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THE VEGETARIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT:

AN ANALYSIS OF WITHDRAWAL AND BACKSLIDING

by

JAIME DEBORAH HECHT

B.S. Florida State University, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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## **ABSTRACT**

The vegetarian social movement is a “new” social movement based in lifestyle and cultural change. New social movements hold a strong emphasis on collective identity and social networks as a means to sustain participation. The majority of the social movement literature remains focused on movement engagement and mobilization while a large gap exists regarding disengagement.

This project explores the barriers to vegetarian maintenance. The primary question answered is, why do some vegetarians and vegans backslide and withdraw from the practice? Fourteen individuals were interviewed to discover the social and cultural factors inherent in vegetarian instability. Over the course of the interviews, the project morphed into an analysis of why and how my respondents changed their food habits over time and what was the context that prompted these changes.

Vegetarianism is a unique movement as definitions of what constitutes a vegetarian is rooted in the individual, idiosyncratic biographies of individuals. This study found the influence of family, traditions, labels/definitions, peers, gender and the lure of social status to be very significant regarding vegetarian flux. Results indicate that vegetarian membership is fluid and permeable, takes on a life course trajectory and is rooted within the context of many social and cultural factors. Uncovering the barriers to vegetarianism not only adds to the disengagement aspect of social movement research, but also hopes to

aid movement leaders in overcoming this problem as well as further substantiate and progress the vegetarian social movement.

For my Grandpa, I miss you every day. You will forever hold a special place in my heart.  
Thank you for starting our family. I know I got my bravery from you.

And for the animals... forgive us. We know not what we do.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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And finally to my Mom: you are truly my best friend. I love you. Your constant support, encouragement, patience and advice never go unappreciated. I told you I would graduate.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

FARM: Farm Animal Reform Movement

NSM: New Social Movement

RCT: Rational Choice Theory

SES: Socio Economic Status

SMO: Social Movement Organization

## **PREFACE**

My transition to vegetarianism began as a personal, private and solitary choice. Over time, however, I grew interested in the overarching tenets of vegetarianism as a social movement. Vegetarianism gave way to veganism, for which I gained a similar movement-rooted interest.

I quickly realized that the vegan movement's success hinges upon dedicated and consistent membership, and attempted to define barriers to these ends. With the general knowledge that all movements faced some issues of burnout and abandonment, I began casual conversations regarding individual inability to maintain the sometimes stigma-inducing title of "vegetarian" or "vegan." Out of those discussions, this project was born.

## INTRODUCTION

Grounded in aspects of new social movement (NSM) theory, this study explores a question regarding the vegetarian movement's strength and future: Why do vegetarians or vegans backslide? For instance, why do "vegans" start to reincorporate eggs and/or dairy products? Why do vegetarians begin to include fish in their diets? Answering these questions has important implications for social movement processes in general, and the vegetarian<sup>1</sup> movement in particular.

Social movement literature is vast and growing by the day, yet a solid definition of the term "social movement" has yet to be agreed upon. For some a social movement is simply a form of collective action meant to either resist or induce change. I have chosen to elaborate on two theories of collective action, both of which offer answers to questions concerning why and how people engage, jointly, for a common goal. I will draw upon contemporary, "new" social movement theory to provide insight into possible reasons for backsliding and drop out. By outlining what is known about these new movements and their constituents, we can begin to ask questions regarding why people move in and out of them.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this project, I will use the vegetarian and vegan movement interchangeably, although the ideal for both movements is veganism.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### Social Movement Theories

To fully understand activity in the vegetarian movement, it is necessary to determine what is known about participation in collective action. Scholars generally accept two main theories to explain why people engage in social movements: rational choice, and “new” social movement (Downton and Wehr 1997).

Rational choice theories (RCT) describe protest behavior and movements as rational responses to the ever-present grievances of society (Downton and Wehr 1997). Rational choice theorists measure success by the degree to which a movement can attract and utilize available resources such as money, people, social networks, media and government (Gamson 1990). According to this theory, the decision to act and participate in social change activities is determined by an assessment of costs and benefits. Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977) is one approach that utilizes the rational choice perspective. Resource mobilization theory focuses on social movement organizations and how they intend to rationally mobilize resources in order to meet specific goals. Another approach that stems from rational choice is political process theory. This posits collective action as a means to impact political behavior and action (Eisinger 1973).

New social movement theories attempt to “distinguish older, class-based labor movements from more contemporary, identity-centered political challenges such as the civil rights movement, the women’s movement and the gay and lesbian liberation

movement” (Haenfler 2004:786). The logic of these theories is grounded in politics, ideology and culture as a means to explain collective action (Buechler 1995). This theory of collective action will be expounded to clarify the vegetarian movement’s inclusion as one of many new social movements. Exploring the principles of this theory will prove valuable to understanding the challenges of maintenance and commitment in the vegetarian movement.

Rational choice theories and new social movement theories have been compared and contrasted heavily throughout extant literature as each perspective competes for status. Examining the differences makes it clear why new social movement theory is the appropriate platform upon which to study non-traditional types of collective action such as the vegetarian movement. For instance, RCT holds a social movement organization as the main unit of analysis as opposed to the individual members (Dalton 1994). NSMs on the other hand are interested in movement members, the social and psychological factors that lead to identification with a movement, as well as broad structural conditions that aid in a movement’s mobilization.

### New Social Movement Theory

Starting in the late 1980s, sociologists shifted their attention toward a new area of social movement research commonly referred to as “New Social Movement Theory” (Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). Previous theories of collective action had difficulty explaining movements based less in “institutional targets” and more in “diffuse, identity-based, lifestyle ideologies” (Haenfler 2004). Proponents of this approach hold that post-

World War II movements are “qualitatively different from earlier ones” (Downton and Wehr 1997:3).

Steven Buechler (1995) warns of the inaccuracy of referring to NSM theory as a unified front. Instead, he implies that the literature is abundant with several variations to the study of this “new” type of movement. Nonetheless, Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield (1994) lay out eight characteristics of new social movements, but emphasize that current movements need not display all characteristics to be considered for inclusion. The following characteristics by no means encompass every characteristic of a new social movement, and the work of other scholars and theorists will also be included to help clarify this way of thinking about contemporary collective action.

First, NSMs “do not bear a clear relation to the structural roles of participants” (Larana et. al 1994:6). Class and social background of participants are of less importance than “diffuse” status indicators such as gender, sexual orientation, or profession. Second, NSMs “exhibit a pluralism of ideas and values” (p.7). These new movements are more difficult to characterize in terms of a unifying ideology. Third, instead of a focus on economic or political grievances, NSMs tend to focus on “cultural and symbolic issues of identity” (p. 7). They also represent the member’s image and sense of belonging to a “differentiated social group” (p.7). Fourth, because NSM members tend not to be unified by class or structure, movement goals and ideology provide members with a sense of identity that serves as a cohesive unifier. Fifth, NSMs tend to pursue intimate areas of human life. Examples include gay rights, abortion, antismoking, and new age (p.8). Sixth, NSMs



“employ new mobilization patterns characterized by nonviolence and civil disobedience that often challenge dominant norms” (p. 8). Seventh, NSMs tend to distance themselves from the “traditional mass parties”(p.8). Members are usually in search for an alternative form of participation in the Western democratic system. Finally, NSM organizations “tend to be segmented, diffuse, and decentralized” (p.8). Local movement organizations exercise considerable autonomy and decision making which limits connection with regional and national organizations.

Because my research centers on individual behavior and lifestyle choices, new social movement theory will be used as a guide. New social movement theory places an emphasis on processes that promote autonomy as well as fluid memberships (Dalton and Kuechler 1990). New social movement theory emphasizes the role of identity and culture and these factors, I propose, will greatly influence issues and problems with vegetarian maintenance.

### Vegetarianism: A New Social Movement

Via the previously outlined characteristics of new social movements, one can argue that the vegetarian social movement is a candidate for inclusion under this heading of collective action. The following section will elaborate aspects of this movement that solidify its inclusion. While the question of social movement status hangs over this study, grounding vegetarianism as a social movement is done as a means to apply the appropriate theoretical framework in order to draw conclusions regarding backsliding and drop out.

