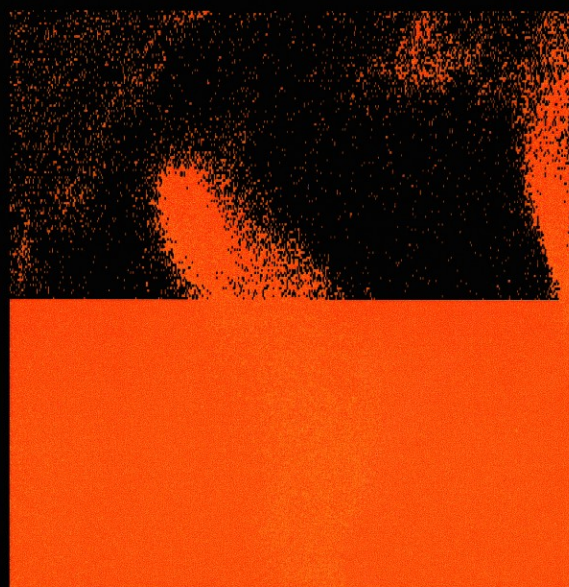


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The psychology of becoming a vegetarian

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A survey of 385 vegetarian activists was taken to learn more about how people become successful vegetarians. Health and animal welfare were the most common reasons given. Those giving health were more likely to be older, use a gradual method without emotion and focus on how good vegetarian food is. Those with animal concerns were more likely to be younger, sudden, with emotion, and focus on how bad meat is. Most respondents had some kind of memory of the last time they ate meat. Most currently find meat repugnant, with only a handful of more recent vegetarians even being tempted by it.

Scholarly literature on becoming vegetarian

To find out more about how people go about becoming long-term vegetarians, a survey was carried out among groups of vegetarian activists. This survey was exploratory with the idea that it would inspire ideas for further research. A fairly comprehensive review of previous literature on this subject is, unfortunately, quite brief.

Psychology: from deviance to health

The psychological literature on vegetarianism is remarkably sparse. Those scholarly articles which look directly at the psychological aspects of being vegetarian, not including those on the impacts of specific nutrients within such diets, are few, and reflect the US and British societies' changing attitudes toward the subject.

Friedman (1975) wanted to do the first psychoanalytic examination, using two case studies to study the "etiology" of vegetarianism. Cooper *et al.* (1985) used psychometric tests on 20 vegetarians to ascertain a lack of psychopathology, and Lester (1979) tested 57 students with the same conclusion.

In the early 1970s, the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* ran three articles on the same survey with 100 respondents (Dwyer *et al.*, 1973; 1974a; 1974b). They described "new" vegetarians, young people frequently from the counter-culture, as opposed to the "old" vegetarian groups of primarily Trappist monks and Seventh-Day Adventists. They regarded vegetarians as a nutritionally at-risk group, but did conclude there were few health reasons for trying to dissuade vegetarians, provided that there was proper consumer education.

This journal over the years demonstrated a clear evolution in thinking to become more positive. In 1979, Calkins wrote a "Perspectives in practice" that went over various ways in which vegetarians had not been studied but really needed to be. By 1981, Strobl and Groll looked at the growth of professionalism and suggested that vegetarianism was becoming less cultist and more widespread. In 1986, the journal published two back-to-back articles by Freeland-Graves *et al.* (1986a; 1986b) on

a survey of 150 vegetarians and age and sex-matched non-vegetarians. Vegetarians were divided into the categories, ranging on a continuum, from pesco (would eat fish), lacto-ovo, lacto, and vegan. They found that the largest percentage of vegetarians were middle children, with few being only children. The only major difference they found between the four types of vegetarians was the level of support network of family and friends, with stronger support for those on the more restrictive side of the continuum.

Sociology

The sociological literature on vegetarianism is also not extensive but has some contributions to make to psychological understanding. In an exploratory look at values (Dietz, 1995), a telephone survey of 194 suburbanites in Fairfax, Virginia, found that 7.2 percent considered themselves vegetarians, but on further questioning only a fifth of these never ate poultry or fish. Individuals who hold altruistic values were more likely to be vegetarian, while traditional values reduced the probability of someone being vegetarian. Sims (1978) found that the four major reasons given for becoming vegetarian were personal health, concern with cruelty to animals, concern for world hunger, and concern with damage to the environment from the meat industry.

