

Veganism as a Cultural Movement: A Relational Approach

ELIZABETH CHERRY

Department of Sociology, University of Georgia, Athens, USA

ABSTRACT *Social movement scholars have long studied actors' mobilization into and continued involvement in social movement organizations. A more recent trend in social movement literature concerns cultural activism that takes place primarily outside of social movement organizations. Here I use the vegan movement to explore modes of participation in such diffuse cultural movements. As with many cultural movements, there are more practicing vegans than there are members of vegan movement organizations. Using data from ethnographic interviews with vegans, this article focuses on vegans who are unaffiliated with a vegan movement organization. The sample contains two distinctive groups of vegans – those in the punk subculture and those who were not – and investigates how they defined and practiced veganism differently. Taking a relational approach to the data, I analyze the social networks of these punk and non-punk vegans. Focusing on discourse, support, and network embeddedness, I argue that maintaining participation in the vegan movement depends more upon having supportive social networks than having willpower, motivation, or a collective vegan identity. This study demonstrates how culture and social networks function to provide support for cultural movement participation.*

KEY WORDS: Vegan, punk, animal rights, cultural movement, social network, social movement

Introduction

As studies of social movements and culture grow, many scholars find that traditional conceptions of social movements have diminishing empirical relevance. Many recent social movements, especially cultural movements, are more loosely defined than preceding movements and do not have conventionally identified adversaries or goals. The vegan movement is a good example: vegans are strict vegetarians who, in addition to not eating meat, fish, or fowl, also do not consume any animal products such as dairy and eggs. Since veganism focuses on eliminating animal products from people's diets and lifestyles, veganism is often considered as only one goal or tactic of the animal rights movement (Munro, 2005). However, veganism itself can be considered a 'post-industrial movement' (Jasper, 1997) or a New Social Movement, according to Melucci's analytic definition: 'a social movement [is] a form of collective action, (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, [and] (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs' (1984, p. 825).

Correspondence Address: Elizabeth Cherry, Department of Sociology, 114 Baldwin Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-1611, USA. Tel.: + 1 (706) 254-5874; Fax: + 1 (706) 542-4320; Email: lcherry@uga.edu

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Despite veganism's close ties to animal rights and environmental movements, there do exist social movement organizations devoted primarily to spreading veganism. With an estimated 1.7 million vegans in the USA, and with vegan movement organizations counting their memberships in the tens of thousands, there are arguably more practicing vegans in the USA than there are members of vegan organizations.¹ These numbers suggest that many vegans who might be engaging in activism or moral protest are not affiliated with any vegan movement organization. Thus it is necessary to consider veganism as a larger, more diffuse movement than organizational membership alone implies. While traditional social movements often define success in terms of legislative changes, veganism, like New Age Travellers (Martin, 2002) and Straight Edge participants (Haenfler, 2004), measures its success in terms of cultural and lifestyle changes. Vegans represent a new form of social movement that is not based on legislation or identity politics, but instead is based on everyday practices in one's lifestyle.

Historically, the study of traditional social movements, and even newer social movements such as veganism, has followed what Emirbayer (1997) terms a substantialist approach. Substantialist thought, as opposed to relational thought, focuses on static, pre-formed entities and rational actors. These entities act under their own powers, independently of all other substances. For example, resource mobilization (Tilly, 1978) bases its inquiry on rational beings acting in their best interest, with an emphasis on purposeful, strategic decisions, and thus constitutes a substantialist approach. More recently, McAdam *et al.* (2001) have declared that the 'classic social movement agenda' of piecing together resource mobilization, political process, and framing is too static and focused on individual actors. They contend that moving to a more relational approach better captures the dynamism of contentious politics and social movements.

Not only do classic theories of social movements focus on individual factors, but previous studies of vegans also use substantialist reasoning to explain veganism. Willetts studied food practices in London, and found that 66 percent of her vegetarian and vegan respondents incorporated meat into their diets. She explained their meat eating by saying that their 'guard was momentarily down', which often occurred after an evening of drinking (1997, p. 116). More often, scholars attribute adherence to veganism to epiphanic moments – participants who had an 'epiphany' experience were more consistent in their diet, while those who did not have such an experience were more lenient in their practices (Pestello, 1995; McDonald, 2000).

This reliance on individual explanations is insufficient for explaining veganism and other cultural movements whose success is predicated on major lifestyle changes. As the sustained practice of veganism represents one such measure of success, I studied this movement by interviewing twenty-four vegans. Though all of them self-identified as vegan, I found that, among the participants, there were two different ways of defining and practicing veganism. About half of the respondents adhered to the Vegan Society definition of veganism and practiced veganism according to that definition.² The other half created and abided by personal, idiosyncratic definitions of veganism, which were considerably less strict and often included dairy products or honey.

