tasty and chewy, beefburgers are tasty, especially with chips. Beef, pork, lamb, chicken, yeah, it’s a great thing to eat. Especially on Sundays. Sunday joint. It wouldn’t be the same if you had a Sunday joint every day but it’s good 1 day a week.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

The mean age of the vegetarians and non-vegetarians was 17.2 years and 17.3 years, respectively (no significant difference by Mann–Whitney U-test). The mean period of following a vegetarian diet reported was 5 years.

Interview Results: Attributes of Meat

The terms attributed to meat have been grouped into eight themes (Table 1). Five of the themes were common to vegetarian and non-vegetarian subjects. The themes are detailed separately below. Selections of quotes from the interviews, which illustrate each theme, are also presented.

TABLE 1

Themes of terms attributed to meat by vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls

Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
Animal	Animal
Colour	Colour
Flesh and blood	Flesh and blood
Taste, texture and smell	Taste, texture and smell
Miscellaneous	Miscellaneous
Health-related	Eating well
Life and death	

TABLE 2

Attributes of meat described by vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Animal

Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
Animals	Animals getting killed
Animals have similar organs to us	Butcher
Cruel	Cow
Come from animals	It's an animal
Dead animal (2) ^a	Lambs
Eating an animal	Pig
Eat animals	Running around the farmyard
Eat its life	Sheep
Flesh of the animal	
Kill animals (2) ^a	
Only an animal	
Part of an animal	
Slaughtered	
Slaughter	
Bred to be eaten	
Dead animals	

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

Theme 1. Animal

A total of 10 vegetarian (66%) and five non-vegetarian (33%) subjects made one reference or more which could be included under the theme Animal (Table 2).

Vegetarian quotations:

Resp.: What I decided was I just saw a store in town that had the pictures of the animals and how they are slaughtered and how they were exported and stuff like that. I just decided then that I didn't want to eat it any more.

Int.: And how old were you then?

Resp.: Eleven. It was the first time that I had ever really been aware about how it was made and the first time I actually thought about what I was actually eating, that I was actually eating an animal.

Int.: Were there any particular experiences you had which made you decide to become vegetarian?

Resp.: No, not really, no. I just went off the idea. I decided that I didn't like why animals are killed and things like that.

Int.: Were there any particular experiences you had which made you decide to become vegetarian?

Resp.: A thing on the TV. You know how they have documentaries about slaughtering animals and stuff like that, I was watching that and thought, right.

Resp.: When I see pictures on TV about war and stuff like that and I see all the effort that goes in to making things that kill people, then I can kind of see how people find it so easy to kill animals. I mean, if they can kill each other so easily then a few cows or pigs aren't going to be any problem, are they?

Non-vegetarian quotations:

Resp.: I don't like meat, I'm not really vegetarian but I don't like meat, especially red meat. I like chicken and stuff like that. I don't like pork and beef. I haven't liked it since I was little.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: I don't know, just to know that it's an animal and there's flesh in it.

Theme 2. Taste, texture and smell

The attributes described and grouped under the theme Taste, Texture and Smell are presented in Table 3. A total of 10 (66%) of the vegetarian and nine (60%) of the non-vegetarian subjects described one or more attributes grouped under this heading.

Vegetarian quotations:

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Really chewy. Horribly chewy. It smells horrible when you cook it.

Int.: Could you describe a little bit more the things you don't like about meat?

Resp.: It's just yuk, bad, not real. The worst. Can't swallow or chew it but I wouldn't even try anyway. Not for anything.

Resp.: I relate meat to being stringy and chewy. I can eat lots of vegetarian sausages but the soya in them is often like meat, stringy and chewy, and there is hardly any taste and that's what I relate to meat, what I can remember about meat anyway, stringy, chewy and no taste.

TABLE 3
Attributes of meat described by vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Taste, Texture and Smell

Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
Chewy (4) ^a	Raw meat
Can't chew it	Chewy (3) ^a
Doesn't taste very nice	Chew the fat
Horribly chewy	Greasy (2) ^a
Lump of yuk	Stringy
No taste	Gristly fat
Pooey after taste	Looks rough
Foul smell	Not very chewy
Smells bad	Raw it smells funny
Stringy and chewy	Raw (2) ^a
Smells	Really chewy
Squidgy	Soft fat
Slimy	Sick taste in your mouth
Smells horrible	Squidgy
Stinky	Smells
Raw	Tough
Can't swallow or chew it	Tasty (2) ^a
	Tastes nice (3) ^a
	Too chewy
	Tender
	Tastes better

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

Non-vegetarian quotations:

Int.: What is it about meat, could you describe what you like especially about it?

Resp.: Gammon is, like, really chewy and it's nice to chew the fat as well. Pork fat just slithers down your neck. Really nice.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Great. I like it a lot. Erm, describe it, tasty and chewy, beefburgers are tasty, especially with chips. Beef, pork, lamb, chicken, yeah, it's a great thing to eat.

