



## Research report

# Normalizing ideological food choice and eating practices. Identity work in online discussions on veganism

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we use discursive psychology to explore the relation between ideologically based food choice and identity in an online forum on veganism. The discursive psychological perspective underlines the notion of identities being part of social actions performed in talk, and thus designed and deployed for different interactional purposes. It is demonstrated that participants draw on specific discursive devices to (1) define vegan meals as ordinary and easy to prepare and (2) construct methods of preventing vitamin deficiency, such as taking supplements, as routine procedures. In 'doing being ordinary', participants systematically resist the notion that being a vegan is complicated—in other words, that it is both difficult to compose a meal and to protect your health. In this way, 'ordinariness' helps to construct and protect veganism as an ideology. We point out similarities and differences with other studies on eating or healthy lifestyles and argue, more broadly, that identities and their category-bound features are part and parcel of participants' highly flexible negotiation package.

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## Introduction

In this paper we examine how people's identities are used as part of their accounts of vegan food choice and eating habits. We explore online discussions on veganism for participants' situated categorization work. In general, we demonstrate how members of a group associated with ideological food choice construct identities for specific interactional tasks, like undermining some of the potential negative inferences about their eating practices. This focus on identity work in everyday interaction differs from approaches that are commonly used for studying food and identity.

## Food choice and identity

In social scientific disciplines like anthropology and sociology, food consumption is viewed as a social marker to construct social identities and lifestyles (Caplan, 1997; Lupton, 1996; Mintz & DuBois, 2002; Southerton, 2001; Tivadar & Luthar, 2005). These studies show the importance of identity matters in relation to food, but largely refer to the classical socio-demographic variables such as gender, class and ethnicity (for examples, see Charles & Kerr, 1988; Lockie, 2001; Murcott, 1995). In doing so, they tend to position these identity structures as consistent and omni-relevant,

while others treat identity as fragmented (see also Caplan, 1997; Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Southerton, 2001).

Beck (1992) first suggested that the relevance and meaning of sociological variables like gender, class and ethnicity have shifted in the last decade. People are confronted with a complex diversity of choices in all areas of life. As a consequence, self-identity is determined more by lifestyle or people's actual practices than by the classical distinctions, although consumers' socio-demographic characteristics may still have an impact in particular areas (for example, Tivadar & Luthar, 2005). The routines people put into practice are reflexively open to change, making self-identity open to change as well (Giddens, 1991). In this perspective food consumption can be regarded as a choice that is part of the lifestyle decisions people make in late modernity.

Adopting a cultural rather than a structural pattern, the concept of (consumer) lifestyle partly solves the problem of the strictness of more traditional divisions. It is nonetheless increasingly criticized for altogether different reasons, especially in the area of health promotion (Bunton, Nettelton & Burrows, 1995). For example, the scientific grounds for the pathogenic properties of lifestyles are being disputed. Moreover, the idea that lifestyle can cause certain diseases is considered morally sensitive (Davison & Smith, 1995). Overall, the concept of lifestyle would have been given too much weight as a predictive factor (ibid.).

Looked at from a somewhat different angle, 'lifestyle' does not capture the way in which identities are formulated, reformulated and managed in daily life by social members *themselves*. The latter

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seems essential, for example, if we want to understand the many apparent inconsistencies in consumer behaviour (cf. Gabriel & Lang, 1995). It would appear that identities are much more fluidly drawn upon in daily practice than the current theories suggest.

Psychological theories on identity may provide us with a more fruitful basis for understanding the flexibility of identities. The dominant social psychological perspectives on identity were developed by Tajfel (1982) and Turner (1987). Tajfel (1982) focuses on the way in which individuals identify themselves in terms of group membership. An extension of social identity theory, self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987) is more concerned with how people categorize *themselves*. According to this theory, the self changes in the sense that different social categories may come to be seen as more or less important. Features of the context determine which of these social categories are perceived as relevant. However, there is a remarkable lack of research on social categorization theory in relation to food choice. Adding the concept of self-identity to the well-known theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), several studies have focused on the way in which self-perception influences food choice (Armitage & Conner, 1999; Sparks & Sheperd, 1992). For example, Sparks and Sheperd (1992) found that people who self-identified as 'green consumers' were more likely to consume organic vegetables. A study among Type 2 diabetes patients showed that eating healthily was strongly associated with viewing oneself as a healthy eater (Shankar, Conner, Jones, & Bodansky, 2004). As explanations for the predictive quality of self-identity, social psychologists argue that self-perception may be developed by repeated behaviour such as choosing the same food over a period of time (Charng, Piliavin & Callero, 1988), and that people are driven to communicate their self-identity to others (Shavitt, 1990), for example, by choosing certain foods over others (Conner & Armitage, 2002: 36).

The possibility however that people may work up multiple and even inconsistent identities becomes especially apparent if we examine the ways in which people present themselves in their *everyday talk*. This is a major focus for discursive psychology. Instead of treating identity as a largely individual and mental concept, discursive psychology recasts it as a members' concern drawn upon for various interactional purposes (see also Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002, for a constructionist conception that includes the possibility of multiple identities but not their action-orientedness).

Discursive psychological studies on eating have increased over the past few years. Sneijder and te Molder (2006) explored how participants of online culinary forums built their identity as a gourmet. Wiggins (2004, see also Wiggins & Potter, 2003) studied the way in which parents hold their children accountable for eating or not eating particular foods. Research into the everyday reasoning practices on veganism is however still lacking.

#### *Veganism and identity*

In this article we present an analysis of online interaction on veganism. Veganism refers to a particular dietary style that entails eating only plant-based foods and abstaining from all animal products. Existing social scientific research related to this type of diet mainly focuses on the motives and values that supposedly underlie becoming a vegetarian or vegan. Vegetarians and vegans describe their motives as 'ideological', and mention mainly environmental concerns, animal welfare and other ethical considerations as the reasons for their choice of a vegetarian or vegan diet (for example, Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). Furthermore, in a study among young Swedish vegans, participants reported reasons such as health, distaste for meat and a preference for vegetarian food (Larsson, Rönnlund, Johansson, & Dahlgren, 2003).

