

Where's the Beef? (With Vegans):
A Qualitative Study of Vegan-Omnivore Conflict

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Introduction

In 2010, the United Nations Environment Programme issued a groundbreaking environmental impact report focusing on the causes, rather than effects, of environmental degradation and stressed that agriculture be moved into the spotlight as a main contributor to the rapid depletion of resources. It was cited that agriculture accounts for 70% of the earth's freshwater, 38% of total land use, 19% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Shockingly, half of the crops produced were directed to the raising of livestock (UNEP report, 2010). The dire state of the planet stands as a sobering comparison to human health; the United States spends far more, per capita, on health care than any other society yet ranks dismally low in overall health. Cancer rates have remained consistent since the "War on Cancer" in the 1970's, new cases of type 1 and 2 diabetes appear more frequently and at younger ages, and heart disease has ascended to the leading cause of death in America; it is clear the problem requires a greater overhaul than medicine alone can accomplish (Campbell, 2006). Finally, meeting the massive demand for animal products has required revolutionary changes in the field of animal agriculture. Red barns and rolling pastures have largely been replaced with feedlots and assembly-line slaughterhouses. Many animal welfare activists maintain this shift guarantees a life of confinement, misery, and torture followed by a frightening and excruciating death (Bekoff, 1998).

Despite the diversity of pressing issues addressed above, all share a common thread of solution: less production and consumption of animal-based foods. The United Nations Environment Programme's impact report urged for a global diet shift away from meat and dairy products (UNEP report, 2010). Similarly, the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, and the American Association of Diabetes Educators provide healthy living tips for

treatment and prevention and unanimously advocate more fruits, vegetables, and grains and less meat and dairy products, particularly red meat and whole milk. Finally, capitalist economies propel the production of in-demand products and cease funding, and by nature continuation, for undesirable products. Analysis from the US Department of Agriculture indicates the average meat eater consumes about 33 farm animals per year; it can be assumed that abstaining from these products lessens this demand by a similar amount (Sethu, 2012). For these reasons among others, a small but growing population of vegans in the United States has taken the form of an activist group.

My interest in veganism began with a speech given by animal welfare activist Gary Yourofsky. At the time, I had been proudly vegetarian for about 4 years; having grown up on a modest farm, I was exposed to animals that were regularly used for food and familiarized with their vast capabilities for emotion, intelligence, and companionship. Therefore, when I watch Gary Yourofsky's video, I anticipated it would merely reinforce my decision. Instead, I was confronted with a more complete picture of animal agriculture including environmental damage, skewed food distribution, human health implications, and above all the animal suffering byproduct of the dairy industry. My pride as a vegetarian was challenged when Yourofsky stated "in fact, if you wanna know why vegetarians never go vegan... cheese". He showed footage taken by undercover investigators on a small Ohio dairy farm consisting of newborn calves being torn from screaming mothers, force-feeding, and systematic beating. One farm worker is shown throwing a wobbly calf to the ground and punching it in the face. After, he stands up and says "I get going. It's just like "oh this feels good." I wanna keep fucking hitting 'em. We beat the fuck out of this cow. We stabbed her, broke her tail in three places, kept stabbin' her ass, beat her... If I don't think they're feeling any pain, I just keep going until the cows like [moaning noise]"

(Yourofsky, 2013). After seeing this footage, I had to face the reality that my consumption, ethical as I thought it had been, was funding these kinds of practices. With this knowledge I made the jump to veganism.

I expected my friends and family would mock me as they had done before when I became vegetarian. What I did not expect was the hostility I faced and the almost daily confrontations in which I found myself forced to engage. I was called “freak”, “naïve”, and was even told by one roommate “you should just do the world a favor and kill yourself”. Shockingly, an old friend who had recently turned vegan confided that he found it much harder emotionally to tell people he was a vegan than it was to come out as a homosexual in a conservative middle school. Being an anthropology major, I found these statements both disturbing and fascinating. Why was my quiet admittance of being vegan a catalyst for confrontation and hostility? If people were this resistant to my personal choice, how would it be possible to persuade people that a shift away from animal products would provide huge benefits to animal welfare, human health, and the environment?

To provide some background, the term “vegan” is often referred to as “strict vegetarian” and used to describe an individual who has chosen to abstain from using any product found to be derived from animals including meat, dairy, fur, leather, gelatin, down feathers, and non-animal products manufactured by use of animals such as beer filtered with isinglass (fish bladder). Vegan diets differ from the well-known “vegetarian” diet as vegetarian only encompasses the avoidance of meat. These categories are often fluid as vegetarians may further clarify themselves to be pescetarian (avoid meat but eating fish) or indicate an exclusion of red meat while occasionally eating chicken (Povey et.al., 2001). Due to limited previous research, this study draws upon publications relating to both vegans and vegetarians, often solely referred to as

vegetarians, while maintaining strict distinctions for its own scope and conclusions. Additionally, since only deviant diets need adopt a distinguishing name, there exists no fixed term for individuals who do not exclude animal products. To avoid confusion, all non-vegan individuals will be categorized as “omnivores”.

It should be noted there exists diversity within the vegan category. While there are many motivations for abstaining from animal products, the most predominant reasons appear to be motivated by either animal welfare or health. Rarely does a vegan individual solely adhere to a vegan diet for one reason while having a disregard for another; however, a main reason of health or animal protection can be detected. These groups are collectively referred to as “health vegans” (those who abstain from animal products in favor of the healthy plant-based diet) and “ethical vegans” (those who protest animal agriculture by abstaining from purchasing and consuming animal products). These modern categories have arisen from a greater historical diversity of vegan/vegetarian motivations such as religious restrictions and scarcity of animal-based foods.

“Vegetarian” is a more easily-recognizable term perhaps due to its long history dating back to ancient Egypt and Pythagoras. Vegetarianism is prevalent in certain religions such as Mahayana Buddhism and some sects of Hinduism as both religions maintain sacred laws of ahimsa, or un-injury, and believe in karmic consequences of inflicting pain and death on all beings (Encyclopedia Britannica). Veganism, through less-widely practices, is a fundamental part of Jainism, an Indian-based religion which maintains “the only way to save one's own soul is to protect every other soul” (Dundas, 2014). In the West, however, veganism is a relatively young movement having only recently distinguished itself in 1944 with the Vegan Society founded by Donald Watson in Leicester, England. Once a part of the existing Vegetarian Society, the group split after a majority refusal to publicize the vegan view (Spencer, 1995).

Current research indicates this to be a continued phenomenon; topics of veganism have been largely absent from research and has presently assumed the marginalized, extremist stigma vegetarianism held before its popularization. Today, veganism is seen as unnatural, restrictive, bland, nutritionally unbalanced, and above all extreme. Not surprisingly, vegans report viewing meat-containing diets as being cruel, unhealthy, and environmentally irresponsible (Povey, Wellens, Connor; 2000). These conflicting viewpoints appear to not only defend a personal food choice but actively reject that of others, and the vegan movement has been no exception.

Though 7-11% of Americans reported having a vegetarian diet in 2008, it is estimated the actual number lies between 2-3%, with vegans comprising yet another small percentage of this subset (Vinnari, 2008). Due to their small numbers and unpopular opinions, media coverage of vegans, veganism, and animal rights has further marginalized the group by reducing the scope of the issue to stereotypes and generally negative perceptions of vegans. Though the reasons for this are unclear, a great deal of studies on vegan and vegetarian issues have been conducted in the United Kingdom while research in the United States is notably scarce. A survey of print media in the UK found only 5.5% of reports containing the word “vegan” to be positive, 20.2% neutral, and 74.3% categorized as negative. These results reflect the phenomenon of media highlighting stories which reflect expected opinions and values of the audience (Cole and Morgan, 2011). Perhaps due to lack of positive representation in mainstream media, the vegan movement largely takes the form of DIY (or Do It Yourself) activism. This small-scale approach includes strategies such as distributing pamphlets, videos displaying graphic images, social media posts, food blogs, and the basic act of engaging others in discussion (Munro, 2011). It is anticipated these personal approaches remove the subject from the security of a passive viewer and put them in a position of defending their choices or admitting a wrongdoing.

This study focused on three particular areas; first, interpersonal interactions and conflicts between vegans and omnivores serve as the stage for deciphering underlying beliefs. Second, this research will seek to understand the ways by which vegans potentially catalyze defensive positions. Finally, it is hoped the results will shed light on the resulting ways by which omnivores construct ideas about veganism.