What could explain these inconsistent definitions and practices within this sample of self-identified vegans? Adhering to the norms of a social movement organization is a possible explanation for only two of the participants, since the vast majority of these participants – all but two – were not members of any local or national vegan movement organization (termed here 'unaffiliated' vegans). In addition to the fact that, in the USA,

unaffiliated vegans vastly outnumber vegans affiliated with a vegan movement organization, the success of the movement relies on individuals making lifestyle changes. Consequently, explaining the differing practices of these unaffiliated vegans is vital to understanding the vegan movement and other similar cultural movements.

But these differences were not the only compelling sociological paradox found in this sample – the different practices and definitions of these unaffiliated vegans also corresponded to the participants' subcultural affiliations. The strict vegans were all punks, and the participants with more lenient definitions and practices were all not punks. One could attempt a facile explanation by attributing the strict practices of the punks to the oppositional norms of the punk subculture, but this argument is incomplete as there are many more non-vegan punks than vegan punks.

Thus it appears that simply having a collective identity (Melucci, 1995) of vegan is not enough to encourage a uniform definition and practice of veganism. Equally insufficient would be a substantialist interpretation that attributes these participants' actions to individual strength and willpower. Perhaps the answer does lie with the participants' subcultural affiliation, but not in terms of strict norm following. In what follows I attempt to explain these variations by taking a relational approach to the data and arguing that these differences in definitions and practices can be attributed to differences in the punks' and non-punks' social networks. Three main aspects of their social networks – discourse, support, and network embeddedness – will demonstrate that maintaining a vegan lifestyle is not dependent on individual willpower, epiphanies, or simple norm following; it is more dependent on having social networks that are supportive of veganism.

Relational Approaches to Collective Action

In his manifesto of relational sociology, Emirbayer (1997) distinguishes between substantialist and relational thought, and deems the choice between the two modes of thought as the newest paradigm of sociology. Substantialist thought considers social actors as pre-formed entities who act rationally in specific situations. Relational thought, in contrast, describes aspects and phases of action, without attributing action to outside entities. These approaches embed the social actor in dynamic, processual relationships that shift over space and time.

One can trace the progress towards relational thought in the field of social movements through the prevailing paradigms of social movement theory: resource mobilization theory (Tilly, 1978) is based on the idea of rational actors performing in their best interests, and is linked to the norm-following neo-Kantian aspects of substantialist thought. Political process (McAdam, 1982) begins to move beyond substantialism in that it includes such dynamic features as cognitive liberation, which links humans to ideas. Framing (Snow & Benford, 1988), though, provides the bridge to relational approaches to social movements, as demonstrated below.

In his critique of frame analysis, Steinberg (1998) reveals the discursive foundations of framing, noting that in Bakhtin's work language is not composed of fixed signifiers. Instead, its meaning is produced through 'a dynamic social process that always has the potential for shift' (Steinberg, 1998, p. 852). Further, ideological meaning and consciousness are located 'not within us, but between us' (Steinberg, 1998, p. 852). Steinberg believes that this perspective recognizes the discursive fields in which the framing process takes place. Through a dialogue of symbols and meanings, social actors

develop collective discursive repertoires, which they use to collectively diagnose a social problem and advise a specific route for social change.

Discourse can be integral to relational analyses of social movements, as Mische and White state that ‘discourse is the stuff of social networks’ (1998, p. 695). They argue that social networks and discursive processes would be better understood by focusing on mediating factors such as the Habermasian concept of ‘publics’, which are essential to developing conversation as a specific type of social discourse. Here I favor Ikegami’s (2001) concept of publics, as she theorizes that publics emerge at the temporary intersection of two network domains, when two networks overlap. Publics facilitate network switching, and the dynamics of network switching produce the ‘interanimation’ of talk and ties (Mische & White, 1998). These interactions are socially charged and have a mobilizing force, and thus are necessary to analyze when studying mobilization and participation in social movements.

Emirbayer (1997) and Diani (2003) point out, though, that relational approaches to collective action are nothing new. Many scholars have studied ties between prospective participants in social movements (Tilly, 1978; Snow *et al.*, 1980) as well as social movements as networks themselves (Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Curtis & Zurcher, 1973), but current research has grown in both volume and topic. More recent network analyses of social movements link embeddedness in social networks to identity construction (Somers, 1992; Passy, 2003), identity salience (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Melucci, 1996; Passy, 2003), and higher intensity and commitment in participation (Passy, 2001, 2003).

In addition to an increase in the range of topics studied and the depth of results, the methods employed for studying social networks have also broadened. While traditional network analyses rely on sophisticated statistical methods, certain scholars are calling for more qualitative analyses of the inner workings of such social networks (McAdam, 2003; Passy, 2003). In doing so, researchers should strive to show how networks operate rather than simply showing that social ties and collective action are linked.

Methods and Participants

I based this study on twenty-four in-depth interviews with self-defined vegans in two college towns in the southeastern USA. The interviews were semi-structured ethnographic interviews, lasting ninety minutes to two hours. I asked participants about how they learned about veganism, their definition of veganism, their reasons for being vegan, how they practiced veganism, their interactions with (vegan and non-vegan) friends and family, and their cultural consumption.