Lindeman and Stark (1999, 2000) point out that ideological reasons for food choice may be linked to the expression of one's personal identity. Fox and Ward (2008) refer to vegetarianism as both a practice and an identity for its proponents. In line with these notions, dietary styles like vegetarianism and veganism are also described as part of a chosen life project (cf. Giddens, 1991; Larsson et al., 2003).

From a nutritional perspective, veganism is often evaluated as an unhealthy lifestyle. In a diet without meat, fish, poultry and eggs, key nutrients such as zinc, vitamin B12 and protein would need to be obtained from alternative sources (Davies & Lightowler, 1997). However, it is not known if participants themselves make this issue relevant, and if so, for what purposes. Moreover, other concerns may be pervasive without being noticed and taken into account by researchers. We are particularly interested if health concerns or other potentially problematic nutritional issues are attributed to veganism as a category or lifestyle and resisted or accepted as such.

#### *Discursive psychology and identities*

An important analytic principle of discursive psychology (and conversation analysis) is the action orientation of language (te Molder & Potter, 2005). Psychological concepts like attitudes and identity are studied as social practice or, in other words, as participants' resources for performing interactional business. Identities are designed to perform all kinds of context-relevant interactional tasks, like displaying neutrality, discounting blame or building credibility (cf. Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Edwards & Potter, 1992, 2001). For instance, one may present oneself as a gourmet to counter accusations of being an unhealthy eater.

In discourse, identities are made relevant by constructing or ascribing membership of a broad range of possible categories that make particular inferences available and are associated with particular kinds of activities and features (Sacks, 1992). Depending on the context, one and the same person can be described as a 'family member', 'doctor' or 'ordinary person' or, in relation to food, as a 'consumer', 'vegan' or 'gourmet'. All these categories suggest different actions and aspects as being relevant for that person. In Sacks' terms, each category has certain category-bound features. Describing someone as a gourmet evokes what is 'conventionally known' about this category, for example, that gourmets enjoy food and take an interest in cooking and eating out. Conversely, describing a person as having particular characteristics can also suggest and build their membership of a particular category (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Edwards, 1998).

Furthermore, identities may be associated with certain rights or entitlements to claiming particular knowledge or experience (Potter, 1996; Sacks, 1992). For instance, a doctor is treated as being entitled to perform a diagnosis, and someone who identifies herself/himself with veganism can be expected to know whether or not particular nutrients are plant-based.

Note however that categories, category-bound features and knowledge entitlements are worked up rather than fixed, and are put into practice rather than just being there. Assigning a person to a particular category makes the identity relevant to the interactional business at hand (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). For instance, selecting one category over others may work to undermine particular inferences about the other available categories, as we will demonstrate in this article. The criterion the analyst uses to treat categories as relevant is that they should be made relevant and be oriented to by the participants themselves and have a visible outcome in the interaction (Schegloff, 1991).

This article focuses on how particular descriptions contribute to the construction of an 'alternative' identity, and how this identity is used to resist negative inferences about the vegan lifestyle. The

first part of the analysis shows accounts that depict vegan meals as ordinary, while the second part presents posts that normalize methods for preventing vitamin deficiencies, in particular the intake of food supplements and vitamin pills.

## Method

### Corpus

Our data consist of online forum discussions on veganism. Most studies starting from the detailed analysis of online talk emphasize the similarities rather than the differences with face-to-face interaction. People copy practices from face-to-face communication in such a way as to suit the technical specificities of the medium (cf. Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003). Quoting (Reed, 2001) and naming the recipient are examples of ways by which participants – in the absence of face-to-face phenomena such as interruption, overlap, gaze and continuers – preserve a sense of sequentiality.

Although these studies convincingly argue for the influence of the medium, they lack attention for the way participants accomplish actions through their talk (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003). In this study, differences between face-to-face and online interaction are taken into account where relevant for the actions that are being undertaken (see also Antaki et al., 2005). We will see that participants (also) exploit the online environment to perform ‘immediacy’, spontaneity and sequentiality with, all in the service of ‘normalizing’ aspects of veganism.

The fragments have been copied from the site of the Dutch Association for Veganism (<http://www.veganisme.org/>), an organization that aims to provide independent information about veganism. The website states that the use of data from this site is authorized on condition that the source is given. It contains a forum where people can interact with each other. We expected identity work to be most salient in relation to potential concerns or criticism. The main criterion for selection therefore entailed that the content of the talk should refer to health problems or other concerns regarding vegan meals. It appeared that these threads often start off with a question of a novice—not surprisingly, perhaps, since potentially problematic issues are most comfortably addressed by those ‘in ignorance’. We collected a data set of 40 discussion threads, containing a total of 525 emails. 28 out of 40 threads (76%) displayed a clear pattern in the way participants negotiated activities and features potentially connected with the category of vegans. We illustrate our findings by showing fragments from three threads in which these ‘normalizing’ devices are visible.

### Analytic procedure

Two analytical principles were applied. The first is the next–turn proof-procedure. By examining the understandings of first turns displayed by participants in second turns analysts ensure that observations are not merely imposed by the researcher (cf. Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998). The second analytic principle concerns the rhetorical features of descriptions (Edwards & Potter, 1992, 2001). People construct their own version of reality by simultaneously countering alternative versions, for example, as to protect themselves against potential accusations of having an interest or stake in their description (Potter, 1996). Inspecting these counter-versions helps the analyst to make sense of the action-orientedness of the present description.

In correspondence with the nature of qualitative research, no claims are made for sample representativeness. The results will inform further analysis over a larger, or a different but related data corpus such as face-to-face interaction on vegan eating practices. All names and dates have been changed in the data extracts for the

sake of anonymity. Lines in the extract that did not generate a visible outcome in the interaction have been omitted. A native speaker of English has carefully translated the Dutch threads in cooperation with the researchers. The analysis was performed on the Dutch materials. It informed the translation to the extent that it was designed to capture the social actions found by the researchers in the data. In line with discursive psychological practice to ensure as much transparency on data and analysis as possible, the original Dutch postings are also made available to the readers.

## Results

### Preparing meals and varying ingredients as simple practices

In the first fragment, participant Anne, who categorizes herself as a novice by the activity of introducing herself, poses several questions about vegan practices. More specifically, she asks what a vegan breakfast looks like.

