

Introduction

Like many malleable college students in their formative years, I experienced a type of social awakening; a liberal arts education and a diverse campus opened my eyes to many injustices in our world. Somewhere between learning about social inequality and unsustainable consumerism, I found myself in the classic role of the self-righteous student-activist. I still share links to feminist rants and jarring exposés on social media and side-eye anyone who does not compost (recycling should be a given). At the same time, I have become increasingly aware of my own faults and hypocrisies: do I turn off the lights when I leave a room? Where do my clothes come from? What does “cage-free” really mean on a carton of eggs? At this point in my “awakening,” all I wanted was to be as ethical as possible. . What are the most “correct” lifestyle choices that I can make, in alignment with my newfound beliefs? Eventually, after long consideration and a meaningful conversation with a pescatarian mentor, I confronted my guilt in supporting an unsustainable meat industry. For a year, I practiced vegetarianism, experimenting with the spectrum from pescatarianism to veganism.

The responses I received ranged from derisive questioning of my intentions to down-right rude and combative remarks. The closest semblance of support from my family was praise that I had lost weight, which somehow justified what they called my “extremist diet.” I felt pressure from everyone. My family complained that I made meals hard whenever I visited home; a friend once introduced me as “Linda, she’s very...organic,” like it was a bad thing. As a sensitive person to begin with, I was feeling uncomfortable every time I shared a meal. I felt ostracized and embarrassed about my decision, which I thought I made to “do good” for the world. The resistances I faced and confusion I felt about my impact made me feel punished for trying to do the right thing.

Now, less fervent and more confident, I follow a balanced diet with a small amount of meat and aim to shop organically and sustainably. I no longer feel I am attacked for being a vegetarian, but I still reflect on that period of inner turmoil with academic interest. First, how do other vegetarians, vegans, or those with alternative diets deal with these pressures and resistances? How do their experiences compare with mine? I am interested in what stereotypes actually exist and how they affect these groups. Finally, why do these stereotypes exist in the first place? By finding the answers to these questions, I hope to not only understand my own reaction to my experiences as a vegetarian, but also the social environment that vegetarians find themselves in today.

According to the Vegetarian Society, a vegetarian is someone who avoids eating meat, poultry, game, fish and other sea animals, or by-products of slaughter (1). This definition is extended with the various forms of vegetarianism, based on flexibility in dairy or egg consumption: lacto-ovo-vegetarianism, lacto-vegetarianism, ovo-vegetarianism, and veganism. A 2008 study by the Harris Interactive Service Bureau shows that 7.3 million Americans are vegetarians and an additional 22.8 million (ten percent of U.S. adults) follow a “vegetarian-inclined” diet, an omnivorous diet that leans more plant-based (20). The same 2008 study breaks down the survey responses into seven categories of reasons participants cited for their choosing their restricted diets: health, environment, natural approaches to wellness, food-safety concerns, animal welfare, weight loss, and weight maintenance (2). Notably, fifty-three percent cited health reasons, forty-seven percent cited environmental concerns, fifty-four percent cited animal welfare, and forty-nine percent cited weight-related reasons (2). The categories were not mutually exclusive, which reflects the reality that people do not become vegetarian for any single reason. More broadly, vegetarians choose their diets for many different reasons including;

religious beliefs in nonviolence towards animals or other spiritual aspects, health and nutrition awareness in an increasingly unhealthy food culture, environmental concerns of unsustainable intensive agriculture, moral and ethical reasons supporting animal rights and welfare, and economic reasons in terms of global food shortages as well as personal necessity.

Many minority communities, including vegetarians, often face resistance from outsiders for their differences from the majority norm. These pushbacks occur in the form of stereotypes. Stereotyping behavior can be explained by Social Identity Theory, developed by British social psychologist Henri Tajfel, which describes a person's sense of who they are as based on their group membership, or their social identity (5). While the tendency to categorize by group membership or identity is a "normal cognitive process," its effects are far-reaching; stereotypes are a tool of governance, used to discriminate against outsider groups and cement social hierarchies. Typically, research on stereotypes of minorities centers on racial, ethnic bias or LGBTQ discrimination. Although implicit "othering" through various means still exists, our society has reached the point where openly stereotyping and discriminating against racial minorities or the LGBTQ community would violate all political correctness. In these cases, stereotyping is condemned as outdated, backwards behavior. Unfortunately, other minorities do not have this new cultural protection. The discrimination vegetarians can experience often lead the vegetarian minority to feel pressure to revert their behaviors to the majority. Stereotype threat, the concern about confirming a negative stereotype about one's group, frequently accompanies the resistances the vegetarian minority faces, and functions to place this group in a position of vulnerability in the social hierarchy (4). This fear for vulnerability prevents many from participating in the vegetarian diet and lifestyle in the first place. The pressures and stresses held against the vegetarian lifestyle by the carnivorous majority provides us a space to study

stereotyping behavior when it is permissible and not culturally-censored as hateful. The following work gives an overview of what stereotypes exist for vegetarians and examines the experiences of a few individuals who can speak to how these perceptions affect the vegetarian social identity.