I recruited participants in three main ways: I began with convenience sampling by posting fliers in three health food stores, which garnered six interviews. Nine other respondents were people whom I already knew to be vegan. I located the final nine respondents through snowball sampling, mainly from other interviewees. There was a total of ten female respondents and fourteen male respondents, whose ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-two, with a median age of twenty-three.

Upon transcription, I analyzed the interviews using grounded theory (Charmaz, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Though many themes arose from this inductive method, the most theoretically interesting was the empirical puzzle of the differing definitions and practices that corresponded to participants’ subcultural affiliation. These differences, as well as the comparative aspect of this study, emerged from the analysis and were not incorporated

into the sampling or data gathering – participants were recruited based upon their self-identification as vegans, regardless of their organizational or subcultural affiliations.

Before presenting the analysis, I need to provide a brief explanation of the terms I will use throughout the paper to describe the participants. This paper focuses on the twenty-two participants who were unaffiliated with a vegan movement organization, though half of them were affiliated with the punk subculture.³ Thus to describe the unaffiliated vegans in this analysis, I use the terms ‘punk’ and ‘non-punk’. The emic definition of punk, as used by these participants, may help explain the link between veganism and the punk subculture. For these respondents, and for many young punks, punk describes a state of mind and a willingness to change society more than a sartorial display. This is accomplished through a DIY ethic, characterized by independent bands, record labels, and book presses, as well as a politically progressive way of living. Though many scholars have focused on the stylistic rebellion of punk (Hebdige, 1979; Fox, 1987; Muggleton, 2000), others have noted the larger cultural and political resistance espoused by many punks (McKay, 1996; O’Hara, 1999). Since the anarchist band Crass espoused animal rights and vegetarianism (McKay, 1996), many more punk bands sing about animal rights and veganism, and the topics are often discussed in punk zines (Duncombe, 1997).⁴

By using the heuristic terms ‘punk’ and ‘non-punk’ I do not wish to insinuate that non-punks were as coherent a group as the punks. The non-punks were composed of people who might self-identify as a member of many different types of subcultures. However, all the respondents who were not punk responded similarly to the interview questions. Therefore, although they were not of one coherent subculture, they all practiced veganism in similar ways and they were all not punks. It also should be clarified that punks and non-punks were not two groups pitted against each other, like the Mods and the Rockers of 1960s England. They were two groups which, in this case, had different ways of practicing veganism.

Definitions and Practices

As mentioned above, the differing definitions and eating practices of these participants, as well as the emergence of the two divergent groups of punks and non-punks, arose during the data analysis. These differences are summarized in Table 1. In this section I will explore the definitions and practices of punk and non-punk vegans, before moving on to an analysis of their social networks.

Table 1. Punk and non-punk vegans’ definitions and practices

	Punk vegans	Non-punk vegans
Definitions	Collectively constructed Based on Vegan Society definition Known to punks and non-punks Unchanging	Subjectively constructed Based on individual food preferences Known only to the individual Change with time, place, and person
Practices	Animal products never acceptable	Continuum of acceptability of animal products Eat certain animal products, based on individual definition of veganism

Though this paper focuses on unaffiliated vegans, it is essential to note the similarities between affiliated and certain unaffiliated vegans in order to understand the implications of social networks to diffuse and unorganized movements. Only two participants (Bronwyn and Meredith, both non-punk) were members of vegan movement organizations. Both women maintained strict definitions and practices of veganism, similar to the punks in this study. Meredith said of her veganism, 'I try to follow really specifically what the Vegan Society says that veganism should entail.' Bronwyn was a member of almost ten vegan organizations, and had even attended a few national conferences:

I like going to those conferences because for once I feel like I'm surrounded by people, I'm more relaxed and I feel I can say exactly what I'm thinking and not worry that I'm offending someone. And just surrounded by like-minded people. And I always found it so difficult to go back to work after these conferences and be among regular society and have them bring me down off cloud nine.

Bronwyn said she found support for her veganism at these conferences and though she described the strict demarcation of the 'normal world' to the conferences she attended, it seemed that her active participation with these groups positively affected her veganism. Bronwyn's experience echoes Maurer's thesis that vegetarian organizations are essential for successful vegetarian practices: 'Vegetarian organizations, despite their lack of public visibility, are the backbone of the vegetarian way of life' (Maurer, 2002, p. 2). However, Maurer seems to overstate the importance of these formal organizations. The punk vegans in this study were unaffiliated with any movement organization, yet they all adhered to strict definitions and practices, as did the affiliated vegans. Thus movement organizations do not account for all successful cultural movement activity, which is why it is necessary to study the activism of unaffiliated participants, such as these punk and non-punk vegans.

