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Veganism as status passage
The process of becoming a vegan among youths in Sweden

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Abstract

In a town in northern Sweden, 3.3% of the 15-year-old adolescents were vegans in 1996. This study describes the process of becoming a vegan among adolescents and interprets the informants' descriptions by constructing categories, which later on were related to relevant theories. Group interviews were conducted with three vegans and in-depth interviews were performed with three other vegan adolescents. The methodology was grounded theory and the adolescents' perceptions were analyzed in the framework of symbolic interactionism. Three types of vegans were identified: the Conformed Vegan, the Organized Vegan, and the Individualistic Vegan. The decision to become a vegan was reported to be influenced by perceived internal reasons such as ethics, health, distaste for meat, and preference for vegetarian food. In addition, friends, family, school, media, and music influenced the decision to become a vegan. The perceived consequences of becoming a vegan were positive as well as negative and differed between the three types of vegans. Veganism as a new type of status passage with specific characteristics was illustrated. No modifications or new properties were discovered that add to the theory of status passage which indicates that the general model is applicable also in a vegan context.

Keywords: Vegan; Adolescents; Status passage

Introduction

Vegetarians eat foods from the plant kingdom including or excluding dairy products, eggs, fish and/or poultry (Larsson, Klock, Nordrehaug Åstrøm, Haugejorden, & Johansson, 2001). Vegans are the most extreme type of vegetarians eating only plant foods and no animal products whatsoever. The practice of eating diets composed largely of vegetables and grains, even when other food products are available, began in ancient times (Dwyer, 1994). The reasons were primarily philosophical and not scientific, economic, or practical. From ancient times to the present, several philosophical and religious groups have advocated vegetarian diets for philosophical as well as health reasons. One lifestyle-philosophy, called Straight Edge, was developed during the 1980s and originated from the punk movement. Straight Edge emphasizes animal liberation, freedom from drugs, and vegetarianism (Larsson & Johansson, 1997). This lifestyle-philosophy became very popular among Swedish adolescents in the 1990s, especially in the city of Umeå. Music groups expressed the Straight Edge philosophy in the lyrics of their hardcore music. There was an increased interest in vegetarianism among young people, and in 1996, 16% of the 15-year-old adolescents in Umeå had become vegetarians and 3.3% of those were vegans (Larsson et al., 2001). Much has been written about adult vegetarianism and its health aspects, but less about adolescent veganism and the perceived meaning of becoming a vegan among adolescents. In a study of the experiences of individuals who adopt vegetarianism, two types of vegetarians were identified, health- and ethical vegetarians (Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998). It was also shown that the process of adopting a vegetarian diet might occur gradually or abruptly. For many vegetarians, the practice of not eating animal products encompassed more than just dietary behavior and it often became an important aspect of their identity (Jabs, Sobal, & Devine, 2000).

Socialization is a process that allows individuals to adopt norms, values, and rules that will be accepted in the group of which they are or will become members (Wentworth, 1980). Primary socialization takes place during childhood when norms and values are transmitted within the family. Secondary socialization follows primary socialization and is characterized by influences from outside the family unit (Grbich, 1990). The symbolic interactionist perspective

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emphasizes that the individual has a certain amount of freedom to choose and make important decisions regarding friends and lifestyle (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 1995; Mead, 1972). In the present paper, we focus on human interaction and our methodological approach is to use a qualitative case study with an emphasis on exploration rather than theory testing. A crucial premise is that human beings continuously construct and reproduce their conditions. We also regard the self and self-identity as something collective (Calhoun, 1994). This means that when an informant describes the meaning of veganism, she/he provides a personal view and this view simultaneously tells us something about a growing collective identity (e.g. vegans) in society.

This qualitative interview study has two aims. First, we want to describe the process of becoming a vegan among adolescents. With the help of our informants, we want to describe the ideas and perceptions of vegan adolescents. Second, we have interpreted these descriptions by constructing categories which later on were related to theories of relevance for the topic.