#### Extract 1: Breakfast.

Date: August 29, 2001, 17:00

From: Anne

1           Hi, first I will introduce  
2           myself, I'm Anne and I've been  
3           eating vegetarian food for one  
4           year now. I want to reduce  
5           my use of dairy products and eggs  
6           etc. but now I have a  
7           small question, what exactly can  
8           you eat? Because you are  
9           talking about E-numbers and stuff  
10          on this site, but how do  
11          I know exactly what I  
12          (preferably) cannot eat, just to  
13          name an example, What does a  
14          vegan have for breakfast? To be  
15          honest, I haven't got a clue! And  
16          what can you do about the  
17          nutrients you miss out on by not  
18          eating certain things?! Can  
19          anyone help me?! Thanks in  
20          advance, best wishes, Anne

In her introduction Anne constructs members of the category ‘vegans’ as strict rule-followers based on a specific corpus of ‘expert’ knowledge. This construction is accomplished in different ways. For example, Anne explicitly presents herself as a help seeker. She makes her identity as an ignorant person relevant and credible by means of different conversational tools. First, she refers to the other visitors of the site as ‘you’ (line 8), thereby placing herself outside the group. She then refers to the use of ‘E-numbers and stuff’ (line 9), by which she distances herself from the specific vocabulary of vegans. Anne thus creates a contrast between her ignorance and the technical knowledge of the vegans. This technical knowledge is presented as crucial for her transition to veganism. Finally, the word ‘exactly’ (lines 7 and 11) formulates the information needed for practicing veganism as very precise and clear-cut.

By thus increasing the distance between her lack of knowledge and the technical knowledge of ‘full-blown’ vegans, Anne portrays veganism as an eating pattern that is bound to very specific rules and insights. We will see that this is precisely what the respondents subsequently select as the relevant item. They describe their breakfasts as ‘simple’, thereby undermining the rule-governed and difficult nature of veganism implied by Anne.

Let us take a look at Brian’s reply, in which he undermines Anne’s inferential implication that vegan meals are difficult to prepare:

*Extract 1a: Reply to Breakfast.*

Date: September 01, 2001, 09:15

Reply from: Brian

21 (5 lines omitted) I myself eat  
 22 only fruit in the morning. I  
 23 start with some squeezed oranges  
 24 and at work I eat a big banana.  
 25 The rest of the morning I eat  
 26 even more fruit, like kiwis,  
 27 grapefruit, grapes, peaches, you  
 28 name it. You can take muesli for  
 29 breakfast both with soy or rice  
 30 milk or just sandwiches  
 31 because there are enough  
 32 vegetable products to spread on a  
 33 sandwich.  
 34 All nutrients, vitamins  
 35 and minerals are present  
 36 in vegetable products in a very  
 37 useful form, often much better  
 38 than those in animal products.  
 39 By mixing vegetables, fruit,  
 40 pulses, cereals and nuts, it's  
 41 almost impossible to lack  
 42 anything, and you don't have to  
 43 pay special attention.  
 44 (41 lines omitted)

Brian presents his breakfast as very simple and straightforward: he eats 'only fruit' (line 22). However, he prevents this from being associated with an unbalanced meal, by referring to all kinds of fruits: 'squeezed oranges', 'a big banana', 'more fruit, like kiwis, grapefruit, grapes, peaches, you name it'. Brian emphasizes the variety of his breakfast by adding adjectives like 'squeezed' and 'big', indicating the preparation and size of the fruits. 'Like' (line 26) and the expression 'you name it' (lines 27–28) at the end of his list, suggest that he 'can go on for hours'. In this way, Brian not only constructs his vegan breakfast as uncomplicated but also underlines the simplicity of bringing variety into such a breakfast.

In addition to this description of his own breakfast, Brian names alternatives: 'muesli for breakfast both with soy or rice milk or just sandwiches' (lines 28–30). Note how Brian defines sandwiches as products that are mostly part of 'ordinary' breakfasts by using 'just'. This downplays the noteworthiness of sandwiches as meal composers (cf. Lee, 1987). Again, by indicating that 'normal' products can just as well be part of a vegan breakfast, he emphasizes the ease with which such a meal can be prepared.

In lines 39–43, Brian confirms the image of a vegan as an uncomplicated eater who does not have to do anything out of the ordinary to prevent a shortage of nutrients. By presenting his breakfast in this particular way, Brian is simultaneously rebutting versions that can be contrasted with his description (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996). In other words, the categorization of his breakfast as mundane and easy to prepare counters Anne's description of the vegan breakfast as a complicated event. The second reply to Anne's question also constructs the vegan breakfast as simple to prepare but with an emphasis on different discursive means:

*Extract 1b: Reply to Breakfast.*

Date: October 02, 2001, 13:25

From: Janet

45 Hi Anne,  
 46 I'm eating breakfast now:  
 47 1/2 frozen banana and a whole  
 48 banana, a dash of soy milk, (I  
 49 add linseed, wheat germs and bran  
 50 as well) and then through  
 51 the mixer! Oatmeal goes very well  
 52 with water, a little maple syrup  
 53 or something in it, tasty as  
 54 well.

Describing a breakfast that is eaten and thus physically experienced at the moment of writing enhances the authenticity of that description (cf. Wiggins, 2002). In summing up the parts of her breakfast, Janet displays a particular arbitrariness: neither order nor exact quantities are important. Note how the potentially more 'complicated', relatively unknown ingredients are placed between brackets (lines 48–50). At the end of her description it becomes clear that the ingredients have to be blended: you have to use a mixer (line 51). This procedure is constructed as a routine one, which is reflected in the simple syntactical sentence in the absence of an agent. The 'ungrammatical' description of the procedure suggests swiftness and constructs the procedure as a simple and brief action.

The addition 'or something' after mentioning maple syrup in line 53 suggests that this idea is not so strict in its application but more of a spontaneous thought: it is not difficult to come up with all kinds of ingredients to make a nice meal. Janet thus subtly manages the dilemma of how to provide a description without invoking the impression that it is artificially worked up as an argument (cf. Edwards, 2003). Finally, by using the phrase 'tasty as well' (lines 53–54), Janet makes available the inference that there are many ways of preparing oatmeal, all of them tasty. Like Brian, Janet constructs the vegan breakfast as a straightforward meal, containing more or less routine ingredients, without being tasteless.