Punk vegans adhered to the Vegan Society definition and were frustrated when other vegans did not. Many punk vegans described knowing people who called themselves vegan but who ate fish, dairy products, or eggs. They said that while they understood that not everyone could be as strictly vegan as they might be, lenient definitions and practices only harmed other vegans. Ralph (punk) depicted the value of strict definitions and practices:

I have friends who call themselves vegetarian, but they eat fish, too. And it frustrates me a little bit, because people go to a restaurant and say, 'I'm a vegetarian.' 'Oh, you eat chicken.' 'No, I'm a vegetarian.' 'Oh, you eat fish.' 'No, I'm a vegetarian, I don't eat any meat.' 'Okay, so you don't eat flesh, but it's okay if you have chicken stock or beef stock.' You know? And I think people who call themselves vegetarian and eat these certain things, or people who call themselves vegan and eat these certain things, it makes it hard for those people who are actually really strict about the definitions to try to go out.

Non-punk vegans, in contrast, constructed idiosyncratic, personal definitions of veganism. In doing so, they maintained their vegan identity, even while eating non-vegan food. Almost every non-punk respondent cited certain non-vegan items that they allowed themselves to eat, all while considering themselves vegan. Stuart (non-punk) explained his definition of veganism and how it related to his vegan identity:

I understand that the vegan, the true vegan, they do not even partake in any animal products, not even bees' honey. So from time to time, I can call myself a true vegan. But milk is my only deviation from a true vegan. I consider myself vegan because their philosophy is that they don't believe in cruelty to animals. And my main philosophy is that I don't believe that we should be in any way bothering God's creatures. Of course, drinking milk deviates from that a little bit.

Stuart realized his behavior deviated from what he and others considered to be a 'true vegan'. He did not rely on his behavior to define himself as vegan, though. He used his religious philosophy as the backbone of his vegan identity, even if his practices did not always reflect that philosophy. Both punk and non-punk vegans knew and referred to the Vegan Society definition of veganism, which excludes all animal products. Punk vegans tended to adhere to that definition in practice, but non-punk vegans often deviated from that definition yet still called themselves vegan.

How strictly one practiced veganism was directly related to one's definition of veganism. Substantialist interpretations of these differing definitions and practices of veganism would define these vegans as rational actors and would attribute their actions to individual strength or willpower. Even vegans sometimes called on individual willpower to explain veganism. For example, Andrea (punk) used willpower to explain why some people are not vegan: 'I think most vegetarians think it's pretty cool that I'm vegan. They just don't have the willpower to do it themselves, but I think they think that it's good that other people are.' The idea of willpower, or even arguing that these vegans are following the norms of the vegan or punk subculture, are inadequate arguments to account for punk and non-punk vegans' different practices.

Though promising and somewhat applicable to this problem, Melucci's (1995) concept of collective identity falls short of explaining these different definitions and practices. In Haenfler's (2004) study of the Straight Edge movement, collective identity adequately explained participants in that diffuse movement because his participants all defined and practiced Straight Edge in a similar way. Collective identity was the bastion that encouraged commitment to the 'essential behaviors' of a Straight Edge lifestyle (Haenfler, 2004, p. 794). In this study, every participant cited the Vegan Society definition as the authoritative definition of veganism, making the elimination of animal products from one's lifestyle an 'essential behavior' for a vegan. However, despite the fact that all of these participants claimed an individual vegan identity, and they all spoke of a collective vegan identity in a way very similar to Haenfler's participants, half of these vegans ate non-vegan food. This discrepancy leads me to believe that collective identity is important, but not sufficient, for maintaining participation in a diffuse social movement such as veganism. In what follows I take a relational approach to this phenomenon and argue that maintaining a vegan lifestyle is not dependent on individual strength, subcultural norms, or collective identity. Instead, maintaining a vegan lifestyle depends upon having strong social networks that are supportive of veganism.

Discourse

The first half of this section examines relationships between punk vegans as well as discourse within the punk subculture, to show how these social networks helped create a discursive repertoire that aided punk vegans to frame their social world in a way that was

supportive of their veganism. The punks in this analysis were all members of the punk subculture before they became vegan. Once they became punks, the subculture provided them with information on veganism, examples of other vegans, and possibly the impetus to go vegan. The connection of punks to the subculture was not only with the music or the membership but was also with the more abstract political ideals that the subculture promotes. This ideological link partially fills a gap in network analysis described by Emirbayer and Goodwin, who argue that social networks are typically ‘conceptualized as linking “concrete” identities such as persons and organizations, rather than as also embodying ideals, discursive frameworks, and “cognitive maps”’ (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994, p. 1427).

The ideological link to subcultural ideals does not mean that the music itself is not important. Rather, many of the respondents in this study first learned of veganism by listening to vegan bands or reading the liner notes in their albums. One even became vegan after hearing a speech on veganism at the end of a punk album. The discourse of the punk bands in their songs, in their liner notes, and in zines can all influence punks to become vegan or reinforce their current veganism.

