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### “Actually, I Don't Eat Meat” : A Multiple-Goals Perspective of Communication About Vegetarianism

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# “Actually, I Don’t Eat Meat”: A Multiple-Goals Perspective of Communication About Vegetarianism

Lynsey Kluever Romo & Erin Donovan-Kicken

*Engaging in non-mainstream behavior can be challenging to negotiate communicatively, especially when it involves the simple but necessary task of eating, a lifelong activity that is often done in others’ company. Through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of 20 vegetarians, this study used a multiple-goals perspective (Goldsmith, 2004; Goldsmith, Gumming, & Bute, 2006) to examine the communicative dilemmas faced by vegetarians. This investigation suggests unique self-presentational challenges for vegetarians (e.g., being true to oneself yet fitting in; talking about vegetarianism without judging others) and identifies strategies that “healthy deviants”—people who violate society’s norms in relatively healthy ways—can use to discuss their lifestyle choices. Findings offer practical implications for how communication can help people enact or sustain potentially stigmatized healthy lifestyles while maintaining their relationships.*

*Keywords:* Health; Multiple Goals; Stigma

In the U.S., approximately 3% of adults are vegetarians, meaning that they voluntarily eschew all meat, poultry, and seafood (Stahler, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Vegetarians tend to adhere to their lifestyles for health, moral, environmental, family, gustatory, religious, or economic reasons or a combination thereof (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Rajaram & Sabate, 2000). Living as a vegetarian has implications for

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individuals' physiological health and also for their relational well-being, because discussing vegetarianism with others has the potential to be awkward or even to trigger interpersonal conflict (e.g., Boyle, 2007; Jabs, Sobal, & Devine, 2000). How people actually talk about their vegetarianism is not well known, however. In the following sections, we describe the benefits and potential disadvantages of choosing this uncommon path, as well as the findings of a qualitative study designed to uncover how vegetarians negotiate their communication.

### **Vegetarians as a Deviant Group**

Vegetarians are members of a special type of minority group comprised of individuals who choose to engage in nonmainstream behaviors that are ostensibly beneficial but that others may view as eccentric or even deviant. Vegetarians are relatively atypical, even though eating a well-balanced vegetarian diet provides such advantages as lowered weight and blood pressure (Berkow & Barnard, 2005) and protection against and management of Type 2 diabetes (Barnard, Katcher, Jenkins, Cohen, & Turner-McGrievy, 2009). Vegetarianism also benefits the environment; the livestock industry is one of the world's largest contributors to land degradation, climate change, water use, and pollution (Steinfeld, Gerber, Wassenaar, Caste, Rosales, & de Haan, 2006) and not consuming meat helps to offset these problems (Leitzmann, 2003).

To better understand the complexities of interacting with others when belonging to a minority group such as vegetarians, some parallels may be drawn to other groups that voluntarily pursue behaviors they view as beneficial but that others may find unconventional—for example, homeschoolers, breastfeeding mothers, and voluntarily childless couples. For example, although breastfeeding has been repeatedly linked to positive health outcomes for mother and baby and is recommended exclusively for a minimum of 6 months, only one-third of mothers solely breastfeed their babies at 3 months (Godfrey & Meyers, 2009), making breastfeeding a minority, albeit positive, practice. Similarly, studies have found that homeschooled children have higher standardized test scores than traditional students (Rudner, 1999) and perform just as well in college (Jones & Gloeckner, 2004), yet homeschoolers comprise an estimated 2% of the school-age population (Wasley, 2007). Further, compared with parents, couples who do not have children experience a variety of positive outcomes, including higher levels of relational satisfaction (Somers, 1993) and less depression (Evenson & Simon, 2005). However, most people idealize parenthood, believing that children are necessary in order to live a full and happy life (Simon, 2008).