Finally, Beardsworth and Keil (1992) published a study of a sample of 71 British vegetarians with whom they did lengthy interviews for a qualitative analysis. Like Freeland-Graves *et al.* (1986a; 1986b), they also did a typology of forms of vegetarians from least strict to most strict. They distinguished two main types of conversion: a relatively gradual process of change, or one in which the change was much more abrupt, usually triggered by a conversion experience which respondents could recall in detail, usually associated with disgust. They identified four broad types of motivation: moral, health related, gustatory and ecological. They found that vegetarians seemed to have more variety in their diet, and explained this paradox by how much a meat-based diet is restricted by tradition, a tradition from which vegetarians are free and therefore become more innovative. They

point out that the modern world has greater menu pluralism, allowing for more idiosyncratic combinations of menu principles to be assembled, making vegetarianism more feasible. Most respondents supported the idea that their dietary practices were coming to be seen as more acceptable and unremarkable.

Popular press

The largest studies of vegetarians have been a mail-in survey done by *Vegetarian Times* of its own readers, and a poll commissioned by the magazine and conducted by Yankelovich was reported in the same article (Krizmanic, 1992). That and other polls have found that those who self-identify as vegetarians in the USA are about 7 percent of the population (about 12 million people). Yankelovich did a 14-minute interview with 301 Americans, 16 or older, which they found through random-digit dialing from the general population, and then they also interviewed a random list taken from all subscribers to the *Vegetarian Times*, which included 166 self-described vegetarians and 134 non-vegetarians. Those "self-described" often showed on further probing to be using a very broad definition.

"...Nearly half of both samples gave health as their major motivation to become vegetarian, with 15 percent of all vegetarians and 22 percent of subscribers giving animal welfare as the main reason..."

They found that vegetarianism's "hippie connotation" which had kept many people away before, was a thing of the past. Vegans were 9 percent of the magazine subscribers and 4 percent of the vegetarians from the general population. The article says that most became vegetarians slowly, eliminating one food at a time, but does not indicate how many responded this way nor give any more details. More women than men describe themselves as vegetarians.

Nearly half of both samples gave health as their major motivation to become vegetarian, with 15 percent of all vegetarians and 22 percent of subscribers giving animal welfare as the main reason. Smaller percentages of each chose influence of family and friends, ethical reasons, and the environment. Alleviating world hunger, which had been a major concern especially in the 1970s, was apparently not on the list. In sharp contrast to that decade's concern about nutritional adequacy for vegetarians, 63 percent of the vegetarians in the general population said that someone had asked them for advice on nutrition, food

or health in the past six months simply because they were vegetarian.

To meet the ideal of drawing a random sample from the entire population, the *Vegetarian Times* survey clearly comes the closest of all these studies, since they used random dialing of the general population to draw vegetarians from it. However, this has the same problem always found in the use of the telephone, which may be more problematic with this population than it would be with, say, voters: vegetarian teenagers and children who live with non-vegetarian adults along with college students could be under-represented. Those groups do have large numbers of vegetarians among them, and adding them could well pull down the percentage of those over 40 and add to the percentage of those whose main motivation is for animal welfare, among other things.

Method

For the purposes of this study, an initial questionnaire was distributed at the Vegetarian Center at the 1996 Friends General Conference, a national conference for Quakers, with 36 respondents. Next, respondents were personally solicited at the 1996 World Vegetarian Congress held in Pittstown, Pennsylvania. Questionnaires were handed out at one of the evening plenary sessions, and most people turned the questionnaires in that same evening, with the remainder turned in at the conference desk.

Additional respondents were: six from a literature table at Missouri Valley Friends Conference in Kansas, 31 from a potluck of the Kansas City Vegetarian Society, and 39 collected from a display on the counter of Amber Waves, a vegan restaurant in Kansas City, during February and March of 1997. The total number of respondents was 387, but two were discarded for lack of answers. This left a sample size of 385.

Results

Demographics

The age ranged from 4-79, with a median of 43, and was pretty well distributed on a normal curve. Those under 35 were 28 percent of those that gave their ages, 35-65 were 62 percent, and above 65 were 10 percent. In other words, almost two-thirds of the sample were middle-aged, in contrast to the young people surveyed in the 1970s literature.

The sample was 227 females and 155 males, or 59.4 percent female and 40.3 percent male. No significant differences were found in how the different sexes answered any of the questions.

The bulk of respondents, 90.6 percent, came from the USA. There were 15 from Canada, two from the UK, four from Germany or Switzerland, one from India, three from eastern Europe, two from Latin America and one from Australia.