However, many punks said that listening to pro-vegan music in isolation was not a sufficient catalyst for them to become vegan. Simply having information does not necessitate an ideological shift or a behavioral change. For example, Jason said that when he was in high school, he and his friends started listening to punk music and became vegetarian, but they had no idea of how to be vegan until they started attending punk concerts and meeting other punk vegans. Jason evidenced how his veganism benefited from interaction and dialogue with other punk vegans:

That’s another big thing too, is you go to the shows, and you meet people at the shows, and you realize, that’s when we realized that veganism is a really big thing. It was pretty amazing. You just meet people like, ‘You know this record?’ ‘Yeah, I know that record.’ ‘Have you read this?’ ‘No, have you read this?’ And you can talk about different books that you’ve read about veganism and share different ideas about the recycling of information and just getting ideas back and forth. When you’re interacting with other people, and even when you talk about it, like when you become verbal and vocal about it, it makes you think about why you’re doing it. And then you hear why someone else is doing it, and it just concretes your ideas and makes you have more faith in what you’re doing instead of just being alone and thinking about it in the quiet.

Jason and his friends met other punk vegans and used the information they obtained from records and books in dialogue with the other group. Two previously separate social networks intersected, brought together by the punk and vegan subcultures. This type of interaction is what Ikegami calls a ‘public’. She states that even a book can form a public, but an individual must interact agentically with that book to turn it into a public (Ikegami, 2001, p. 1002). Jason and his friends created such a public when they discussed veganism, music, and books with other punk vegans.

The creation of this public, this overlap of social networks, was likely a critical moment in the formation of Jason’s vegan identity. Mische and White (1998) define what occurred in this public encounter as a situation, when the ‘interanimation of talk and ties’ created a high-stakes encounter that put the social actors’ existing roles into question.

Though the outcome of this situation could have been negative, for Jason, these encounters had a positive outcome in that they sustained and reinforced his vegan identity and ideology. As in Steinberg's (1998, 1999) work on discourse and framing, Jason and the other punk vegans created a discursive repertoire, constructing a set of common meanings of veganism that help them understand the world. Through such interactions, their interpretations of social problems came to be seen through a vegan frame, and their solution to those social problems, in the form of veganism, was strengthened.

Since the punk subculture relies on communitarian methods (e.g. zines and distros) to regenerate itself, there is more dialogue between bands and fans than in more commercial music.⁵ If a fan writes a letter to a commercial pop singer, she will usually receive a form letter or a glossy photo in return. In the punk subculture, interaction with bands is encouraged. Seymour wrote his favorite band to ask if they were vegan, and they responded with a lengthy letter describing their views on animal rights and human rights. These interactions often enhanced the appreciation of the music, as when Ralph described learning that a band he liked was vegan. In contrast to many bands who sing about veganism, Ralph did not learn they were vegan from their lyrics:

And I like [their music] more because of the social awareness . . . they have one song called 'Eat a Lot of Tofu,' but they don't really have a lot of songs that talk about the ethical reasons to be vegan. But I've seen them enough times and I've talked to them enough to know that that's something that they're into.

The above examples depict punk vegans entering into dialogue with other punk vegans or vegan bands, often with the result of strengthening their belief in veganism. It is this interanimation of talk and ties that provides interactions with a 'social charge' and 'mobilizing force' (Mische & White, 1998), and thus make analyzing these situations necessary to understand continued activism in diffuse cultural movements.

Having positively experienced the 'mobilizing force' of these interactions, many punk vegans set out to engage others in dialogue on the subject of veganism and animal rights. Josh promoted veganism by being in a band and writing songs about veganism and animal rights, David hosted punk shows and vegan potlucks, and Andrea wrote a zine and ran a distro. By promoting vegan ideals through the punk subculture, and by interacting with other punk vegans, these punk vegans created publics and frameworks of belief through which they and other punks understood the world.

Non-punk vegans had a different discursive experience than punk vegans. While punks created collective discursive frameworks in publics, non-punks rarely discussed veganism with other vegans. The main reason for this, most said, is that they simply did not know any other vegans. Therefore, much of the discussion of veganism consisted of non-punk vegans defending their diet or explaining veganism to non-vegans.

Another major difference was that while punk vegans learned of veganism through the punk subculture, most non-punks learned about veganism from informational pamphlets. Reading pamphlets or books was an enlightening experience for these non-punks, but they did not dialogically take their interaction beyond the book to form a public, as the punks did. Steph learned about veganism from reading a PETA pamphlet and a book on veganism. However, she did not interact with other vegans in the same way the punks did. She said she did not know any vegans, but 'there was a girl in my Hebrew class who was vegan. But she didn't talk about it, I just knew. From when we had Hebrew cookouts and

stuff. She always brought her own food.' While the punks looked for opportunities to discuss veganism with others, Steph and her classmate never discussed their veganism with one another, even in a likely salient situation involving food. Most non-punks said they did not know any other vegans, thus such opportunities for discussion were infrequent. In one rare case, Alicia, her roommate, and her boyfriend all became vegan together, after reading a Vegan Outreach pamphlet:

When I became vegan it was very easy because my roommate was vegan and my boyfriend was vegan, and the friend, well, he became vegan, like we became vegan on the same day. One of our friends who went with us to the rally became vegan. It was very, lots of discussion about it helped a lot, because we were all in it together. And then, now I'm the only one left, I think.