In the final reply to Anne's message, we see how the author Rick designs his message as an immediate response to Brian and Janet.

*Extract 1c: Reply to Breakfast.*

Date: October 04, 2001, 21:32

From: Rick

54 my breakfast looks somewhat simpler  
 55 still: Peanut butter sandwich with  
 56 sprinkles and a glass of lemonade.

Rick assesses his own breakfast as simpler than those of Brian and Janet. The sequential relationship to the responses of Brian and Janet is clear through the use of the words 'still' (line 55) and the comparative 'simpler', which mark a relationship to the previous utterances. By using the comparative 'simpler' (line 54), Rick shows that he treats Brian and Janet's contributions as descriptions of *simple* breakfasts and he upgrades the simplicity of the described vegan breakfasts by presenting his own breakfast as even simpler. In doing so, Rick both underlines the potentially undemanding character of a vegan, or vegan meal, and his own autonomy in this respect. Rick's response is constructed as if it were a direct response in a face-to-face conversation. He accomplishes this directness by leaving out a greeting and starting his message without a capital letter, unlike Brian and Janet. This construction counters the idea that Rick carefully prepared his contribution (see also Edwards, 2003). He makes available the inference that the description of his breakfast has been formulated on the spot without any ulterior motives. As was the case with Janet's message, the immediate character of the response works as a 'stake inoculation' (Potter, 1996), protecting the authenticity of the displayed ordinariness.

In lines 55–56, Rick constructs the routine nature of his breakfast by naming commonly known and used products. The combination of products that he proposes, peanut butter and lemonade, is of an 'extremely' ordinary nature: it is the kind of combination that a child also could or would make. Rick presents himself as an 'extraordinarily' ordinary person, thereby refuting the notion of vegans as complicated eaters. Furthermore, unlike for instance soymilk, lemonade is not a drink that common sense would associate with veganism or health. It is 'designed to be uncomplicated' and suggests that Rick refers to a product he enjoys

for its taste or its practicality. This counters the idea that every product in a vegan meal should be 'notably healthy'.

*Describing the avoidance of monotony as easy*

In fragments taken from a second thread, we see a similar cluster of versions of 'simple' eating practices. As in extracts 1a–c, these versions are provided in response to a question of a novice regarding a specific food item.

*Extract 2: From vegetarian to vegan.*

Date: February 05, 2003, 23:06

From: Dick

1 (8 lines omitted) How do you solve  
2 what to put on your sandwich? I know  
3 there is Tartex, it tastes good (and  
4 is expensive), but eventually it  
5 bores you very much.  
6 (6 lines omitted)

The declarative statement 'it bores you', put together in a list with other properties such as taste and price (lines 3–4), presents boredom as an objective feature of the product rather than being Dick's problem. This externalizing device downplays Dick's own accountability for problems with sandwich fillings.

*Extract 2 a: Reply to From vegetarian to vegan.*

Date: June 16, 2003, 21:01

From: Emma

7 It's certainly true that you can get  
8 temporarily tired of Tartex after a  
9 few sandwiches. Have you ever tried  
10 fried onions and tomatoes with  
11 Herbermare from Dr Vogel fried in a  
12 bit of olive oil on top on your  
13 bread?  
14 (5 lines omitted)  
15 A broccoli sandwich can also be  
16 recommended. Cook some broccoli and  
17 make some garlic butter (16 lines  
18 omitted). If you try all kinds of  
19 things you will discover after a  
20 while that vegan sandwiches are  
21 tasty!

Emma replies to Dick by displaying agreement with his assessment of Tartex (lines 7–9). However, she softens the general implications by referring to *the possibility* of becoming tired of Tartex, using the modal 'can' and qualifying the tiredness with temporariness. 'You can get tired' also places responsibility for not liking the product on the person instead of the product. Emma thus counters the suggestion that a vegan product like Tartex is in fact a product that bores people after a while.

Note how Emma offers examples of vegan sandwich fillings in the form of 'casual noticings' (see also Edwards, 2003). It is not projected in any way how many examples will be mentioned and no reasons for naming these particular examples are given. In doing so, Emma undermines the suggestion that she prepared her message carefully. She makes available the inference that she does not have to think at all about what to put on her sandwich every day.

In lines 16–17, Emma constructs her directions as to how to prepare this filling as a recipe, using the imperative mode that is frequently used in recipe descriptions in cookery books. This recipe-like formulation evokes the impression that the described sandwich topping is common and scripted. Furthermore, instructions (like those in a recipe) are designed as 'doable'. They suggest not only that many people have done it before, but also that it is easy to do or to learn.

In lines 18–21 Emma claims that trying all kinds of things will lead to the conclusion that vegan sandwiches are tasty (note that she does not use the phrase 'can be tasty'). The formulation 'if (X) then (Y)' is a so-called script formulation (Edwards, 1994, 1995), which presents events as having a predictable, sequential pattern. This specific type of script formulation is especially useful in ascribing 'logical' accountability to the respondent (Sneijder & te Molder, 2004). Here, Dick is implicitly allocated the responsibility of trying 'all kinds of things', which will then automatically lead him to discover that vegan sandwiches are tasty. The suggestion is that Dick, the recipient, has the responsibility of changing his attitude towards vegan sandwich toppings. A potential inherent relationship between tastelessness and vegan food products is thereby undermined. The notion of vegan products, or tasty vegan products, being difficult to prepare is resisted at the same time—being able to try 'all kinds of things' defines the matter of sandwich fillings as a choice from a broad range of options.

In the message following Dick's and Emma's, John implicitly categorizes Emma's tips as taking quite a lot of time. He refers to the tendency of vegans to come up with time-consuming tips, and defines 'frying vegetables' as not practical. An enumeration of possibilities without an explicit ending is used to suggest that there are many solutions to Dick's problem. Note again how this reply is constructed as an immediate response without a greeting or a capital letter, thereby bringing it off as spontaneous.