Qualitative research was gathered from a sample self-divided into two groups: “vegan” and “omnivore”. The intent was to obtain accounts of interpersonal conflict in order to detect any relation to dietary identity, a topic virtually unexplored in existing literature. Since a large part of vegan activism takes place in individual discussion, it is vitally important to discover what impression these interactions are leaving as well as if and how both groups are impacted. Though both vegans and omnivores are included, omnivores remain the focus of the study as their beliefs and diets arguably contribute to the environmental damage stated in the UNEP report and the animal abuse cited by animal welfare organizations. Guiding this study were three assumptions: 1) vegans feel the need to actively encourage others to adopt their diet, 2) interactions and/ or discussions are often confrontational or negative, and that 3) conflicts between vegans and omnivores stem from generalizations and stereotypes held by both groups.

After the completion of interviews and analysis of results, this study found negative interactions, while reported, were not considered to be a driving force in the formation of dietary identities. Rather, members of both groups reported similar values such as health, humane treatment of animals, mutual respect for diet choices, and rejection of extremist mentalities. The differences resided in how those opinions manifested into behavior and appeared to be linked with exposure to alternative media, connect and disconnect with food and the animals that produce the food, and varying feelings of power as a consumer.

Methods

Recruitment

This was a qualitative study requiring participants to be both opinionated enough to provide elaborative answers and, preferably, have previously engaged in conversation or debates concerning veganism. The interview structure was selected over a written questionnaire in hopes of better-replicating interpersonal interactions and the spontaneity of answers. Since this was a qualitative study of a specific social phenomenon, random sampling was not used since it was assumed not every omnivore would have had the level of interest or experience in discussing veganism that vegans were expected to have; this assumption was drawn from a study of diet types and ambivalence in the United Kingdom wherein it was revealed omnivore participants had the strongest opinions about their own diets rather than those opposite to their own (Povey, Wellens, McConnor, 2001). The narrow focus of this study merited a combination of snowball and judgment sampling; due to differences between the two groups, such as strength of opinions, level of knowledge, and interest in participating, recruitment methods required more selectivity than true random sampling allows for. The snowball method relies on participants to name specific acquaintances they believe would be appropriate to include in the research process and, since this method draws on existing relationships, it was expected participants would convey the same or similar opinions used in prior debates. Judgment sampling was also used as it is defined as an “approach used when a sample is taken based on certain judgments about the overall population. The underlying assumption is that the investigator will select units that are characteristic of the population” (Government of Canada, 2009). While judgment sampling was

not the primary recruitment method, it was useful and necessary in providing the omnivore sample with a few heavily informed and opinionated representatives.

This study was submitted to the Internal Review Board (IRB) approval on November 17, 2013 and approved shortly after on November 21. A traditional snowball recruitment method was initially employed by requesting participants through a Boulder vegan group's webpage. Members of the group received a mass email asking for participation in an undergraduate thesis researching conflict between vegans and omnivores. This resulted in nine successful vegan interviews. Following the interview, every vegan participant (9) offered names and contact information for potential vegan and omnivore recruits, some of whom were contacted for interviews. About half (5) of the vegan interviews were conducted in person, others were conducted over the phone (3), and the remaining participant (1) submitted responses via email.

While it would have been preferable to use uniform recruitment methods such as random sampling, it became clear differences between the vegan and omnivore groups had to be accommodated. The intent of the research was to study a specific demographic (vegans) interacting with members of a larger population (predominantly omnivorous). Utilizing a small, specific sample population, such as the online vegan group, would have altered the study; the results would reflect conflicts between vegans and the Boulder hunting enthusiasts or members of the Denver Agricultural and Livestock club. Likewise, soliciting interviews from random omnivores may not reflect issues of conflict at all; having the normative diet, not every omnivore will have experienced debates over diet the way vegan participants unanimously reported. Therefore, omnivore recruitment took a different approach because, unlike vegans who share a common belief, the selected omnivores needed to represent a more diverse population. To accomplish this, three different recruitment methods were used. Most omnivore participants (6)

were recruited by way of direct referral from vegan participants who provided names and contact information of omnivorous friends with a past history of confrontation or engaging in debate. A few (3) were secured by way of randomly approaching individuals at a local restaurant; while other participants had been specifically chosen for their prior conflicts, this method was used in an effort to eliminate some bias and constituted somewhat of a control group. After these (9) interviews were completed, a final omnivore participant (1) was recruited specifically for his strong opinions, extensive knowledge, and activism in the field of animal agriculture.

A qualitative research strategy was chosen over a quantitative one due to its superior capabilities to detect a diversity of answers rather than attempt to generalize a population. Interviews were conducted in order to compare word choice, enthusiasm, hesitation, abundance or lack of knowledge, etc. As the research question was fairly non-specific, it was feared a questionnaire would have restricted responses whereas a more open approach allowed for participants to elaborate on the topics they deemed most interesting or important.

It should be noted the recruitment success rate of omnivores was far lower than that of vegans. Veganism constitutes a sizeable sacrifice in an American culture and such a drastic change does not happen because of weak opinions or indifference. Therefore, participants responded with enthusiasm and voiced they saw the interview as a chance to spread their message to others. Not surprisingly, 9 requests to participate in an interview resulted in 9 successful interviews. The average omnivore, on the other hand, has not formed the strong opinions which would cause them to deviate from the standard American diet; once contacted for an interview request, omnivores who had been referred by vegan friends as having had hostile interactions or who had anti-vegan sentiment displayed on their Facebook page often were apprehensive about discussing the topic of diet choices and vehemently denied any conflict

existed. One exception to this was an advocate for American beef farmers who, like vegan participants, was eager to publicize the debate and promote his cause. Overall, 24 attempts were made to recruit omnivore participants and only 10 resulted in successful interviews, giving omnivores a recruitment success rate of 41%.

Considering most snowball recruits had been named by vegan acquaintances for their vocal rejection of veganism, the low response rate was unexpected but could potentially be prevented in future research. Vegan participants often reported debates with friends took place online or in the form of shared photos conveying pro-meat or anti-vegan sentiment. Therefore, this study would have benefitted greatly from distributing questionnaires mimicking the anonymity and security associated with online debate. Despite this limitation, a sufficient pool of omnivore participants (10) was recruited and resulted in successful interviews.

Interviews

Interviews began on January 23rd, 2014 and concluded on February 2nd, 2014. Most participants (15) were interviewed in person, a few (3) over the phone, and the remaining interview (1) consisted of responses submitted via email. In-person interviews were conducted in public places such as coffee shops, grocery store dining areas, restaurants, and student centers. Subjects in the vegan group comprised of 5 females (55%) and 4 males (45%) and subjects in the omnivore group comprised an equal 5 females and 5 males (50/50%). Participants' ages ranged from 21-66 years. At the scheduled interview time, each participant was again informed of the study's focus on conflict between vegans and omnivores and encouraged to speak freely on the

given questions. The interview structure remained constant for both groups and consisted of 7 questions/ topics:

1. *Describe your diet. Would you consider yourself an omnivore or a vegan?*
2. *Why do you choose your diet?*
3. *What do you know and/or think of veganism?*
4. *What do you know/ think of meat and dairy consumption?*
5. *Do you feel the need to encourage others to adopt your diet?*
6. *Have you ever been pressured/ encouraged to adopt a different diet? If so, tell me your thoughts on that.*
7. *How do you feel you are perceived by (either vegans OR omnivores)?*

The seven questions were used as guidelines for discussion rather than strictly-defined topics as participants often wished to return to a previous question in order to add or modify information. Additionally, follow-up questions were often used to gain clarification on an unfamiliar term or to ask participants to elaborate on larger statements. After each question was asked, participants from both groups were given an opportunity to ask questions or speak to an aspect of the vegan-omnivore debate they felt should be included in the discussion. Interview lengths ranged from 15 to 90 minutes with an average time of about 25 minutes. Apart from the single email response, all (18) were recorded handwritten in a notebook at the time of the interview. Priority topics for recording were specific terminology, general themes, amount of knowledge, and strength of opinions/ willingness to discuss questions. If a participant asked about my personal diet choices, I promised to tell them after concluding the interview so as not to influence their answers.

Results were analyzed for general themes only after all interviews were completed. Direct comparisons of specific questions were sometimes useful in detecting similarities or

differences. If certain buzz words such as “extreme” or “cruel” were prevalent and frequent in interview notes, the context in which those words arose likely became classified as a theme. However, most themes merely portray points of contention between vegans and omnivores in an effort to guide discussion and advocate for future research.