Method

Informants

A group interview was conducted with three vegan adolescents (2 females, 1 male) from Skellefteå, a town nearby Umeå in northern Sweden. The three vegans (Table 1) were recruited in September 1997 by contacting one of their teachers. The informants had never met before and were chosen to represent different types of vegans. The aim of the group interview was to learn about different type of vegans and to generate ideas for topics to focus on in individual interviews. Separate qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted in October 1998, April 1999, and May 1999 with one female and two male vegan adolescents living in Umeå. The informants were chosen purposively one after another as interpretation of the data proceeded. A search for differing opinions among the participants was conducted as the sample developed (Patton, 1990). The three vegans participating in individual interviews were recruited from a research project including 30 vegan adolescents who had been recruited by advertisements and visits to schools. Vegans were defined as people eating food from plant origin only, and they were included if they had been consuming a vegan diet for at least six months and were planning to continue eating a vegan diet. Each participant gave informed consent and the study was approved by the research ethics committee of the Medical Faculty, Umeå University.

Table 1
Informants participating in a group interview (F1, F2 and M1) and three separate in-depth interviews (F3, M2 and M3)

Study name	Gender	Age (years)	Diet	Vegetarian diet (years)
F1	Female	16	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	0.7
F2	Female	18	Vegan	0.5
F3	Female	18	Vegan	3.0
M1	Male	17	Vegan	1.1
M2	Male	20	Vegan	3.5
M3	Male	18	Vegan	3.7

Qualitative interviews and data analysis

All interviews were performed by Larsson and Rönnlund together. The group interview took place at the school of the informants while the in-depth interviews took place at Umeå University. All interviews were tape-recorded and lasted approximately 1.5–2 h. The interviews addressed the following areas:

- The process of and reasons for becoming a vegan.
- Changes in lifestyle and attitudes after becoming a vegan.
- Present lifestyle habits and vision of future habits.

The guide was used throughout the study but the questions were slightly changed as the interpretation proceeded so that results from the former interviews were taken into consideration in the later interviews.

Each interview was transcribed word for word. The text from the interviews was read several times and coded using Open Code version 1.0b6 (Open Code, 1997). The different codes were then categorized using the Grounded Theory method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The main reason for choosing a grounded theory design was that the research field is rather undeveloped. The coding and categorization procedures were conducted first by the two investigators separately and then together.

Methodological design

The methodology used is based primarily on grounded theory. Instead of merely describing the informants' perceptions and understandings of their process of becoming a vegan and their motives for being vegans, we have tried to conceptualize the whole process. This means, as Glaser puts it, a shift from the concrete voice of the interview to a more abstract interpretation in order to generate something more general (Glaser, 2001). Guided by symbolic interactionism, we look for influences from the social environment. We consider socialization and internalization, in which significant others are supposed to have a crucial influence on decisions to become vegan among adolescents.

Results

Because of space limitations, we have decided not to include quotations. The two categories identified were reasons influencing the process of becoming a vegan and perceived consequences of becoming a vegan. Both these categories belong to the first of 18 theoretical coding families described by Glaser (1978) and they are used to sort the codes that are shown in Fig. 1.

Perceived causes influencing the process

The introduction to the process of becoming a vegan was perceived to be influenced by one or several reasons of more or less importance, some facilitating and some inhibiting the process. Examples of perceived internal reasons that influenced the process were ethical, health, distaste for meat, and preference for vegetarian food (Fig. 1). When asked about the reasons for becoming vegan, the respondents identified their single most important motive as moral concern about the treatment of animals. For some, the inception of the process started after an experience of distaste for meat. One informant described his first memory of thinking of becoming a vegan as a traumatic experience when he as a child was chewing a piece of meat without being able to swallow. Another informant described how her stepfather almost forced her to eat meat that she strongly disliked.