Survey

To approach these questions, I distributed an online survey to University of Washington students and to social media, conducted one-on-one interviews with volunteer participants from the University of Washington, and researched the relevant anthropological and psychological literature. In my online survey, I aimed to gather a comprehensive database of common stereotypes of vegetarian and vegan diets. I asked two questions: 1) “Do you follow a vegetarian or vegan diet?” and 2) “What are your thoughts on vegetarians or vegans? What are some words that come to mind when you think of these diets?” Of the 106 participants in my survey, 16 were vegetarians and 9 others had other semi-vegetarian (meat-restricted) diets. I categorized responses to the question, “What are your thoughts on vegetarians or vegans?” based on overall perceptions and by several keywords including “healthy” and “preachy”. I also asked all participants to participate in an optional follow-up, one-on-one interview. In total, 11 people, both vegetarians and non-vegetarians volunteered and offered valuable perspectives.

To begin discussion of stereotypes on vegetarianism, I created a representative collection of existing perceptions of vegetarians from a diverse population. First, I categorized responses as positive, neutral, or negative in order to gauge the overall sentiment towards vegetarians. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative data, many responses did not fit just one perception. Survey responses were thus coded as positive, neutral, negative, and ambiguous, meaning they could be classified as either positive or negative depending on point of view and analysis.

Positive responses typically discussed vegetarians as “strong-willed,” “environmentally sustainable or conscious,” or “socially aware.” Many respondents identified an admiration or respect for vegetarians and vegans but said that they could never do it themselves, as though viewing the practice of vegetarianism as a moral high ground that they recognized but did not want to adopt.

Example of “positive” perceptions:

- *I think they're usually thoughtful in their eating, often considerate of others, and proud to stand ground on what they consider right.*
- *Generally they are people that consider their everyday choices more carefully. Regardless of whether they are vegan or vegetarian for environmental, animal rights, or personal reasons, they are likely people who consider carefully how their everyday actions impact the world around them.*

I coded responses as neutral if they lacked an opinion or if they emphasized their indifference to the choices of others. These responses tended towards being lists of facts about vegetarianism and did not have a particular tone in favor or against the practice.

Example of “neutral” perceptions:

- *No negative opinions towards them. They have to focus more on what they eat when shopping.*

I deemed responses negative if they gave critical and unfavorable views of vegetarianism. These comments often regarded vegetarians and vegans as pushy and self-righteous, naïve or misinformed, or hypocritical.

Examples of “negative” perceptions:

- *They are not able to eat a diverse group of foods. It's not as healthy as they think.*

- *It's fine as long as they don't try to guilt trip me about my own eating habits.*
- *They won't eat meat because it's animal cruelty but still wear that embellished Topshop jumper that took 5 Cambodian children three weeks to make.*

Some survey responses were quite intricate, which made sorting much more difficult and subjective. I categorized some by the overall tone of the response; others were separated into categories containing two different perceptions.

Examples of more ambiguous perceptions:

- *"It's just a matter of choice like people choose what to eat for dinner every day. Healthy, fresh, somewhat boring, lack of joy for food. (Categorized as "both neutral and negative.")*
- *Are being environmentally friendly, but not socially friendly (i.e. forcing their thoughts on everyone around them). (Categorized as "both positive and negative.")*

Out of 106 responses, 44 responses were positive, 26 responses were negative, 11 responses were neutral, 10 responses were categorized as both neutral and negative, 9 responses contained both positive and negative perspectives, and 6 responses were both neutral and positive.

In addition to perceptions, I also categorized all responses based on these specific keywords, each representative of a particular stereotype: "healthy," "preachy," "activist," and "hypocritical." Again, these categories are not mutually exclusive and many respondents expressed multiple stereotypes. For healthiness, I found that twenty-seven percent of respondents think that either the vegetarian diet is healthy or practicing vegetarians are healthy themselves, and nine percent think vegetarians are unhealthy. A large proportion of respondents who see vegetarianism as healthy also think that vegetarians choose their diet to lose weight. Nine percent

of people mentioned the stereotype that vegetarians and vegans are preachy and tend to push their thoughts on others. Many respondents said they are “okay with [vegetarians and vegans]” as long as they don’t carry an air of superiority. I also coded responses based on the stereotype that vegetarians are some sort of activists, also using key terms like “conscious,” and “sustainable” or “moral” in this category. I found that forty-two percent of respondents saw vegetarians in this capacity. One particularly representative response claimed vegetarians to be “the intersection of trend, environmentalism, and conscience.” Eighteen percent of respondents thought that vegetarians are hypocritical in some way (“inconsistent”) or misinformed about what their actions do. This category included comments that criticized vegetarians for selectively caring about animal rights or the environment, but not other issues, as well as responses that highlighted the irony that some vegetarians are very unhealthy. Other notable mentions of a stereotype in the responses included “hippie” or “trendy,” implying that some vegetarians are just “bandwagon-ing” and becoming vegetarian to fit an image.

