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Gender differences in family and peer reaction to the adoption of a vegetarian diet

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Abstract

Although ethical vegetarianism has been the subject of considerable theoretical attention and debate among feminists, the subject has received little empirical attention. This research note summarizes an interview study with ethical vegetarians of college age, and describes gendered responses to the adoption of a vegetarian diet. While friends and family were neutral or favourable to men's vegetarianism, women vegetarians encountered significant hostility from male family members, in particular. The study is by no means conclusive, but the evidence may suggest that this hostility is rooted in a double standard, wherein men are seen as capable of governing their bodies, while women are not. Despite opposition from male intimates, women participating in the study persisted in their diets, suggesting a high degree of moral autonomy. This tension between individual agency and constraining social and economic structure is at the centre of the ongoing feminist debate on vegetarianism, and the findings presented here invite further discussion and more targeted research.

Keywords

diet, ethics, gender, non-human animals, paternalism, patriarchy, the body, vegetarianism

Vegetarianism has been a subject of intense academic and political controversy since the publication of Peter Singer's groundbreaking *Animal Liberation* (1975). The debate about vegetarianism has been particularly heated among feminists. The opposing camps have claimed variously that vegetarianism is a moral imperative for women, or that vegetarianism is a form of ethical coercion and elitism. However, ethical vegetarianism, understood as abstinence from meat in the pursuit of a supraindividual moral end, has received little scrutiny as a social practice; the

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debate is overwhelmingly philosophical or theoretical, or informed by medical evidence about nutrition and body image. In the hope of redressing the insufficient attention paid to the living practice of vegetarianism, I conducted an interview study with ethical vegetarians, asking them about social factors that have affected the adoption and maintenance of their diet.

Despite the traditional association between meat-eating and masculinity, this study revealed that men who adopted a vegetarian diet did not meet with disapproval from friends and family. Women in the study, however, were very likely to face hostile reactions, and these reported hostile reactions came exclusively from women participants' *male* friends and family members. The study leaves many unanswered questions about the causes of this hostility, and the source of women's capacity to surmount it, but also raises fruitful questions. This brief note presents a description of the study and gender-specific findings, and suggests how the results may further the feminist discussion on vegetarianism. It is also hoped that it will stimulate more in-depth, explanatory research.

Goals, methods, and data

The study assumed that social factors are of primary importance in the adoption and maintenance of an ethical vegetarian diet and in the evolution of a coherent rationale for such a diet. As a strictly exploratory project, the interviews did not prefer a particular view, but merely attempted to uncover factors that influenced the development of participants' ethical vegetarianism. Previous sociological studies of ethical vegetarianism have linked it *prima facie* with the animal rights movement, overlooking the large majority of ethical vegetarians who are not vegan or heavily involved in activism (see Maurer, 2002).

Rather than drawing a sample from a politically homogeneous setting, all participants were part of the student body at a large public university in the Southern United States. The university was employed out of convenience, but the pluralism of a non-social movement setting assured that diverse views were represented. Participants were asked to give referrals to those they knew 'with a similar diet', rather than similar attitudes, which produced a diverse set of responses. The ethical orientations of the participants were in general consistent with one of three views: concern for animals; concern for the environment; and concern for the social conditions of production. This triad of rationales for pro-animal ethics has been previously described in Benton (2003).

While a university may create distortions of its own, the sample was mostly consistent with the demographic profile of American vegetarians as a whole (Maurer, 2002). Twenty-three students and former students gave interviews about their vegetarian diets, of whom 12 were women and 11 were men; men were slightly over-represented in the study relative to the gender distribution of vegetarians nationally. All of the students were white and from working-class or middle-class origins. While there was a fairly clean split between rural and suburban upbringing, nearly all participants came from communities resting right of

centre on the political spectrum. Those interviewed ranged in age from 20 to 25, with a median age of 22.

Participants' interviews were conducted at participants' chosen on-campus locations between March and May of 2008, then recorded and transcribed by the author. The transcripts assigned pseudonyms to the subjects, and removed any sensitive or personally-identifying information. Participants responded to set prompts and dilemmas designed to probe their ethical orientations and patterns of reasoning. For instance, they were asked to describe how they would behave if they were guests at a dinner where meat was being served, or what they might do if they were travelling to another country where it would be rude to refuse meat or difficult to find suitable food. Participants were also asked if they could describe ideal circumstances where meat-eating might be justified, and invited to offer a general statement of personal principles. Some of these scripted questions were adapted from studies by Hamilton (2006) and Templer et al. (2006). Participants also spoke with greater length and less formality about their backgrounds, diets, activities, and relationships with family and friends.