Despite the advantages offered by these behaviors, because they clash with mainstream beliefs, they are sometimes looked down upon or even stigmatized by others (e.g., Boyle, 2007; Park, 2002). As a result, it can be difficult for people who engage in behaviors outside the norm to talk about their lifestyle choices. Durham (2008) examined the disclosure habits of voluntarily childless couples (who are stigmatized for choosing not to have children; e.g., Park, 2002), finding that couples were open about their decision not to have children when they perceived others to be supportive

or likeminded but would not reveal if they anticipated the possibility of a negative reaction, judgment, or lack of understanding. A national study of nearly 800 vegetarians (who also experience stigma; e.g., Boyle, 2007; Jabs et al., 2000) found that vegetarians are aware of this stigma and tailor disclosure of their vegetarianism accordingly. The more participants believed that vegetarianism was stigmatized, the less they disclosed their vegetarianism to meat eaters (Romo & Donovan-Kicken, 2010).

What vegetarianism has in common with choices such as breastfeeding, home-schooling, and not having children is that all of these lifestyles can arouse the discomfort, skepticism, or disparagement of others. What sets vegetarianism apart, and highlights the value of understanding it better, is that eating is a lifelong physical necessity that is often done in the company of others. Vegetarians naturally engage in communication when they cook, dine or otherwise socialize with family, friends, and colleagues. Talking about food and the lifestyle choices that influence what people eat may occur on a regular basis. Consequently, living a meat-free life may entail some meaningful social and communicative challenges.

Consider that cultures and families establish rules about the types of foods that are acceptable to consume, and deviating eating habits can represent a rejection not just of food but of the family or culture in which it is served (Lupton, 1994). Thus, the enactment and philosophy of diet can affect not only food consumption but relationships. Because eating is often social and public, people may notice and comment on a vegetarian's diverging eating habits. Vegetarians may need to make arrangements for alternative meals if meatless options are unavailable or may find themselves having to explain or defend their lifestyle. As a result, vegetarians must make deliberate decisions about whether and how to communicate about their vegetarianism in order to procure sustenance while sustaining their relationships. Vegetarians must balance the tension between staying true to their diet and beliefs in a meat-dominated world and fitting in socially (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Jabs et al., 2000).

Previous research has found that, by modeling a meat-free diet, vegetarians can influence others to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle or to curtail their meat consumption (Powell, 2002). However, very little research has addressed how vegetarians actually communicate about their vegetarianism. In one notable exception, Beardsworth and Keil (1992) found that vegetarians range from taking on a "self-effacing reticence" to assuming an "assertively evangelical attitude" (p. 280). More work is warranted to describe in greater detail the considerations and the processes of talking about vegetarianism. Research is especially needed to examine how vegetarians can overcome the communicative challenges with which they are faced. Using a multiple-goals perspective (Goldsmith, 2004; Goldsmith, Gumming, & Bute, 2006), the current study explores the dilemmas faced by vegetarians and identifies strategies vegetarians can use to successfully negotiate communication about their vegetarianism.

### **Multiple-Goals Perspective**

Multiple-goals perspectives on interpersonal communication assume that (a) communication is strategic, (b) whether and how people discuss certain subjects is

influenced by multiple interests and purposes, and (c) messages are capable of accomplishing more than one objective at a time (e.g., Caughlin, 2010; Goldsmith, 2004; Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006). In communication scholarship, goals are traditionally conceptualized as states of affairs that people wish to attain or maintain and as culturally viable explanations for communication behavior (Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989). When studying how vegetarians communicate about their lifestyle with others, we can employ a goals framework to identify the individual motivations that push or pull them to talk (or avoid talk), and we can examine the normative interpretations of messages about vegetarianism. For example, people may choose not to share that they are vegetarians because they do not want others to label them as eccentric.

A multiple-goals perspective is particularly informative when it helps us to examine the challenges people face when they are motivated by several competing demands. In some circumstances, the multiple goals that are relevant to the conversation and of interest to the speaker conflict with each other; this poses dilemmas for communicators as they assess the extent to which it would be effective and appropriate for them to be open, honest, direct, and so forth. For example, previous research has demonstrated that a person may want to accomplish the goal of encouraging a partner to enact healthier behaviors, but doing so might seem insulting or hurtful, which conflicts with the person's simultaneous desire to protect the partner's identity and to preserve a harmonious relational climate (Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006).

