

The Process of Exiting Vegetarianism: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The experience, reasons, and contexts associated with leaving vegetarianism were explored.

Methods: Interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 19 ex-vegetarians and 15 continuing vegetarians.

Results: Exiting vegetarianism is similar to the process of leaving other important individual identities, including exiting diets containing meat. It is a process, not an event, and partially a response to inconvenience, particularly when the person's table companions were not vegetarians. Major life changes and declines in self-perceived health provided occasions to reassess life choices, including the vegetarian commitment. Ex-vegetarians interpreted their vegetarianism as a transition to a new, healthier diet. Including a comparison group of continuing vegetarians revealed that the ex-vegetarians were more likely to have become vegetarians as a result of concern about the well-being of animals and the environment, not animal rights, a value more difficult to compromise.

Conclusions: Exiting processes show the five central food values of taste, health, time, cost, and social relationships undermine people's commitment to a diet chosen largely for moral reasons.

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RÉSUMÉ

Objectif. L'expérience, les raisons et les contextes associés au choix d'abandonner le végétarisme ont été explorés.

Méthodes. Des entrevues ont été menées auprès d'un échantillon de commodité composé de 19 personnes anciennement végétariennes et de 15 végétariens.

Résultats. Abandonner le végétarisme est un processus similaire à celui qui consiste à abandonner d'autres importantes identités individuelles, par exemple à abandonner un autre type de diète comprenant de la viande. Il s'agit d'un processus (et non d'un événement) et, en partie, d'une réaction à des inconvénients, particulièrement lorsque les compagnons de table d'une personne n'étaient pas des adeptes du végétarisme. Des changements de vie majeurs et un déclin perçu de la santé constituaient des occasions de réévaluer les choix de vie, entre autres l'engagement envers le végétarisme. Les anciens végétariens interprétaient leur végétarisme comme une transition vers une nouvelle alimentation plus saine. L'inclusion d'un groupe de comparaison formé de personnes ayant décidé de demeurer végétariennes a permis de constater que les anciens végétariens étaient plus susceptibles d'être devenus végétariens en réponse à des préoccupations relatives au bien-être des animaux et à l'environnement, et non aux droits des animaux, une valeur plus difficile à ébranler.

Conclusions. Les processus d'abandon montrent que les cinq valeurs alimentaires centrales, soit le goût, la santé, le temps, le coût et les relations interpersonnelles, ébranlent l'engagement des gens envers une alimentation choisie principalement pour des raisons morales.

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INTRODUCTION

While no recent national Canadian data are available, 6.5% of females and 1% of males in an Ontario sample claimed they followed vegetarian diets (1). Studies show strong internal convictions, positive physical feedback, the development of vegetarian food preparation skills, and supportive friends help people remain vegetarian (2,3). Conversely, health concerns and a lack

of social support have been identified as central to why some vegetarians become ex-vegetarians (4). Largely unexamined is our concern: the process through which people become ex-vegetarians.

Vegetarianism expresses an ideological commitment, helping people remember and reflect on their values while stabilizing

their identity (5,6). An examination of exiting vegetarianism reveals how a reflected-upon food choice, a chosen identity, breaks down. When identity is seen not only as a self-image, but also as a process of maintaining and changing that self-image for oneself and others (5,7), then how people leave an identity reflects how food values break down in particular personal and social circumstances. We examine how this commitment is transformed.

Studies of exiting identities important to the individual stress it is a process, not an event (8,9). These studies also indicate the importance of cognitive transformations (10), emotional adjustments (11), the central role of family and friends (11,12), and how vestiges of the previous identity (13) or a role hangover (14) may become part of the new identity. When people are loosely connected to a lifestyle built around an identity, exiting is easier and has less impact on their new identity than it does when people are strongly enmeshed (9,15). People's own accounts of exiting stress that they make choices, with the identification of a turning point being a possible way in which people assert to themselves that they are in control when they are responding to processes largely beyond their control (9,16).

When studies of becoming vegetarian are read as accounts of leaving the food identity of being a meat eater, then similar themes are apparent (17). The exit from meat-based diets is usually gradual, with various animal items being successively eliminated from the diet (18,19). Many vegetarians view meat eating as repulsive, a view that illustrates a cognitive transformation (17). Emotionally, feelings of self-efficacy often flow from learning new food preparation skills. These, with changes in physical well-being such as weight loss, help consolidate the new vegetarian identity (18). One study (20) showed that adoption of a vegetarian diet is often concurrent with other significant life events, such as moving or divorce, and suggests that this may be an assertion of control in people's lives in transitional periods.