Reactions by others to the adoption of a vegetarian diet were coded along a five point scale, ranging from materially and verbally negative reactions, then verbally negative reactions, indifference, verbally supportive reactions, and verbally and materially supportive reactions. Materially negative reactions included a refusal to purchase suitable food, attempts to coerce or trick participants into eating meat, and physical abuse. In almost all cases, material hostility or approval was accompanied by verbal hostility or approval, while verbal hostility or approval was not necessarily joined to an overt action. This scale was applied to reactions from all family members mentioned by participants, and for peers.

Findings: Paternalism, hostility, and moral resilience

On the whole, there were few significant differences between women and men who participated in the study; considerable variety in diet, behaviour, and background was represented in both groups. However, one important difference emerged: none of the men met with disapproval from family or friends, whereas many women were challenged. Moreover, women were never confronted by other women. They met with disapproval only from family members and friends who were men.

The men in the study reported that other men responded to their change in diet with indifference; fathers and other male family members tended to offer little comment or reaction, and non-vegetarian friends were similarly neutral. Friends who were vegetarians tended to respond positively, as did mothers, who often felt that the diet was healthful and reflected well on their sons' maturity. If friends or family asked about the men's decision, they generally accepted the proffered explanation without debate. None of the men reported a verbally or materially hostile response from a friend or family member.

Women in the study received more ambiguous approval from mothers. Often, mothers helped by buying or cooking special food, but offered only a qualified

endorsement of a vegetarian diet, expressing concerns about health. Moreover, most women met with negative reactions from fathers, brothers, or male friends when starting a vegetarian diet. In some cases, this disapproval was verbal, in the form of argument, mockery, or condemnation. Unlike the men who gave interviews, the women were not pressed on the issue just once – diet often became a point of significant contention, with challenges lasting for months or years.

Abigail: I definitely had tension with some of my guy friends from home. Every time we talked on the phone or saw each other while visiting it would come up.

Ruth: My boyfriend hates the idea, and he won't let it go!

Elizabeth: My brother in law will pick fights with me about it all the time.

Among male family members – fathers or father figures in particular – verbal hostility was often accompanied by material efforts to interfere with the diet, including refusal to buy groceries, threats of punishment, or inclusion of meat in meals:

Laura: My uncles would put turkey on my plate, to see if they could trick me, so it was almost a running joke, but if anything it just made me more defiant.

Pat: My dad and I battled constantly . . . he put meat on my plate [for six years] . . . My brothers made fun of me; my [male] cousins would too. It was a big struggle for a long time.

There are several alternative explanations for such a thoroughly gendered bifurcation of responses. It is possible that the difference owes to chance alone, as the study had a relatively small number of participants. Likewise, it may be that participants made selective disclosures in interviews; men may have opted not to disclose negative responses to a male interviewer, and women could be more likely to emphasize the disapproval of men, rather than women, to a male interviewer. The mothers, sisters, and woman friends of woman participants may also have expressed disapproval in ways that were more subtle and less likely to be discussed in an interview; this disapproval also could have had less emotional salience, and been more easily shrugged off after the fact.

In the United States, women become vegetarians at a much higher rate than men (Maurer, 2002), and empirical research has not yet accounted for this difference. Therefore, it is possible that differing family and peer reactions to vegetarian men and vegetarian women indicate distinct pathways to the adoption of a vegetarian diet. The approbation or indifference conferred upon men may suggest that men are only likely to become vegetarians when they possess a relatively supportive network of friends and family. These are all propositions subject to confirmation or refutation by further study.

While these alternative explanations bear enumeration, the data offer no direct support for them, and such explanations also stray from existing lines of theory on gender and vegetarianism. The most persuasive interpretation of the findings can

be situated within existing debates in feminist theory. Carol Adams (1990) offers a familiar explanation for men's disapproval of the women who participated in the study. For Adams, masculinist culture and the exploitation of non-human animals are inextricably linked by practices of objectification. Both women and non-human animals are objectified, and the subjugation of women is ratified by their figurative and discursive equation with animals and 'meat'. Her theory can thus account not only for hostility to vegetarianism, but also for the link between hostility and emotional intimacy; fathers and boyfriends react most negatively to women participants' adoption of a vegetarian diet, and these are the same people who would have the most 'claim' to authority over women in a patriarchal mindset.

However, Adams' account cannot explain why the vegetarian men in the study were not regarded with similar suspicion; vegetarian men would also be a challenge to patriarchal authority over both women and animals, and could provoke a homophobic reaction due to perceptions that it is effeminate to abstain from meat. Some men participating in the study did report that they met with homophobic epithets, but only from strangers or slight acquaintances. Potts and Parry (2010) similarly find that sexually hostile and homophobic remarks about diet may be directed at strangers.