Results

Overall positive thoughts of vegans and veganism

Participants from both vegan and omnivore groups reported a positive perception of veganism as a lifestyle choice. Expectedly, 100% of vegans (9) stated veganism was positive and progressive. Despite interview questions framed to detect negativity and conflict, vegan participants reported the following:

“I wish I had learned about it [veganism] much earlier in life. Once I changed, I felt a transformation of mind, body, and soul. It’s just a peaceful, wholesome way of living” (Jen, vegan).

“I think the whole world should be vegan. It’s the optimal way to live and aligns with everyone’s interests- environment, health, treating animals ethically- it’s just good and sustainable” (Tinya, vegan).

“I want to invite others to feel the joy and connection that comes with living vegan, and living one's life aligned with their own values of justice, kindness, and compassion” (Matt, vegan).

A surprising 80% of omnivores (8) voiced admiration and support for vegan diets. Omnivores predominantly cited health benefits as motivation more than ethical or environmental reasons that vegans favored.

“Even though I personally am not vegan, I think it’s a good thing to do. I try to be healthy and avoid GMOs, but vegans are way better at it” (Parker, omnivore).

“I think people do it for two reasons: there is animal rights and health. So I mean yeah, I think it’s great if you can do it” (Allie, omnivore).

“They [vegans] are really into being healthy and eat a lot of vegetables and can’t have fast food or ice cream” (Jon, omnivore).

Rejection of the “extreme” vegan

Most (89%) of participants reported negative attitudes towards vegan individuals with extreme attitudes. Nearly all omnivores (90%) and vegans (77%) cited extreme vegans as off-putting and/or having a counterproductive effect on promoting veganism. This indicates a unanimous belief that extreme vegans are responsible for catalyzing defensive positions in omnivores and even fellow vegans. Omnivores reported overall positive interactions with vegans but generally spent significantly more time elaborating on the more extreme cases.

“The vegans I know have big hearts, but some of them are extreme- like a lot of them throw fake blood on people. I might be the devil to them” (Jon, omnivore).

“I have a few vegan friends and they’re really respectful. What bothers me are the ones who, like, *just* turned vegan and are really pushy. Like now they’re suddenly experts” (Wendy, omnivore).

While vegans often admitted to agreeing with the extremist perspective, they generally disagreed with extreme efforts to convert others and expressed suspicions that they themselves had been characterized as crazy or extreme due to the publicity the extremists receive. This sentiment was particularly expressed by vegans with a background in activism.

“An abolitionist [one who does not condone animal use in any form, from eating meat to keeping pets], to me, is a person completely out of touch with mainstream society... it’s embarrassing... they cast a pall on veganism. Sadly, they constitute a small but vocal group in the movement” (Phil, vegan).

“It blows my mind how much people get into food. People often view you [vegans] as an outlier, radical, extremist- and yeah, some people on our side seem to have far too much free time and pick fights over little things. The best activism is setting an example and the most powerful changes come from people making their own decisions. I really don’t argue anymore” (Marc, vegan).

“My experience has been that some vegetarians may sometimes feel a little superior. I understand that; I was that way -- I felt good about myself because I believed I was no longer killing animals (until I learned the truth about dairy and eggs). But superiority is something I think any of us react negatively towards” (Matt, vegan).

When discussing arguments concerning veganism, omnivores unanimously credited vegans as being the instigators, often specifically citing extremist cases.

“There are radicals on both sides. I’m not going to attack someone for being vegetarian. But I remember one time I was working a beef booth at a health fair, talking to people about choosing lean cuts and whatnot, and this woman comes up to me, points her finger, and yells “shame on you!” and left. I chased her down to ask what the matter was and she

said how horrible it was that we that we were trying to convince people meat is healthy”
(Darren, omnivore).

Omnivores occasionally referenced “extreme” stereotypes to determine reactions before interactions even occur.

“I don’t want people to get in my face and tell me the gory details of where meat comes from while I’m eating a burger. I mean, I’ve never been pressured to stop eating it or anything but I would probably just be put-off and ignore them” (Todd, omnivore).

Many activist vegans spoke of an evolution in thought away from extreme or confrontational veganism towards open, positive persuasive strategies. Disassociating with the extreme stigma was reported to have positive effects on interpersonal relationships.

“When I first became vegan, I felt like I had to tell everyone. But no one wants to hear about it. I was the “angry vegan”. People would ignore me or ridicule me and I would get even angrier that they weren’t changing. Over time, I realized how ineffective this was and adopted a calmer approach. Like now I just send my mom cute videos of cows and she’s come around to cooking more vegan meals” (Michelle, vegan).

“I just try to lead by example now. I think people think ‘oh it’s just Tinya and her ways. We don’t necessarily love the shit you do but we love you” (Tinya, vegan).

Involvement with media

100% of vegans (9) stated they became vegan after being exposed to information about animal agriculture. These transitions varied from immediate to gradual and were largely incited by animal rights campaigns in the form of video documentaries, pamphlets, speeches, and photos. Every vegan reported conducting their own research, predominantly citing alternative

media sources such as research activist group webpages, documentaries, and non-profit awareness campaigns. 88% of vegans (8) even reported they had become personally involved with producing and perpetuating alternative, pro-vegan media sources.

“For me, the decision [to go vegan] was completely ethical. I watched PeTA’s “Meet Your Meat” and gave up meat cold turkey and slowly transitioned into being vegan... I’ve read books by Nick Cooney, founder of the Humane League... on my Mercy for Animals tour I did a few radio interviews to try to get the word out” (Phil, vegan).

The decision to seek further information was cited as a personally significant transformation as well as a believed necessity for others to change their diet habits.

“People will remain willfully ignorant. Like people will refuse to talk about factory farms and say “I’ve already seen the videos” as a way to justify their decision, like they’ve seen enough. Change happens when people seek out information on their own and do independent research. That’s crucial” (Alex, vegan).

A few (3) omnivore participants seemed to make the connection during the interview process and even demonstrated the empathy encouraged by vegans.

“What I don’t get is why vegans have a problem with cheese. It’s not like milking a cow kills it... I mean I’ve seen Food Inc. so I know what goes on. Wait, now I remember how bad it was for the chickens and they were just laying eggs- fuck, now I think it’s really sad” (Hill, omnivore).

“Kosher meat is way better than other kinds. Someone tried to get me to watch a video about Kosher meat and said it wasn’t better for the animal but I didn’t want to see it. I don’t want to know how sad it is” (Mark, omnivore).

Other omnivores (4) cited popular advertisement content to defend their consumption of animal products. The effectiveness of dairy advertising was especially apparent.

“Milk is an essential source of calcium and good for your bones. They say you can get it from other food but it’s probably not enough” (Claire, omnivore).

When asked about meat and dairy production, one omnivore participant cited a specific commercial promoting California cheese. His subsequent comments reflected a lack of extensive knowledge and a desire to maintain a connection between happy images and food production.

“It’s like the commercials- ‘great cheese comes from happy cows, happy cows come from California’. Colorado is probably awesome too- I see a lot of cows out on pasture and I hope that’s where all my stuff comes from” (Jon, omnivore).

Misrepresentation in the media was not solely a complaint of vegans. One omnivore paralleled vegan participants in his desire to promote responsible advertising and become an advocate for the underrepresented aspects of food production in the United States.

“I developed the program [Masters of Beef Advocacy] because I talk to a lot of ranchers and they were getting frustrated by their poor representation, you know like in Food Inc. or The Omnivore’s Dilemma... I love my job because my job is to help those people [cattle ranchers] and help them connect with consumers... today’s consumer wants that connection. ” (Darren, omnivore).

Disparities in terminology

A prominent difference between vegan and omnivore interviews was terminology. Vegan participants were far more likely to use graphic terms in their discussion of animal agriculture.

“I can’t believe I used to eat the bodies of dead animals. It really kills me to think about it” (Liz, vegan).

Strong word choice had a strong positive correlation with levels of knowledge regarding the mechanics of animal agriculture.

“People like to narrow the argument to the ethics of killing animals but it’s so much more than that. For meat to be that available and that cheap, animals have to be mutilated and tortured in horrible living conditions for months or years before they are even killed” (Alex, vegan).

“Animals are the ones making sacrifices for us... hormones, small cages, gestation crates- just so much suffering” (Tinya, vegan).

Omnivore participants, on the other hand, avoided using names of animals in the context of meat and were quick to speak of animal products’ essential nutrients.

“I like meat- I think it’s essential... some of it is probably gross, like hot dogs- hard to tell what’s in it... ugh. I avoid hot dogs” (Parker, omnivore).