PURPOSE

The literature on exiting central identities in general and exiting meat-based diets in particular guides our study of exiting vegetarianism. The purpose of this study was to describe the experience, reasons, and contexts associated with leaving vegetarianism. To provide a contrast with the ex-vegetarians' experiences, we interviewed some continuing vegetarians.

METHODS

Data collection and participants

This cross-sectional, exploratory study was conducted from 2004 to 2007 in and around Guelph, Ontario, and qualitative data were collected by one graduate and five undergraduate students. The inquiry started as a sociology master's degree student's study of the differences between those who maintained their vegetarian commitment and those who became ex-vegetarians. She developed her semistructured interview schedule with assistance from her faculty advisors and pilot tested it with six

The exit from meat-based diets is usually gradual.

participants. Some minor changes were made and the final semistructured interview schedule was used to ask people to describe their voyage to becoming a vegetarian and an ex-vegetarian (if applicable), their confidence in their ability to buy and cook vegetarian food and prepare a nutritionally adequate vegetarian diet, major life changes at the time of becoming and/or leaving vegetarianism, and who their regular table com-

panions were. As little was known in the Canadian context, the decision was made to interview a substantial number of people, rather than opt for fewer interviews with tape recording and transcription, an approach frequently adopted in sociology.

To be eligible to participate in the study, individuals had to be English-speaking, and at least 18 years old on the university campus and at least 21 years old off campus. (The age criterion difference was due to institutional ethics policies on age of consent for students versus non-students.)

Individuals who adopted a vegetarian diet for religious reasons, for example, Hinduism, were excluded as we were interested in understanding how dietary, not religious, commitments change.

By definition, vegetarians are individuals who do not eat meat, fish, or poultry. Lacto-ovo-vegetarians eat eggs and milk products while vegans avoid these (21). People were asked about their understanding of the term "vegetarian" and what they actually ate, as many self-identified vegetarians eat some meat or fish (21). To help ensure accurate recall of their vegetarian voyage, we interviewed only people who had become vegetarian in the preceding five years.

An ex-vegetarian was defined as an individual who now eats meat, poultry, and/or fish but who had previously been a vegetarian for at least three months. To help ensure an accurate recall of life circumstances when exiting vegetarianism, we interviewed only those individuals who had become ex-vegetarian in the preceding five years.

When we, the authors, examined the findings from the graduate student, we found that the most interesting material was the qualitative information on how vegetarians became ex-vegetarians. Five undergraduate students were recruited to follow up on the graduate student's work. For consistency, they followed the methodological approach used by the master's degree student. The students were encouraged to use follow-up questions to probe for clarification or more depth, and to allow the interviews to shift in new directions if participants introduced relevant but unanticipated comments or new topics. Notes were taken during the interviews and supplemented by the interviewers shortly afterward. This ensured that the information was recorded in, or very close to, the participants' own words. Interviews usually lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

Participants were initially recruited through snowball sampling using personal contacts, an advertisement on Windows Live Messenger, and referrals from those recruited. In addition, cards and posters describing the study and providing contact information were posted on campus, in the public library, in

lunchrooms of commercial buildings, in two local vegetarian restaurants, in the university cafeteria, and in two health food stores and a chiropractic office.

Participation in this study was voluntary and no remuneration was offered. Because vegetarians comprise a small segment of the population and to preserve confidentiality, only basic demographic information about age and sex and whether the participant was a student or not was collected. Age was determined by a direct question in all but three cases, where the interviewer felt the question might disrupt the smooth flow of the interview. The study was approved by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board and all participants gave written consent.

Research team's experiences

The researchers sought to depict accurately the participants' ideas about how their vegetarian food choices fitted into their lives or had ceased to fit. In qualitative research, researchers recognize that their own experiences and values inevitably shape the questions asked and the responses given, and that considering researchers' own contexts in relation to the research is therefore important (22). In this study, the research team included a range of perspectives and experiences with vegetarianism. The six students who collected the data included a vegan, a vegetarian, an ex-vegetarian, and some who had never been vegetarians. They followed interview schedules to ask the questions and probes, and were trained to remain neutral and not to discuss their own diet/food philosophy. We saw no evidence of bias in the way that the questions and probes were asked or recorded by the students. The authors (a never-vegetarian and a vegetarian) did the analysis and discussed and agreed on the themes that emerged from the data. The themes were supported using participants' own words, with minimal interpretation by the researchers. Strauss and Corbin (23) call this type of analysis "accurate description."