*Extract 2 b: Reply to From vegetarian to vegan.*

Date: June 17, 2003, 10:51

From: John

22 what I think is a shame is that  
23 vegans tend to suggest all kinds of  
24 things which are rather time-  
25 consuming when it comes to tips for  
26 sandwiches.  
27 I mean to say, frying vegetables and  
28 cooking stuff for sandwich fillings  
29 is all very well, but not very  
30 practical when you for example have  
31 to lunch at work. therefore, here  
32 are some more practical sandwich  
33 tips besides tartex from me:  
34 vegan cream cheese (tasty, but  
35 expensive)  
36 humus (also available at ah)  
37 ((supermarket))  
38 leprechaun pate (3 lines omitted)  
39 peanut butter with sambal  
40 veganise as butter and then, for  
41 example, cucumber on top with some  
42 pepper (somewhat more elaborate, but  
43 never mind) you see, easier is an  
44 option.

John constructs the tendency to provide time-consuming tips as a category-bound activity of vegans (lines 22–26). Note, however, that he counters the notion that vegan sandwich fillings are indeed time-consuming by restricting the evaluation to the tips rather than to actual practices. He also restricts this tendency to the product category 'bread' (lines 25–26), thus undermining the possible inference that vegans give time-consuming tips when it comes to eating practices in general. Subsequently, the impracticality of Emma's 'frying vegetables' tip is limited to mealtimes such as lunchtime at work (lines 29–31).

John goes on to provide tips that he upgrades as 'more' practical in comparison with Emma's tips. The last tip (line 40: veganise as butter) is evaluated as somewhat more elaborate, but still listed in the enumeration following the announcement of practical tips. He ends his message with 'easier is an option', thereby explicitly countering the notion that vegan sandwiches are difficult to prepare.

The next reply again shows the discursive devices of constructed immediacy and the device of enumeration. Furthermore, the author explicitly refers to mundane, non-vegan products as solutions to the sandwich problem.

*Extract 2 c: Reply to From vegetarian to vegan.*

*Date: June 18, 2003, 17:43*

*From: Billy*

45 ordinary peanut butter, apple syrup,  
46 chocolate sprinkles, nut paste,  
47 hazelnut paste...I'm never bothered by  
48 monotony or the like.:)

By referring to products that are even more mundane than the ones John described, Billy presents himself as an 'extremely' ordinary person, thus dealing with and refuting the image of vegans as complicated eaters. By using the category 'ordinary' right at the beginning (line 45), Billy underlines the relevance of this attribute of the product for his message.

The response is offered 'casually', suggesting that Billy did not have to think about it. This impression is invoked by the presentation of sandwich fillings in a list (lines 45–47) without an explicit ending, which suggests that there are many more ordinary products that are not mentioned here. The simple grammatical device of a list instead of full grammatical sentences further enhances the spontaneous character of the response. Also note the smiling face (line 48), which works to construct the response as informal and as something that the speaker himself would not worry about.

To summarize, we have shown a number of discursive devices that worked to build vegan eating practices as simple and ordinary, thereby rebutting the rhetorical alternative of veganism as a complicated lifestyle, i.e., difficult or time-consuming to put into practice. For example, participants used listings of products, descriptions of preparation procedures without an agent, and suggestions of spontaneity and immediacy to establish the ease of coming up with simple options for a vegan meal. Characterizations of the meals were treated as also making available particular implications about speakers' identities. 'Boring' vegan products were redefined into a person-related problem (complicated products suggest difficult people), and the ease with which simple alternatives were mentioned also suggested that the participants were uncomplicated.

Note that these devices often co-occur and accomplish the mundane character of vegan eating. This is not to say that devices like created immediacy or simple grammatical constructions may not perform different functions in other contexts. Table 1 demonstrates that normalizing procedures are present in 76% of the data, which shows normalizing vegan food choice and practices to be a common practice in this context. The passive constructions refer to those cases that were used to suggest minimal agency for accomplishing a simple meal or good health.

#### *Normalizing 'artificial' methods for health control*

In this second analytic section we will consider how participants present their methods for health control as normal and

**Table 1**  
Normalizing devices in online interaction on veganism.

Normalizing device	Threads with devices (%) <sup>a</sup>
Constructed immediacy	93
Reference to mundane products	75
Passive constructions	21
Minimization	18

<sup>a</sup> 28 out of 40 threads (76%) contain normalizing procedures.

routine activities. In this way, they undermine the potential inference that it is difficult to remain healthy as a vegan. The extracts presented are exemplary for our material.

In extract 3, a new participant poses questions about veganism and the implications of that lifestyle for one's health.

*Extract 3: Healthy?/Gezond?*

*Date: March 20, 2003, 13:27*

*From: Laura*

1 (10 lines omitted)  
2 Okay, here is my real question. Do  
3 you miss out on nutrients that you  
4 need structurally? A friend of mine  
5 got a b12 deficiency (not because  
6 of vegetarian food or something) and  
7 has had troubles with that for  
8 years (1 line omitted). I cannot  
9 have that kind of problems with my  
10 job and in the rest of my life.  
11 Are there vegans among you who have  
12 been vegan for years now? And how  
13 do you feel? How do you ensure that  
14 you stay healthy?  
15 (5 lines omitted)

First note that the question on missing out on nutrients is termed the 'real' question (line 2), which formulates it as a difficult one to pose. At the same time, Laura entitles herself to ask that question by providing serious grounds for it (lines 4–8). She constructs her question as originating in the problem itself rather than coming from a possible bias towards (for example) vegetarianism (lines 5–6). Note that Laura invites the other participants to inform her about how they feel just after having asked if there are participants who have been vegan for a long time. Hereby Laura implicitly connects feeling a certain way to being vegan. Furthermore, the question 'How do you ensure that you stay healthy?' (lines 13–14) suggests that vegans have to do extraordinary things to stay healthy.

Now look at how Roy treats Laura's displayed worry about health and how he normalizes the procedure to solve vitamin deficiencies.