“I eat everything: burgers, sandwiches, pizza, steak, quesadillas... I need protein to start my day” (Hill, omnivore).

Many vegans and one omnivore used terms that personified animals in efforts to distance themselves from animal cruelty.

“Not to sound cliché, but it’s murder. We recognize these animals have love for their children and personalities and we kill them anyway” (Michelle, vegan).

“Farmers have a great deal of love for their animals raised for food. I think people assume you can’t care about something if you’re raising it for meat but that’s just not true... mama cows get to spend 7-8 months out on pasture with their babies... groups like

Mercy for Animals like to take crowded feedlot pictures and say ‘look how cruel this is’, but cows are social animals... they like to be close and touching each other” (Darren, omnivore).

The invisibility of food production was cited by both vegans and omnivores as a dominant reason for why people continue to consume animal products. Vegan participants cited blind or negligent consumption as the problem.

“I think the problem is that most people are just naïve to what’s happening to these animals in slaughterhouses. Like they just haven’t made the connection” (Jen, vegan).

Some omnivores spoke of the importance of informed consumption while maintaining it was ultimately a personal choice.

“Like I said, I wish I had enough time to learn about it [food production] but right now I don’t and I like eating whatever I want” (Todd, omnivore).

Varying definitions of conflict

Participants were not given a definition of conflict and were therefore allowed to speak of anything they considered to be confrontational. Conflict was reported by 100% (10) of omnivore participants, perhaps because of the broad spectrum of interactions considered to be confrontational. Some (4) omnivores reported feeling judged by vegans.

“I just always feel attacked [around vegans], like they feel superior and are judging my choices. I can tell they look down on me. I hate getting ganged-up on” (Claire, omnivore).

Oftentimes, it was unapparent whether the interactions reported were actually conflicts, as indicated by omnivores, or simply conversations. Many omnivores reported negative feelings towards any conversation involving veganism or food production.

“If they [vegans] actively talk about it all the time, I don’t like that” (Wendy, omnivore).

“I’ll respect your choice if you respect mine. Don’t try to talk to me about where meat comes from” (Eric, omnivore).

Vegan participants were far less-likely to report or elaborate on “conflicts” with omnivores but were quick to clarify that they often engaged in “debates” or “conversations” on vegan topics. All (9) vegan participants reported actively engaging with others in conversations about veganism but rarely viewed their actions as antagonistic.

“I want to be a resource for people who are curious. It concerns everyone who eats food, after all” (Taylor, vegan).

Despite omnivore claims of vegan antagonism, many (5) vegans maintained conversations and debates (rarely “conflicts”) arose organically from everyday conversation.

“Food comes up in conversation a lot- I didn’t notice that until I became vegan. I used to try to hide it, but eventually you have to talk about it. Then of course, you’re seen as the stereotypical antagonistic vegan” (Tinya, vegan).

“I don’t fight with people, it doesn’t work. But I feel like I’m lying or apologizing if I don’t tell someone I’m vegan when the topic comes up. If someone is going to eat meat in front of me and ask me why I’m not eating it, I think it’s perfectly OK to tell them why” (Michelle, vegan).

Vegans often claimed omnivores as the source of vegan discussions. Generally, debate or conversation was reported to arise from attempts to mock veganism.

“All my friends know I am a vegan and it’s one of the first things they say about me when they introduce me to other people, for the shock value or something, you know? I feel like I’m always having to talk about it” (Phil, vegan).

“I know they [my kids] are going to get made fun of someday and I dread the day they have inhibitions and feel ashamed [of being vegan]” (Tinya, vegan).

The powerful/ powerless consumer

Another key difference between vegan and omnivore participants revolved around ideas of the connection of consumption to capitalism and production. All (100%) of vegans reported they adopted and maintained their vegan diet out of a desire to not support the companies and systems responsible for the production of animal products.

“It’s basic supply and demand- voting with the dollar. I won’t be a part of the demand” (Taylor, vegan).

“Once I realized that I could no longer reconcile my belief that eating animal products fit my own moral framework, no matter my excuses, it was time to live in a way that my actions reflected my beliefs” (Matt, vegan).

Omnivore participants occasionally alluded to disapproval of the mechanics and/or ethics of meat production but dismissed them for being unavoidable.

“As for where meat comes from, I know they’re raised in terrible conditions but I also think it’s an unfortunate byproduct of trying to feed a large capitalist society” (Todd, omnivore).

Most (8) omnivores viewed their eating habits as insignificant and maintained a distance between themselves, their food, and the production methods they recognize to be wrong.

“It [meat] makes me feel horrible. I have to push the thoughts away when I’m eating it.

You think about everything the pig went through to make that little strip of bacon... but it tastes so good. Me not eating meat isn’t going to stop that” (Hill, omnivore).

A few omnivore participants chose to speak to the ineffectiveness of vegans’ protest against animal products by speculating on how large and powerful the system is and/ or how impossible it is to maintain the diet. Participants who chose to address these topics rarely spoke of the effects of their own diet choices.

“The problem is, the vegan argument doesn’t really work because there are animal byproducts in everything. You can’t even eat a tomato without eating arctic tuna DNA” (Parker, omnivore).

Veganism as a religion

Vegan participants spoke of their vegan diet and lifestyle in much the same way people are often heard talking about their religion. As seen in previous results, vegans spoke of their transition from the omnivore diet as a sort of awakening.

“When I realized how awful things were, I knew I couldn’t support it anymore” (Liz, vegan).

A couple (2) vegan participants recognized their discourse in describing their diet and self-defined veganism as a sort of religion:

“Once I went [vegan] I felt a transformation literally of mind, body, and soul... It’s almost like a religion- some use God, I use veganism” (Jen, vegan).

“Even smart people don’t seem to know nutrition. Ok here’s one, my mom had surgery a few years back- she had been veg[an] since I can remember. Anyway, when she was in

the hospital we could not find vegan meals for her. We eventually got frustrated and asked to speak to the head of nutrition at the Houston hospital- big hospital, right?- and the lady said 'I can get you Ensure'. We said 'um that's dairy based- whey is the first ingredient' and she said 'whey isn't dairy'. If we had demanded Kosher meals, the hospital would have had legal obligations to cater to my mom's diet... Sometimes I think we should push for veganism as a religion" (Tinya, vegan).

"I follow the four pillars of veganism: animals, planet, people, and health... quietly we [vegans] speak of it as a religion" (Michelle, vegan).

Oftentimes, vegans would report aspects of the vegan community that sounded similar to a church or other religious congregations.

"Community is a huge part of it. I would come home and cry after a lot of hard days in college. It was always just so healing to be around like-minded people." (Michelle, vegan).

"People [non-vegans] don't understand how hard it is to live in a world where your highest beliefs are laughed at on an almost daily basis... Thank god I have [vegan] friends who understand and are on my side cus' some days are really tough" (Liz, vegan).

Additionally, vegans unanimously (100%) reported feeling a need to convert others to a vegan diet, much like is expected of followers of many religions. Justification in doing so was often placed on a consequence such as global warming, food shortages, health epidemics, widespread suffering, and so on.

"It's imperative to persuade others [to become vegan]. Even if you don't care about animals, the environment concerns everyone." (Michelle, vegan).

“That’s probably the number one thing I focus on: my passion is to just lessen suffering in the world... It has to start with changing people’s minds” (Phil, vegan).

In combating harmful lifestyles of omnivores, most vegans offered statements suggesting a “love the sinner, hate the sin” mentality.

“If you eat it [meat] then you support factory farms...I don’t think you’re a bad person if you eat meat” (Marc, vegan).

“I don’t put a lot of blame on people [omnivores], most of them don’t know any better” (Tinya, vegan).

On the contrary, omnivores did not feel veganism should be something that vegans push on them. Omnivores saw veganism as little more than a personal diet choice, suggesting they would respect one’s decision to do so.

“To each their own.” (Todd, omnivore).

“They [vegans] seem so peaceful and down to earth and into worldly love and all that... I think there’s a mutual respect [between vegans and omnivores]”. (Hill, omnivore).

“If somebody chooses it, that’s ok. It’s entirely a personal choice” (Darren, omnivore).

Discussion

This study sought to analyze negative interactions as a source for disparities in thought and behavior between vegans and omnivores. Using interpersonal conflict as a focus, negative interactions were indeed found but the results indicate a multitude of other factors constitute a greater influence on the formation of ideas and behaviors such as exposure to alternative media, the acknowledged connection between animals and food, and perceptions of the power of

individuals. Interview responses supported this study's prediction that vegans or topics of veganism catalyze defensive positions in omnivores. These key differences contribute to the formation of separate cultures between vegans and omnivores, mainly concerning concepts of veganism and activism. Therefore, this study suggests interpersonal communication does not cause polarization, but instead reveals it.