Interviews

I next identified current or former vegetarians and conducted in-depth interviews to understand the experiences of vegetarians who have dealt with these stereotypes. My prepared questions for these interviews ranged from reasons for their diet, experiences with the diet in different cultural environments and family backgrounds, what support and/or resistances they face from different people in their lives, what stereotypes they think exist of vegetarians, and finally, their responses to perceived stereotypes of their community. Ultimately, conversations gravitated towards stories of particularly common or significant interactions with non-vegetarians, many of which demonstrated how many vegetarians deal with pressure from outsiders.

Most vegetarians are aware of the widespread and sometimes conflicting stereotypes that exist for them. From the conversations that I have had, it seems that most vegetarians are incredibly aware of the image that society paints of them (as one survey participant put it, “bleeding heart hippies” or “Hindus”) and the critical lens they are often seen through. My findings revealed several trends of how vegetarians fend off negative stereotypes (snarky comments) or how they respond to and reflect positive stereotypes (expectations to be healthy and an activist).

I quickly noticed that stereotypes affect vegetarians less the longer they are a vegetarian. Long-term vegetarians (over two years) appear less easily fazed by the teasing by adults and peers. In fact, one interviewee first answered that she hadn’t faced any resistance from family and friends and only realized that she had after I described some common aggressions. *“Oh, you mean like obnoxious comments? They’re just teasing, it doesn’t bother me.”* Other long-term vegetarians devise mechanisms to ward off attacks and just tell me that *“It’s annoying, but I’m used to it now.”* This is supported by the Harris Interactive Service Bureau study that showed that the majority of current vegetarians have been vegetarians for longer than 10 years. Maybe it really does get easier over time, with more practice finding the right foods and dealing with the stigma. As another interviewee said, *“Maybe it’s also harder to remember what meat tastes like.”*

Excerpts from interviews:

- *Elana (vegetarian, 9 years): “When friends tease me with “Oh look, I’m eating meat!” or “Woah, what would happen if you eat meat?” I have to not take it seriously. If something did bother me, I wouldn’t make a big deal about it because I don’t want to play into more*

stigmatization for vegetarians by making a scene. I always feel like I'm representing vegetarians everywhere."

- *Isabella (vegetarian, 4 years): "Someone once told me that it's a turnoff that I'm vegetarian, but I don't take it to heart."*

Another common theme I found among vegetarians I interviewed was their notable distaste for stirring-up confrontations with non-vegetarians. They adamantly insist that they do not judge what others eat, and it does not bother them when friends eat meat around them. They don't mention their diets unless they are asked and actively try to distance themselves from the "pushy" or "preachy" stereotype.

Excerpts from interviews:

- *Liza (vegetarian, 2 years): "I don't talk about it or encourage it unless I sense that others are interested, because most people are uninterested or unwilling in changing their diets."*
- *Sophie (former pescatarian, 3 years, currently no red meat and pork, 2 years): "I didn't like telling people about my diet, because I feel like there's a stigma around it like 'it's just a fad' or 'you're just a hippie'. I'm at the point where my diet is my diet and it doesn't need to be anybody else's business."*

Many vegetarians (long-term or not) can relate to the struggle of constantly defending themselves and putting up with confrontation. Like me, they are more comfortable keeping their diet to themselves and distancing themselves from negative traits stereotypes. They achieve this distance by downplaying their diet, telling anyone who asks that "it's not that hard" or "but mac 'n' cheese and French fries are vegetarian!" They also learned to make fun of themselves and to never bring up their differences with others in conversation unless asked. I see these protective

methods as natural behavior to minimize vulnerability to attack and maximize inclusion in the majority to secure social support. While using coping strategies to deal with the pressures can become a part of life for many vegetarians, it was not enough for me. Eventually, I felt that hiding my diet to protect myself defeated the purpose of my vegetarian diet. I wanted to reduce meat consumption for a wealth of reasons, but being outspoken about my diet would deem me “preachy” by my peers and being quiet about my diet wasn’t going to inspire anybody to eat less meat.

We also discussed why non-vegetarians have such strong opinions on alternative diets when it does not affect them personally, especially why non-vegetarians tend to form such strong opinions about vegetarianism.