Vegetarians may be forced to communicate about their dietary preferences in order to avoid consuming a dish that contains meat, but at the same time they may be hesitant to draw attention to their vegetarianism if it makes them seem high maintenance or abnormal. Analyzing the goal-relevant dilemmas of talk helps sensitize us to why communication about some topics is particularly challenging, and how some conversational strategies are more successful than others because they attend to the requirements of the situation at hand (Goldsmith, Gumminger, & Bute, 2006). It is important to understand how people strategically manage these dilemmas characterized by competing communication goals, because the interpretations that people make about each other's goals have implications for the stability and satisfaction of their relationships (Caughlin, 2010; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2010). Guided by this framework, we pursued the following research questions in the current study:

- RQ1: What communicative dilemmas do vegetarians face in talking about their lifestyle?
- RQ2: How do vegetarians negotiate communication of their vegetarianism?

## **Method**

Vegetarians from a medium-size Southwestern city participated in face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews to discuss how they talked about their vegetarianism with vegetarians and nonvegetarians. Participants were recruited through

an online posting on the listservs of two local vegetarian networking groups and through snowball sampling. No incentives were provided.

### *Participants*

Twenty vegetarians were interviewed for this study. Seventy percent ( $n = 14$ ) of the participants were female and participant ages ranged from 18 to 69 ( $M = 33$ ). The length participants had been vegetarians spanned 3 to 42 years ( $M = 16.7$ ). Sixty-five percent reported they were primarily vegetarian for moral reasons, 20% for family reasons, and 15% for health reasons. Every participant had attended at least some college; 70% had earned their bachelor's degree, and 40% had an advanced degree.

### *Procedure*

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio recorded for transcription and analysis. Field notes were taken and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. To protect their privacy, participants were assigned pseudonyms during transcription.

### *Instruments and Analysis*

Participants were informed that they would be participating in a study about how people talk about being a vegetarian. After they were asked how long they had been a vegetarian and their primary motivation for being a vegetarian, they responded to a series of questions regarding how they managed communication about vegetarianism (e.g., "In what cases do you voluntarily bring up vegetarianism with people"; "What are conversations about your vegetarianism like?"). At the end of the interview, participants shared basic demographic information.

Analysis began with transcription of the interviews. Consistent with recommendations for qualitative inquiry, data were analyzed as they were collected, so that emerging themes could be incorporated into the interview guide and examined in subsequent interviews until theoretical saturation was attained (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following the interviews, each author reviewed the transcripts two to three times, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to organize, to interpret, and to code the data. In their initial analysis of the transcripts, the authors used open coding to independently generate a preliminary list of themes and exemplars, which were compared against each transcript and modified as new interviews were conducted. Saturation was deemed to have occurred when interviews no longer generated significantly different information than the previous interviews. The authors met to reconcile the initial themes before returning to the transcripts to review the data again, using second-order analysis to refine the original themes. Using axial and selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the authors collapsed the themes into major categories, meeting again to further refine and connect the master categories and to establish the final categories

and themes. Finally, the first author re-reviewed the transcripts to ensure that the themes were best reflected by the excerpts.

## Results

### *Communicative Dilemmas*

Two major communicative dilemmas emerged among participants (RQ1): wanting to be true to one's self yet wanting to fit in and wanting to talk about vegetarianism without judging others.

#### *Wanting to be true to one's self yet wanting to fit in*

For 70% of the participants, being a vegetarian was a core part of their identity and value system. Some described vegetarianism as their surrogate religion, and others said that their passion to abstain from meat translated to other parts of their lives, such as a commitment to recycling and working in service-oriented careers. Even if they did not define themselves by their vegetarianism, all participants reported that their diet was important to them. To this end, participants wanted to be honest and forthright about their eating habits to reinforce and share their identities and to build relationships with others. However, at the same time, because every participant realized they were in the minority, they had the competing goal of wanting to fit in and to get along with other people without drawing attention to themselves. While all of the participants found it relatively simple to talk about vegetarianism with fellow vegetarians whom they could trust and with whom they could forge a bond, they also reported that being forthright about their eating habits to meat eaters could result in mockery and stereotyping, yielding unwanted attention and making them feel like they did not belong.