Vegetarianism has been cited as a new social movement by both Elizabeth Cherry (2006) and Donna Maurer (2002). Maurer emphasizes the role vegetarians and vegetarian organizations play in movement growth via individual actions and cultural acceptance. Cherry bases the inclusion on Melucci's (1984) analytic definition of a new social movement. He states that a social movement is "a form of collective action based on solidarity, carrying on a conflict, and breaking the limits of the system in which it occurs" (p. 825). Cherry uses organizations dedicated primarily to spreading veganism (FARM, Compassion Over Killing) to substantiate veganism as a NSM. However, she does place emphasis on the many practicing vegans who have no affiliation with an organization, thus suggesting viewing veganism as a large, "diffuse" movement (2006). She goes on to state, "vegans represent a *new* form of social movement that is not based on legislation or in identity politics, but instead is based on the everyday practices of one's lifestyle (p. 156) (emphasis added).

Like other NSMs, vegetarianism lacks a unifying ideology. Donna Maurer's (2002) extensive account on vegetarianism addresses the numerous discrepancies and debates concerning definitions of vegetarianism, proposed ideologies, and advocacy methods for the movement. One portion of the debate promotes the ideology as flexible and thus advocates an exemplary approach. This approach is a gradual one in which meat eaters are encouraged to seek out plant-based foods based on health reasons. This health-oriented approach consists of "downplaying the vegetarian identity in favor of an approach that embraces as positive any and all movement toward a vegetarian diet" (Maurer 2002: 19).

This may help to explain the discrepancies found in numbers regarding the vegetarian population. A study by the Humane Research Council (2008) found 4-6% of the population (8-13 million) comprises self-reported vegetarians, while only 1-3% comprises actual vegetarians (2-6 million).

Instead of promoting strategies to influence and gain power (Habermas 1987), the vegetarian movement and other NSMs emphasize cultural change through conflict-free measures (Maurer 2002). The vegetarian movement typically tries to counter the notion of the necessity of meat, but does so through an emphasis on individual and non-violent actions, which would ideally lead to a cultural acceptance of vegetarianism. Unlike the animal rights movement that often uses “shock value,” vegetarians try to engage others through a gentle, transitional approach (Maurer 2002).

New social movements often consist of intimate and personal areas of an individual’s life. The vegetarian movement, which promotes a plant-based diet, is considered a “lifestyle movement.” The vegetarian movement relies on the continuation of a lifestyle change from omnivore to vegetarian. In Elizabeth Cherry’s (2006) study on veganism, she found respondents identify the practice as one of the most significant aspects of their lives and identities.

We also see support for membership in one NSM correlating positively for support in another (Klandermans 1990). The vegetarian movement finds consistent overlap with the animal rights movement. In a study on animal rights activism, Herzog (1993) found one hundred percent of the animal activists in his study committed to some version of

vegetarianism. One participant summarized the view of the participants when she said “the cornerstone of the animal rights movement is vegetarianism” (p. 110). His study found that with some activists, vegetarianism had led to an interest in animal rights, while others changed their diet because of their involvement within the animal protection arena. The tie between vegetarianism and animal rights is frequently attributed to the philosopher Peter Singer (1975) whose influential book, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for the Treatment of Animals*, asserts veganism as the foundation for the animal rights movement.

Vegetarianism as a new social movement involves the use of individual action to promote the vegetarian lifestyle. It is a movement that debates ideology concerning definitions and recruitment approaches, strives for cultural change rooted in the acceptance of the lifestyle and availability of vegetarian foods, and member overlap into similar movements. Although relatively underdeveloped, the literature does provide studies outlining processes regarding adoption of the vegetarian label. Absent, however, is discussion regarding how the characteristics of this movement influence instability, as well as the propensity for backsliding and drop out of vegetarianism. This research seeks to begin filling this gap.

Although the social movement literature is growing rapidly, it has failed to show great concern for the varying types of members and levels of participation. Vegetarian movement members are unique in that they may not consider themselves activists at all. This lifestyle, with an emphasis on food choice and avoidance, needs to be analyzed with a

flexible lens. Therefore the use of the term “activist” is meant in the broadest of terms and may or may not refer to direct, political, collective, or confrontational behavior.

### Individual Activism

While it is necessary to explore aspects of social movements from the point of view of large-scale collective groups and organizations, it is equally important to understand that the triumph and collapse of any movement fall on the shoulders of individual people. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of social movements, attention must be paid to individuals and their motivations for participation and decline. Although food consumption and avoidance decisions are fundamentally a personal choice, there are several economic, social, and cultural contexts and barriers at play. Understanding why and how people are drawn into a vegetarian lifestyle as well as their motivations for continued participation, will help illuminate the factors involved in drop out and backsliding.

### *Initial Activism*

Strategies of recruitment and mobilization are often explored to explain individual engagement in social movements. New social movement perspective tells us that a search for identity plays an important role in individual participation (Melucci 1980; Johnston, et al. 1994). Some NSM theorists argue that “actors” seek out movements as a way to gain recognition for their identities and lifestyles (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Jasper and Polletta (2001) examine the role of collective identity in social movement participation. They define collective identity as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a

broader community” (p. 285). In their work, collective identity serves as a “loyalty formulation” which motivates actors into movements. With the absence of loyalty or social networks, collective identity can help form “movement identities” which aid in building commitment and solidarity. These movement identities such as “environmentalist” or “feminist,” help to unify members without regular, day-to-day contact.

In their extensive work on peace activism, Downton and Wehr (1997) provide valuable insight into why people engage in activism. They speak of “collective incentives” that activism offers individuals. These incentives may include a space to air grievances and openly express values and beliefs. In addition, activists may be drawn to others with whom they have a shared ideology and passion for change. Individuals who engage in more formal activism may seek to obtain fundraising, advocacy or organizing skills.

It is also important to note the role socio-demographics play in fostering activism. Socio-economic status (SES) is said to be a key predictor in social movement participation. High SES is associated with resources such as time and money, which potentiate participation and make activism more possible (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Corrigall-Brown forthcoming). Therefore, individuals with higher SES are more likely to engage in political activity, activism and social movement organizations (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Along with SES, educational level can also predict a person’s availability for participation in activism. Higher education has been seen to positively contribute to activism (Crozat 1998; Dalton 2008). Similarly, Putnam (2000) shows that political

knowledge is a “critical precondition for active forms of participation” (p.35) and those with a genuine interest in political affairs are more likely to engage in collective action.

The role of gender in movement participation has been extensively studied and generally shows males to hold a greater propensity for activism than females (Rochford 1985; Cable 1992; McAdam 1992; Lee 1997). However, it is important to note that movement context varies, therefore, using gender as a predictor of participation can be skewed depending on the specific movement. For example, movements such as the feminist movement or the animal rights movement are heavily female dominated (Einwohner 1999).

Biographical availability is a term often used to describe how positions in the “life-cycle” contribute to protest or participation availability (Corrigan-Brown forthcoming). When someone is biographically available, s/he is more likely to have the capacity to convert beliefs into meaningful action (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). For example, personal obligations such as family roles or employment may elevate the “costs and risks” of movement participation (McAdam 1986:70).

### *Persistent Activism*

As well as a review of initial entry, gaining insight into mechanisms of stable and persistent activism help illuminate possible reasons behind drop out and backsliding. Committed actors represent the members of the movement who are more likely to take an

activist and leadership role (Maurer 2002) as well as continue in the movement when unfavorable conditions are present (Haenfler 2004).

Taylor and Whittier (1992) explain how collective identity works to sustain commitment. They emphasize the need for boundaries that clearly establish the line between those in power and their challengers. Without this “identity work” they claim solidarity between the group may weaken. In addition, in Jasper and Polletta’s (2001) work, collective identity is cited as a means to sustained commitment. They claim identity management is a crucial tactic to ensure participation remains a primary responsibility of members. A strong commitment to an identity can also unify members as these claims are often used as a protest strategy.

Where collective identity shines is within movements with no formal organization. In Ross Haenfler’s (2004) work on the straight edge movement, he proposes that collective identity is vital to movements in which the majority of members do not identify with a larger social movement organization. Straight edge grew from the punk rock music scene and is considered a “clean living movement.” Members abstain from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and premarital sex (Haenfler 2004: 786). Cherry (2006) found a correlation between members of the punk music scene and an adherence to veganism. In her study, most of the vegans did not affiliate with a larger social movement organization and instead relied on social and peer networks as a way to create and maintain the practice. She proposes the “pull” factors (McAdam 1986), such as those found in close social ties with



other vegans, are the greatest contributor to continued action. “Push” factors, or individual motivations, were found to be a less important variable to commitment.