Examples of perceived external reasons are significant others such as friends, family, school, agents of media or music (Fig. 1). Friends were often described as crucial in the gradual process of becoming a vegan. Other significant people were family members who sometimes initiated the process early in childhood: for example, a parent prepared vegan food for her daughter who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. Also, the possibility of eating vegan food for school lunch was perceived to be an important initiating reason in the process. Adolescents often started to eat vegan food at school lunch but continued eating omnivore food at home. The vegan school lunch was of great importance for those adolescents who had become full-time vegans. Another reason described was the intensive debate about vegetarianism in the media. Many of the adolescents got in contact with other vegetarian adolescents and the lifestyle-philosophy of Straight Edge when attending hardcore music concerts. The music was a way of expressing the message of vegetarianism but the adolescents becoming vegans did not necessarily sympathize with the entire Straight Edge philosophy.

Perceived consequences

Perceived consequences of becoming a vegan were positive as well as negative. The perceived consequences for the vegans and the people around them were of significance e.g. changes in attitudes of family and friends (Fig. 1). Some parents supported their young vegan adolescents in their decision by buying vegan food and vegan cookbooks, and by preparing vegan food. In some cases, other family members also chose to eat vegetarian food. Other parents did not bother and left the adolescents to handle the situation themselves. This was very difficult for the young vegans especially at the beginning of the process. In these cases, living at home

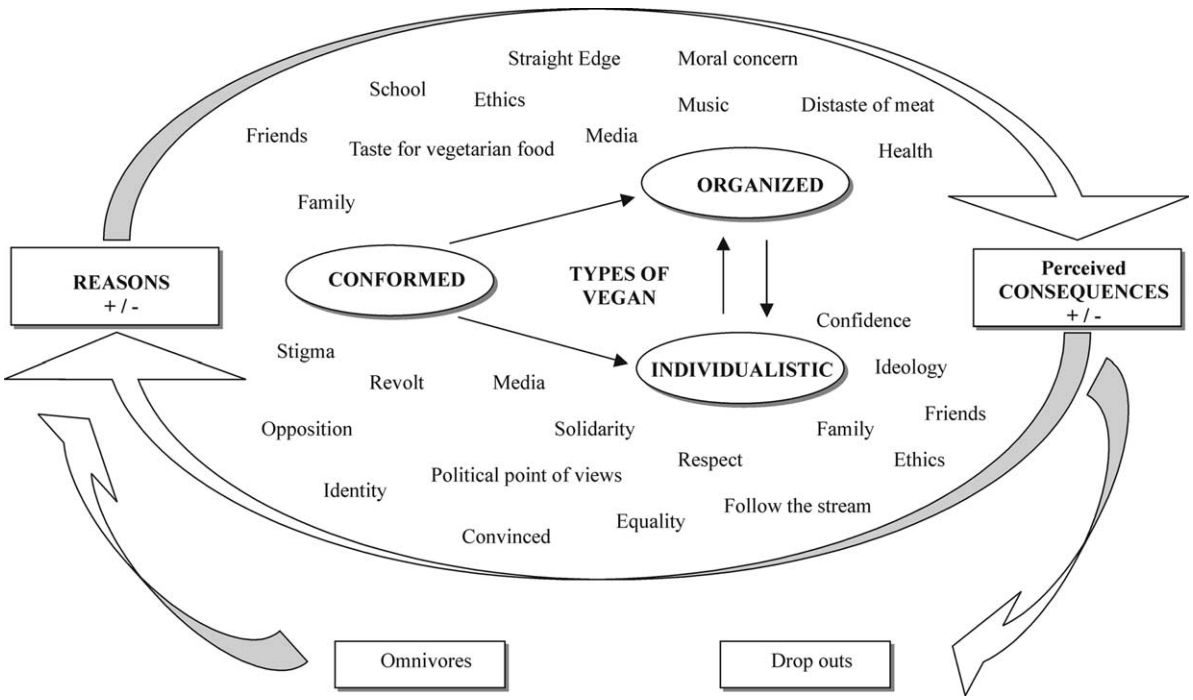

Fig. 1. The process of becoming a vegan among adolescents is a continuous process affected by positive and negative reasons and perceived consequences.

made it difficult to live a vegan lifestyle. Often, parents of a young vegan became worried and frustrated because the vegan sometimes lacked knowledge about the adequacy of a vegan diet, vegan foods, and how to prepare them. There was a concern among parents that the vegans did not get enough energy and nutrients from their diet. This resulted in frequent arguments and conflicts between the parents and the young vegans, especially during meals. In these cases, living at home was often perceived as an obstacle in the process of becoming a vegan, and moving out of the home increased the possibility to implement the new lifestyle. Many friends of the young vegans were also inspired to become vegans. Other adolescents questioned their choice of a vegan lifestyle and even taunted them.