*Extract 3a: Reply to Healthy?*

*Date: March 18, 2003, 14:24*

*From: Roy*

16 (12 lines omitted)  
17 I can be brief about food, good  
18 varied (vegan) food supplemented  
19 with a little B12 tablet won't  
20 cause any health problems in most  
21 cases. However, I think that I (a  
22 student) live less healthily than  
23 you do and that's why I use some  
24 more food supplements  
25 (multi/calcium-magnesium/vit.  
26 c).

It is not until the last paragraph of his message (the first part is not reproduced here) that Roy answers Laura's question about missing out on nutrients. This position underlines the 'insignificant' status of the question and treats vitamin deficiency as an inconvenience rather than a serious problem. It presents the speaker as not being pre-occupied with health in a special way.

The way in which Roy formulates his answer is salient in this respect. By claiming that he can be brief about food (line 17), he makes available the inference that there is nothing remarkable to say about this topic. He first refers to the benefits of eating good varied food, placing 'vegan' between brackets (line 18). By underlining the relevance of eating a variety of foods, which is common advice with respect to healthy eating, and not incorpor-

ating the adjective ‘vegan’, Roy foregrounds the ordinary features of vegan eating practices.

Secondly, Roy adds ‘supplemented with a little B12 tablet’ (lines 18–19). By formulating this as an attributive construction, embedded in the sentence, he underlines the suggestion that the tablet is a supplement rather than a full food item. The construction also suggests that the tablet is a routine rather than noteworthy part of the vegan meal.

Another device for ‘normalizing’ the B12 tablet is the procedure of minimization. In our corpus, tablets or pills were usually presented as minimal items, by means of the Dutch diminutive (tablet-*je* – *little* tablet). These minimizations in supplement descriptions appear in response to descriptions of or questions about health control.

By normalizing the practice of taking pills for health protection, participants play down the unusual character of this procedure and at the same time the reasons that may underlie the procedure, such as veganism being an unhealthy lifestyle (see also Sneijder & te Molder, 2004). By presenting B12 tablets as extras, they are implicitly contrasted with other, more difficult and time-consuming ways of protecting your health.

Finally, Roy claims that he uses more food supplements than would normally be necessary. He ascribes this to his membership of the category ‘students’ (line 21–22). This category is conventionally associated with predicates like eating unhealthily, going out a lot and so on. Roy uses this membership to account for his extensive use of supplements, thereby countering the suggestion that taking all sorts of supplements is an activity that is exclusively linked to the category ‘vegans’. Moreover, by linking his frequent use of supplements to the category of ‘students’ rather than ‘vegans’, he leaves it to Laura to decide if she has the kind of lifestyle that requires this amount of supplements as well.

#### *Constructing taking pills as routine procedure*

In extract 4, ‘artificial’ methods for preventing B12 deficiency are again presented as routine and common practices.

##### *Extract 4: Vitamin pills.*

*Date: October 3, 2003, 18:45*

*From: Brittany*

1     There is always talk about how  
2     important it is for vegans to  
3     supplement the food with extra  
4     vitamin B12 tablets. I am curious  
5     if most vegans take up this advice.

In lines 1–4, Brittany constructs herself as an ‘animator’ (Goffman, 1981) who is merely reporting the talk and views of others. This role enables her to broach the topic while avoiding potentially problematic attributions of responsibility for the truth of the claim. By displaying ‘mere’ curiosity (lines 4–5), Brittany also downgrades the personal interest she might take in the topic. Her ‘disinterested’ mental state carefully avoids confirming the status of the problem as a problem and neutralizes it into a possible issue.

In the reply to this message, the problematic status of taking supplements is resisted by using an idiomatic expression:

##### *Extract 4a: Reply to Vitamin pills.*

*Date: October 4, 2003, 13:51*

*From: Gordon*

6     a little pill a day (if this isn't  
7     forgotten.....)

First note how Gordon’s response is formulated as a direct, immediate response, as we have seen before. By formulating the

procedure of taking a pill as a rule, Gordon ‘scripts up’ the intake of these pills (cf. Edwards, 1994, 1995) as a routine procedure. The type of formulation is typical of procedures that have been incorporated into everyday practices, such as ‘an apple a day’. Note that the activities of actually swallowing or taking the pill have been left out. The absence of agent and action enhances the inference that taking a pill is just a routine procedure: it can be carried out ‘without thinking’. The passive construction ‘if this isn’t forgotten’ (lines 6–7) further emphasizes this procedural nature, as does the reference to ‘a little pill’ rather than ‘a pill’.

Idiomatic expressions such as ‘... a day’ are impervious to undermining because of their formulaic character. They are useful when the speaker is at risk of lacking support or agreement (Drew & Holt, 1988; Potter, 1996). Generally, by defining an action as commonplace or routine, the speaker minimizes his or her accountability for that action (Edwards, 1994, 1995).

To sum up, the second part of the analysis has focused on the ways in which participants ‘normalize’ particular health protection methods. We identified a number of interrelated discursive devices (constructed immediacy, minimization, reference to mundane products or procedures, and the use of scripting), all of which work to present methods of preventing vitamin deficiencies as a routine and unremarkable activity. These constructions systematically undermined displayed assumptions about the ‘extraordinary’ measures that vegans have to take in order to stay healthy.

## **Discussion**

This paper demonstrates that ‘doing being ordinary’ (Sacks, 1984) is an important and relevant activity for rebutting the notion of veganism as a complicated and unhealthy lifestyle. Our study shows how a food-related identity – being a vegan – can be at least partly dependent for its interactional robustness on an identity ostensibly *not* related to food, namely, being an ordinary person. ‘Ordinariness’ is normatively invoked here as the rhetorical alternative for ‘complicatedness’, such that someone who is ‘a vegan but still an ordinary person’ cannot be reproached. Uncomplicatedness is offered as the normatively preferred option. This is reminiscent of the pursuit of flexibility, or an avoidance of rigidity, that is also found in studies on how people construct a healthy lifestyle (for example, Pajari, Jallinoja, & Absetz, 2006). Being a health freak is treated as just as condemnable as leading a careless life. The good life is thus designed to be ‘healthy but relaxed’. Such a portrayal does not seem to tie in with a lifestyle such as veganism that is bound to be associated with strict norms and rules. While the survival of a vegan lifestyle may show a connection with the extent to which the vegan regards it as an individual life project (Larsson et al., 2003), it also seems to depend on how well you are able to account for your way of living towards others, in terms of its non-extremeness, relaxedness and simplicity.