Excerpts from interviews:

- *Elana: “People think you are trying to convert them, somehow I’m ‘looking down on you’ and people think they need to put me in my place.”*
- *Sophie: “It’s the minority, it’s different, and people like to push back from what’s not considered normal. People probably see truth in what vegetarians are saying but might not have the strength or will to say no to meat. They want to ignore the possibility of doing better because it’s too hard.”*
- *Shane (former vegan, 1 year): “People...see my choice as a personal attack on their choices.”*

I also interviewed non-vegetarians to explore how stereotypes about vegetarians arise. I first asked for their general opinion of vegetarianism and then for specific experiences with vegetarians or vegans.

Excerpt from interviews:

- *Elizabeth: “I know a few vegetarians, and I definitely admire their self-control since I love meat and could never do it myself. My inherent bias is that vegetarian food is not as tasty as normal food. One problem I have with vegetarian diets is that some people do it because they think it’s healthier, but then proceed to do the unhealthiest version of vegetarianism possible! The only people who are actually annoying are fake gluten-free people.”*
- *Julia: “I haven’t had any negative experiences with vegetarians. I first met a vegetarian when I came to UW, she’s really passionate about it but she’s not pushy about it to others. When we hang out, I tell her I’m sorry I’m eating meat in front of you, and she is not offended and says it’s my choice. I think the stereotypes and preconceptions of vegetarians come from the minority that really is preachy or pushy. When someone gives you a negative experience, you’re more likely to talk about it and it spreads.”*
- *Albert: “I guess vegetarians are generally hippies, although the ones I know I wouldn’t consider ‘hippies’. This preconception probably comes from a long time ago during the 70s or something.”*

In general, the non-vegetarians I spoke with acknowledged that stereotypes against vegetarians exist, and that the preconceptions do not always relate with their actual experiences with vegetarians. The resistances that vegetarians face are unique and distinct from other minorities, and my findings have divulged some insight on how both vegetarians and non-vegetarians think about stereotypes towards this group. My discussion with vegetarians brought us to the conclusion that unlike other stereotyped behaviors, vegetarianism is commonly viewed as a good behavior. My own survey results show that a forty-two percent of all participants have positive perceptions of vegetarianism. Whether people see vegetarianism positively for health

reasons or if they believe that it is morally and environmentally more beneficial than other diets, the perception that vegetarianism is something to strive for might be unsettling for people who would rather not confront their own choices. Of course, while vegetarianism is not the answer to all problems medically, socially, economically, environmentally or ethically-related, many still see it the practice as some sort of moral high ground. This might intimidate the majority of people who say *“I could never do it myself”* about giving up meat and explains their defensive and offensive behavior when confronting vegetarians.

Elizabeth also brings up another interesting facet of vegetarianism; that because the diet can be viewed with positive stereotypes, vegetarians feel a certain pressure to act a certain way. There is pressure to be healthy, consistently-mindful, and conscious of their every choice. Unfortunately, many vegetarians are not healthy, either because macaroni and cheese tastes better than quinoa or because they are not careful in creating a balanced diet. In addition, the stereotype that some vegetarians are hypocritical can also be true. While many vegetarians cite animal rights or environmental sustainability as reasons for their lifestyle, they might not have the resources to commit to every aspect of these movements. For example, one participant I interviewed revealed guilt that she drives her car to work, instead of biking or bussing. It serves to show that stereotypes, regardless if they are positive or negative, place an undue burden on vegetarians who strive to live the way they choose in the best way they can.

Conclusion

I first embarked on this study to understand my own sensitivity as a vegetarian under attack. I eventually quit the diet, largely because of the pressures I felt. When I spoke with people who have been vegetarian for years, I was envious and in awe. I learned more about the coping mechanisms that they have integrated into their personalities, their armor against the

constant pressure for them to defend or reform their lifestyles. My study also aimed to understand why stereotypes exist, especially for vegetarianism, where an individual's choice rarely impacts anyone else. To this end, I agree with the vegetarians whom I interviewed that non-vegetarians view plant-based diets as an attack on their own lifestyle choices. Notably, *"It's fine as long as they don't try to guilt trip me about my own eating habits."*

While my own experimentation with vegetarianism might be over, my admiration for vegetarians and interest in sustainable eating continues. This interest, combined with my education in anthropology, drives me to understand the attitudes on vegetarianism and how vegetarians react to these attitudes. It is undeniable that vegetarianism are stereotyped like other minority groups have been; however, unlike some other minorities, vegetarians are minorities by choice. This creates a unique dynamic by which any vegetarian can opt out of constant scrutiny, yet choose not to. Their resilience in dealing with both the resistances and pressures of being an outlier in society reveals much about how both positive and negative stereotyping behavior impacts our lives and social relationships. This insight highlights how powerful perceptions can be and reminds us to be mindful of how we treat one another.

References

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