RESULTS

The two groups in the sample had quite similar demographics, and most were women (n=9 of 15 vegetarians; n=14 of 19 ex-vegetarians). On average, the vegetarians (n=15) had been following their diets for three years, whereas the ex-vegetarians (n=19) had followed vegetarian diets for an average of 2.7 years. The vegetarians were somewhat more likely to be students (12 of 15) than were the ex-vegetarians (11 of 19).

As Table 1 shows, most of the largely young adults embraced a vegetarian diet for ethical reasons, not health concerns. Among continuing vegetarians, the moral reasons for choosing vegetarianism were almost evenly split between a belief in animal rights (i.e., a belief that animals have the same right to live as humans and that killing them is speciesism) and animal/environmental concerns (i.e., a belief that a vegetarian diet promotes the welfare of all living things and the environment supporting them). However, the ex-vegetarians overwhelmingly had become vegetarian

Eating with others was easier as a meat eater.

for reasons of concern about the well-being of animals and the environment (e.g., because of opposition to the factory farming of animals).

During the research, five major themes emerged: hassle, a decline in self-perceived health, major life changes, change as process, and a path or transition diet.

Hassle

Many ex-vegetarians attributed returning to eating meat to the hassle of being vegetarian when surrounded by meat eaters. They spoke of being vegetarian as "too much work," "inconvenient," and "more expensive," and of eating separately being "too difficult." Several linked their return to eating fish and meat to moving out of university residences where they had chosen vegetarian options for their meal plans. When they started to cook for themselves or with others, their often limited food preparation skills meant vegetarian food was a meat diet minus meat—a result several described as "boring." Sharing food preparation and eating with others was easier as a meat eater. For example, one participant became vegetarian after moving in with his vegetarian girlfriend, who did most of the cooking. When she moved away to university, he moved in with meat-eating males. He became an ex-vegetarian as he shifted to sharing cooking and meals with his housemates: cooking on his own had become too much hassle.

On the other hand, continuing vegetarians spoke of emotional and tangible support, especially recipes, which they received from vegetarian companions. The relationship was not

Table 1

Characteristics of vegetarians (n=15) and ex-vegetarians (n=19) in the study

Characteristic	Vegetarians	Ex-vegetarians
Female	9	14
Students	12	11
Age (years)		
Average	24	24
Range	18-30	18-35
Years vegetarian		
Average	3	2.7
Range ^a	0.5-5	0.25-5
Reason for vegetarianism		
Health ^b	2	3
Animal rights	6	1
Animal/environmental concerns ^b	7	16
Average time ex-vegetarian (years)	N/A	1.7

N/A = not applicable

^a To ensure that participants had a clear memory of becoming vegetarian, people who had become vegetarian more than five years earlier were excluded from the study.

^b One ex-vegetarian believed factory farming of animals was immoral as it produced health-destroying meat. She was counted as having both health and animal/environmental concerns for being vegetarian.

unidirectional: food choices also influenced the choice of close friends. For instance, one vegetarian asserted that she would have been unable to maintain her relationship with her boyfriend unless he had become vegetarian.

Decline in self-perceived health

Even if several years had passed since they became vegetarian, all ex-vegetarian respondents attributed a perceived decline in health or well-being (e.g., feeling “constantly tired”) to their vegetarian diet and resumed eating meat and fish. A typical example is a triathlon athlete, whose energy declined as she trained while following a vegetarian diet. She felt her diet interfered with her sport and that she had to choose between her ideals and her sport. She chose her sport. In another case, a woman felt “run down.” Her physician said she was not getting enough iron and prescribed iron pills. These helped, but were expensive. Eating meat was effective, and so she ceased being vegetarian.

Major life changes

Major life changes, such as moving, a new job, or marriage, were often catalysts for the reassessment of one’s vegetarianism. For instance, one woman was planning to travel to Africa with a volunteer group shortly after the interview. Her volunteer organization had informed her that maintaining a vegetarian diet where she was going would be very difficult. To participate in the local culture and avoid giving offence, she resumed eating meat. Another example is a woman who broke up with her live-in fiancé. She returned to eating meat as it simplified her life and she wanted time to focus on her emotions.