Diet

After demographic data, the first question respondents were asked was what type of diet they had. There were 71 (18.4 percent) who checked lacto-vegetarian, and 166 (43.1 percent) who checked vegan. Eight (2.1 percent) were vegetarian except for certain items, 8.8 percent were vegetarian with occasional exceptions, 22.9 percent were vegan with occasional exceptions, and 13 (3.4 percent) were not really vegetarian at all, but were sympathetic. Additionally, two listed macrobiotic and two listed raw foods only.

The vegans were concentrated in the vegetarian convention; they were 52.6 percent of those going to the conference, but only 15 percent of the Quaker conference-goers and 22.5 percent of the Kansas City sample. The most activist of the three groups, consisting of people who had travelled specifically for vegetarian purposes, had the greatest proportion of vegans. This is a far higher percentage of vegans than has been found in any of the previous studies, and can largely be attributed to conference-related self-selection. Although not as large, the Kansas City group also had a larger percentage of vegans than is normally found, with respondents who tended to be activist but were doing so with less effort, since no travel was involved. This suggests that an activist population of vegetarians can be expected to have more vegans in it, or that vegans are more likely to be activists; both explanations could easily be true at the same time. A trend toward more people becoming vegan is another possibility, especially since such a trend might show up first among the most activist.

"...An activist population of vegetarians can be expected to have more vegans in it, or that vegans are more likely to be activists; both explanations could easily be true at the same time..."

A few people had been vegetarian for a long time, but most for a fewer number of years. From one to ten years covered 70.8 percent of the list. The mean number of years was 9.8, median six years exactly and the mode was three years. The range went from a few months up to 71 years.

The question which ascertained how long respondents had been vegetarian read, "How

long have you been in the above category?". Since they had just checked which type of vegetarian they were, 71 of the 166 vegans (42.8 percent) were unsatisfied with simply answering how long they had been vegan and also marked down a larger number of years for how long they had been vegetarian. The above figure includes how long they had been vegetarian. The figures for how long they had been vegan were calculated separately, and was also positively skewed (mean = 5.2, median = 3.0, mode = 1.0). This may also bolster the case for a trend for vegetarians to become more vegan.

Reasons

For the reason they first became vegetarian, everyone responded. Compassion to animals alone was cited by 30.4 percent, and health alone by 33.8 percent. Another 7.8 percent gave compassion to animals as one of two reasons, and 10.6 percent more gave health as one of two reasons. The vegans were more likely to express concern for animals as the only reason, since 58.1 percent of them did so, while 33.1 percent of them gave health alone. Only four respondents each gave either world hunger or environmental concerns as their sole reason, and three more gave both those together. Another five cited world hunger as one of two reasons and 17 gave environmental concerns as one of two reasons. The largest two-reason answer patterns were a combination of compassion for animals and health, 21 (5.5 percent) and a combination of health and environmental concern, 13 (3.4 percent). A total of 49 gave three or all four reasons, accounting for 12.7 percent of answers. Three more wrote in answers involving discipline, four cited aesthetics, and four mentioned the influence of a significant other.

A few written comments suggested that the reason for remaining vegetarian at present was different from the reason for becoming vegetarian, but the question of whether the reasons are now the same or different from they were at the beginning was not asked in this survey.

The health concern was more recent. The mean number of years for those who gave health as the reason was 7.85, while the mean for those concerned for animals was 13.05 years.

There was a significant difference in age between those who chose compassion to animals (mean = 41.18 years) and those who chose health as the primary motive (mean = 49.06 years). Those 50 and over were significantly more likely ($p < 0.001$) to choose health, with those under 50 more likely to choose animal welfare.

Procedure of change

To the question, "When you chose to give up meat, how did it happen?" the largest group, 30.1 percent, checked that it was sudden, but their meat consumption had been decreasing for some time. Another 23.1 percent checked that it was a smooth and gradual process. In other words, for 53.2 percent of the respondents, it involved a transition period in which meat consumption decreased until it was eliminated. In a large number of cases, the decision to cut out meat happened at the beginning of this process, but in most of those cases, it happened at the end of the process. Additionally, 22.1 percent said they went from large meat consumption to none, suddenly.

"...Most respondents had some kind of memory of the last time that they ate meat. Of those who did recall, only eight people gave answers that were inconsistent with how long they had said that they were vegetarian..."

Smaller numbers used other methods: 25 said they never really decided to give meat up so much as that it started to be repulsive; 14 decided to give it up for a short period, which kept getting extended; 16 tried to quit several times and finally succeeded; 11 were still working on it and making smooth progress; five were still working on it, having tried several times to quit; and 13 were raised vegetarian.