Theme 3. Flesh and blood

The attributes described and grouped under the theme Flesh and Blood are presented in Table 4. A total of 13 (86%) of the vegetarian subjects described one or more attributes of meat under this theme. Four (26%) of the non-vegetarian group described similar attributes.

Vegetarian quotations:

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Well, it's got all blood in it and veins and tubes and things.

Resp.: It's like something we've stolen, the life of the animal, and just spilled its blood.

Resp.: There are plenty of alternatives and things that are much nicer to eat. It's just blood.

TABLE 4
Attributes of meat described by vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Flesh and Blood

Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
Blood in it	Blood (2) ^a
Bleed	Blood in it (2) ^a
Blood (3) ^a	Blood comes out of it
Bloody (4) ^a	Flesh in it
Body parts	
Eating the flesh	
Eat flesh	
Flesh	
Structure of a human	
Find it on a human	
Little heart	
Little veins	
Live off blood	
Like blood	
Muscle	
Pain	
Part of your body	
Spilled its blood	
Spilling its blood	
Veins and tubes	
Body organs	
Filled with blood	
Bones	

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

Resp.: And the worst is if there is blood in it when you cut it. Uugh! Aagh! Yuk! How can people eat it when it's like that?

Resp.: Vegetarians are a blood-free zone.

Non-vegetarian quotations:

Int.: Could you explain to me why you particularly like the steak rare?

Resp.: It's more tender and the taste is better, more pleasant, I don't mind the blood or the red in the meat, in fact, I prefer it like that.

Resp.: I can't eat beef, when it's cooked properly it's supposed to have a bit of blood in it, but I can't eat it when it's like that. I have to have it cooked so there is no red left on it.

Theme 4. Colour

Colour was not a commonly described attribute. However, members of both groups did make references to colour (Table 5). A total of five (33%) of the vegetarian subjects and three (20%) of the non-vegetarian subjects attributed colour to meat.

Vegetarian quotations:

Int.: Could you describe all the things that you usually don't like to eat and what it is about them that you don't like?

Resp.: Liver, Oh God, Liv . . . Uugh! . . . Yuk . . . The whole idea of putting that in your mouth is the worst. Mum's fault for making me eat it when I was a kid. And anything that is blue.

Int.: Blue?

Resp.: Yes, ha ha ha ha!!! Sorry, does that sound a bit odd? Have you ever had a blueberry muffin from Tesco? The blue lines in it remind me of the blue veins in the back of my hand. It's almost as if the colour is leaking in and staining the muffin. It just makes me want to vomit. When I had one and opened it up I had this gross vision of finding a little heart inside pumping into all the little veins. Imagine that. Blue Smarties and M & Ms! Foul.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: The colour doesn't bother me unless it's burnt. When it's raw it smells funny and the colour's a bit, like, loud, like dangerous. Red and all that. It jumps out on you like a red flag.

Theme 5. Miscellaneous

Both groups used terms which could not be grouped under any of the other themes (Miscellaneous; Table 6). Miscellaneous attributes were described by nine (60%) of the vegetarian subjects, compared with seven (46%) of the non-vegetarian subjects. Miscellaneous attributes differed considerably between the two groups. They also illustrated the huge variety of attributes (included terms) used by the interviewees to describe a single cover term, meat.

Vegetarian quotations:

Int.: Can you say a bit more about meat for me?

Resp.: Couldn't even imagine putting it anywhere near my mouth now. Sick. I would definitely vom!!!

Resp.: It's disgusting and I just hate it so much.

Resp.: It's part of an animal. It's flesh. It's just, it's chewy!! And horrible and I just don't like it.

Resp.: I'm vegetarian. I hate meat.

Non-vegetarian quotations:

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: We don't have it every day but every Sunday we have a roast dinner.

TABLE 5

Attributes of meat described by vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Colour

Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
Blue	Blue
Blue veins	Like a red flag
Horrible and brown	Not red (chicken)
Red (3) ^a	Pinkie or brown
Very red	Colour's loud—dangerous

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

TABLE 6
Attributes of meat described by vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Miscellaneous

Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
Awful	Christmas
Disgusting	Fun (cleaning out chickens)
Dirty	Skin
Horrible	Sunday (3) ^a
Power	Heavy
Repulsion	Winter
Sick	Expensive
Unclean	McDonalds
Yucky	
Bad	
Heavy	
Sick	
The worst	
Not real	

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: When I see chicken I think of Christmas, it's like the turkey, all displayed out with the little back legs coming up. Don't know why, just reminds me of those 2 weeks at Christmas.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: I've tried being vegetarian but I didn't manage for very long. Just waft a bacon sandwich under my nose and I change my mind. We don't actually eat an awful lot of meat. We eat it on a Sunday with Sunday lunch.