While citing these discussions as helpful, they did not provide enough support for Alicia's friends to maintain a vegan lifestyle. These non-punks did not create discursive frameworks for understanding the world, and they never experienced the same interanimation of talk and ties that the punks did. The social networks of punk and non-punk vegans offered opportunities for different types of discourse on veganism. Punks discussed veganism with other vegans and reinforced their beliefs, while non-punks defended and explained veganism to non-vegans, or simply did not discuss it at all.

Support

In her study of the vegetarian movement, Maurer (2002) claims that local and national vegetarian organizations provide the necessary social support for vegetarians and vegans, who lead a deviant dietary lifestyle. Vegan movement organizations did seem to provide support for the two affiliated participants, but such organizations played a much smaller role in the veganism of the twenty-two unaffiliated participants. If these unaffiliated vegans did not find support in such organizations, they must have found it elsewhere.

Punk vegans received support from their friends and the punk subculture. This support included becoming vegan together, helping backsliding friends become stricter vegans again, listening to vegan bands and buying their records specifically because they are vegan, and having vegan potlucks with the band before a punk show. Josh described the importance of a supportive network to becoming vegan and helping backsliding vegans:

When I finally decided I was going to be vegan I talked to one of my friends and he was vegetarian at the time and we were like, 'We should be vegan, we really need to do it.' We kinda made a pact to go vegan, like 'Let's do it! We're going to do it.' So we did it, and a couple of our friends that were kinda being slack on being vegan, we were like, 'Come on, you have to do it.' And they followed a little bit later. So it was a personal decision, but I guess it probably wasn't at first. I mean, it helps to do it in a group. Not letting other people think for you, but it's easier if you have kinda like a support system.

Not just other punks, but punk shows also acted as a support for veganism. Punk shows often began with a vegan potluck, after which the bands played, and then they sold merchandise and distributed vegan and animal rights literature. David described his

experience with local punk shows and veganism by saying ‘A lot of the punk scene is vegan. I don’t know if that is as widespread in the world punk scene as it is here, but here there are a lot of vegans. For a lot of the shows we’ll have a vegan potluck.’ These punk vegans were supported by their social networks within the punk subculture, including friends, bands, and shows. They did not find support from conventional animal rights or vegan organizations, of which no punks were members.

The unaffiliated non-punk vegans also did not find support from national or local organizations, but, unlike the punks, very few had the support of vegan friends. Steph, Amy, and Jonas were the only non-punk vegans who shared close social networks.⁶ Jonas practiced veganism more strictly than Steph and Amy, but his practices did not appear to influence the women to be stricter vegans. Rather than providing support in a manner that encouraged strict veganism and discouraged backsliding, Steph and Amy seemed to provide social support for each other to eat non-vegan food:

Amy and I last week, I don’t know what was wrong with us, it must have been hormones, we went on a cheese binge. We went and spent \$40 on cheese because it was the expensive, healthy, happy cheese. And we were like ‘cheese cheese cheese cheese cheese!’ And I got the worst allergies, and I was all constipated, and it was like, oh, why did I do that? It was like a dairy hangover. (Steph)

Despite having close social networks that included other vegans, Steph and Amy practiced a lenient form of veganism. Thus it seems that in order to maintain vegan practices, it is indeed important to have other vegans in one’s social networks, but there can also be a cultural difference in the type of support found in those social networks. That is, there are both relational and cultural differences in the social networks of these punk and non-punk vegans. While the punks found support for veganism in their everyday lives through friends or music, the non-punks did not have such support, or had support that did not encourage them to maintain a strict vegan lifestyle.

Network Embeddedness

As McAdam (1986, 1988) evinces in his studies of dropouts from the 1964 Freedom Summer projects, it is not the ‘push’ variables such as individual motivation that drive actors to continue to participate in social movements, it is the ‘pull’ factors found in social network embeddedness that determine continual action. This section compares punk and non-punk vegans across their embeddedness in social networks to show how actors in the two groups entered into and maintained a vegan lifestyle, and to demonstrate how that network embeddedness affected their social world. To measure punks’ embeddedness in social networks, I analyzed their descriptions of their friends and the punk subculture, their interactions with other vegans, as well as any instances of the punk vegans replacing conventional dietary norms with vegan-friendly norms.⁷

The strongest example of punk vegans’ embeddedness in a supportive social network was that nine of the eleven said that most of their friends were vegan or, as many said, ‘at least vegetarian’. Josh stated that at one point all of his friends were vegan:

For a long time, all my friends were vegan. It got to the point where it was shocking to see someone eating meat. We were totally taken aback, like ‘That kid’s drinking

milk! What is he thinking?’ Like what people say when you say you’re vegan, but in reverse. ‘Wow, you drink milk and stuff. Wow, that’s odd. Why on earth would you do that? Don’t you know?’