Talking about being a vegetarian with meat eaters was especially complex because in a culture in which vegetarians were violating what "mainstream culture has taught us to do," in the words of Alicia, 36, a 16-year vegetarian, 25% of participants reported that they sometimes felt like they were engaging in "healthy deviance." Healthy deviance was a phrase coined by Rob, 48, a 29-year vegetarian, to describe the sense that, although they did not intend to set themselves apart from others, because they were enacting a healthy behavior that went against society's norms, participants felt like they stood out and that they were sometimes treated differently. As Vijay, 42, a lifelong vegetarian, said, "no one really likes to stand out as somebody different." This was in part because participants reported that once meat eaters realized they were vegetarians, they were sometimes openly mocked. As Rob explained, there is an "undercurrent of making fun of vegetarians" in society: "It's sort of like, I wouldn't compare it to homophobia . . . but it's just kind of a passive thing in the background." This "undercurrent" permeated participants' stories of being chased around the house with a sausage by a relative, being tricked by coworkers into eating cookies made with lard, and being called a "goddamn vegetarian" by a mother. None of the participants wanted to stand out or be mocked. They just wanted to fit in.

Part of this desire for assimilation means that 60% of participants were reluctant to bring up their vegetarianism because they did not want to be stereotyped (e.g., as a radical, activist, hippy, tree hugger, malnourished, or weak) for being a vegetarian. Diana, 26, a lifelong vegetarian, said that she intentionally avoided telling people about her vegetarianism because “it’s not a defect but it’s . . . already categorizing me, you know.” Although Diana was passionate about being a vegetarian (in fact her parents owned two vegetarian restaurants, which she managed), she did not want people to immediately draw conclusions about her based on her eating habits. Twenty percent of participants were especially reticent to discuss their vegetarianism at work because they worried that this knowledge would affect the ways they were viewed and treated professionally. Lisa, 31, also a lifelong vegetarian, explained that she did not want her clients to know that she was a vegetarian for fear that they would consider her “crazy, like I want to shove bean sprouts down your throat.” Amber, 29, a 4.5-year-vegetarian, did not disclose her vegetarianism to the lawyers she worked with because she was concerned that she would be stereotyped as weak or overly sensitive, and, as she put it, “lawyers don’t respect that.” As Rita, 39, a vegetarian for 18 years, said, “If you’re at work, you don’t want the thing that defines you to be something like your eating habits” These participants wanted to be judged on their own merits, not by their colleagues’ stereotypes. As a result, vegetarians largely shied away from talking about their vegetarianism, even at the expense of being true to their vegetarian selves.

#### *Talking about vegetarianism without judging others*

Another dilemma vegetarians faced was how to talk about their lifestyle without judging others or implying that they believed what the other person was eating (or not eating) was immoral. This was a concern for 75% of participants. As Sid, 35, a vegetarian for 10 years, said, “some people feel threatened by vegetarianism, [they] don’t understand it; [they] assume that I think their way of life is wrong.” It thus became very important for vegetarians to explain themselves to meat eaters without making nonvegetarians feel judged. At times, every participant said they preferred to minimize confrontation by avoiding the topic of their vegetarianism all together. As Anne, 34, a 20-year vegetarian, explained:

Vegetarian disclosure is like a time bomb. If you really don’t know someone you don’t know if you’re walking into a situation where they’re going to take something that’s part of your identity and be offended by it on a personal level.

Participants indicated that they would rather say nothing about their vegetarianism because they wanted to get along with others and not “make waves,” even if that meant they could not be open about their lifestyle. Ideally, the participants would have preferred to talk about being a vegetarian but often felt such conversations were not worth the possible backlash. As Amber put it, vegetarianism is “something that polarizes people, so I just think religion, politics, and food should maybe not be

spoken of.” Rather than risk conflict, every participant reported times in which they avoided talking about what could be a potentially divisive topic.