Striking differences between omnivores and vegans were easily detectable in this study such as media preference, vernacular, and overall identity. The fact that these two demographics reside in one, shared environment suggests they be considered two unique cultures. Though this may seem a drastic title for minor differences, "culture" has been a difficult concept to define and attempts to do so have resulted in a broadened scope which by no means excludes veganism as a distinct culture. In 1976, Welsh academic Raymond Williams referenced three societal shifts that have been designated as the formation of "culture". First, the term "culture" has been used "to refer to the intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic development of an individual group or society"; secondly "to capture a range of intellectual and artistic activities and their products (film, art, theatre)"; and lastly "to designate an entire way of life, activities, beliefs, and customs of a people, group, or society" (Williams, 1976 as cited in Smith, 2001; 3). Ethical vegans have deviated from the dominant omnivore culture in rejecting an anthropocentric view towards the use of animals, resulting in a demographic which seeks and creates different sources of information, organizes and protests against elements of American culture, and considers itself to be spiritually and ethically distinct. Since culture represents more than individual action, conflict between vegans and omnivores must originate from many different aspects of everyday human life.

How do vegans and omnivores perceive conflict?

One hugely important distinction revealed itself during interview questions of conflict. Interpersonal communication, while not a main contributor, did provide insight into the occurrence and source of conflict. Though conflict was reported, it was described in very different terms by both vegans and omnivores. For example, vegans were quick to report they had never been pressured to drop their vegan diet but often returned to the question to modify their answer, having remembered interactions which resembled conflict. Vegans were more likely to talk about conversations with people and were fond of recounting success stories. As Michelle, a vegan, stated

“when I first became vegan, I felt like I had to tell everyone. But no one wants to hear about it. I was the “angry vegan”. People would ignore me or ridicule me and I would get even angrier that they weren’t changing. Over time, I realized how ineffective this was and adopted a calmer approach. Like now I just send my mom cute videos of cows and she’s come around to cooking more vegan meals”.

Vegans described themselves and their experiences in terms that suggest they often felt victimized during conflicts. Considering the sensitivity of the issue and devotion of its activists, the failure to persuade others constituted a personal offense to many vegan participants. Despite this, vegans were hesitant to view many confrontations as being a conflict or even negative.

Omnivores, however, were quick to comment on the topic of conflict. Unlike vegans, omnivores considered a broad array of interactions to be definable as hostile. Oftentimes, omnivores were willing and able to discuss conflict even though they had never personally

experienced it. A few omnivore participants reported positive thoughts on vegan acquaintances but preferred to elaborate on confrontation:

“The vegans I know have big hearts, but some of them are extreme- like a lot of them throw fake blood on people. I might be the devil to them” (Jon, omnivore).

“I have a few vegan friends and they’re really respectful. What bothers me are the ones who, like, just turned vegan and are really pushy. Like now they’re suddenly experts” (Wendy, omnivore).

Some omnivores didn’t report any experience in interacting with vegans but still spoke to anticipated conflict, such as seen in Todd’s statement “I don’t want people to get in my face and tell me the gory details of where meat comes from while I’m eating a burger. I mean, I’ve never been pressured to stop eating it or anything but I would probably just be put-off and ignore them”. This statement reflects both a fabricated confrontational scenario and a predetermined negative response to the message. This reflects a strong stereotype amongst the omnivore culture that vegans are confrontational or hostile.

This preference for elaborating on the extreme vegans was unique to omnivores. However, some vegan participants offered speculations on some of the more extreme members of the vegan community. These extreme individuals were described in terms such as “some people” or “abolitionist” which is a term for one who does not condone any use of animals in any context from eating food to keeping pets.

“An abolitionist to me, is a person completely out of touch with mainstream society... it’s embarrassing... they cast a pall on veganism. Sadly, they constitute a small but vocal group in the movement” (Phil, vegan).

“It blows my mind how much people get into food. People often view you [vegans] as an outlier, radical, extremist- and yeah, some people on our side seem to have far too much free time and pick fights over little things. The best activism is setting an example and the most powerful changes come from people making their own decisions. I really don’t argue anymore” (Marc, vegan).

These attempts to differentiate extreme vegans from the rest of the vegan population indicate participants did not share omnivore beliefs that vegans were largely confrontational.

The lack of conflict reported by vegans and the often hypothetical but probable conflict reported by omnivores indicates interactions between vegans and omnivores are not the source of opposing opinions but rather simply reveal them. These ideas held by omnivores, therefore, are formed before interactions occur. Where, then, does the omnivorous expectation of confrontation originate?

Does media play a role in shaping and strengthening beliefs?

Across the globe, a media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities (Kellner, 2013; 1). This power to shape identity and behavior is especially interesting given the recent prevalence of alternative media sources, or sources other than prominent newspapers or news networks. This diversity of sources, offering a broad array of opinions, has led to the practice of people selecting for sources and stories which reaffirm their existing beliefs while

avoiding those that challenge them, leading to various polarizations within the United States. This phenomenon is often referred to as “niche theory” (Dimmick, et.al, 2009).

Having deviated from the dominant food culture, vegans unanimously reported seeking information from alternative media sources such as undercover videos, blogs, or research conducted by animal rights groups which resulted in the adoption and maintenance of the vegan diet. Vegans spoke of the discovery of these sources as a sort of awakening, as seen in the statements below:

“When I realized how awful things were, I knew I couldn’t support it anymore” (Liz, vegan).

“Once I realized that I could no longer reconcile my belief that eating animal products fit my own moral framework, no matter my excuses, it was time to live in a way that my actions reflected my beliefs” (Matt, vegan).

This faith in alternative media seemed to coincide with beliefs that the majority of the population maintained their diets out of ignorance. Jen’s statement reflects the perceived polarization between omnivores and vegans: “I think the problem is that most people are just naïve to what’s happening to these animals in slaughterhouses. Like they just haven’t made the connection” (Jen, vegan).

Vegan reliance on alternative media is not surprising given misrepresentations of vegan and animal rights issues in popular media outlets. Prominent media sources such as newspapers and television broadcasts have been shown in UK and United States studies to ignore or negatively portray issues concerning animal rights and veganism. In a study of print media coverage in the United States, coverage of animal rights-related topics dropped sharply and remained low after 1990. The occasional animal-rights story usually consisted of violent or failed

protests by activist groups (Jones, 1997; 71). Similarly, a study conducted on UK national newspapers concluded nearly 75% of news stories including the word “vegan” portrayed vegan issues as marginal, radical, faddish, crazy, or having impossible standards. Presumably, these stories are released with the understanding that most of the audience will be omnivorous and people are interested in stories which confirm existing beliefs (Povey et al, 2011; 134-153). Thus, a dominant culture containing anti-vegan messages is both inherent and perpetuated.

The interest of news sources to maintain viewers/ subscribers, although strong, is not the only factor prohibiting the release of vegan-agenda news stories. The 1980’s witnessed the famous “McLibel” battle in which a London Greenpeace group was sued by the McDonalds corporation for distributing leaflets, titled “What’s Wrong with McDonalds: everything they don’t want you to know”, accusing McDonalds of animal cruelty, being hazardously unhealthy, and exploiting children through marketing. This court case bankrupted the low-income leaflet-distributors who were forced to represent themselves while McDonalds spent upwards of 10 million euros, spurring the European court to state “the inequality of arms could not have been greater” (Oliver, 2005). Corporate interests in maintaining a positive image and prominent media’s need to maintain subscribers combine to largely prohibit stories which reject dominant patterns of food consumption.

Given the scarcity of news stories criticizing the popular diet, it was unsurprising that 90% of omnivores (9) demonstrated minimal involvement with food-related educational media (including news stories, books, documentaries, photos, etc.). This was indicated by participants revealing statements such as “like I said, I wish I had enough time to learn about it [food production] but right now I don’t and I like eating whatever I want” (Todd, omnivore). Interestingly, in responding to the question “what do you know/think of meat and dairy

consumption?” most (7) omnivore participants cited materials such as animal rights or health promoting pamphlets, videos, and pictures in an effort to convey they were knowledgeable about animal agriculture, indicating at least some level of trust or belief in the content. Hill, an omnivore participant, stated “I mean I’ve seen *Food Inc.* so I know what goes on”. Speaking objectively, omnivore participants were more likely to reference the same materials vegans used for information.