Knowing vegan friends was important to these punk vegans, but knowing vegetarians was not as essential to them. When asked whether any of her friends were vegan or vegetarian, Andrea stated ‘I know who’s vegan, but I don’t know who’s vegetarian. But I think most of my friends probably are vegetarian, at least.’

If punk vegans did not already have many vegan friends, it seemed relatively easy to make new vegan friends. Seven of the eleven punk respondents described having more in common with other vegans, or feeling a certain affinity or connection with other vegans, even if meeting them for the first time. Andrea said, ‘It’s funny whenever I meet somebody vegan, there’s always a really close connection and you get close to them really fast just because of the vegan thing.’ Similarly, David replied, ‘I’m stoked when I meet another vegan, definitely. There’s an affinity, I’m more likely to just talk to someone if I find out.’

Having a majority of vegan friends, or having a perceived or actual connection with other vegans, could shape punk vegans’ social world to the point where they created a new set of norms. When these newly created norms surrounding animal rights and food replaced the dominant cultural norms they manifested themselves in assumptions. Six of the eleven punks made at least one assumption of other people based on their immersion in vegan-friendly social networks. For example, Lucian and Katie assumed that people who supported animal rights and who were punk were vegan. Ralph became frustrated whenever he ate at restaurants where the wait staff could not recommend vegan items: ‘You just assume they’re in tune with this stuff.’ David was surprised to learn that some of his co-workers ate meat: ‘Working at a vegetarian restaurant, probably a third of the people there eat meat. Who knew? I just assumed when I started that they would be vegetarian.’

As shown in the previous two sections, non-punks did not have many vegan friends and did not have social networks that were supportive of veganism. If they did not have the necessary pull factors to stay vegan, how did they maintain their veganism? Some of the non-punks had, at one time, been involved in social groups that were loosely associated with veganism or vegetarianism – Roger had attended potlucks at the local natural foods co-op, Para had lived in a vegetarian monastery, and Charles had worked with Food Not Bombs, an international group that serves vegan food to the homeless. While these organizations may have provided a social world that was supportive of veganism, these non-punks’ participation in those groups was short lived. This temporary participation could not substitute for the everyday support provided by a group of vegan friends.

Although some non-punks said they felt a ‘special bond’ with other vegans, others eschewed special relationships with other vegans. Charles speculated, ‘I certainly have friends who are vegan, but who are they? It’s interesting that I can’t really pick them out. For me, it’s not really important to know.’ In direct contrast to Andrea, who knew only which of her friends were vegan but not who were vegetarian, Charles did not know and did not think it important to know which of his friends were vegan.

Non-punk vegans also displayed no signs of replacing conventional dietary norms with vegan-friendly norms. Though they valorized a vegan lifestyle, they often viewed their veganism as a deviant dietary lifestyle, in a way similar to dominant cultural norms. When non-punk vegans did create new vegan norms, they normalized their loose practices of

veganism. For example, Sasha and Amy said that they thought that all other vegans ‘cheat every once in a while’, like them. Thus again, punks and non-punks were embedded in social networks that were differentially supportive of veganism. Punk vegans were embedded in supportive social networks to the extent that they replaced conventional norms with subcultural norms, but most non-punks were embedded in social networks that were unsupportive of veganism.

Discussion

In this paper I have attempted to demonstrate the functioning and importance of social networks to lifestyle movements, especially to unaffiliated and unorganized participants. Using unaffiliated vegans as the case study, I showed supportive social networks to be invaluable to maintaining a vegan lifestyle and thus to sustaining the vegan movement. Previous studies of vegans defined veganism as a solitary practice that requires individual willpower, but these substantialist approaches were inappropriate for explaining the differing definitions and practices of the unaffiliated punk and non-punk vegans in this study. By approaching this problem with a relational framework, this study showed that the differences in definitions and practices depended on having social networks that were supportive of veganism.

Taking a relational approach to activism is necessary to understand participation in diffuse cultural movements. Since the success of the vegan movement is predicated on maintaining lifestyle changes in practice and not just in identity, sociologists need to study the relational mechanisms that help sustain vegan practices. Studying social networks is also important to understand what seems to be an estrangement between affiliated and unaffiliated movement participants. Bronwyn, one of the two affiliated vegans in this study, attended a presentation of this work. As I described the punk subculture and its link to veganism, she reacted with astonishment, saying, ‘I had no idea that punks were vegan. Why don’t we know each other?’ Despite her intense participation in traditionally organized vegan and animal rights organizations, she did not realize that veganism is a large part of the contemporary punk subculture. This disconnect between organized and unorganized participants seems detrimental to the vegan movement, since a large number of sympathetic individuals are not participating in movement organizations. However, it could have a positive spin in that, as Haenfler (2004) speculates in relation to Straight Edge participants, more people could be participating in this cultural movement than percentages of affiliated participants suggest.