When participants did find themselves having to disclose that they were vegetarians, for example, to friends and family when they first became vegetarians, they all reported instances in which that communication was challenging, as they had to determine how to explain their new eating habits without distancing themselves from others. Becky, 28, a 7-year vegetarian, spoke of a “weird tension” at holiday meals when relatives struggled to adapt their cooking for her, of a “wall” that existed between her and some family members. As she explained, vegetarianism “gets in the way sometimes.” Becky’s decision to become a vegetarian created a wedge between her and some of her family, making her feel left out from meals. It is also possible that some family members thought that she had become too good for their food and their way of life. Matt, 31, a 3-year vegetarian, explained that his new eating habits put a “dividing fence” between him and his friends. Because he was no longer eating the same foods as his friends, he felt like a bit of an outsider and perceived that his friends thought he was criticizing what they ate and who they were as individuals. As a result, Matt said that he and some of his friends were no longer as close as they had been before he stopped eating meat. Laura, 22, a 5-year vegetarian, said that after she became a vegetarian she and her boyfriend broke up, in part because he thought that by giving up meat she had become a radically different person. For these participants, changed eating habits changed the dynamic of their relationships.

### *Communication Strategies*

The following two major communication strategies, which enabled vegetarians to manage multiple goals and to negotiate communication about their lifestyle, surfaced from the interviews (RQ2): Have a plan and minimize others’ discomfort (with subthemes: make vegetarianism a personal choice; tailor disclosure; downplay; stretch the truth; and excuse people for eating meat). Vegetarians used these strategies when determining whether to talk about their vegetarianism and in determining what to say.

#### *Have a plan*

A common way in which 65% of participants negotiated disclosure of their vegetarianism was by devising a communication plan. As Jessie, 29, a vegetarian for 15 years, said, as a vegetarian you need to prepare what is appropriate to say to people about your eating habits ahead of time. This planning was demonstrated in the conscious reasoning participants reported using to explain their vegetarianism to others. For example, Jennifer, 26, an 8.5-year vegetarian, said that she developed a plan for what to say if someone asked her why she was a vegetarian or questioned her lifestyle:

Usually the vegetarian question comes up when I don’t know people very well, when I’m trying to build a relationship with someone, and so I have to be really careful not to destroy the relationship before it gets built. So having a plan of what

I'm going to say and what I'm not going to say allows me to keep in mind how not to offend people.

Having a plan helped participants stay on message and not insult others. Part of this planning also included thinking of ways to attend to others' face wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness strategies were evident in half of participants' communication approaches, as they tried not to offend or impose upon people when they talked about their vegetarianism. Julie, 38, a lifelong vegetarian, recounted a conversation she had with coworkers when they were choosing a restaurant for a group lunch. She said: "Well, you know, if nobody particularly cares among these, then I would prefer something else because they have more vegetarian choices." Similarly, if someone told Phil, 69, a 30-year vegetarian, that there would be plenty for him to eat at a restaurant because it had a salad bar, he'd say, "I'm looking for something a little bit more interesting than just salad," rather than, "Salad isn't going to be enough food for me." Through these two comments, Julie and Phil made deliberate attempts to appear reasonable and mindful of meat eaters' feelings and autonomy while politely making their opinions known. This minimized tension and the possibility of offending others.

Another component of vegetarian planning was conducting research on vegetarianism prior to discussing it with people. In this way, 25% of vegetarians reported relaying data about the health or environmental benefits of vegetarianism to support their reasoning and to prevent conversations from getting personal or heated. As Vijay advised, when communicating about vegetarianism, "don't tell the other person they are wrong, support your position with research." Being armed with knowledge also enabled vegetarians to avoid coming across as preachy or "holier than thou." Additionally, fact-based conversations helped participants feel secure in their eating habits. Twenty percent of participants said confidence was necessary in order to initially "come out" to friends and family that "you are changing something about your life," as Laura put it. High self-esteem was also needed to cope with questioning, jokes, and scrutiny, as well as to order special meals in restaurants or to inquire how a dish was prepared. By thinking through their communication in advance, participants were able to remain secure in their lifestyle while lessening conflict and awkwardness.