It is not only easiness that is negotiated here. Deviance and normality are also at stake. Participants’ reports of simple eating practices and preparation procedures indexically display these participants as normal: the meals are no more complicated than any ‘normal’ meal would require, or any ‘normal’ person would be willing to prepare. Previous discourse studies have shown normality and ‘ordinariness’ to be a recurrent feature of participants’ methods in defensive environments. Lawrence (1996) argues that stigmatized practices such as prostitution are often accounted for by underlining the mundane aspects of these practices. More recently, Burrige (2008) shows how claims to ordinariness are used to argue that hunt supporters are no sadists or barbaric.

In relation to food choice, Bisogni et al. (2002) reported the common use of normalcy as an identity category next to participants' self-portrayal as "extreme" with regard to eating. In contrast, this study shows that participants resist the notion of extremeness (in the sense of doing or being complicated), and do so implicitly. This result is in line with the finding of discursive psychologists that management of stake is preferably done in an inauspicious manner, namely through apparently straightforward descriptions of the 'world-as-it-is'.

The relevance of ordinariness in this study seems in conflict with the notion that ideological food choices like veganism are ways of expressing personal identity (see for example, Lindeman & Stark, 1999, 2000). When a dietary style like veganism is considered to do precisely that, ordinariness is not the first thing that comes to mind as worth 'striving for'. Note however, that such a perspective ignores the action-orientedness of identities. Participants do not deny their vegan identity but draw on the alternative identity of an ordinary person to counter negative inferential implications from the first one. In this sense, their claimed ordinariness underlines the relevance and importance of their vegan-ness.

In the second part of the analysis, it was shown how the prevention of (future) health problems was presented as a routine practice involving mundane and simple actions. The notion that vegans have to put more effort into health control than any other human being with 'normal' eating practices was thus undermined.

Moreover, by defining an action as routine or normal, speakers also counter the suggestion that they are in any special way accountable for it, which reduces the relevance of describing their motives or the causes of their actions, for instance 'lacking vitamins' or 'preventing health problems' (cf. Edwards, 1994, 1995). In this case, the intake of supplements is presented as a 'taken-for-granted' action that does not need explanation. The protection of health is not treated as a problem or a noteworthy activity for vegans, but rather as an insignificant inconvenience that can easily be corrected (Sneijder & te Molder, 2004, 2005). Normalizing supplement intake is part of their everyday reasoning processes and helps to construct and protect veganism as an ideology.

Health professionals could benefit from these findings by taking clients' implicit concerns into account when developing nutritional communication. Although a topic for further research, we may expect that other lifestyles or food products commonly associated with ethical motives are susceptible to similar counter arguments about their complex and restrictive nature. In other words, supporting this kind of lifestyle would need to include attention for its practical and mundane character, i.e., the *ordinariness* of its practitioners, rather than only making a link to the ethical benefits. Furthermore, once professionals anticipate the type of counter-identity that is used by their clients they are better able to design their communication pro-actively. Such an approach may involve treating clients whose diet is based on ethical considerations as uncomplicated, 'ordinary persons' from the start, thus making normalizing procedures interactionally less relevant. Depending on both the client's and the professional's take on veganism, it may also come down to 'confessing' the complicatedness of veganism – in the sense of veganism requiring effort rather than being an easy lifestyle – and make it a visible aspect rather than something that needs to be hidden.

This study brings up several questions that require further attention. We need to establish how specific the reported normalizing procedures are for this online vegan environment. It would be worthwhile to investigate identity construction in face-to-face contexts, also related to other food talk such as about taste,

in which the protection of a 'rule-led' ideology is not at stake. In an earlier study, we showed that participants in an online forum on food pleasure presented themselves as having independent access to knowledge of food and recipes, thereby constructing the identity of a gourmet (Sneijder & te Molder, 2006). Rather than normalizing their food choice to protect it against attributions of being difficult, participants would either underline the complexity of recipes or demonstrate their detailed knowledge of ingredients and preparation methods. This shows that the construction of ordinariness is not relevant in all contexts of food talk, but rather related to particular domains in which complexity is presented as problematic.

Although discursive psychology in relation to food research has yet to be applied broadly, we consider it a promising approach that ties in well with the trend of combining multiple disciplines (Wiggins, 2004). It offers an opportunity of studying the relationship between food and identity in practice, as a participants' rather than an analyst's concern. Considering the flexible and action-oriented nature of that relationship gives us insight in how much there is at stake in food talk, and not only in terms of one's eating practices.

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## Appendix A. Dutch original data

Extract 1: From thread 'Ontbijt'.

Date: August 29, 2001, 17:00

From: Anne

1 Hoi, ik zal me eerst even  
2 voorstellen, ik ben Anne en ben nu  
3 een jaar vegetarisch aan het eten.  
4 Ik wil ook gaan minderen in het  
5 eten van zuivel en eieren etc.  
6 maar nu heb ik een vraagje, wat  
7 mag je precies wel en niet eten  
8 eigenlijk? Want jullie hebben het  
9 op deze site wel over E stoffen  
10 enzo maar hoe weet ik nu precies  
11 wat ik (liever) niet kan eten, om  
12 maar een voorbeeld te noemen, hoe  
13 ziet het ontbijt van een veganist  
14 eruit? Ik heb eerlijk gezegd geen  
15 idee! En hoe zit het verder met de  
16 voedingsstoffen die je door  
17 bepaalde dingen niet te eten  
18 niet binnenkrijgt?! Kan iemand mij  
19 helpen? Erg bedankt alvast,  
20 groetjes Anne

Extract 1a: Reply to Ontbijt.