However, when elaborating on their personal diet choices, omnivores often instead chose to reference facts or even commercials that supported their practices, as is demonstrated by Jon’s statement “It’s like the commercials- ‘great cheese comes from happy cows, happy cows come from California’. Colorado is probably awesome too- I see a lot of cows out on pasture and I hope that’s where all my stuff comes from”. Claire, an omnivore, admitted little knowledge about nutrition but was quick to defend that “milk is an essential source of calcium and good for your bones”, reflective of the prevalent “Got Milk?” campaign in the United States. This dissonance between materials cited as educational and materials cited to defend diet is reflected in Hill’s statement “it [meat] makes me feel horrible. I have to push the thoughts away when I’m eating it... but after I’m not hungry I can say ‘yeah, that’s fucked up’”. This guilt associated with reconciling food with cruel food production methods sometimes causes people to change their diet; more often though, it simply causes people to avoid media that portrays guilt-inducing content and seek information that reassures their habits (Chance and Norton, 2009).

Of course, this process of selecting media applies to vegans as well. In this study, vegan participants demonstrated a very high involvement with alternative, vegan-friendly media such as online news sources, documentaries, and studies contradicting popular conceptions of animal nutrition. Again, vegan thoughts of “discovering the truth” and viewing the population as largely

uneducated in the area of food production indicates a rejection of the dominant media which blocks some stories and perpetuates popular, “ignorant” opinion. This pushes vegans to seek and trust stories presented by independent media sources. Much like dominant media sources serve the interests of omnivorous recipients, vegan media defends the vegan perspective. Though empirical data concerning the content of vegan-promoting media is absent and needed, searches on vegan-referenced websites such as PeTA, Mercy for Animals, One Green Planet, and others portray success stories of animal activism, horrific animal cruelty in need of response, studies showing health benefits or rising numbers of vegan diets, and a general promotion of vegan pride. Like “Got Milk?” or “happy cow” commercials, these types of stories seek to promote specific habits by reinforcing existing beliefs.

Despite the bias that arises from selecting for specific news content, it was clear vegans generally had a much larger knowledge base of animal agriculture in the United States and the rest of the world. For instance, while omnivores tended to use sweeping statements such as “some of it is probably gross” (Parker, omnivore), vegans used graphic, specific terminology to demonstrate their knowledge:

“People like to narrow the argument to the ethics of killing animals but it’s so much more than that. For meat to be that available and that cheap, animals have to be mutilated and tortured in horrible living conditions for months or years before they are even killed” (Alex, vegan).

“Animals are the ones making sacrifices for us... hormones, small cages, gestation crates- just so much suffering” (Tinya, vegan).

However, it should be noted there was one exception to omnivores’ overall removal from food production issues and education. Beef advocate Darren told a story of animal agriculture

that largely contradicted vegan claims of systematic abuse. Having devoted his career to helping cattle ranchers find their voice in the public debate, Darren maintained conditions for cattle are only seen as inhumane by outsiders and animal rights groups, such as ethical vegans, misinterpret many mechanisms of farming as cruel. Vegans stated calves are taken from their mothers immediately after birth in order to obtain the mothers' milk and are themselves either left to die or chained to be raised as veal meat. Darren contradicted this by stating

“the calves stay with their mamas for about 7-8 months, maybe a year, on pasture... groups like PeTA like to take extreme cases and say they're standard but farmers don't condone that either” (Darren, omnivore).

He addressed animal-activist beliefs that feed lots are cruel because they are cramped and are fed corn instead of unnatural grass, to which he responded

“when you get up close to one [a feed lot] the cows actually have a ton of space... anyway, cows are social creatures and like to touch one another... I don't know who declared corn to be unhealthy but cows eat all parts of the corn- stalk, seed, leaves- technically, you can call that grass” (Darren, omnivore).

Darren demonstrated the high level of involvement and passion unanimously portrayed by vegan participants, indicating the same information can be interpreted differently and results in very different behaviors. Regardless, it can be maintained that knowledge corresponds with purposeful consumption.

How do vegans and omnivores view their roles in larger problems and solutions?

Another reason for purposeful consumption revealed itself to be ideas of effectiveness in the environmental movement. While all vegans reported concern for the environment, it was a topic referenced by only two omnivores. This supports findings from Lea and Worsley's study on Australian consumers' food-related environmental beliefs and behaviors which indicated the backwards public thought that meat consumption had the least impact on environmental degradation while the use of packaging was seen as the most harmful (Lea, et.al; 2008). Vegans' interest in food production, rather than mere consumption, leads to different environmental beliefs and conservational practices than the general public. These disparities in interpreting interactions, exposure to media, and knowledge of the issues combine to create entirely separate ideological constructions of vegan activism.

Vegan participants referenced veganism as being merely a component of animal activism. Changing one's diet was reported to as a transformation, growing into an ethic that embodied all areas of life.

"I wish I had learned about it [veganism] much earlier in life. Once I changed, I felt a transformation of mind, body, and soul. It's just a peaceful, wholesome way of living" (Jen, vegan).

"I want to invite others to feel the joy and connection that comes with living vegan, and living one's life aligned with their own values of justice, kindness, and compassion" (Matt, vegan).

As seen in Phil's comment below, vegan participants unanimously reported and elaborated upon their path to involvement:

"For me, the decision [to go vegan] was completely ethical. I watched PeTA's "Meet Your Meat" and gave up meat cold turkey and slowly transitioned into being vegan..."

I've read books by Nick Cooney, founder of the Humane League... on my Mercy for Animals tour I did a few radio interviews to try to get the word out" (Phil, vegan).

This concept of veganism was occasionally referenced by omnivores, such as seen in the statements below, but did not indicate a belief that veganism was anything more than a personal diet choice:

"Even though I personally am not vegan, I think it's a good thing to do. I try to be healthy and avoid GMOs, but vegans are way better at it" (Parker, omnivore).

"I think people do it for two reasons: there is animal rights and health. So I mean yeah, I think it's great if you can do it" (Allie, omnivore).

"They [vegans] are really into being healthy and eat a lot of vegetables and can't have fast food or ice cream" (Jon, omnivore).

In this study, omnivores demonstrated a focus on the act of eating, perhaps explaining their unanimous references to health benefits as an anticipated prominent concern of vegans. Given these stark differences in understanding veganism, it is clear the vegan "lifestyle" is misinterpreted by the larger omnivorous population as merely a vegan "diet". Omnivores' demonstrated fixation on personal choice provides insights into the debate as a whole.

Given their stated involvement with promoting veganism, the vegan culture possesses an emic perspective on vegan activism with a broader and more comprehensive scope on the issue of related movements such as animal rights, environmental protection, and health. Vegans reported to have read materials that support their beliefs, befriended other vegan individuals, engaged in debates of veganism, and been involved vegan-related protests or education initiatives. Transitioning from the omnivore diet requires at least an exposure to vegan principles and usually develops into a practice of involving oneself further with information, support

groups, and activism. Generally, changing to a vegan diet is caused by a single trigger such as the decision to protect animals but is reinforced over time by exposure to other reasons such as health benefits or environmental protection (Fox and Ward, 2008). Vegans in this study reported seeing specific videos of slaughterhouses or animal torture as their initial motivation to become vegan but included a far greater list of reasons in justifying veganism as a whole, such as seen in Tinya's statement: "I think the whole world should be vegan. It's the optimal way to live and aligns with everyone's interests- environment, health, treating animals ethically- it's just good and sustainable" (Tinya, vegan). Vegans view their diets as a means of serving a greater good and existing as only an aspect of their larger contribution to activist movements.

As previously discussed, omnivores were shown to have different involvements with media. Some reported seeing videos such as PeTA's "Meet Your Meat" or watching critical food documentaries such as *Food Inc.* and referenced them in an effort to defend their knowledge of food production. These same videos were referenced by vegans as initial catalysts for piquing interest in changing their diets but were never defended as being comprehensive. In fact, they were reported as being "grossly watered down" (Jen, vegan), "tame" (Liz, vegan), and "much easier to watch than the things I've seen" (Phil, vegan).