Types of vegans

The informants were omnivores from the start and had become first lacto-vegetarian and then vegans. Some of them had dropped veganism but had later become vegans again. Three types of vegans were identified as core categories: Conformed Vegans, Organized Vegans, and Individualistic Vegans (Fig. 1). Conformed Vegans socialized mainly with other vegetarians often in groups and wished to share the main attitudes and behaviors of the group. They followed the group and imitated the ideas of others. Conformed Vegans were not convinced in their veganism and the informants reported that most often they eventually dropped off. However, sometimes the Conformed Vegans became more consistent vegans such as Organized or Individualistic Vegans, and the latter was the case of one of the informants and also described by the others.

Organized Vegans were convinced in their veganism and anchored in vegan ideology (Fig. 1). Their ideas were characterized by animal ethics, equality, solidarity, and non-parliamentary political points of view. They believed animals were equal to humans and protested against the exploitation of animals. Many of the Organized Vegans had developed or were developing their identity. The more like-minded people they associated with, the more likely they would take actions and partake in youthful revolts that reflected their philosophy. They wanted public attention and were very engaged in taking part in demonstrations, distributing vegan information, and participating in campaigns against companies such as McDonald's. They participated in public debates with enthusiasm and initiated boycotts of various products. An inspiration for the Organized Vegans was international contact with other groups of vegetarians in Europe. A few of them performed illegal actions against the meat industry and animal farms by destroying property and releasing animals. They were called 'Militant vegans' by the media, who gave them a bad reputation. Consequently, public perception was that all vegans were classified as militant and many felt stigmatized because of that. The Organized Vegans were often involved with the local police and some felt harassed by the Swedish Security Police.

Individualistic Vegans like Organized Vegans were very convinced in their decision about being vegans but had no need for unifying and associating themselves with other vegans (Fig. 1). They disassociated themselves from trends and did not wish to be identified with that kind of veganism. They respected the omnivores and wanted to be respected by them. Most often they interacted with omnivores and did not try to convince them about the benefits of being vegan. They did not perceive veganism as their identity and the only thing that differed between the Individualistic Vegan and the omnivore was their dietary preferences. Veganism was not their entire life but a part of their life, and they described themselves as more sensible than other vegans and felt confident and secure in their identity. The Individualistic Vegans made a conscious decision that they believed would last for their entire life. They were self-confident and convinced that they would be vegans in the future. Often, the Individualistic Vegans were proud to have made their decision and were able to show their family and friends that they could survive on a vegan diet. However, the unfavorable debate in the media about 'Militant vegans' resulted in a hesitation on their part to reveal their veganism to other people if they were believed to have prejudices against vegans.

It should be noted that the present categories of veganism are not always stable and sometimes an adolescent may start as a Conformed Vegan but in the continuous process develop to either an Organized Vegan or an Individualistic Vegan (Fig. 1). Furthermore, an Organized Vegan may very well develop into an Individualistic Vegan at a later stage. Table 2 shows properties of a status passage suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1971) which have been used for the present analysis. We have also indicated how these properties fit into the three categories of vegans generated from our data.