Concerning relational approaches to social movements, many scholars have called for more qualitative approaches to show how networks and culture interact: ‘What we need is a more dynamic conception in which social networks are seen not merely as locations for, or conduits of, cultural formations, but rather as *composed of* culturally constituted processes of communicative interaction’ (Mische, 2003, p. 258, emphasis in original). This study represents one such attempt, but this work could also advance theoretical conceptions of the relationship between discourse, networks, and culture.

Relational analysis does not only investigate the interaction patterns within a group but also emphasizes networks and culture as social structure. Following Giddens (1984), Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) see culture as structured, and they argue that cultural structures can be both constraining and enabling to human action. On the one hand, cultural structures can constrain actors by ‘blocking out certain possibilities for action’ or

by 'preventing certain arguments from being articulated in public discourse or, once articulated, from being favorably interpreted by others or even understood' (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994, p. 1440). On the other hand, these same cultural structures can enable actors 'by ordering their understandings of the social world and of themselves, by constructing their identities, goals, and aspirations, and by rendering certain issues significant or salient and others not' (1994, p. 1441). In the face of these promising theoretical frameworks, Steinberg (2002) critiques that 'although a number of analysts recently have emphasized that cultural practices have a constraining and enabling duality, this is rarely demonstrated' (2002, p. 210).

Vegans are an ideal case for demonstrating the constraining and enabling aspects of cultural structures, especially when one can compare across differing social networks. By comparing the social networks of unaffiliated punk and non-punk vegans, this work has shown that the cultural and dialogical practices within these two groups' social networks enabled punk vegans to maintain a stricter practice than non-punk vegans. Punk shows, records, zines, and song lyrics provided support for the punks' strict veganism. The non-hierarchical structure of the punk subculture, which encouraged dialogue between punks and bands, created high-stakes, mobilizing situations that encouraged and reinforced vegan activism. But outside the punks' social networks, in dominant American culture, certain arguments such as veganism are rarely articulated in public discourse, thus inhibiting the influence of those arguments. Consequently, non-punk vegans' practices were constrained by the dominant cultural discourses against veganism, just as they were inhibited by their largely non-vegan social networks. Further, even when non-punk vegans had social networks that included other vegans, their social networks enabled backsliding rather than strict vegan practices, because these non-punk vegans envisioned all vegans as having loose definitions and practices.

These differences in discourse, culture, and networks have theoretical implications for diffuse cultural movements. Without implying a falsely facile process, social movement organizations provide a structure within which networks and culture interact to create empowering forces such as collective identities. In their formal and informal operations, social movement organizations often actively attempt to facilitate such processes in order to encourage movement participation. But in cultural movements such as veganism, where many participants are not members of movement organizations, informal processes play a greater part in continual movement participation. To ensure the success of movements that rely upon maintaining cultural and lifestyle changes, unaffiliated participants need support for their activism, which can be found in culture and social networks. With the growth of newer social movements that focus on cultural change, social movements increasingly include activists who are not members of social movement organizations. In order to understand these movements, social scientists must investigate how informal processes such as culture and social networks operate to provide support for cultural movement participation.

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Notes

1. These data are taken from Roper polls conducted by the Vegetarian Resource Group and from personal communication with group leaders on membership numbers (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2005).
2. The Vegan Society definition states that 'A vegan eats a plant-based diet free from all animal products, including milk, eggs, and honey. Most vegans do not wear leather, wool, or silk' (Vegan Society, 2005).
3. Of the unaffiliated participants, there were eleven punks and eleven non-punks. There were three punk women and eight punk men, and there were five non-punk women and six non-punk men.
4. Zines, from the words 'magazine' and 'fanzine', are DIY magazines that are usually handwritten and photocopied. Zines cover almost any topic, but many punk zines include interviews with or reviews of bands and shows, political writings, and often discussions of veganism and animal rights. Some punks have made 'cookzines', which include vegan recipes accompanied by suggested punk albums to listen to while cooking.
5. Distros, from the word 'distribution', are DIY catalogues for punk records, books, and sometimes clothing.
6. I found Steph through a co-worker, and then Steph introduced me to Amy and Jonas, who were married.
7. This practice has also been explored in criminology. Sutherland (1939) developed the concept of differential association, which says that deviance is learned, normative behavior. In the process of differential association, the individual replaces one set of norms with others, in which the deviant behavior is acceptable.

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Elizabeth Cherry is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, USA. Her dissertation is a cross-cultural analysis of the animal rights movements in France and the USA.

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