#### *Minimize others' discomfort*

Seventy-five percent of participants acknowledged that, as vegetarians, they were the ones deviating from the norm and said they were determined to minimize meat eaters' discomfort around them. To this end, participants engaged in tactics that are reflected by the following subthemes: make vegetarianism a personal choice; tailor disclosure; downplay; stretch the truth; and excuse people for eating meat.

*Make vegetarianism a personal choice.* A strategy that half of participants employed was emphasizing that being a vegetarian was a personal choice—focusing on the fact that people were vegetarians because they wanted to be and not because they

considered it wrong that others opted to eat meat. As Becky advised, when explaining vegetarianism to others:

It's good to say things like, "You know, I've made this decision," or "I believe," instead of making statements like, "Well, I think this is the right way to do things," "This is what people should do," or "This is how it should be . . ." Bring it back to yourself, like, "This is something that's a part of me and this is my history with it and this is why I made this choice."

Participants also suggested emphasizing the personal benefits of being a vegetarian; for example, saying that they had "tried it both ways" [eating a non-vegetarian and vegetarian diet] and they were able to sleep better, feel healthier, lose weight, and so on as a vegetarian. A key characteristic of the personal choice strategy was the use of I/me statements, which minimized conflict by focusing attention on the vegetarian's decision and away from potential judgment of others' choices. Employing this strategy enabled participants to keep vegetarianism a core part of their identities while achieving their relational goal of getting along with others.

*Tailor disclosure.* Participants reported that when others learned they were vegetarians, they usually asked why. One way that 65% of participants negotiated communication of vegetarianism was by customizing their reason for being a vegetarian to the meat eater's interests. In this way, participants delivered person-centered messages (e.g., Burluson, 1982), tailoring disclosure to the other person's beliefs or receptiveness towards vegetarianism in order to respect and acknowledge their conversation partner's values and feelings. As Jessie explained, tailoring disclosure to the individual with whom she was talking helped her find common ground, which reduced tension and conflict. For example, if her conversation partner were an animal lover, Jessie would talk about animal rights; if he or she were trying to lose weight, Jessie would talk about health. Further, Jessie was careful to stress the similarities between her eating habits and the other person's, saying, for example, "The only difference is that I choose to do different things and put different things in my body."

Along these lines, Alicia reported that she generally talked about the health reasons for being a vegetarian because she found that most people could relate to health and got inspired by healthy people. Even though animal rights was a large reason Alicia became a vegetarian, she said she avoided talking about morality because it "implies judgment" of the other person, and she did not want others to feel guilty or judged. For the most part, participants did not discuss the moral reasons behind their vegetarianism, emphasizing health benefits or the fact that they were raised vegetarian—two motivations that would be less likely to offend.

Two participants reported that they simply told others that they did not enjoy the taste of meat, which helped prevent meat eaters from feeling defensive about their eating habits. As Julie explained, everyone can relate to not liking some type of food:

[Nonvegetarians] can equate [not eating meat] to "I don't like mushrooms," "I don't like olives," "I don't like whatever else," and so people seem to be more

accepting of that, so you know it usually is a very, very quick explanation if I say, “You know, I’ve been a vegetarian my whole life, I’ve tried meat and I just really don’t like it . . .” People don’t view it as a choice as much as how things worked out.

Julie speculated that this strategy kept the nonvegetarians with whom she interacted from feeling judged and made her vegetarianism a nonissue. One reason why tailoring disclosure was such a valuable strategy for participants was that it enabled them to talk about vegetarianism without offending the particular sensibilities of the individual with whom they were interacting. Tailoring disclosure allowed vegetarians to successfully accomplish their identity goal of being true to their values while simultaneously attaining their relational goal of not alienating others.