Discussion

Young vegans in Sweden represent an interesting group because they have become vegans in a more or less self-conscious and reflective manner rather than just continuing what was established for them during childhood. The process of individual conversion to veganism is most often a very personal one, shaped by that person's unique biography and experiences (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991). It can be illustrated as a continuous process stimulated and inhibited by positive and negative reasons and perceived consequences. This confirms the work of McDonald', 2000 who concluded that the elements of the process of becoming a vegan include catalytic experiences that trigger a specific response. The response might be repression of information or a willingness to learn more about veganism and an eventual decision to become a vegan. The catalytic

Table 2
Properties of status passage for three types of vegans

Properties	Vegan types		
	Conformed	Organized	Individualistic
Degree of desirability	A bit desirable	Desirable	Very desirable
Degree of reversibility	High	Small	Very small
Degree of repeatability	Possible	Small	Very small
Degree of voluntariness	Yes, but enticed	Yes, influenced	Yes, life project
Possible to communicate	Yes, superficial	Yes, very in-depth	Yes, and deep
Degree of hush–hush	In some contexts	Not at all	To some extent
Degree of control	Small	Big	Very big
Degree of centrality	Limited	Big	Very big
Duration	Temporal—short	Temporal—long	Lifelong

experiences seem to be comparable to what we call reasons in the present study and the trigged response is comparable to what we call perceived consequences.

A British study showed that young vegetarians avoided animal food products because of ethical principles and the liking for animals (Santos & Booth, 1996), which was the major reason given by the present informants. An attitude study showed that meat was a negative symbol for vegetarian teenage girls in England (Kenyon & Barker, 1998). Vegetarians sometimes also mention taste preference motives—distaste for meat and meat texture—that could often be traced back to childhood (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991). A reason for avoiding animal products in an Australian (Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998) and a British study (Santos & Booth, 1996) of young vegetarians was dislike of meat or adverse effects of meat consumption, which was also expressed by the present informants.

Povey, Wellens, and Conner (2001) suggest that pressure from significant others is more important for vegans than for e.g. lacto-vegetarians. Among possible social influences in the present study was stimulation or inhibition of the adoption of veganism by family members. This has earlier been shown in several other studies. However, little is known about the balance between support and lack of support for vegetarian practices (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Freeland-Graves, Greninger, & Young 1986; Kerr & Charles, 1986). Parents and other close family members have significant early influences. A US study showed that adolescents perceived their parents to be one of the most influential factors on their food choices, and that they influenced it in a number of ways (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 1999). Adolescents abstaining from meat may be discarding traditional family values, including food habits (Kenyon & Barker, 1998). In a British study of vegetarian students (18–23 years old), one reason mentioned for avoiding animal food products was rebelliousness (Santos & Booth, 1996). The present informants expressed a desire to rebel against their parents' wishes or beliefs and sometimes conflicts accompany this phase in the adoption of veganism. However, young vegans in the present study perceived it to be easier to become a vegan if other family members were supportive. An Australian study of young vegetarians showed that half of the respondents expected support from their mothers (Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998). The same study showed that young vegetarians expected less support, or downright opposition, from fathers or other relatives (Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998). Beardsworth and Keil (1991) reported that youthful inclinations toward vegetarianism were often suppressed by parental opposition, and for a number of respondents, their vegetarian tendencies were dormant until they reached an age that gave them some degree of independence from parental control (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991). Eating more vegetarian foods after moving away from home could possibly be a result of no longer being under the traditional control of parents (Santos & Booth, 1996) and this was also found in the present study.

Later during the period of adolescence, significant others may be, for example, friends, a singer in a music group, or a leader of an animal liberation organization. These people influence adolescents because they respect them and the ideas they promote. These important people might also belong to groups, so-called reference groups such as a group of young vegans. New actors influence the individuals and new experiences and beliefs are internalized. There is, especially in Western society today, a growing influence of the general trend among adolescents and mass media concerned with what Mead (1972) labels 'the generalized other'. This was shown in a British study of vegetarian students where one reason for avoiding animal food products was fashion (Santos & Booth, 1996). Adolescents in that study were also shown to be influenced by their friends and surroundings. In an Australian study of young vegetarians, over two-thirds of the females expected support from their best friend, followed by boyfriends, and classmates (Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998). Generally, teenage males expected less support from their friends than did their female peers.