Change as process

Most ex-vegetarians described their move from vegetarianism as a process, not an event. In addition to experiencing hassles, some started to find other vegetarians “conceited” or “holier than thou.” They came to believe that ways other than avoiding meat were available to support animal and environmental welfare, such as eating limited quantities of meat or only “organically farmed” meat. Another example of cognitive change comes from a person who started working on an organic farm. Instead of seeing animals as having rights, she came to see them as part of a cycle of life. Thus, eating meat was acceptable, as long as the animal had had a reasonable life, or, in her formulation, one could “eat meat with a happy face.”

Often the restrictions of a vegetarian diet were broken gradually with a phase-in of some prohibited items first, usually chicken and fish before red meat, if this was reintroduced at all. Other vegetarians broke their commitment by eating meat when eating out at friends’ houses or restaurants, but not when alone. Sometimes people were informed gradually of the change. Some ex-vegetarians reported they hid their change for several months from vegetarian friends or their families (when family members had gone out of their way to accommodate and support their vegetarian food choice).

Some started to find other vegetarians “conceited”.

Some vegetarians claimed they shifted suddenly to being meat eaters, usually in response to the smell of meat cooking. While some people may fit this sudden shift model—most being vegetarians whose commitment was limited, judging by the length of time they were vegetarian, cooking skills, and number of vegetarian table companions—others gave clear evidence during the interview that their shift was a drawn-out process.

For instance, one person talked of the hassle of cooking vegetarian food while living with meat eaters and had worked out a set of rules for what sort of meat, ideally, he would eat (e.g., no fast food, only meat that could be traced to a particular farm), and yet he asserted his conversion to eating meat was sudden.

A path or transition diet

Many ex-vegetarians interpreted their vegetarian experience as a path to their current food choices, choices they saw as both reflecting their values and beliefs and being healthier than their pre-vegetarian diets. As evidence of improved diets, many reported eating less meat now, and a few mentioned eating different types of meat such as buffalo and pheasant. One person, who had resumed eating meat when she was in Africa, used meat in the way she had learned in Africa, in a sauce or a stew, but not as the centre of the meal. Some participants said they became “sometimes vegetarians” or “weekday vegetarians,” referring to the fact that they still made a point of eating meatless meals on many occasions. One participant summed up her vegetarianism as “a rung on the ladder to a healthier diet.”

On the whole, the more embedded the ex-vegetarians had been in vegetarianism, as evidenced by the length of time they had been vegetarian, regular vegetarian table companions, and confidence in their ability to prepare satisfying vegetarian meals, the greater the perceived impact of having been vegetarian. Conversely, ex-vegetarians who had been loosely connected to the vegetarian life reported little or no impact from having been vegetarian. In our sample, usually these ex-vegetarians were students who had chosen the vegetarian option in university cafeterias and quit when they moved into accommodations with meat eaters and started learning to cook.

DISCUSSION

Health and “role hangover”

Many of the ex-vegetarians in this study claimed to have a diet closer to vegetarianism than the typical North American meat-based diet; an earlier study of ex-vegetarians had the same result (4). The ex-vegetarians believed their current diet was healthy, a finding in line with a previous study of vegetarians, which showed that, in comparison with meat eaters, they tend to know more about nutrition and believe their own actions have a greater impact on their health (24). However, this perception of moving to a healthier diet should be viewed with caution. The large-scale EPIC-Oxford study indicated that when mean weight gain over five years was measured, individuals in the “reverted” category (i.e., those who had moved one or more categories in

the direction from vegan to vegetarian to fish eater to meat eater) had the highest average annual weight gain when they were compared with vegans, vegetarians, fish eaters, and meat eaters (25). While the health significance of this weight gain is not known, “role hangover” was evident among those interviewed several years later (25). Vegetarianism continued to be part of their self-identity, rather than intended as a temporary adaptation, as in many instances where individuals adopt a new diet (e.g., a weight loss diet) and then revert to their previous eating habits (26).