### *Leaving Activism*

Although scholars generally agree that the activist process occurs in three stages: initial engagement, sustained engagement and disengagement (Klandermans 1997), little systematic research exists explaining movement attrition, backsliding or drop out (Corrigall-Brown forthcoming).

According to Jasper and Polletta (2000), “if identities play a critical role in mobilizing and sustaining participation, they also help explain exodus from a movement. One of the chief causes of movement decline is that collective identity stops lining up with the movement” (p. 292). If an actor can find sufficient representation through mainstream or “nonpolitical” avenues, membership is no longer seen as necessary. Sandell’s (1999) study of the Swedish temperance movement, found that individuals often left the movement when their friends did. The role of social networks in participation decline was also evaluated by Van Der Veen and Klandermans (1989). They conclude, along with Passy and Giugni (2000), that social networks and a feeling of connectedness are vital for commitment. Therefore, feelings of isolation tend to result in withdrawal from activism.

We also see family roles and obligations have an effect on the trajectory of participation. Biographical circumstances may lead to individual unavailability and therefore may negatively effect activist participation. For example, Stoker and Jennings

(1995) report the commitment of marriage may cause a decrease in movement loyalty. They cite corresponding changes such as geographical changes, children, and new career paths that marriage creates as support for this decrease. Wiltfang and McAdam's (1991) work bolsters this hypothesis with their finding that unmarried people tend to devote more time to activism than their married counterparts.

In sum, we explore the three stages of activism to gain a holistic perspective on the possible trajectory of activist life. Initial activism may involve the pursuit of lifestyle expression or collective identity. Connecting with other like-minded individuals, sharing certain emotional inclinations as well as similar demographics may make involvement more feasible. Persistence, or sustenance activism is strongly influenced by social ties as well as the strength of collective identity. Finally, leaving or disengaging from activism is also greatly influenced by a weakened identity, a disconnected social network and biographical circumstance. These factors can be applied to a specific movement such as the vegetarian movement to further and more specifically delineate the complexities involved in the stages of activism and the reasons for backsliding.

### Vegetarian Activism

#### *Becoming Vegetarian*

In order to fully understand possible reasons for leaving vegetarianism, review of the motivations for initial adoption is vital. Rachel MacNair (2001) and Barbara McDonald (2000) offer in-depth analyses on the process of adopting veganism as an identity.

Seeking to answer the question, “how do people learn to become vegan,” McDonald (2000) conducted 12 interviews with practicing vegans. McDonald discovered seven steps to the conversion process: 1) “Who I Was, 2) Catalytic Experience, 3) Repression, 4) Becoming Oriented, 5) Learning, 6) Decision, and 7) World View.”

Pertinent to the present study on backsliding and drop out are the “repression,” “becoming oriented,” “learning,” and “world view” stages of McDonald’s model. “Repression” refers to disregarding information on animal cruelty or health benefits temporarily, “becoming oriented” refers to the inclination to learn and acquire more information as well as the final decision to become vegetarian or vegan. McDonald (2000) notes that years may be spent in the “learning phase” before adoption of the label is finalized and the “world view” is adopted. “World view” is used to explain a vegan’s belief in the basic equality between humans and non-human animals (McDonald 2000).

Rachel MacNair (1998; 2001) expands on McDonald’s work with her own qualitative and quantitative assessments on the process of becoming vegan. Her survey suggests that those who become vegetarian for animal concerns (ethics) used emotions as their initial impetus. When health concerns were revealed to be the initial motivator, respondents claimed their convergence was based in logic. Some “purists” of the vegetarian movement argue that an exemplary health-based approach makes one more likely to give in to cravings for meat and succumb to social pressures. Health-motivated vegetarians are also more likely to seek out information that absolves meat from its negative health effects (Maurer 2002). Therefore, the other side of the debate argues that a stricter approach to

vegetarianism, one that promotes a rapid change to veganism, is the best form of advocacy (Maurer 2002).

Compassion for animals and health reasons seem to be the two main motivating factors in conversion to a plant-based diet (MacNair 2001). Once either of these is adopted, it is also common practice to include other reasons such as environmental, world hunger, spiritual, aesthetic, and anti- big-business (MacNair 2001:64). The incorporation of additional reasons bolsters and solidifies a person's commitment to the practice.

Who is likely to become vegetarian is associated with social class, ethnicity, and gender. Maurer suggests that white, middle-class females are most receptive to vegetarianism. Low-income individuals rarely adopt vegetarianism (Maurer 2002). Incidentally, as members of low-income groups gain momentum toward the upper class, there is an increase in meat consumption. Lamont and Fournier (1992) have concluded that some members of the upper class choose vegetarianism as a way to separate themselves from competing social groups. Back and Glasgow (1981) conducted a study of middle class "gourmets" and vegetarians and draw the conclusion that middle class vegetarians are most likely to reject the status of meat as a representation of power or prestige.

It is generally agreed that the majority of the vegetarian population is female, with most surveys concluding a figure around 70 percent (Maurer 2002). In her widely acclaimed book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams (1991) details the relationship between gender and meat eating. She writes that in our society "attributes of masculinity

are attained by consuming meat in a sort of homeopathic transfiguration in which a dead animal's former strength animates the consumer. Because vegetarian men, by definition, challenge conventional masculinity norms, they become targets of taunts that they are not 'real men' (p. 32).

Because of "hierarchal divisions of power" in the household, marriage may deter women from adopting vegetarianism (Maurer 2002:11). Although women have some influence over eating habits, men seem to have primary control over what is consumed within the household (Charles and Kerr 1988). Since we see married women charged with the role of pleasing and appeasing the dietary wants of their husbands and families, it is unsurprising that vegetarians are less likely than the general population to be married (Charles and Kerr 1988).

### *Sustaining Vegetarianism*

One of the goals of the vegetarian movement is to build a larger pool of committed vegetarians (i.e. vegans). Those who are loyal to the movement are more likely to engage in leadership roles, advocacy and activism (Maurer 2002). Both popular and academic opinions conclude that those grounded by ethics are the most committed vegetarians.

Building a strong vegetarian collective identity includes agreeing upon "definitions of membership, boundaries and activities for the group" (Larana, et al. 1994:33). This identity is beneficial to group loyalty as it encourages members to uphold movement practices or beliefs (Maurer 2002). Confusion regarding the vegetarian identity challenges

the movement's ability to build a coalition of committed members. Vegetarian organizations generally adopt an inclusive approach to the promotion of vegetarianism (Maurer 2002). This approach has led to a discrepancy between those who identify as a vegetarian and those who actually lead a vegetarian lifestyle (Stahler 2006). Leaders fear that a strict interpretation of the practice may deter meat eaters from embracing a new way of eating. However, some argue that by allowing for dilution of the identity, the ability to build a strong collective identity and therefore accrue loyal activists, will be rendered impossible (Maurer 2002).

### *Leaving Vegetarianism*

The reason behind one's vegetarianism may indicate motivations for abandonment (Rozin, Markwith, and Stoess 1997; Maurer 2002). Some propose that abandonment of a plant-based diet is more likely in health-motivated individuals than those bound by ethics or morality (Maurer 2002). With the dairy and meat industries continuing to develop lower fat and calorie products, it is becoming easier for those who have eliminated animal products on the basis of health to begin to justify their reincorporation. In sum, some argue that without a strong foundation of moral and ethical motivations, the movement will fail to attract and sustain committed vegetarians.

The debate centering on the inclusive health-based approach to vegetarianism compared to the strict, ethically anchored, approach will be of vital importance to the current research. In addition, inconsistencies in definitions and therefore identity will also be a central theme to be explored. This research will in turn be utilized to explore the merit

of the exemplary vs. inclusive approaches while allowing for other emerging themes regarding vegetarian sustainability.

### Summary

Scholars of social movements have extensively studied the dynamics of collective action. New social movement theories build upon existing knowledge to help explain a new type of movement in which identity acceptance and cultural change are central components. The vegetarian movement is a new social movement dedicated to a specific aspect of social change: increasing acceptance and availability of a plant-based diet. Success equates to the adoption and commitment of vegetarianism by as many people as possible. Valuable data regarding strategies of recruitment and mobilization exist, but a large gap exists concerning activist backsliding and dropout. An understanding of the factors that enable vegans or vegetarians to fall backward on the food choice continuum or abandon the practice totally will begin to fill a large whole in social movement studies in general, and provide valuable insight for the vegetarian movement in particular.