For those who did quit deliberately in a gradual process, 19 (11 percent of that subgroup of 82) took from 1-6 months, 14.6 percent took a year, 23.2 percent took two years, 12.2 percent took three years, and 20.7 percent took more than three years. To bunch together the largest groups, 61.0 percent took six months to three years.

Those who are now vegan were more likely to have stopped suddenly from eating large amounts of meat, since 31.3 percent of them did so, and they were 61.2 percent of those who did so (compared to the lacto-vegetarians, $p = 0.048$). Similarly, those whose reason was for animals were much more likely to have used that method (37.8 percent of them, 52.9 percent of those who used this method), while those concerned for health were disproportionately likely to use the other two major methods ($p < 0.001$). Four of those who stopped suddenly gave health crises such as heart attacks as reasons, yet 30 respondents had had such a crisis for themselves or a loved one.

Social support

For social support, 50.6 percent indicated they had gone through the process of

becoming vegetarian by themselves, under their own motivation. Another 13.2 percent checked that they did it by themselves, but others were interested, and 4.9 percent indicated they did it by themselves but they were one of several people working on it. Six did it informally with a group, and four did it as a formal programme with a group. A total of 60 (15.6 percent) were brought to vegetarianism by family members, and 12 were raised vegetarian. Another 24, instead of checking one of the options, wrote that they had done it with one other person, usually a spouse or other family member. The first three categories, variants on doing it on their own, accounted for 68.8 percent of the answers. Combining the categories of being encouraged by family members with doing the process with one of them is 21.7 percent.

For their household situations, 43.1 percent have households that are entirely vegetarian, and another 36.6 percent have some members that are and some that are not. A total of 29 (7.5 percent) said they lived alone, and the same number said that they were the only vegetarian in the household. That means that only a small portion are the lone vegetarians in a household of non-vegetarians. These results are in contrast to those in the *Vegetarian Times* survey (Krizmanic, 1992), which found little support in the general population, but consistent with the findings in Freeland-Graves *et al.* (1986a; 1986b) that associated greater support with being further along in the continuum of restrictions. This sample not only had more vegans that would be expected in the vegetarian population, but was also more activist.

Memory

Most respondents had some kind of memory of the last time that they ate meat. While 38.4 percent said they did not recall it, 53.8 percent did. Answers that were descriptive and specific about the occasion or gave an exact date were 20.0 percent of the entire sample. Of those who did recall, only eight people gave answers that were inconsistent with how long they had said that they were vegetarian. Another 50 (13.0 percent) gave occasions that were shorter than the amount of time they claimed, but they had only claimed to be vegetarian with occasional exceptions. Therefore, their answer on this question was not inconsistent with their answer on what type of vegetarian they were. It is of interest that they did in fact remember the last occasion on which they had meat. In some instances, this was because it had been very recent, but in most cases, it was more than a month in the past.

There was a sharp difference in the two major groups of vegetarians on this point ($p = 0.01$): for vegans, 56 percent did remember the last time in some way and 38 percent did not, whereas for ovo-lacto vegetarians, 38 percent did remember and 54.9 percent did not.

Method of change

Several options were given for the method by which they got to their current diet. Just focussing on how good vegetarian food could be was claimed by 30.6 percent, checking only that option and another 10.9 percent giving that along with another option, for a total of 41.5 percent. Reminding ones self how meat was made every time meat was eaten was checked by 60 people total, or 16 percent; 49 (12.7 percent) checked only that. A total of 50 (13.1 percent) got active with other vegetarians for group support, and 14 were in a group where vegetarianism was the norm. Seven people checked all three of these answers. The remainder who wrote down answers were classified as follows: 24 did much reading and reminded themselves of positive health benefits, seven had someone else doing their cooking for them, 34 said they were just convinced, ten were motivated by financial savings.

"...It would appear that the vast majority of vegetarians do not miss nor are tempted by meat, and those few that do have not been vegetarian as long as those that do not..."

There was a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in the method used by those with the two major reasons for becoming vegetarian: those concerned about compassion to animals were more likely to focus on how meat was made when they ate it, and those who gave health as the reason were clearly more likely to focus on how good vegetarian food could be.

Current attitudes

On current attitudes toward meat, most respondents find it repugnant – 51.2 percent. The next largest group, 35.6 percent checked that they do not really have emotions about it, but just do not have it for logical reasons. Not surprisingly, those who focussed on how bad meat was were more likely to find it repugnant (57.1 percent of them did so, $p < 0.05$) and those who focussed on how good vegetarian food was were more likely to lack emotions (50.8 percent of them did, while only 42.4 percent found it repugnant). In a similar vein, those whose reason was animal welfare were a little more likely $p < 0.001$) to find it

repugnant as opposed to those whose reason was health. Vegans were more likely to find it repugnant than the group as a whole, since 64.5 percent did so.