Life changes

The food choice model (27,28) stresses that people develop food routines, and that these change as their situation changes (29,30). This model fits people shifting from vegetarianism to ex-vegetarianism when major events occur in their lives. With our sample of mostly young adults, the event often involves moving in with new housemates. The concept of table companions is appropriate for our data and points to a problem with the frequently used category of family support. Parents may be concerned about their child’s vegetarianism, but may accommodate it, while a sibling may resort to teasing or be indifferent. Alternatively, the vegetarian may not be living with his or her family, but may have housemates who shop, prepare, and eat meals together. This study suggests that new housemates’ diets have a major impact on people’s vegetarian commitment.

A major form of sharing accommodation, with even greater impact on food choices, begins with cohabitation or marriage. Typically, in our largely female sample, a girlfriend moved in with her boyfriend. Previous studies have shown that when couples start to live together (and cohabitation, not marriage, is central), their diets tend to converge (31,32); often, a woman will eat more meat to accommodate her male partner’s eating pattern (32).

Decline in self-perceived health

Three of the nine vegetarians whose self-perceived health declined after they adopted a vegetarian diet were serious athletes. An American Dietetic Association (ADA) position paper (21) states clearly that vegetarians can be high-level athletes. However, this paper and another paper on nutrition and athletic performance (33) endorse this position cautiously and mention that studies are limited; concerns remain about protein quality for vegetarians, particularly for vegans. Concerns also exist about fat, calcium, and iron, particularly for women. Furthermore, athletes need to be taught the skills to plan adequate vegetarian diets. Caution also characterizes books by dietitians, such as *Vegetarian Sport Nutrition* (34), which includes comments such as “vegetarian athletes, in most cases can achieve adequate iron status” (p. 86; see also pp. 109-112 on zinc, iodine, and copper). Popular books on diet and sports, such as *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* (35), provide encouraging but limited advice (nine of 263 pages) on how to be a vegetarian athlete. Because of profes-

Concerns remain about protein quality for vegetarians.

sionals’ caution and the lack of detailed advice on planning vegetarian diets in easily accessible popular material, some vegetarian athletes’ commitment to vegetarianism is not reinforced, and they may feel pressured to choose between their sport and their diet.

Moral reasons for vegetarianism

The comparison group of continuing vegetarians alerted us to a feature of the exiting process that none of the ex-vegetarians recognized. Overwhelmingly, among the ex-vegetarians, the moral concern that led them to become vegetarian was a commitment to the welfare of animals and the environment. For instance, several had rejected modern meat production, as they saw it as both cruel to animals and a cause of environmental degradation. Normally they continued to hold animal and environmental welfare values, but their understanding of the human–animal–environment relationship changed. They respected animals’ well-being by eating organic “free-range” meat, or believed that as long as they restricted their meat intake they were following a sustainable diet, as some land is best suited for animal pasture. On the other hand, animal rights, the moral basis for about 50% of the continuing vegetarians, is much more absolute and less open to compromises with other values. The ethical positions justifying vegetarianism and leaving vegetarianism were usually vaguely formulated and blurred into each other. However, we found ethicists’ welfare versus rights distinction strongly marked (36,37).

The process of exiting vegetarianism

Exiting vegetarianism is a process with emotional and cognitive dimensions that usually results in a role hangover (14). Exits usually are easier (i.e., more an event and less a process) and produce no or almost no role hangover when people are loosely connected to vegetarian life.

Study limitations

A difficulty was recruiting former vegetarians who had left vegetarianism within the preceding five years, and therefore the sample size was relatively small. Food intake data were not collected, and thus the participants’ perceptions that their post-vegetarian diets were “healthier” cannot be assessed.

RELEVANCE TO PRACTICE

Canadian vegetarians, especially young adults, usually have selected this diet for moral reasons. The process through which vegetarians exit this chosen diet highlights the power of the usual five central food values of taste, health, cost, time, and social relationships. Exiting vegetarianism is a serious possibility when vegetarians lack the skills to produce, quickly, tasty vegetarian food in their price range, experience ill health, or find their vegetarian food choice generates major hassles with their table companions (especially live-in partners).

Clients may resist an examination of their eating patterns when their lives are in upheaval. However, this study of exiting

suggests that times of transition, when new practices are born, are times when successful interventions by dietitians are possible. While dietitians know vegetarianism can be an adequate diet, people leave vegetarian diets when their self-perceived health declines. This finding suggests that, if a new diet is followed by self-perceived poor health, then the dietitian needs to find a new way to attain the client's nutritional objectives. While the new diet may not be responsible for the person's feeling of worsening health, likely he or she will believe it is: lived experience trumps professional expertise.

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