Theme 6. Eating well

Attributes grouped under the theme Eating Well were described only by non-vegetarian subjects (six of them, 40%) and are presented in Table 7.

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Well, it's good. Yes, it's good to eat. I suppose it's the best thing to eat, isn't it, really?

Int.: Could you describe meat for me?

Resp.: Meat, describe it, erm, it's good. It's expensive. Mum always makes us eat it all because she says it's the most expensive food to buy and it's bad to waste it. We don't have it every day, we have it on special occasions, like Dad's birthday or if someone comes for tea.

Theme 7. Life and death

Attributes grouped under the theme Life and Death (Table 8) were described by vegetarian subjects only (10, 66%).

Int.: Do you ever talk about being vegetarian with other people like family or friends?

Resp.: Yes, sometimes I wind people up a bit.

TABLE 7
Attributes of meat described by non-vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Eating Well

Eating Well

Best thing to eat
 Costs too much
 Expensive (2)^a
 Good to eat (2)^a
 Good for you
 Great
 Good (3)^a
 It's good
 Loads of taste
 Pleasant
 Really nice

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

TABLE 8
Attributes of meat described by vegetarian teenage girls and grouped under the theme Life and Death

Life and Death

Been destroyed
 Dead (3)^a
 Dead and horrible
 Death
 Dead thing
 Killed for meat
 Killed
 Killed for food
 Killing
 Life
 Like death
 Make death
 Once alive and happy
 Alive (2)^a
 Dead cow
 Dead thing
 Dead life

^a Identical attribute described by (X) different subjects.

Int.: Could you tell me some of the things I may hear said?

Resp.: I sometimes say things like that's a nice bit of dead cow you've got there. To remind someone that they are eating a dead animal. Sometimes I say really horrible things

TABLE 9
*Attributes of meat described by vegetarian
 teenage girls and grouped under the theme
 Health-related*

Health-related
Bad for you
Fat and everything
Hormones pumped in
Unhealthy
Don't have to eat it

like, have you got a nose bleed, your plate's all covered in blood, Oh, it must have come from a dead thing.

Resp.: I'm vegetarian so I like anything that is not dead animal. Everybody forgets that it, the meat, the stuff under the counter, was once alive and happy.

Resp.: But, normally, I can't imagine eating anything that used to be part of something that was alive. I don't think of animals as any different from us. They should be allowed to live their lives in peace.

Theme 8. Health-related

Attributes grouped under the theme Health-related (Table 9) were described by vegetarian subjects only (three, 20%).

Int.: Consider the phrase "meat-eating". Could you give me a sentence or two in which you may use this phrase?

Resp.: Like I said before, eating meat is unhealthy and dirty.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the vegetarian interviews a deep dissatisfaction with the killing of animals to provide food was clear. A dislike or even hatred of the concept of killing and eating animals was a common justification for a meatless diet. The rejection by the vegetarians of the use of animals for food was particularly clear under the themes Animal, Flesh and Blood, and Life and Death. To some degree a dislike of using animals for food was also apparent in the non-vegetarian group. However, the non-vegetarians who related animals to meat seemed aware of, but much less troubled by, meat's origins. The present study suggests that some teenage girls are troubled enough by meat's origins to make dietary changes aimed at reducing what they regard as unnecessary animal suffering.

Beardsworth and Keil (1993) suggested that the present popularity of vegetarianism in the U.K. reflects guilt, in a minority of the population, towards using animals for food. The animal welfare issue has become popular in recent years and many animal welfare organizations have emerged (e.g. Compassion in World Farming,

International Fund for Animal Welfare) with the apparent intention of raising and maintaining public awareness regarding methods of animal production. Young people attributing *dead animal*, *cruel* and *slaughter* to meat may be reflecting the effectiveness of these organizations.

When described by the vegetarian subjects, the physical properties of meat were generally abhorrent and the notion of ingesting flesh was portrayed as repugnant. Meat was a negative symbol for them and this was particularly noticeable in those attributes grouped under Taste, Texture and Smell—*lump of yuk*, *foul smell*, *slimy*—and Miscellaneous—*disgusting*, *repulsion*, *sick*. Although the non-vegetarian subjects described some less favourable attributes of meat, also under the Taste, Texture and Smell theme—*smells*, *sick taste*, *looks rough*, other physical properties of meat described under this theme also justified eating meat—*tasty*, *tender*, *tastes better*.

The ingestion of blood was an anathema to the vegetarian group and a hatred of blood was a recurring issue in their interviews. Blood is very powerful symbolically; to be red is to be the colour of blood, and it is the striking, even violent, colour of blood which is often associated with disfavour; to be in the red or shown the red card implies disapproval, red-handedness insinuates crime and bloodshed signifies social disharmony. It was therefore surprising that, although blood itself recurred frequently in the vegetarian interviews, few of the vegetarian subjects attributed the colour of blood to meat.