### Contributions to Literature

This study aims to add to the literature by shedding light on the need for increased attention to the “disengagement” aspect of activism (Klandermans 1990). The literature appears to disregard this aspect of collective action although it is clear that processes regarding leaving activism and backsliding provides valuable insight to social movement studies.

This study also hopes to build on the foundation that Donna Maurer and other vegetarian scholars have built. Academic attention to this social movement can only bolster its recognition as a legitimate form of collective action. I consider this piece to be a form of academic activism, and certainly hope it can aid vegetarian leaders, activists and potential members in their pursuit.

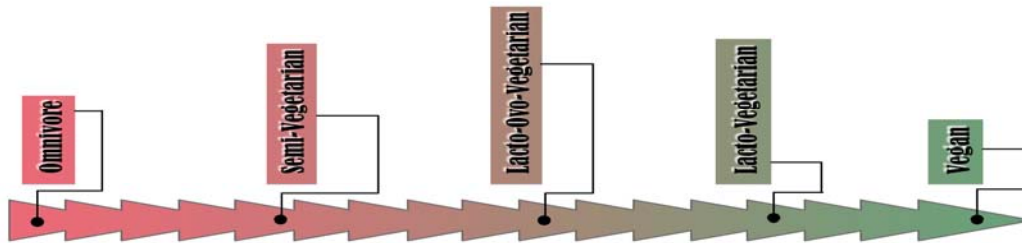


## METHODS

In a general sense, this study explores the ways in which individuals have altered their avoidance and choices of certain foods over time. It also explores areas of lifestyle and culture that appear in conjunction with food choice. The particular emphasis centers on individuals who at one time made the commitment to abstain from certain animal products, but failed to continue the practice. Due to my desire to gain first-hand accounts of the narratives and motives of my participants, as well as garner rich data on the topic on vegetarian recidivism, a qualitative approach was employed.

### Respondents

Connecting to former vegans and vegetarians required personal contacts and snowball sampling. The final sample size consists of 14 respondents, 9 female, 5 male. Criteria for inclusion in the sample were individuals who have backslidden down the “food choice continuum” (Maurer 2002). The food choice continuum, for the purposes of this project, begins at one end with an omnivorous diet and ends with a vegan diet (see Figure 1). Participants have at one point identified as vegan or vegetarian, but chose to disengage from the practice or fall backward down the continuum.



**Figure 1 Food Choice Continuum**

An elaboration of the figure was given to participants at the beginning of the interviews. For the purposes of this project I described an omnivore as an individual with no constraints or stipulations toward their diet. A semi-vegetarian was described as either a pescatarian or someone who occasionally eats vegetarian. Lacto-ovo vegetarians consume no flesh (including fish) but incorporate eggs and dairy products. Lacto vegetarians consume no flesh or dairy but allow for eggs. Vegans eat no animal flesh or by-products and do not support industries that exploit animals for fur, wool, leather, silk, honey or within circuses or zoos.

I gained access to participants with the utilization of personal relationships and social networks. As a member of a local vegetarian meet up group, I have bi-monthly meals

with individuals who fall across the food choice continuum. Casual conversation revealed several possible participants who were screened according to the criteria as well as interview availability. Within my professional contacts I also discovered several individuals available for inclusion. By pooling my professional and personal networks as well as incorporating snowball sampling, I was able to reach my goal of a diverse and unique sample. However, because of the nature of qualitative research methods, there were some inherent limitations that will be elaborated elsewhere.

Of the 14 people interviewed, 3 (21%) have children, and 3(21%) are married. Four respondents (28%) hold master's degrees, 2 (14%) are doctoral students, and one individual holds a Ph.D and is the director of an academic department at a 4-year university. Two individuals are current undergraduate students. A breakdown of ethnicity, age range, and occupation are detailed in figure two (see Appendix C).

It is also important to discuss the differing ways in which the respondents came into vegetarianism as well as explore the differing trajectories they took. Five cite health reasons for the initial flirtation with vegetarianism. Three mentioned spiritual reasons, such as religion and yoga training as their impetus. Finally, three cited ethical, animal oriented reasons for their initial abstention. Figure 3 (see Appendix C) also outlines the various trajectories of vegetarianism. It is clear from the table that for the majority of the respondents, vegetarianism was something individuals fell in out and of often over the life course.

## Data Collection

It has been noted that interviews are a valuable tool to social movement research (Blee and Taylor 2002). Although the literature mainly supports this method with regard to motives of participation and protest activities, I propose that this is the most optimal method to gather data concerning dropout and backsliding. The use of interviews allows for a more holistic view of the social and cultural reasons behind food choice and avoidance. The narratives of the motives given by my participants allow for a detailed look into this complex topic, which I believe could not be deduced quantitatively.

In order to gain insight into the individual perspective, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview begins with an interview guide (see Appendix B), which includes a set of topics, but allows for flexibility and the freedom to digress (Blee and Taylor 2002). Blee and Taylor (2002) also claim that this methodology is conducive to exploring “rhythms of social movement growth and decline, and participant involvement and withdrawal over time” (p. 95).

Content for the interview guide was informed by a thorough review of the literature. The interview took on the form of a life history as I asked my participants to start with their childhood experiences regarding food and eating and then explain how their choices changed over time. I attempted to cover the role social networks and family played in their food choices as well as their opinions concerning definitions of vegetarianism. I also ascertained whether the respondents identified as activists or were involved in animal

rights or other social justice causes. When necessary I probed for clarification and elaboration.

The duration of most of the interviews was roughly an hour with some minor variation. On one occasion the interview lasted only 30 minutes as the respondent found it difficult to recall reasons or time frames regarding her backsliding. Two interviews went slightly over an hour, with the longest interview lasting 90 minutes.

The interviews were completed in October and November of 2010. They were tape recorded with a Sony Digital Voice Recorder then manually transcribed.

### Analytic Strategies

The analysis began while the interviews were still being conducted (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Before transcription, certain themes became clear. I began to notice narratives of new relationships and family struggles by nearly all the participants. This was a topic I knew I would need to address in detail during subsequent interviews, as well as during coding processes. Within the time frame of the interviews, I called upon peers and colleagues to address some of my preliminary findings. This constant brainstorming allowed me to go into the coding with some ideas of what to look for in more detail.

After all interviews had been conducted, other coding processes began. The first step in the coding process involved a thorough re-read of all the interview transcripts (Rubin and Rubin 1995). At this point I began to look for concepts and themes that became

“coding categories.” Coding categories are the main themes, concepts, and ideas that were successfully examined in the interview process (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Several readings of the transcripts were necessary to evaluate how often these themes emerged. It is important to note that during this intricate coding process new coding categories became clear, and required a return to previous transcripts for additional coding.

Once the main categories had been decided, the data were grouped by category to compare how the different interviewees responded to similar themes or concepts (Rubin and Rubin 1995). “Through examining the information within each category, we come up with overall descriptions of the cultural arena or explanations of the topic we are studying” (Rubin and Rubin 1995:228).

By this point in the coding, it became important to keep in mind the goals of the research, which aims to inform scholars of social movements of the cultural and social dimensions involved in withdrawal. It is not beyond the scope of this research to provide the vegetarian movement meaningful strategies to avoid loss of constituents or to gain prospective members.

### Ethical Concerns

The conversations that took place with participants are considered personal and I certainly feel privileged to have been let in on private matters. I never forgot my scholarly obligation to protect the privacy of my interviewees and chose to refrain from being

unnecessarily provocative of their vulnerabilities (Blee and Taylor 2002). Although it is a goal of this research to offer strategies to overcome dropout and backsliding, privacy and anonymity is of primary concern. Provisions such as name changes have been taken to ensure privacy.

### Reflexive Statement

As a member of the vegetarian movement, I had certain motivations and biases to be mindful of during the conducting and writing of this research. My personal interest in vegetarianism soon led to an academic interest in the plight of social movements. Once an academic interest in the current movement began, I noticed studies that described processes of becoming vegan, but perceived a lack of information within the academy regarding the difficulties of maintenance and reasons for withdrawal.