A few vegan participants referenced a recent interview between Katie Couric and Ellen DeGeneres which, upon investigating, parallels the different understandings of veganism and animal rights that were surmised from in this study. Couric focused on food and eating while DeGeneres elaborated on her understanding of food production and ethics:

Katie Couric: *"I know that you're a vegan now and so you eat no meat, right? No eggs, no dairy products... Why did you decide to become a vegan and when did you decide?"*

Ellen DeGeneres: *“The welfare of animals- I always hear ‘animal rights’ and I just think it’s a crazy thing ’cause it’s really just the right to be left alone [laughs]... Years ago, I read Diet for a New America which is a book about, uh, his last name is Robbins, his father owned Baskin Robbins. He wrote this book about factory farming and I read it and was horrified and was a vegetarian, I still ate cheese and stuff, but I was a vegetarian for about 8 months or so. And then I just went back to eating meat. I used to love cheeseburgers and steak and I just did what most people do, I just had a disconnect ...And then, I forced myself to watch a documentary called Earthlings and it’s inside footage of factory farms and dairy farms. You just see that and you go, ‘I can’t participate in that. I can’t be a part of something that is suffering.’”*

Katie Couric: *“Did you see the documentary Food Inc.? [Ellen nods] So that probably just reinforced everything that you were feeling.”*

Ellen DeGeneres: *“Yeah, Food Inc. is a Disney movie compared to Earthlings. Food Inc. is nothing. I would like people to look at that, but it’s hard. It takes a lot. It takes a major shift in your life ’cause it’s easy to grab for something and it’s just there. But every time you think about what’s on your plate and what it was, you know, you just can’t do it.”*

(Youtube, 2010).

Discussions like this reflect a narrow fixation on veganism as an act of eating as opposed to the more holistic lifestyle that vegans vocalize. Much as vegans achieve the emic perspective on their activism, omnivores’ distance from educational materials and actions beyond food creates a narrowed, etic perspective of vegan activism. That is, omnivores focus on the rules and technicalities of veganism such as diet restrictions while vegans see it conceptually as an ethical framework for life. Anthropologist David Graeber addresses this difference by suggesting a

culture not be evaluated by what it makes or consumes but instead approach analysis by way of asking the question “what if one did try to create a theory of value starting from the assumption that what is ultimately being evaluated are not things, but actions?” (Graeber, 2001; 49). Ethical vegans value their diet both for what it is and what it stands for (i.e. for health benefits and part of larger animal welfare movement). Omnivores, being outside the culture of veganism, did not address this second value which Graeber argues to be more important and accurate in evaluating cultural practices. Instead, omnivores see veganism as a restrictive diet largely adhered to by individuals with naïve ideas about the importance of their choices. For example, omnivores dually stated “Even though I personally am not vegan, I think it’s a good thing to do. I try to be healthy and avoid GMOs, but vegans are way better at it” (Parker, omnivore) and “me not eating meat isn’t going to stop that [bad conditions for farm animals]” (Hill, omnivore). Omnivores were proficient at addressing the use value of a vegan diet but rarely chose to discuss or even speculate the meanings of a vegan diet.

The focus on food is possibly attributed to the universality of food, meaning everyone eats and, by default, has a choice they need to defend when the topic arises. Additionally, this universality makes eating a very public event. In this study, vegan participants maintain veganism was a topic that arose naturally and often:

“Food comes up in conversation a lot- I didn’t notice that until I became vegan. I used to try to hide it, but eventually you have to talk about it. Then of course, you’re seen as the stereotypical antagonistic vegan” (Tinya, vegan).

“I don’t fight with people, it doesn’t work. But I feel like I’m lying or apologizing if I don’t tell someone I’m vegan when the topic comes up. If someone is going to eat meat

in front of me and ask me why I'm not eating it, I think it's perfectly OK to tell them why" (Michelle, vegan).

Likewise, omnivores cited scenarios (either past events or purely hypothetical) that occurred within a dining setting which demonstrated omnivores' expectation of debates triggered by food:

"So I used to date this vegetarian girl and she couldn't even be in the kitchen when I was cooking meat- said she couldn't handle the smell. And I'm like *o-kay*, that seems like a little much" (Jon, omnivore).

"I don't want people to get in my face and tell me the gory details of where meat comes from while I'm eating a burger. I mean, I've never been pressured to stop eating it or anything but I would probably just be put-off and ignore them" (Todd, omnivore).

Statements such as Todd's suggest that opinions are formed before an individual even becomes involved in the food debate. This same participant had previously stated in his interview "I wish I had enough time to learn about it [food production] but right now I don't" (Todd, omnivore). Having stated an anticipated a negative response, Todd's answers seem to contradict his claim to want to know more about the food industry in favor of maintaining his neutral or positive association with animal products. Nonetheless, omnivore participants' focus on conflict occurring within the atmosphere of eating, cooking, etc. indicates a popular preference to keep food debates away from personal food choices. Conversation about veganism or meat production appears to be perceived as an attack on individuals and their choices and seem to catalyze defensive positions in omnivores.

Could veganism constitute a religious movement?

As this study progressed, many interactions and perceptions between vegans and omnivores seemed too familiar to be unique. The way vegans described their path to becoming a vegan activist shares remarkable similarities to ways by which individuals talk about their beliefs and duties under a particular religion. Religion, with its endless forms and variations, is an inherently difficult concept to define. Renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggested the following definition:

A religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general-order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1965: 4, as quoted by Dubisch, 1981).

Jill Dubisch's research in 1981 focused on religious aspects of the health food movement; however, this study of ethical vegans shares religious elements such as notions of purification, symbols, and codes of conduct, all relating to the ethics of food.

The rise of the health food movement beginning in the 1960's led to a faddish protest against the dominant, unhealthy lifestyle and the general establishment (Kandel and Pelto 1980; 328). All (9) vegan participants in this study cited nutrition as a reason for maintaining the vegan diet; however, the strongest motivations centered on animal welfare. Regardless of the source of disgust, be it unhealthy ingredients or required animal suffering, these motivations manifest themselves in dietary beliefs and behaviors similarly. Both Dubisch's research and this study indicate a strong food taboo which motivates health-conscious and ethical vegans' food consumption habits. Ethical vegans' negative terminology for meat as "murder", "disgusting",

etc. indicates the food itself is being used to symbolize a greater injustice. Similarly, health foods and/or non-animal-based foods appear to construct what Dubisch calls *mana*, or “a type of beneficial or valuable power which can pass to individuals from sacred objects through touch (or, in the case of health foods, by ingestion)” (Dubisch, 1981; 295). Both health and ethically-motivated consumers (i.e. vegans) demonstrate food-related beliefs and behaviors that aligns surprisingly well with Geertz’s “system of symbols” qualification for religion.

On the topic of symbolism, most if not all religions have places of congregation such as temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, holy lands, etc. These places seek to emulate and preserve the essence of the particular religion they serve and thus gather followers for a shared religious experience. Dubisch argues health food stores constitute a “temple where the purity of the movement is guarded or maintained” (Dubisch, 1981; 295). This does not apply to vegans as most health food stores still carry the taboo animal products. Instead, vegan participants alluded to finding a safe, almost sacred space in the company of other vegans. As Michelle states, “community is a huge part of it [being vegan]. I would come home and cry after a lot of hard days in college. It was always just so healing to be around like-minded people” (Michelle, vegan). Seeking refuge in like-minded congregations such as the Boulder and Beyond Vegan group provided a relief from the stresses of being constantly in the minority and having to defend unpopular practices. Michelle also cited “the pillars of veganism” in a confident way which suggested this idea, with its heavily-religious and organized connotations, was universally recognized and accepted by vegans. Thus, amongst fellow vegans, ethics become uniform and everyone abides by the same codes or practices, much like an organized religious service.

‘Religion’ is a difficult idea to summarize, even for those belonging to organized religions. In addition to Geertz’s rigid definition, religion may also be summarized as a doctrine

which guides the thoughts and actions of its followers in an effort to bring about a desirable outcome (Kwilecki, 1999). The basic function of religion appears to be universal for established doctrines as well as the new vegan movement. For example, Christianity requires its followers to assemble, praise God, refrain from sinning, and share teachings from the Bible in order to ascend to heaven and end all evil. Ethical veganism, while lacking a god, maintains the general practice of universal compassion as a higher power which motivates vegans to sacrifice meat and dairy consumption and take collective action against harmful animal production practices in an effort to rid the world of animal cruelty, environmental degradation, world hunger, and declining health. This almost religious devotion could explain vegan beliefs the diet should be universal.