Santos and Booth (1996) alluded to a disgust for “bloody” meat amongst British female student vegetarians. In teenage females a dislike of blood, and anything which can be associated with blood, may reflect a difficulty coping with the menarche, menstrual blood loss and the transition from a girl to a woman. Blood in red meat may become a symbol of the bodily changes which some teenage girls may struggle to cope with and/or resist. Apart from menstrual blood, it is possible that the only other time that girls are regularly confronted with blood, or a powerful symbol of blood, is during meal times when the meals contain meat. It is interesting to note that, in the present study, the mean age of the vegetarian subjects was 17.2 years and the mean length of time being vegetarian was 5 years. Therefore, the mean age at which the vegetarian subjects began abstinence from meat is 12.2 years, around the time of the menarche. The connection between female vegetarianism and menstruation has also been addressed by Adams (1990).

The passionate hatred of ingesting blood was not generally an issue in the non-vegetarian group. The non-vegetarians were obviously aware of the blood in meat but were much less troubled by it. This relative indifference to the blood in meat may indicate that the non-vegetarian subjects were less troubled by the physiological and bodily changes during puberty.

Some of the vegetarian subjects also voiced dislike and unease at what they perceived as a similarity between animal and human flesh or parts of the body. This discord may be viewed in the light of the way we, as humans, distinguish between meat and flesh (Twigg, 1983). Mankind is flesh and blood, a combination of the human body and human nature. To eat meat is to eat the flesh of another creature and, although meat is flesh and blood, referring to it as meat dissociates it from its animal flesh origin (Twigg, 1983).

Attributes described by the non-vegetarians under the Eating Well theme—*expensive*, *good to eat*, *best thing to eat*, *loads of taste*—illustrate how they generally regarded meat as a positive constituent of their diet and associated it with good

eating. Eating meat has long been associated with good times. The killing of the fatted calf was associated with the feast in Biblical celebrations, and part of the American post-depression dream was “a chicken in every pot”. In the present study three non-vegetarians attributed *Sunday* to meat. Charles and Kerr (1988) showed that the Sunday roast had a cherished position in British food culture and meat was aspired to as the centrepiece of the traditional British meal. Teenage girls attributing positive things to meat indicated that meat has retained its association with good times and has maintained its appeal as a quality item to eat and as a status symbol for some teenagers.

Charles and Kerr (1988) described the importance of meat in terms of the home, the family, its place at the top of the food hierarchy and its close association with the proper meal. As teenagers experience increasing autonomy and freedom to become individuals (individuation) they may reject parental values and this rejection may involve food (Gong & Heald, 1988). Teenagers abstaining from meat-eating may be discarding traditional family values, including food aspirations. Rejection of meat may also reflect family tension, disharmony, or a non-compliance with the family status quo. Furthermore, as meat is also associated with power (Fiddes, 1994), masculinity and the red-blooded male (Twigg, 1983), rejection of meat for teenage girls may symbolize the rejection of male dominance in the traditional nuclear family and society as a whole. A rejection of patriarchal culture was put forward by Adams (1990) as one reason for the avoidance of meat by women.

Only three (20%) of the vegetarians made any reference to meat being unhealthy, indicating that abstinence from meat was not a strategy for a “healthier” diet in this group. Draper *et al.* (1990), in their study of adult vegetarians, found that health was an important positive influence for becoming vegetarian. The present study does not suggest that the same is true in teenage vegetarians in the same country some years later, and is in accord with the recent finding of Santos and Booth (1996) that female vegetarian students did not put forward health as a reason for avoiding meat.

Conclusion

The present study showed that contemporary vegetarian and non-vegetarian teenage girls in England attributed very different meanings to meat. Meat was a negative symbol for the vegetarians; they generally abhorred the concept of killing animals and ingesting blood. The non-vegetarians were less troubled by meat and its origins and tended to attribute positive terms to meat. It would seem that meat was still a highly valued food for some teenagers and had maintained its place at the top of the food hierarchy. Surprisingly, teenagers did not seem to adopt a vegetarian diet for health reasons. The most striking observation was that vegetarian teenage girls had an aversion to blood and associated meat with blood.

We have speculated on possible explanations for these differences—for example, that an avoidance of meat may be an expression of the rejection of parental values and that an abhorrence of bloody meat may reflect the difficulties some teenage girls experience in coping with menstruation; however, we cannot say that the girls’ responses substantiate these reasons. Research which goes beyond a domain analysis, as well as a longitudinal design including males and females with vegetarianism as an outcome measure, would be necessary to substantiate such interpretations and their role in causation.

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