*Downplay.* An additional way participants made vegetarianism less of an issue (or even a nonissue) was by downplaying or deemphasizing their lifestyle. The act of downplaying was employed by every participant at times and took several forms—from keeping the conversation as short as possible to avoiding using the word “vegetarian” altogether. In fact, two participants found the term vegetarian to be too loaded and preferred to tell people that they “don’t eat meat” instead. As Laura explained, “to me, it’s a less negative reaction, ‘I don’t eat meat,’ and it is the same thing.” Laura said that because some people equated being a vegetarian with being an activist, “all of a sudden it gets touchy” when she would call herself a vegetarian. “Even if you don’t want to be, by talking about vegetarianism, you’re an activist.” With the exception of two participants who sometimes “preached” their beliefs, participants did not associate themselves as activists nor did they want others to view them this way. Instead, they preferred to assimilate into society by ending conversations as quickly as possible and avoiding labeling themselves as a vegetarian, putting their relational goal ahead of their identity needs.

*Stretch the truth.* Rather than “admit” to being a vegetarian, 10% of participants lied about their eating habits to pass as meat eaters. Both Alicia and Jessie said they would occasionally stretch the truth about their vegetarianism versus risking offending people, being judged by others, having to ask questions about how food was prepared, or explaining their vegetarianism. Jessie, for example, reported telling new dinner companions such falsehoods as “I don’t eat meat right now,” “I’m on an antibiotic that won’t let me eat a lot of protein,” “I’m trying to lose weight,” or “I’m allergic to fish” instead of revealing that she was a vegetarian, particularly around people she perceived would be intolerant of her eating habits. These strategies were effective in giving participants what they wanted—a meat-free meal—without awkwardness, conflict, or the communication work involved in determining how to talk about vegetarianism. Although participants were able to realize their relational and instrumental goals by downplaying and stretching the truth, they comprised their identity goals.

*Excuse people for eating meat.* Nearly 87% of participants who were concerned about not coming across as judgmental reported that they were vegetarians for moral

reasons and that they believed it was unethical to eat meat. Yet, it is interesting to note that all but three of these participants did not actively hold carnivores to the same ethical standards. Even though they believed that eating meat was wrong, participants said they did not judge meat eaters because they realized that eating meat was a dominant part of American culture. Additionally, all but one of the moral vegetarians converted to vegetarianism later in life, 2 participants had previously been vegetarians and then reverted to eating meat before living as a vegetarian at the time of the study, and all participants had friends, colleagues, or loved ones who ate meat. It is likely that in order to resolve cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) about the morality of eating meat when most vegetarians used to eat meat and many people close to them still consumed it, participants needed to find a way to excuse meat-eating behavior.

Three of the participants said they did not want to come across as judgmental but admitted that they considered meat eaters to be immoral. However, in order to get along with others, they too had to reconcile this dissonance by justifying meat eaters' behavior. Anne acknowledged that she thought less of people who ate meat, but at the same time, she equated her refusal to become vegan to meat eaters' unwillingness to become vegetarian:

In the same way that some people have a visceral emotional reaction to not giving up meat, that is how I feel about sour cream. I don't care what they have to do to a cow to make sour cream, they need to do it and they need to give me the sour cream.

Anne was able to make sense of meat eaters' decisions, which helped her better come to terms with her beliefs. Similarly, Laura said that she was able to keep her judgments from getting in the way of building relationships with meat eaters because she concluded that meat eaters did not know any better: "Not that ignorance is an excuse, but it's easier to not be angry with someone if they don't have the information to make those judgments." In this way, participants were able to retain their beliefs about the immorality of eating meat while still getting along with others.

## **Discussion**

This study revealed the conflicting goals and challenges that participants experienced in talking about their vegetarianism with meat eaters. Many participants noted that they often felt forced to manage the tension between being honest about their vegetarian identity and fitting into society as well as talking about vegetarianism without coming across as judging others. This dilemma was especially illustrated by participants who were vegetarians for moral reasons but rationalized meat eaters' eating habits in order to accomplish their relational goal of getting along with others. When participants did open up about their vegetarianism, they negotiated this talk by enacting communication strategies that involved having a plan and minimizing others' discomfort (including making vegetarianism a personal choice, tailoring

disclosure, downplaying, stretching the truth, and excusing people for eating meat). Just as disabled people feel a responsibility to reduce the discomfort of so-called normals during conversations about their disability (Braithwaite, 1991), the current study's participants often felt a responsibility to smooth over communication about vegetarianism so as not to offend meat eaters. Just because participants were generally concerned about meat eaters' well-being, however, did not mean that participants sacrificed their instrumental goal for the good of their relationship. In all cases, participants were unwilling to eat meat and would rather temporarily abandon their identity and lie about their vegetarianism instead.