The idea that veganism could be deemed a religion was not apparent until a few vegan participants applied the term themselves. In one statement, Jen stated “once I went [vegan] I felt a transformation literally of mind, body, and soul... It’s almost like a religion- some use God, I use veganism”. This idea of discovering the truth, admitting past wrongdoings, and giving yourself over to a new way of life is common discourse for discussing religious conversion. In a qualitative study of born-again Christians conducted by James Bielo, one interviewee Roland recounts what it was like to discover God and Christianity:

“your thought process changed, you recognize what you’ve done wrong. Before you’re doing sin and living in sin, you didn’t realize it as such, the way you do when you become a Christian. But all of a sudden you recognize it and say ‘this stuff isn’t right or these thoughts are not right’ or whatever” (Bielo, 2004; 278).

In both religious and vegan conversion, these sorts of realizations are personal but inevitably carry implications for the rest of humanity; in acknowledging the right way to live, one must also accept there are less-right or wrong ways to live. In this aspect, a key difference is discovered;

while many religions fear punishment in the afterlife, vegans fear a continuation of existing punishments such as continued animal abuse, environmental decline, and health crises.

The basic principles of veganism bear striking resemblance to pillars of Jainism, “a religion of India that teaches a path to spiritual purity and enlightenment through a disciplined mode of life founded upon the tradition of ahimsa, nonviolence to all living creatures” (Dundas, Encyclopedia Britannica). Jains strive to reduce if not eliminate negative impact on the earth by way of living a life of compassion to all creatures. Phil’s statement is emblematic of both a vegan and Jain life purpose: “that’s probably the number one thing I focus on: my passion is to just lessen suffering in the world”. Like veganism, Jainism requires no anthropomorphic god to enforce these rules; therefore they differ from many western religions by focusing on a relationship between man and earth rather than man and God. Both reject anthropocentrism in favor of considering all forms of life (and suffering) to be of equal worth. These stark contradictions to many Western religions may explain why religious themes were only discussed by vegans and never envisioned by omnivores.

Omnivores unsurprisingly held an opposing view on veganism’s place in the world. Many voiced disagreement of vegan attempts to discuss or persuade omnivores into adopting their diet. Recalling previous accounts of feeling “judged” by vegans, omnivores maintained that a mutual respect of one another’s diets could be reached if a policy of mutual respect was implemented. During interviews, omnivores could objectively admire vegan practices until their own diets were called into question at which time arguments against veganism arose. Vegans did not demonstrate a great deal of interest in self-promoting themselves, but rather emphasized the necessity of persuading others to consider adopting a new diet themselves; even the idea of this was shown to catalyze defensive positions in omnivores.

Omnivores' negative reactions to vegan persuasion often took on an interestingly secular tone. Many statements suggested veganism remain a personal choice in statements such as "to each his own" (Todd, omnivore), "it's entirely a personal choice" (Darren, omnivore), and "I personally am not vegan, [but] I think it's a good thing to do" (Parker, omnivore). These statements were preceded or followed by positive thoughts of veganism, suggesting ethical implications only need apply to those who choose to enter the discussion. As philosopher Peter Singer states, people "do not condemn those who indulge in luxury instead of giving to famine relief" (Singer, 1972). Singer maintains there exists a problematic social philosophy in affluent societies due to the prevalent belief that it would be *nice* to sacrifice (money, time, food, etc.) for others but by no means is it *required* or *expected*. Omnivores attributed morality and positivity to veganism but were able to remove themselves from moral implications by personally disassociating with veganism.

If the dominant food culture within the United States does not consider eating meat to be immoral, there will be a resistance to enter or agree with the vegan ideology as it would require one to enter an entirely new realm of ethics. Similarly, people may reject adopting a religion by saying "I'm already a good person" even though their lifestyle may directly contradict said religion's practices or beliefs. Without the fixed codes enforced by religion, "morality" is far more debatable and one's ethical standing is easier to defend. In violating the norm, veganism has emerged as a novel approach to ethics and established methods to adhere to them, thereby constituting a form of religion. Since religion in the United States is considered deeply personal, attempts by vegans to establish it as a universal norm appears to be received by omnivores as "confrontational", "aggressive", "extreme", and "pushy". This fundamental difference between

vegans and omnivores could mean mutual respect is an idea only capable of being said rather than implemented.

Food is an obvious trigger for debate as it is both deeply personal in every culture and often a public subject or activity. However, it appears many ideas are constructed before veganism arises in interpersonal debate, thus nulling the hypothesis that opinions are formed by discovering conflicting viewpoints during a conversation or debate. Therefore, the findings from this study do not necessarily prove interpersonal conflict cannot be a source of different beliefs and actions. Rather results simply do not support the original prediction as a likely phenomenon. This could be a true reflection of reality or be misconstrued by shortcomings in the research strategy.

Study Limitations: did interview structure and participant recruitment accurately represent vegan and omnivore viewpoints?

It should be noted that the absence of proof for interpersonal conflict causing different opinions and behaviors between vegans and omnivores may reflect the limitations of this study rather than reality. The interview structure was selected in an effort to capture spontaneous word choice and detect the ease or hesitance in discussing certain topics. Upon reviewing the results, however, some shortcomings in this research design were detected. One apparent limitation was made clear in discussions of conflict; both vegans and omnivores mentioned conflict in broad terms but did not choose to speak of specific details at length. In a calm, removed environment such as these interviews, it is difficult to honestly talk about past conflicts or strong opinions. I suspect the formality of the interview structure pressured participants to appear more collected

than they might be in an actual debate. For example, Michelle, a vegan participant, was hesitant to talk about negative interactions with people but referenced her family's strong disapproval. Such a response from one's family would undoubtedly cause distress or at least be categorized as a negative interaction; however, this was not reflected in her interview which indicates a potential barrier caused by the interview structure.

The possible softening of answers would be supported by studies such as one conducted by Klein, Maher, and Dunnington which found that employees interviewed about work conditions face-to-face were significantly more likely to report positive opinions on their salaries and top management whereas employees asked to complete anonymous questionnaires were found to be more critical. Both sides were promised confidentiality but the formality and exposure of the personal interviews created a "positive distortion" within answers (Klein, et.al, 1967). This could explain inconsistencies in statements such as Wendy's comment: "I have a few vegan friends and they're really respectful. What bothers me are the ones who, like, just turned vegan and are really pushy. Like now they're suddenly experts". Statements such as this demonstrate an immediate positive declaration but potential for underlying negativity. Unfortunately, perhaps given the interview structure, it was unclear whether participants felt pressure to report positivity and if their statements accurately reflected their true perceptions.

Additionally, it is debatable whether or not this sample was representative of the population. Different recruitment methods had to be used to gather a sufficient pool of participants. Vegan recruitment was far less problematic than that of omnivores. This is most likely attributable to the nature of the research; vegans often responded to participation requests with enthusiasm and saw it as an opportunity to educate the public. Omnivores, however, often declined to take part in the study after finding out the topic concerned veganism and conflict.

Particularly, omnivores specifically named by vegan friends as having engaged in prior conflict either denied any ill feelings towards veganism or became defensive. A few even stated reasons for disliking vegans and used the harsh words originally expected from omnivore participants. Unfortunately, these were always followed by a refusal to participate. It is suspected the confrontational recruitment may have excluded those with the strongest opinions.

To rectify these problems, this study could have benefitted greatly from distributing questionnaires both randomly and to the interview participants. The anonymity of writing opinions on paper rather than stating them to a researcher may have produced more bold or honest answers. These could be used as a cross-reference to test the validity or representation of answers obtained through interviews. Additionally, given the difficulty in calmly discussing conflict, interviews could have yielded different results if simultaneous interviews were conducted of one vegan and one omnivore. This would have more-accurately simulated vegan-omnivore interactions and cultivated a more conversational format rather than a formal, rigid interview. Finally, it was not taken into consideration that many if not more debates occur online; stating opinions over the internet parallels the process of filling out a survey due to the removed, secure positions maintained by those participating.

Conclusion

After the completion of interviews and analysis of results, this study found negative interpersonal interactions, while reported, were not considered to be a driving force in the formation of dietary identities. Rather, members of both groups reported similar values such as health, humane treatment of animals, mutual respect for diet choices, and rejection of extremist

mentalities. The differences resided in how those opinions manifested into behavior and appeared to be linked with exposure to alternative media, connect and disconnect with food and the animals that produce the food, and varying feelings of power as a consumer. With regards to activism, these findings suggest less of an emphasis be placed on showing graphic images and shaming consumers and more of an emphasis on adopting new approaches which encourage open discussion and strongly emphasize the importance of individual action and responsible endorsement of products. Future research should further investigate the many forms of DIY activism, particularly as it exists in social media as it is suspected that the anonymity of online discussion yields more conflict, overt stereotypes, and a more rapid and widespread distribution of ideas.

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