This research served as a personal growth experience. Encountering several individuals who held different points of views, and whom seemingly abandoned previous ethical positions, was a somewhat enlightening experience. Although, I experienced a level of disappointment upon learning that participants reverted back to meat eating, the course of listening to the complexities in their lives and the struggles they found with the practice, served as an exercise in tolerance and understanding.

During the course of the interviews I remained a professional, active listener, and withheld personal points of view unless directly asked by a respondent. When asked to give a personal position, I tried to make my responses as neutral as possible. When the

interviews were over, and the recorder turned off, I did not hesitate to point respondents in the direction of literature or websites that could possibly help with their struggles.

### Limitations

The scale of this project presents several limitations. Because of the subject population's nature, the sample size is inherently small. Therefore, further systematic research is needed in order to generalize my findings to vegetarian movements in other regions. In addition, the vegetarian movement is unique and complex, and although the findings here will certainly have implications for social movement processes in general, continued studies on vegetarians and motivations for backsliding and continued investigation on burnout in similar movements will enhance our understanding of this particular problem. Finally, several members of this study did not consider themselves activists at all. Although they all adopted the label of vegetarian or vegan at one point, this label cannot be deemed synonymous with activism. Additional studies of individuals engaged in activism (leafleting, protests, etc) would be an important follow up to this research.

In addition, the demographic makeup of the sample consists of other limitations in need of disclosure. First, the majority of the sample was female. While I put extra effort into seeking out male participants, the ratio remained uneven. In addition, because of my close ties to the academic world, significant portion of my sample were found through these channels. One participant is on faculty in the women's studies program at my university,



two others are doctoral students in sociology, and two participants are undergraduates. Second, I failed to achieve ethnic diversity in my participants. Two participants were of Puerto Rican descent, one of Indian, one unknown due to adoption, and the rest Caucasian. I would hope that further research would include an emphasis on cultural disparities, specifically within the African American community-a group I was unable to represent.

## **FINDINGS/ANALYSIS**

The few studies that address the disengagement aspect of activism tend to view it as a permanent orientation. Such disengagement is occasionally referred to as a complete, all or nothing, withdrawal from activism. In addition, most studies have centered on the engagement, sustained participation, and disengagement within social movement organizations (SMOs). My research into disengagement with vegetarianism spotlights individuals' tendency to reengage with the "diet," as well as revert back to meat eating in a more random, context-oriented fashion. In addition, nearly all my participants did not engage in activism within any animal rights or vegetarian groups or organizations, and had a variety of impetuses for the initial abstention.

I will first address the nature of backsliding, i.e. what backsliding "looked like" for most of the participants. I will then examine the factors that resulted in backsliding and the inability to maintain vegetarianism. I have called upon several areas of sociology to help explain the themes uncovered in the narratives of the participants. Finally, after putting forth an analysis of the factors as well as thoughts for future research, I will suggest ideas for leaders of vegetarian movement organizations and individual activists regarding strategies and campaigns to help stabilize backsliding vegetarians and mobilize potential members.

### Nature of backsliding

Backsliding, for the purposes of this research, refers to an individual's decision to reincorporate an animal food product that was previously avoided. As a qualitative study, I ascertained the motives and narratives behind the changes and the study soon became less about the transition out of vegetarianism toward a look into how the food habits of my participants changed frequently over time.

Backsliding could for example, occur for one day. A majority of participants recall backsliding when partaking in traditional Thanksgiving fare and similar events in an attempt to appease family members. For example, the holidays were a major factor in the backsliding of Elizabeth: "So then I was like [I'll eat meat] only on Thanksgiving and Christmas because that is the only time we sit down as a family."

Others look at veganism or vegetarianism as a means to cleanse, or eliminate unhealthy foods in an extreme manner for a limited amount of time: after cleansing these individuals may reincorporate animal products. Deven, for instance, would go on his "vegan cleanse" in anticipation of "cheating": "it's like, ok, I'm going to go on the cleanse soon so I can cheat a little and it'll be a week of eating food that has cheese."

Backsliding for those who graduated to veganism, mainly took the form of reincorporating eggs and cheese. Many participants recall being "tempted" with dairy products, which led many to fall off the wagon completely. In addition, a majority of the

participants cite fish as a constant in their diet (even when they identified as vegetarian), or as one of the first foods they reincorporated.

Common cultural knowledge on becoming vegetarian reveals that many people who choose to eliminate these products may do so in a neatly patterned fashion: eliminating one type of meat (poultry, red meat) at a time, maintaining vegetarianism for a long period, then slowly phasing out byproducts. While conversions to a vegetarian practice may occur in an easier-to-measure process, this research illuminates that the reincorporation of once avoided animal foods is a more complex process anchored within idiosyncratic biographies.

These idiosyncrasies regarding vegetarianism and veganism took on many different forms. One interesting example is the case of Jimmy, who goes on what he calls “vegan vacations”: “I take vegan vacations, that’s what my parents call it, they’ll say take a vegan vacation.” When home with his family Jimmy will occasionally eat cheese or dairy products, as by doing so he is not monetarily supporting animal products.

The nature of backsliding varied greatly among the participants. While I looked for a clear pattern of reincorporation, I soon discovered that no such pattern exists. How my participants “fell off the wagon” depended on how they personally defined their eating habits and the social context surrounding them. Because of the flexible approach to the practice taken by many in the sample, it became more important to understand a broad sense of their eating habits instead of searching for minute details regarding their backsliding.

### Backsliding Factors

During analysis of the transcripts, several common themes surfaced with regard to the participants' struggle to eat meat free, thus failing to uphold the vegetarian identity. A total of six themes are discussed as major barriers to a complete embrace of vegetarianism or veganism. First, the role of family and spousal relationships are viewed as areas of negotiation and compromise regarding food choice. Second, issues regarding the label and definition of vegetarianism as strict and inflexible serve as a deterrent to several participants. This ambiguity lends to the vegetarian identity competing with other identities such as those stemming from culture and traditions. Management of competing identities acts as an additional barrier. Third, I explore how some participants view vegetarianism as a means to cleanse, as a loose set of guidelines for healthy living, and as a fluid and permeable lifestyle. Fourth, gender roles, especially those associated with "feeding the family" are examined as barriers to a meat-free life. Fifth, I explore how social networks and peer pressure influence the ability to maintain diet and lifestyle changes. Sixth, I examine how fish, particularly as it consumed via dining out for sushi, is employed as a means of gaining social status and trend participation.

### *Family Relationships*

Attitudes toward vegetarianism and patterns of consumption shifted and adapted to suit different environments and contexts. Specifically, we see the home and family as a place of cooperation and compromise. Gill Valentine (1999) has explored the idea behind eating patterns as areas of negotiation within the home. In his research on the home as a

site of consumption, Valentine (1999) illustrates how differences in food choices are reconciled through accommodation and compromise, therefore helping to create a cohesive pattern of consumption.

Addressing vegetarian backsliding and withdrawal through a lens of the sociology of consumption further elaborates the complex nature inherent in food choice and avoidance. One goal of the vegetarian movement is to make consumption of meat-free products more culturally acceptable and available. An understanding of the influential role of family within consumption practices helps clarify the inherent pitfalls in achieving this goal.

Julianna, who turned to veganism after years of vegetarianism, admits that breaking up with her vegan boyfriend and subsequently dating an omnivorous man was a major barrier to sustaining the practice. Although she identified veganism as a desirable option, she recalls her backsliding moment:

When we started dating I maintained my veganness for a while in the relationship and he actually became a vegetarian. Then he ate fish one day and then at some point I broke down and had a piece of pizza. And that piece of pizza was like my falling point.

Elizabeth, who went vegetarian in middle school, recalls her backsliding after beginning the relationship with her husband:

So I stayed vegetarian all through high school, then I came to college at UCF and I actually did ok until I met my husband. So, then I started compromising when I

would go over to his family's house: whatever they cooked, I was like, I'm a guest I don't want to cause any trouble, so I'll just eat whatever they serve. So I would do that and you know, I would start compromising with my family too.

The decision to "compromise" was a common theme among the participants in the study. Lauren, now vegan, stated that she always had uneasy feelings about meat. However, when faced with the prospect of being a guest at someone's dinner table, she, like most of the participants, chose to compromise in an attempt to appease her host: "It was just convenient when someone cooks, like when my friends mom cooked us dinner for Thanksgiving, you're just going to eat what they cook, you don't want to be rude."