Participants were frequently able to manage multiple goals, however, protecting their relationships while also accomplishing their instrumental and identity goals. Participants were successful in negotiating this communication by strategically planning what they wanted to say and tailoring vegetarian disclosure to meet both their own and their conversation partner's needs. This finding echoes other research on preconversational planning, which suggests that individuals who develop relatively extensive plans for handling challenging communicative tasks are more likely to be successful at accomplishing their goals (see Wilson, 2002).

Consistent with other research employing a multiple goals framework (e.g., Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006; Kosenko, 2010), the current study found that talking about vegetarianism can be challenging because of the multiple purposes of such conversations and the numerous interpretations people might ascribe to what vegetarians actually imply when they disclose. Understanding the dilemmas that talk about vegetarianism entails provides a richer sense of why these types of conversations can be more or less successful.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

While this study highlights experiences that may characterize the communication of vegetarians in the United States, due to its limited size and scope, the results are not necessarily generalizable to the population. Additionally, it is prudent to note that the first author, who conducted the interviews, is herself a vegetarian (although not active in the local vegetarian community). Although she was careful not to identify herself as a vegetarian unless asked directly by participants—at which point she answered yes without providing additional details—interviewer effects cannot be ruled out (Babbie, 2007). Further, this study only examined communication from a vegetarian perspective. Future research could examine the goals and dilemmas both of vegetarians and their interlocutors to establish where their interpretations correspond or diverge. Additionally, how vegetarians who espouse ethical beliefs about eating meat establish and define morality in a culture of meat eating could be further explored.

#### *Theoretical and Practical Implications*

Abstaining from meat means constantly being faced with communication choices, because whenever vegetarians eat in the company of others, they may need to

negotiate communication and manage tensions. As a broader theoretical issue, the communication patterns of vegetarians can help inform how people who engage in other healthy yet minority behaviors (“healthy deviants”) can best discuss their behaviors and manage their relationships with others. For example, it could be useful to study how nursing mothers negotiate communication about breastfeeding with non-breastfeeders in hopes of learning how people can maintain healthy behaviors while maintaining their relationships.

A practical implication of the current study is the potential development of specific communication strategies people beyond vegetarians could use to negotiate healthy behaviors in order to implement or maintain lifestyle changes. Many participants reported that vegetarians need confidence to make decisions that go against society’s values and to manage and sustain their vegetarianism. It can be difficult for people to live healthier lives if they lack the ability to talk about their lifestyle or if they worry that their communication could offend others, particularly when these choices run counter to the mainstream, such as breastfeeding. By modeling their eating habits, vegetarians can influence others to adopt a vegetarian diet or to reduce their meat consumption (Powell, 2002), but to accomplish these goals, vegetarians need to be secure in their lifestyle. Arming people with communication skills to talk about salubrious behaviors could empower them to live healthier, more rewarding lives and to influence others to follow their example. Just as obesity can spread through social networks (e.g., Christakis & Fowler, 2007), it is likely that people can transmit healthy behaviors if they are equipped with the necessary communication skills to enact and sustain these lifestyles.

In addition, while the concept of deviance as possessing some worthwhile characteristics is not new, with some scholars conceiving of deviance along a continuum from negative (murderer) to positive (straight-A student; e.g., Dodge, 1985), even “beneficial” (Paton-Simpson, 1995), healthy deviance is a unique notion that emerged from this study. Just because something is viewed as positive or beneficial does not necessarily mean that it is a healthy practice, suggesting that the concept of healthy deviance is distinct and worthy of future exploration.

## Note

- [1] Vegetarians are distinct from pescatarians, who consume seafood but no other meat, and vegans, who eat neither meat nor meat byproducts, including eggs, dairy, and often honey.

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