Adams' account would suggest that meat eating men simply dismiss ethical vegetarianism out of hand, and that hostile responses are direct efforts at domination over women. However, it is possible that hostile men listened to participants' rationale for ethical vegetarianism, but failed to accept them at face value, instead supplementing them with arguments that would call into question the women's capacity for self-determination or the sincerity of their arguments. This could be called a 'soft' rather than a 'hard' paternalism, and it is perhaps more insidious because it is usually not expressed openly.

Major longitudinal studies of vegetarianism suggest that a vegetarian diet is, across all categories of gender and age, significantly healthier than a typical meat-containing diet (Appelby et al., 1999). However, *for women*, vegetarian diets bear the stigma of association with eating disorders and weight control (Gilbody et al., 1999; Worsley and Skrzypiec, 1997). In light of the perceived link, it is possible that men might regard a woman's ethical justification for a vegetarian diet with some scepticism, assuming instead that it is a smokescreen for an effort to lose weight or improve appearance. One father betrayed such feelings:

Rachel: My dad was funny about it – always asking if I wanted something with meat in it when he knew I wasn't eating any. Once he asked 4 times in a matter of 10 minutes and his reasoning was 'I just don't want you to dry up and blow away!'

This unusually blunt statement reveals that the dietary double standard is not based upon gender in itself. Rather, it is a question of health and autonomy, which is to say that it is a question about bodies. Counter to existing theory, parents and relatives regarded men's vegetarianism as a healthful demonstration

of self-command. For women, in contrast, vegetarianism is unhealthy and demonstrates an inability to manage the body. This concern about the body and self-management might explain why those men closest to the participants were the most openly hostile; the opposition is perhaps informed by a genuine concern. This concern nonetheless preserves a fundamental feature of Adams' critique: the hostile men do not respect the validity of women participants' choices, or even their capacity to make life decisions independently. These paternalistic reactions do not necessarily abate as participants prove their commitment to their diet or grow older, suggesting that male friends and family members may regard many of the women in the study as perpetually incapable of autonomy.

Given that men's opposition posed such a radical challenge to the women's self-efficacy, it is of note that hostile reactions were utterly ineffectual. Although such reactions badly strained relationships, none of the women participants were dissuaded – only two compromised their diet at all, and these concessions were only temporary. Because the sample consisted of current vegetarians, it is not possible to say whether or not there are other women who *were* dissuaded by family pressure, and were therefore excluded from the study. However, the resilience of vegetarian diets among study participants suggests that women have considerable individual, basically psychological, resources that enable them to follow their conscience, even when social conditions are unfavourable. It is disappointing, if unsurprising, that young women face a double standard in choosing their diet, yet their persistence suggests that the link between women and animals is not merely one of mutual oppression, but also one of sympathy and mutual aid.

Discussion

The tension between individual agency and deterministic social and economic structure has been central to the feminist debate about vegetarianism. George (2000) offers a feminist critique of ethical vegetarianism, suggesting that it is elitist and coercive to encourage all women to become vegetarian. George offers the still-disputed claim that substantial economic resources and advantages are needed to safely practice a vegetarian diet, in effect reproducing the old exclusions and hierarchies often associated with second wave feminism. Moreover, her argument is culturally specific to Western societies. Lucas (2005) responds by charging George with elitism herself: to assert that ethical vegetarianism is the domain of women with economic and racial privilege is, in effect, to deny that poor or non-White women can have efficacy of conscience. Although the women participating in the study were White, and had access to higher education, they nonetheless dealt with economic and cultural obstacles, along with opposition and suspicion from loved ones. This lends some credence to Lucas' claims about conscience. Although the interplay between the conscience of the individual and socially-imposed constraints remains blurred, it is inspiring to see conscience prevail. However, the ability to surmount external pressure ought not to be used as a justification for coercive or disrespectful arguments.

The academic discourse on ethical vegetarianism has been, to date, theoretical and polemical. Empirical, descriptive study of ethical vegetarianism can contribute a great deal to the discussion, both by revealing the unexpected and lending additional support to what has already been theorized. This study suggests both that women are more likely to be subjected to unwanted pressure when adopting a vegetarian diet, and that they are very likely to stick to their diet despite this pressure. This revises current theory about the linkage between women and non-human animals insofar as it jumbles the implied link between meat and manliness. Previous work has held that meat-eating is a sigil of masculinity, but male respondents indicated that abstention from meat was met with indifference or approval. As expected, women met with hostility in vegetarian practice, but opposition from men is not openly masculinist, nor does it figuratively equate woman and animal. Rather than according with the predictions of prior theories, men's objections are couched in the more elaborate and ramified discourse of paternalism and concern. Women in the study persisted in their diet despite these objections and pressures, affirming the sovereignty of conscience, and suggesting that social structure is by no means the final or determining factor in the actions of the women studied. More empirical investigation is needed to understand the gender dynamics at work in responses to ethical vegetarianism, and to better understand the role of ethical behaviour as a means of individual empowerment.

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