Omar, a current omnivore whose initial vegetarianism was a result of a childhood traumatic experience recalls this moment of pressure: "My girlfriend freshman year of college, her mother was this great cook and they cooked all this kind of stuff and I just felt very pressured when I would go to their house."

Finally, Emma, whose inclination toward environmentalism led her on a vegetarian path, recalls her tendency to compromise:

I was doing it just to make it easier on everyone else. We ate a lot of family meals with his parents and they didn't understand vegetarianism, they didn't get it.

Based on my respondents' narratives, one can surmise that the introduction of new relationships and the desire to be a polite guest are major barriers to vegetarianism. It is

quite interesting to see many backsliding episodes occur within the setting of the “family meal” where there are informal governing rules (Devault 1999:48).

### *Identity/Label*

A focus on the role of identity in vegetarian maintenance is crucial to scholars of social movements. New social movement scholars in particular stress the central importance of collective identity for movement coherence and collective action. The vegetarian identity is complex as it competes with other personal (wife, daughter) and culturally assigned (Puerto Rican, Baptist) identities. In their study of food eating and identity, Bisogni et. al (2002) reveal that people obtain several identities over the life course and meaning is constructed for each by the people, groups and objects around them. Assigning greater levels of importance to some and enacting certain identities at different times helps manage these multiple identities.

Elizabeth, whose culture and Puerto Rican identity plays a vital role in her relationship to food, finds a crossroads within her inclination toward vegetarianism and her cultural identity. This very first statement from her interview expresses how large a role her culture plays on food choice:

First I should say I'm Puerto Rican so there's a lot of culture that goes into the food that I grew up with. So I grew up in Puerto Rico where vegetarianism... you're like a freak if you're a vegetarian. It's just non-existent at least in my circle anyway.



Deborah Lupton (2000) in her work on food preferences of Australian couples shows how childhood eating habits assist in shaping food choices in adulthood. Individuals and their cultural and family traditions play a major part in their food choices. In a study by Hollows (2003) we see women's memories of their mothers cooking serve as a "reference point for their own dinner practices" (p. 186).

When discussing her trepidation toward veganism, Elizabeth thinks of her family's recipes and the difficulty in giving those up:

To go vegan I think, I just think of every recipe that I know and how would I modify it? That was the hardest thing; I think of all the family memories... all these meat dishes are there how do I start supplementing these?

Sociologists frequently cite collective identity to account for individuals' inclination to join or identify with a social movement (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Movements in some cases are instrumental in crafting the identities of its members (Jasper 1997). The identities within vegetarianism however, are, again, more complicated than other non-lifestyle based movements. Collective identity is certainly necessary to build movement cohesion and to maintain their committed members. However, those on the fence, such as the individuals in the present research, struggle to make the identity a top priority. Although at one time or another they may have propensity toward a vegetarian or vegan identity, these motivations are clearly not static entities (Beardsworth and Keil 1992).

Throughout the vegetarian literature, conversations persist concerning how to approach the ambiguity of the definition of vegetarian and vegan. What exactly constitutes a “vegetarian” is a source of common debate both within and outside activist and academic circles. Some call for an exclusionary approach, citing a need for a strict interpretation, while others maintain that a flexible definition is best for the movement (Maurer 2002).

Nick, a graduate student, who approaches vegetarianism in a very flexible way, shows that the label of vegetarian isn't important and will only occasionally address himself that way:

If I'm not going to eat the hamburger because I'm a vegetarian I'll tell them 'No I'm a vegetarian.' If it's because I'm not hungry, I'll just say, 'No, I'm not hungry' and completely side-step that whole moment of 'How do you do that? It's so hard.'

Confusion was common among my participants regarding what constitutes vegetarianism, and in some cases served as a turn-off to the practice. This sentiment echoes other studies that reveal individuals framing vegetarianism differently in order to suit their lifestyles (Cherry 2006; Willetts 1997, Beardsworth and Keil 1992). When asked her opinion on veganism Samantha reveals a unique position on diet and lifestyle:

Harm reduction: you can't really go too far to the left because people think, people just write you off, if you go way too radical. But if you just ask people to take smaller steps you can make a change and eventually maybe they'll get there. That's what I'm taking for myself. That's what I'm going to do.

Rebecca, a non-profit worker and musician, expresses her confusion regarding the movements' discrepancies regarding definitions and practices:

Like is it ok to be this kind of vegetarian or do you have to be the stalwart vegetarian? Is vegetarian not ok? Is vegan the way to go or does pescatarian count as vegetarian? I don't think pescatarian counts as vegetarian.

To many, the identity associated with veganism and vegetarianism is synonymous with inflexibility and an impossible moral absolute to hold. The following quote from Omar, a writer and athletic trainer, reveals his perception of vegetarianism as quite strict, and his resistance to be labeled as such:

"I see it as a lifestyle, a lifetime choice and that's just the way it is. Even if I was to go into a vegetarian lifestyle now, maybe if I did it for like 5 or 10 years maybe I could call myself a vegetarian. Until then I'm just excluding certain parts of my diet."

### *Cleansing/Guidelines*

For many participants, vegetarianism was approached as a practice that was not strictly defined. For some participants this took the form of cleansing, usually lasting no longer than two or three weeks. For others vegetarianism served as a loosely defined guide in which deviation was acceptable given certain circumstances. The boundaries between vegetarianism and meat eating, then, for many participants were highly permeable.

Nick's religious upbringing made him hesitant to adopt vegetarianism in a strict sense:

I needed guidelines so I came up with a handful of guidelines. These guidelines came from my own experience. I have found throughout my entire life, I was raised in a really conservative Baptist background, and I would constantly see that when people would try to hold themselves to moral absolutes it would always fail.

Anna Willet's (1997) work on vegetarianism offers substantial criticism for previously held notions regarding the dichotomy of meat eating and vegetarianism. Her qualitative work of a number of inhabitants of a London borough resulted in discounting the work of such scholars as Carol Adams (1990), Julia Twigg (1983), and Nick Fiddes (1991). Instead of seeing meat eating as a form of patriarchal domination, a symbolic form of strength and vitality, or as an expression of human power of nature, Willetts (1997) asserts, "vegetarianism is not a food practice that is rigorously defined, but is a fluid and permeable category embracing a wide range of food practices. Generalizations, though useful analytic devices, all too often fail to account for everyday life" (p.117) In the everyday lives of her participants, "vegetarians" often still ate meat, which highlights the practice itself as a sentiment difficult to universalize.

My participants who approached vegetarianism with a set of guidelines or as a means to cleanse did not approach eating meat vs. eating vegetarian as two distinct orientations. Therefore, their lapses in vegetarianism could not necessarily be labeled as backsliding at all. Their approach to vegetarianism was not straightforward and depended upon individual definition and motivation. While all three participants below declared

positive associations with the practice itself as well as movement goals, a range of variability was adopted to suit their particular lifestyles.

Julianna's guidelines allowed her to eat meat if she wasn't personally purchasing it: For a long time I would never order, I would have different levels. I would not order an entrée that was seafood. If someone was having one and offered me a taste I would have a taste because I wasn't supporting it. I wasn't monetarily supporting it.

Jimmy's affiliation with "Food not Bombs" opened him up to the idea of "freeganism" which allows for a significant amount of flexibility towards vegetarianism:

Well there's kind of like a whole grey area. You know of freeganism? I don't know if you're open to this, but we'll go like dumpster food. If you go to the dumpster at Dunkin' Donuts you open the bag and there's this huge amount of perfectly good donuts they had thrown away an hour before. And there will be an asiago [cheese] bagel in a dumpster and like I rationalize eating it by saying it was thrown away.

Deven would use veganism as a way to cleanse, but would usually revert back to meat after:

I go through these, this is bad, but I've become a big fan of the master cleanse; ya know what I'm talking about the lemonade diet? So, ever since then I go through what I call my meat periods and my detox period. Personally I can physically feel the difference whenever I'm on and off. But right now I'm on my vegetarian kick and this time around it's been strict. I haven't cheated in like four weeks.