Of the respondents, 17 miss meat, but were disciplined enough to avoid it. Of those, one person was self-classified as not totally avoiding it. Ten checked that they tried to avoid it but were continually tempted. However, three of those turned out to have categorized themselves as not really vegetarian yet and six as being vegetarian with exceptions, leaving only one ovo-lacto vegetarian being tempted by meat; no vegans were. That leaves a total of 4.4 percent of respondents who avoid meat but whose attitude toward the meat they are not having is nevertheless positive.

Those who missed it had been vegetarian a mean of 3.25 years. By contrast, those who found it repugnant had been vegetarian a mean of 11.38 years, and those who did not really have emotions had a mean of 10.33 years. It would appear that the vast majority of vegetarians do not miss nor are tempted by meat, and those few that do have not been vegetarian as long as those that do not. This is evidence against the idea that vegetarians are ascetic or that they are continually battling a natural temptation to have meat.

Causes

Respondents were given six options on what caused them to become vegetarian. A book, pamphlet, television or radio programme, or live speaking engagement which was designed to convince them was cited by 34.7 percent. A family member convinced them for 26.7 percent. Thirty-five said a group of people convinced them. Fifty (13.0 percent) cited facts presented to them that were not intended to cause them to become vegetarian but which had that effect, such as a callous statement by someone or casual mention of a fact. Witnessing or knowing that an animal had been killed was checked by 34. Twelve indicated that they were raised vegetarian. Thirty wrote that they or a loved one had had a heart attack or other health emergency, and 22 wrote that they felt sick or stopped liking the taste. In short, over a third were convinced by media sources, well over a fourth by individuals they knew, over an eighth by independent reactions, and about a quarter (98) as a result of their own life experiences.

Feelings

Finally, respondents were asked what kinds of feelings they had in this decision. Emotional reactions were had by 33.8 percent. It was entirely rational with emotions playing little part for 24.7 percent. Thirteen people checked

both of those options and are included in the foregoing figures, with another 12 writing that emotions and facts were equal.

Those tired or afraid of people calling them a hypocrite were 10.1 percent. Forty-nine (12.7 percent) had been hostile to vegetarianism and argued against it with others for a period before they changed their minds.

Those whose reason for becoming vegetarian was primarily animal welfare were more likely to find meat repugnant or to have had emotional reactions during the process of becoming vegetarian ($p < 0.001$). Those whose primary reason was health were more likely to not have meat for logical reasons or to say that their feelings were rational and unemotional during that process.

Discussion

One finding applicable to the design of future research is that large numbers of extra comments written on the survey showed that vegans frequently use a two-step procedure, becoming ovo-lacto vegetarians first and deciding to become vegans at a later time. Future studies should seek this information when asking the length of time, asking vegans to give both their time for vegetarianism as a whole and for veganism only.

"...There are people to whom it is important to have the self-identification of being vegetarian, but whose elimination of meat is not total..."

Since various studies and polls have found that there are more people claiming to be vegetarian than are actually eliminating all meat, poultry and fish from their diets, the nomenclature used in this study successfully made a distinction which seems to be relatively simple and honest. Along with the option of being vegetarian, respondents were offered the option of saying they were vegetarians with occasional exceptions. The majority that answered yes to the one question that was able to check these designations, whether respondents remembered the last time they ate meat and when that time was, showed that very few had answers inconsistent with the designation they had given themselves. Those that remembered a time that would have occurred after the length of time they had said they were vegetarians had usually selected the "occasional exceptions" designation. If there are people to whom it is important to have the self-identification of being vegetarian, but whose elimination of meat is not total, then the use of the wording

of that extra category could get more accurate results.

With the decision finally to cut it out coming either at the beginning of the process or at the end, there was a sizeable number who said they stopped eating a large amount of meat suddenly. However, since respondents were asked to check off a list, nuances were clearly missing. Two people, for instance, crossed out the word "large" and wrote in the word "small". Perhaps some of those who remembered themselves as having stopped suddenly actually had been decreasing their meat consumption for some time, but for them it was an unconscious process. Some of the people who do make a large change may be having other large changes happening in their lives and accordingly find it an opportune time to add another. There may be a correlation between those that felt strongly enough to make a large change suddenly and those who feel strongly enough to travel to conferences on the subject. Information on whether the sudden new diet was nutritionally sound, or whether large amounts of dairy were substituted for large amounts of meat, would require another survey.

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