Date: September 01, 2001, 09:15

Reply from: Brian

21 (5 lines omitted) Zelf eet  
22 ik' s morgens alleen maar fruit.  
23 Ik begin met wat geperste  
24 sinasappelen en op m' n werk eet ik  
25 een inke banaan. In de loop van  
26 de morgen eet ik dan nog meer  
27 fruit zoals kiwi' s, grapefruit,  
28 druiven, perzikken, noem maar op.  
29 Je kunt ook muesli als ontbijt  
30 nemen met soja- of rijstemelk of  
31 gewoon boterhammen, want  
32 plantaardig broodbeleg is er  
33 genoeg.  
34 Alle voedingsstoffen, vitaminen  
35 en mineralen komen in heel  
36 bruikbare vorm voor in  
37 plantaardige voedingsstoffen,  
38 vaak veel beter als in  
39 dierlijke. Door te variëren  
40 met groenten, fruit, peulvruchten,  
41 granen en noten, kun je zonder er  
42 speciaal op te letten haast geen  
43 tekort oplopen van wat dan ook.  
44 (41 lines omitted)

Extract 1b: Reply to Ontbijt.

Date: October 02, 2001, 13:25

From: Janet

45 Hoi Anne,  
46 Ik ben nu aan het ontbijten: 1/2  
47 bevroren banaan en een hele banaan,  
48 scheut sojamelk, (ik doe er dan ook  
49 nog lijnzaad, tarwekiemen en  
50 zemelen doorheen) en dan de  
51 staafmixer erdoorheen! Havermout  
52 kun je heel goed met water maken,  
53 beetje ahornsiroep ofzo erdoor, ook  
54 lekker.

Extract 1c: Reply to Ontbijt.

Date: October 04, 2001, 21:32

From: Rick

55 mijn ontbijt ziet er toch wat  
56 simpeler uit: Broodje pindaakaas  
57 met vlokken en een glaasje limonade.

**Extract 2: From thread 'Van vegetariër naar veganist'.****Date: February 05, 2003, 23:06****From: Dick**

1 (8 lines omitted) Hoe lossen  
 2 jullie het broodbeleg op? Ik  
 3 weet dat er Tartex bestaat, het is  
 4 lekker (en duur) maar komt op een  
 5 gegeven moment ook je neus uit.  
 6 (6 lines omitted)

**Extract 2a: Reply to Van vegetarier naar veganist.****Date: June 16, 2003, 21:01****From: Emma**

7 Het is inderdaad zo dat je na een  
 8 paar boterhammen Tartex je er even  
 9 genoeg van hebt. Heb je al eens  
 10 gebakken ui met tomaat met daarop  
 11 Herbermare van Dokter Vogel met een  
 12 beetje olijfolie gebakken op je  
 13 brood geprobeerd?  
 14 (5 lines omitted)  
 15 Ook aan te bevelen is een  
 16 broodje broccoli. Kook wat broccoli  
 17 en maak wat knoombokter (16 lines  
 18 omitted). Als je vanalles gaat  
 19 proberen kom je er na een tijdje wel  
 20 achter dat veganistische boterhammen  
 21 lekker zijn!

**Extract 2b: Reply to Van vegetarier naar veganist.****Date: June 17, 2003, 10:51****From: John**

22 wat ik altijd erg jammer vindt, is  
 23 de neiging van veganisten om bij  
 24 tips voor op brood met allerlei  
 25 zaken aan te komen die nogal  
 26 omslachtig zijn.  
 27 ik bedoel groenten bakken en koken  
 28 enzo voor op brood is leuk, maar  
 29 niet praktisch als je bv. tussen de  
 30 middag op je werk moet lunchen.  
 31 daarom van mijn kant wat meer  
 32 praktische belegtips naast tartex:  
 33 vegan creamcheese (lekker, wel duur)  
 34 houmous (ook bij ah verkrijgbaar)  
 35 kabouterpate (3 lines omitted)  
 36 pindakaas met sambal  
 37 veganaise als boter en daar dan bv.  
 38 komkommer op met wat peper (al iets  
 39 uitgebreider, maar okee) ziet u, het  
 40 kan ook makkelijker.

**Extract 2c: Reply to Van vegetarier naar veganist.****Date: June 18, 2003, 17:43****From: Billy**

45 gewone pindakaas, appelstroop,  
 46 hagelslag, notenpasta,

47 hazelnootpasta. Ik heb geen last  
 48 van eentonigheid of zo hoor..)

**Extract 3: From thread 'Gezond?'****Date: March 20, 2003, 13:27****From: Laura**

1 (10 lines omitted)  
 2 Okee, nu mijn echte vraag dan maar.  
 3 Kom je structureel stoffen te kort  
 4 die je nodig hebt? Een vriendin van  
 5 me kreeg (niet door vegetarisch eten  
 6 ofzo) een vit b12 gebrek, en heeft  
 7 daar jaren mee rondgesukkeld  
 8 (1 line omitted).  
 9 Dat zou ik met mijn baan en verdere  
 10 leven er echt niet bij kunnen  
 11 hebben! Zijn er onder jullie  
 12 veganisten die het al jaren zijn? En  
 13 hoe voelen jullie je erbij? Hoe zorg  
 14 je ervoor dat je gezond blijft?  
 15 (5 lines omitted)

**Extract 3a: Reply to Gezond?****Date: March 18, 2003, 14:24****From: Roy**

16 (12 lines omitted)  
 17 Over voeding kan ik kort zijn, goede  
 18 gevarieerde (veganistische) voeding  
 19 aangevuld met een B12-tabletje zal  
 20 in de meeste gevallen geen  
 21 gezondheidsproblemen opleveren. Ik  
 22 denk echter dat ik (student) minder  
 23 gezond leef dan jou en zodoende  
 24 gebruik ik nog wat meer  
 25 voedingssupplementen  
 26 multi/calcium-magnesium/vit. c).

**Extract 4: From thread 'Vitaminepillen'.****Date: October 3, 2003, 18:45****From: Brittany**

1 Er wordt altijd gezegd hoe  
 2 belangrijk het is voor een  
 3 veganist om de voeding aan te  
 4 vullen met extra vitamine B12  
 5 tabletten. Ik ben nu benieuwd of  
 6 deze raad door de meeste  
 7 veganisten ook opgevolgd wordt.

**Extract 4a: Reply to Vitaminepillen.****Date: October 4, 2003, 13:51****From: Gordon**

8 iedere dag (mits deze niet wordt  
 9 vergeten.....) een pilletje