## *Gender*

Feminist scholars have provided a robust body of literature upon which to draw inferences regarding the role of gender within family dynamics, specifically the cultural and social meanings attached to food (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann 2010). Marjorie DeVault's (1991) study, *Feeding the Family* demonstrates a woman's tendency of "doing gender" which oftentimes translates to women favoring the tastes and wants of their partners and children over their own. Lupton (1996) built on this notion in her work and reveals the emotional significance involved in "feminine ideals of care."

Natalie, a well educated divorced mother of two, recalls cooking meat for her ex-husband and family although her interview reveals her personal distaste for most meat:

He loved pork chops and I would like to fry them or whatever, and I would have to smell the whole house with a pork chop and it's really disgusting. It's like pork chops when you fry pork chops they remind you of your menstrual period blood, that's how bad it is to me. It's that smell that you go ahhh! I don't know why, but the pork chops... he will eat two or three he's like a big football player.

Additionally, the following quote, also from Natalie, is telling in that it combines her pull toward family tradition and the gendered female quality of putting one's partners' needs before your own:

I would make this very good chicken stew that I grew up with. It was my mother's recipe and he [her ex-husband] would love it, it would be a whole chicken that I

would have to cut. That's another problem, I would have to cut the whole chicken and I almost cut a finger once. I was doing it because he liked it... and it's the kind of thing its great and cheap and you can have people over.

Proponents of eco-feminism have long studied the entrenched relationship between meat eating and masculinity (Adams 1990). Jimmy and Omar both encountered opposition to their meat abstention from men in their families.

They see it as more of a masculinity thing like my uncle is really offended that I don't eat meat. [Jimmy]

My dad gave me a really hard time and tried to force feed it to me sometimes. He was a very domineering kind of guy and he hated that the fact that Saltana [sister] and myself just all of a suddenly didn't want to eat meat. [Omar]

A look into the salient effects of gender and family roles on individuals helps to understand another barrier to vegetarianism. Women, who are more likely to be vegetarian than men (Stahler 2006), continue to juggle personal preferences with the demands of the family. In addition, the connection between meat and masculinity is an important phenomenon to think about when discussing gender issues in the movement.

### *Peer Influence/Social Networks*

Social networks have the ability to provide positive encouragement or act as a substantial barrier to social movement participation as well as changes in behavior and lifestyle. (e.g. eating a vegetarian diet). In a study on dietary change, Zimmerman and

Connor (1989) explore the effects of an individual's social environment (significant others, friends) on his/her ability to maintain a change in health habits. Their results yielded a positive correlation between social support and the ability to maintain health changes. In her study on vegans, Cherry (2006) emphasizes the importance of social networks to lifestyle-based movements: "supportive social networks are invaluable to maintaining a vegan lifestyle and thus to sustaining the vegan movement" (Cherry 2006:167).

Heather, a social work graduate student recalls the support she received from a friend during her first attempt at veganism:

Luckily my friend Chelsea who was doing the vegan thing for health was going through the same thing so that was good. She and I would go to the green markets and get vegetables and that was our little thing.

Deven, who is currently vegan, recalls receiving a lot of questions and grief from friends that in turn led to feeling ostracized:

Everybody was like 'how do you get your protein, how do you survive?' because they've had this information pumped down them that protein is through beef and dairy...people look at you funny. I think about all the people that I hang out with and I think I'm the only vegetarian. It's just hard to do.

A lack of support can negatively affect an individuals attempt to change their diet; the pressure the respondents received from friends and family made vegetarianism difficult. Being mindful that activism and participation in social movements relies heavily



on network affiliation and social support (Buechler 1993), movement leaders must continue to emphasize strategic focus and resources in this area.

### *Fish*

A repeated theme among the majority of the interviews involves the difficulty in abstaining from fish, even during the periods of “vegetarianism.” Many of the respondents were either unaware of the technical inclusion of fish in the practice, or chose to eat fish regardless of this knowledge. To understand the rather new social status of fish and sushi we can turn to work on food as instruments of social and cultural capital (Johnston and Baumann 2007), as well as the classic work by Bourdieu (1984) in which he addresses taste.

We are beginning to see work specifying the role of food and drink in the acquisition of social and cultural capital, with studies on consumption exploring this topic in more depth. For example, Johnston and Baumann (2007:168) argue that, similar to other forms of culture, “cuisine is a cultural realm where individuals can engage in status displays.”

Jennifer, a current pescatarian, recalls her unhappiness in not being able to participate in a social ritual regarding dining out for sushi:

And also going to sushi with my friends, we love to go for sushi that was one of our things. I went there during my vegan month and it was like I’ll have a veggie roll, and I’ll have a seaweed salad... and that’s it. I couldn’t have the spicy mayo and I like

to dip everything in the spicy mayo. I couldn't have the spicy mayo and that's when I started feeling like I was being denied.

Heather, who admits not enjoying sushi all that much, continues to regard its consumption as a means to display status and support popular trends:

I didn't eat fish in college, but when I started making my own money, making more money, I started going to nicer restaurants, definitely started trying more fish. The fish that I would have would be the less fishy, more of white fish. I always wanted to like salmon, because I knew it was healthier. I didn't like sushi, even in high school I would be like 'I don't like sushi,' then all of a sudden I started trying other things. Honestly I don't even know if I like it that much. It's like the thing, it's a little more trendy to go get sushi and stuff, I would say even when I got it I would get shrimp on it.

In the classic work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984) states that food, in all its modes of consumption, acts as a form of cultural capital. In Heather's interview she cited yoga and other spiritual reasons for dabbling with vegetarianism, yet her inclination to partake in sushi shows how powerful a lure is social status. Lamont (1992:) eloquently posits an explanation: "as it becomes less socially acceptable to overtly declare high status based on wealth, social position, or ethnic/racial superiority, the status attained through cultural appreciation is framed as a matter of individual taste and lifestyle, which are posited as sophisticated, savvy, and cosmopolitan" (p.107).

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

New social movement theory was introduced to delineate the characteristics of a specific kind of movement based in culture and ideology. Although the current movement under review appears to fit well into this heading, I did find certain areas in which the tenets fail to account for the answers I found to the present research questions. I will address areas of the theory that both support and fail to account for my findings.

Status indicators such as profession and education typically unify new social movements. One of my participants holds a doctoral degree, two are pursuing such degree, one holds a master's and two are undergraduate students. This leads to a fairly obvious yet rarely spoken truth revealing vegetarianism as a privilege. Many individuals do not have the luxury to abstain from any kind of sustenance, and such limitations on low income individuals should be addressed in future study.

Identity is a term used often in social movement literature. NSM scholars suggest movement goals and ideology can provide members with a sense of identity. While that may be true for the small percent of committed vegans in the United States, vegetarian goals, within the lens of my participants, merely comprise a framework that is drawn from in a flexible manner. The vegetarian inclinations of my respondents work along side and occasionally in competition with, other more prominent identities.

The literature is saturated with statements declaring that the process by which someone becomes vegetarian has a large impact on his/her ability to remain committed.

Within the parameters of my study, the methods in which someone approached vegetarianism were of little consequence relative to other social factors such as family and relationships. The health vs. ethics debate is alive and well among the activist community, but perhaps it is time to bring other potential influences to the forefront of the conversation.

As aforementioned, support for one movement correlates positively with support for another. I found this to be true with regard to my participants and their affinity toward environmental awareness. Environmentalist tendencies appeared to be easier for the respondents to embrace, as these practices are not as connected to family traditions, meals or culture. The “green” movement has triumphed as their adherents do not appear stigmatized nor are their definitions scrutinized.

When asking the question why do vegetarians backslide, why do they give up on eating a certain way, it is necessary to look deep into the complexities of our social world. It is no longer acceptable to offer simplistic explanations. My research reveals several factors within the lives of my participants that have made a strict adherence to vegetarianism difficult. The family, culture and tradition, social networks and peer pressures, fluid approaches, deeply engrained gender roles, and a desire for social status all weigh on an individual when making lifestyle and identity choices.

In conclusion, I found it significant to reference other areas of sociology beyond the social movement literature to account for the unstable vegetarianism of my respondents. While it is important to remain mindful of theoretical ideas behind mobilization and

recruitment strategies of social movements, it is equally important to closely inspect the individual lives that make up current and potential members. I found the vegetarianism of my respondents to be situational, following a life course trajectory, and occurring within the larger contexts of consumer society and contemporary culture.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

In both social movement studies and vegetarian work, scholars have all too often focused their attention on the committed members, the “activists” within a movement. This research, with a focus mainly on individuals who do not identify as activists, sheds light on more of the general population’s trouble with vegetarianism.