Young vegetarians may influence other adolescents and initiate a move into vegetarianism by persuasion, but may also encourage a move into a specific category of vegetarianism (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991). We identified three categories of vegans, the Conformed Vegan, the Organized Vegan, and the Individualistic Vegan. The present results show that an adolescent may start as a Conformed Vegan but develop to either an Organized Vegan or an Individualistic Vegan. This seems to be a stepwise process and while some young vegans reach a point

of 'stability', others tend to change continuously (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991). This is comparable to the process of changing from an omnivore diet to a vegetarian diet for which studies have shown that 'red meat' (e.g. beef, lamb and pork) usually is the first type of animal food to be excluded from the diet, followed by 'white meat' (e.g. poultry), and in a final stage fish (Santos & Booth, 1996).

Glaser and Strauss, in a classic study in 1971, described status passages as important processes in a person's life, for instance when moving from adolescence to adulthood. They defined many properties associated with status passage, and one of these is circumstantiality. This property describes the three ways of proceeding through a status passage. A person can do it in aggregate with any number of other persons, collectively, or alone (solo). In our emerging perspective of the process of being a vegan, these patterns appeared when we generated the classification into three types of vegans, the Conformed, the Organized and the Individualistic Vegan. There are striking similarities between the three types of vegans and three ways of proceeding through status passage suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1971). We have regarded the process of becoming a vegan as a kind of status passage because this process is of utmost importance to the individual. The choice of becoming a vegan will change many things in a young person's life. People will look at the new vegan with new eyes. For some people, the vegan will become a stranger, while others will welcome the vegan. By going through the process of becoming a vegan, the vegan will for sure reach a 'turning point' in life (Strauss, 1970).

To become a vegan is a crucial part of what Giddens labels a 'life project' (Giddens, 1991). It is a way of life, which is chosen in a conscious and reflexive way, the perceived consequences of which are seriously evaluated. The passages can be regarded as based on knowledge and the individual is regarded as knowledgeable (Giddens, 1987). As is clear from Table 2, there are large differences between our three vegan types with respect to the properties of status passage. These properties are noted within parentheses in the text below. The Conformed and the Organized Vegans are part of what Glaser and Strauss (1971) label a cohort or a collective, more or less organized. They want to be there and share the ideology of the cohort but they are rather dependent on this agent and are less devoted to their veganism than the Individualistic Vegans, who appear to be the most convinced ones (desirable). Because of less devotion, the probability of leaving veganism (reversibility) is higher for the Organized and Conformed Vegans than for the Individualistic Vegan. Consequently, the chance of returning to veganism (repeatability) is greater for the Conformed and Organized compared with the Individualistic Vegans. The reasons for joining veganism (voluntariness) is strongly influenced by significant others of the Conformed and Organized Vegans, while the Individualistic Vegans feel secure in their veganism and regard it as a life project. Conformed and Organized Vegans like to speak up and make attempts to spread the vegan message (communicate). However, the Conformed Vegans are more superficial in their communication compared with the other two types. The Individualistic Vegans discuss (communicate) their veganism, at least with seriously interested people, but do not necessarily wish to convince other people into veganism. All three categories of vegans are more or less proud of being vegan, but the Individualistic Vegans have no need to legitimise their choice of being vegan (hush–hush). Povey et al. (2001) showed that perceived behavioral control was necessary in order to eat a vegan diet and our data indicate that the Individualistic Vegans are more engaged and successful in their veganism (control) than are the Conformed and Organized Vegans. Using a term of Glaser and Strauss (1971), the weight and centrality of their decision is no doubt very large. The Individualistic Vegans have a serious interest in a lifelong vegan lifestyle and the probability of ceasing veganism (duration) is therefore lesser than that of Conformed and Organized Vegans.

Conclusions

Becoming a vegan can be illustrated as a continuous process stimulated and inhibited by positive and negative reasons and perceived consequences. Our case of young vegans has illustrated a new type of status passage with both specific and general characteristics. Two findings are particularly worthy of notice. Firstly, the different types of vegans showed different properties. The hypothesis generated is that the Individualistic Vegan seems to have the greatest chance to be permanent. Secondly, to become a vegan is to pass through a status passage with all the characteristics described in the theory by Glaser and Strauss (1971). Besides that, no modifications or new properties were discovered that add to the theory of status passage and this indicates that the general model is applicable also in a vegan context.

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