Lichback (1996) noted that many individuals support movements but fail to get actively involved. Yet, continually within the literature focus is persistently paid to those active in large-scale movement organizations. This current look at inactive participants sparks the need to look at all aspects of a movement, including non-activists, as they too account for a large part of social change (Haenfler 2004).

The majority of American scholarship of social movements remains focused on social movement organizations (SMO’s). Gusfield (1994) heads the call for a “perspective on social movements that is less confined to the boundaries of organizations and more alive to the larger contexts of change” (p. 64). He asserts that there are important aspects of movements that theorists tend to overlook. This includes individuals within movements who struggle with social pressures and their complex multiple identities. Scholarship could benefit by focusing analysis on “the everyday interactive level” (1994:65). In addition, Gusfield promotes a way of looking at movements in a way that blurs the line between trend and movement as to better assess cultural meanings, how they change over time, and how they affect participants who do not identify as activists.

The literature reviewed focuses mainly on qualitative studies in which committed vegans discussed their transition into meatless lifestyles. Future research on those who fall out of vegetarianism is in need of further scrutiny, as this is a rich, untapped area. Specific emphasis on the role family and children play would be of particular help to movement leaders.

Vegetarianism seems to be a middle-class phenomenon. Future research is needed considering the food choices of lower class individuals. This could assist movement leaders in reaching potential adherents from lower income brackets, as well as help explain and overcome the many diet-related diseases that are prevalent among lower class individuals.

## **AFTERWORD**

This research has shed light on several aspects of the vegetarian movement that I, as a committed vegan, did not understand until now. When I started this project I was frustrated with the lack of attention paid to individuals who struggle with vegetarianism. Yet, I have come out of this journey with a better understanding of the fascination researchers have with the community of committed vegans. Statistics available on current vegans suggest that we make up roughly 1.5 percent (Vegetarian Resource Group 2009) of the population, with vegetarians holding strong at 3 percent. It makes sense that a sociological and inquisitive mind would want to understand how and why someone would come to align themselves with such a counter cultural minority.

I am honored to have spoken to the individuals in my study because I believe that through their stories I can offer movement leaders insight concerning the many barriers that prevent an individual from joining the 1.5 percent. There are solid animal rights arguments supporting the notion that eating animals is an unethical practice. Many of the individuals in my study would most likely agree with that statement. However, I learned that an understanding of that sentiment is not enough. Among the realities embedded in the lives of my respondents, the pressure of family, children, inconvenience, apprehension, social outings, and more all act upon an individual's behavior in incredibly powerful ways.

The movement should seek to garner an understanding of human limitations. I have realized that my ability to sustain the commitment is rare; my friends and I are anomalies.



This does not mean that we should stop striving for our ideals. Veganism is a wonderful, noble and important goal. Perhaps, though, we can begin with small steps, positive reinforcement for incremental changes, and a focus on healthier, animal-friendly options that can be integrated into our fast paced nation.

Educational efforts enlightening students on the ethics innate to the practice of eating animals are important. I also suggest taking significant time to reach an understanding of the history and traditions involved in cultural eating norms. The institution of family has its own rules that are deeply ingrained in many individuals. Perhaps tolerance and slight encouragement to build new traditions will become intriguing ideas worth entertaining.

In popular media, the “V” word has been getting tossed quite a lot. The consensus is that this exposure can only help us. I agree with this train of thought, which leads me towards a plea for more inclusive definitions of both vegetarianism and veganism. Several of my respondents struggled with calling themselves vegan or vegetarian if they had “cheated” that day or the day before. What is more important than if Deven or Julianna had a piece of cheese or a bite of sushi, is that they are doing their best to make healthy and compassionate choices within the complex situations they find themselves in everyday. Life gets complicated, and sometimes it is not desirable to stand out in the crowd or be rude to a host and turn down their homemade dessert. We, as leaders and activists need not condemn these acts. Instead we should offer only positive reinforcement and encourage everyone to try again tomorrow.

Nick's words are forever burned in my brain. During his explanation of his hesitancy to go vegan, he explains:

Any kind of thing that you say you are 'absolutely positively not going to do this under any circumstances' is destined for failure, if you define failure as doing that thing one time in your whole life. Then you feel terrible about it.

We do not have to define veganism as a pass/fail, exclusive practice. It can be forgiving and flexible. Again, committed members are vital to our progress, and we should continue to allocate resources toward cultivating a strong core of activists. However, we should be mindful of how we frame veganism. If we define failing at veganism as one momentary lapse, then we lose the chance of individuals like Nick even entertaining the idea of adopting the identity fully. I think potential members would benefit by the disclosure from current vegans of their struggles. Maybe they too had a bite of cheese at a party, or a Guinness on St. Patrick's Day (I learned Guinness isn't technically vegan). The humility in the setbacks of activists and leaders would benefit the movement as a whole by blurring the focus and redirecting the current perception of veganism as a moral absolute.

In sum, the findings of nearly every study reviewed on vegetarianism or veganism suggest that many people include meat in their definitions of a plant-based diet. A complete abandonment of meat is simply not an option for the majority of the population. As frustrating as that could be for ethically anchored individuals, reality is reality. Now is the time that we suggest new ideas in which to make vegetarian options more accessible, penetrate the public with the benefits of decreasing their meat consumption, and educate

children on the inner lives of animals designated for consumption, their capacity to feel pain, and their similarities to already beloved cats and dogs.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
 Office of Research & Commercialization  
 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
 Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
 Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

**Approval of Exempt Human Research**

**From:** UCF Institutional Review Board of  
 FW.A0000051.IRB0001136

**To:** **John D. Hecht**

**Date:** **October 14, 2010**

**Dear Researcher:**

On 10/11/2010, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulations.

<b>Type of Review:</b>	<b>Exempt Determination</b>
<b>Project Title:</b>	<b>The Vegetarian Social Movement: An analysis of individual and</b>
	<b>longevity</b>
<b>Investigator:</b>	<b>John D. Hecht</b>
<b>IRB Number:</b>	<b>50E-09-07187</b>
<b>Funding Agency:</b>	
<b>Grant Title:</b>	
<b>Biomedical IRB:</b>	<b>N/A</b>

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure Report in order that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bortolin, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joseph M. Sironi on 10/11/2010 08:12 PM EDT

**IRB Coordinator**

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Age, occupation, marital status, parent status, education

(Show them the continuum) What points on this continuum have you been?

Can you talk about what was happening in your life during each position on the continuum?

In addition to food, were other areas of your life affected by these choices?

What kind of support do you (did you) get from your friends? Family?

Where do you currently place yourself on the food choice continuum?

What are some of the influences in your life that effect what you eat?

Do you see yourself as part of a movement, such as the vegetarian movement or animal rights movement? Or did you previously?

**APPENDIX C: FIGURE 1 AND 2**



**Figure 2: Respondent Age, Occupation and Gender**

Name	Initial Motivation	Veg Trajectory	Gender
Rebecca	Health	Pescatarian-omnivore	Female
Jennifer	Health	vegan-lacto ovo-pescatarian	Female
Samantha	Spiritual	lacto ovo-vegan-pescatarian	Female
Lauren	Ethics	lacto ovo-omnivore-vegan	Female
Heather	Spiritual	vegan-lacto ovo-omnivore-pescatarian-lacto ovo	Female
Elizabeth	Ethics (Traumatic Childhood exp.)/Taste	pescatarian-omnivore-pescatarian	Female
Natalie	Health	pescatarian-omnivore	Female
Julianna	Ethics	lacto ovo-vegan-lacto ovo-pescatarian	Female
Jeff	Spiritual/Religious	lacto ovo-omnivore	Male
Nick	Health	flexitarian	Male
Jimmy	Ethics	lacto ovo-vegan-lacto ovo-vegan	Male
Devin	Health	lacto ovo-vegan-lact ovo-vegan	Male
Emma	Rebellious	pescatarain-omnivore-vegan-pescatarian-vegan-pescatarian	Female
Omar	Ethics (Traumatic Childhood Exp.)	lacto ovo-omnivore-lacto ovo-omnivore-vegan-omnivore	Male

**Figure 3: Respondent Motivation, “Veg” Trajectory and Gender**

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