



SOC 416 Research Project: Meat eating and Vegetarianism in the Peel Region

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How do people think about the decision to eat, or not eat meat?

In this project we worked with UTM students in an advanced undergraduate sociology seminar to address this question. Our goal was to interview a wide range of consumers in the Peel Region to explore the diverse motivations and cultural frameworks for adopting a diet that either includes or avoids meat.

As food scholars, we know that food choices are an incredibly important part of people's cultural and ethnic identities. We also know that meat-eating has been critiqued on multiple grounds. Health scholars raise concerns about the effects of meat-eating on human health, animal welfare activists critique how animals are treated in confined feeding operations, and environmentalists argue that meat is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Yet while meat-eating has its critics, the vast majority of the Canadian population does eat meat. To understand why people choose to eat meat dishes or adopt a vegetarian diet, the SOC 416 class explored how meat/vegetarian food choices factored into the identities of their friends and family members, as well as their understanding of any connections between meat-eating and social problems.

Our Research Question: What motivates meat eating?

We started with a fairly simple question: what motivates a diverse community of eaters to eat meat in their daily diet? To gain a comparative perspective on this question, we interviewed meat-eaters and a substantial number of people who had eliminated meat from their diet (i.e. were vegetarian or vegan), in order to pinpoint the factors that allowed them to feel satisfied while not eating meat regularly.



There are lots of great online resources documenting the harms of meat consumption. As a starting point, we recommend the overview analysis written on July 3rd 2016 by Rachel Premack in the *Washington Post* entitled, "Meat is horrible".

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/06/30/how-meat-is-destroying-the-planet-in-seven-charts>



In Canada, only an estimated 4% of the population is vegetarian.

DATA Collection: In-depth Qualitative Interviews

Each student in the class carried out an extensive qualitative interview with four friends and family members. In total, 76 participants were interviewed, a number which included 27 vegetarians and 49 meat eaters. The group of participants was highly diverse, varying in age, gender, ethnicity and region. There was a roughly equal number of men and women, and approximately half of the interview pool were undergraduate students. There was an exceptional amount of ethno-cultural diversity in the sample: 65 interviewees were visible minorities (non-Caucasians) (83% of the total sample). Participants were primarily heterosexual (91%), and represented a range of religious affiliations – Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, Christian – and forms of religious devotion.

Findings: Making sense of meat consumption – and abstention

We found that consumers used a variety of explanations for making sense of meat-eating. There were clear, consistent reasons used by a variety of people in the meat-eating majority. At the same time, we also saw how vegetarians provided an important contrasting perspective to dominant views on meat-eating.

What were the common themes surrounding meat in our interviews?

Theme #1. The 4Ns: Meat is Nice, Normal, Natural and Necessary

For research participants who consume meat, there was a strong adherence to what scholars call the “4 Ns” — the idea that meat is nice (tasty), normal, natural, and necessary for human health. Participants from multiple religions, cultural backgrounds, ages, and genders discussed meat using the “4 Ns”. For example, many participants believed it unthinkable to not eat meat because, evolutionarily, our human ancestors have been eating meat for centuries (i.e. “it’s natural”). Others felt that meat eating was so delicious (“nice”), and engrained in their social or cultural life (i.e. it was “normal”) that they would have a hard time ever giving it up. Interestingly, some life-long vegetarians in our sample provided a very different perspective, and saw their vegetarian diet as completely “normal”, delicious, and couldn’t imagine eating meat in the future.



Theme #2. Meat and Muscles



Our research documented a strong connection between meat consumption and masculinity. Multiple participants made an association between meat-based diets and a masculine appearance, especially the appearance of a body with muscles. In contrast, vegetarians were often perceived as thinner, less masculine, and having less muscle tone.

The connection between meat and muscles was common, but not universally held. In particular, vegetarians often rejected the association between meat-eating and muscles, especially male vegetarians. Some meat-eaters also insisted that you couldn't tell whether a person was a vegetarian just by looking at their body. Still, many male and female meat-eaters acknowledged a cultural association between manliness and meat – especially steak.

Theme #3. Eating Meat, Preserving Culture

One of the most interesting findings of this research was the strong cultural connections between meat-eating and cultural identity. Many participants felt strongly that eating dishes with meat allowed them to express their cultural heritage. For these participants, eating meat is a “normal” part of their culture, and to give up meat would feel like giving up a key piece of their identity. In particular, the “normalness” of meat eating in Muslim communities was a prominent theme in our interviews. Meat eating was seen a key piece of a broader food culture where social connections are made, traditions are enacted, and bonds between families and communities are affirmed. Significantly, some Muslim vegans or vegetarians reported that not eating meat was a difficult choice because they risked being perceived as giving up on their culture and religion; this risk can be considered especially difficult in a broader cultural context of Islamophobia.

Participants from cultural or religious backgrounds with a strong basis in vegetarianism also felt a strong connection between diet and identity. Many of the vegetarians we interviewed were from a Hindu or Sikh religious background. Although religion clearly played a role in their diet, many of these South Asian participants were clear that their decision to eat a vegetarian diet was not totally attributable to their religion, and that they had other reasons for not eating meat, like health, habit, or taste.



Theme #4. Meat is Healthy?

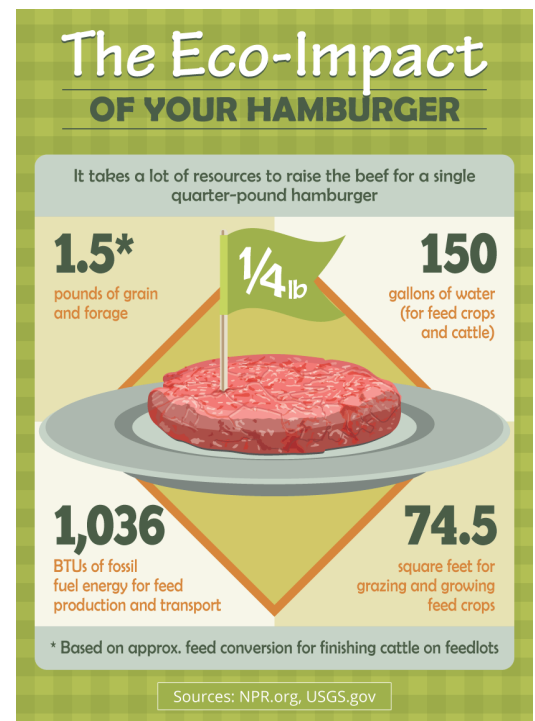
The interviews in this study revealed a paradoxical relationship between meat consumption and human health. On the one hand, meat eaters recognized that meat eating can generate negative health consequences such as high cholesterol levels and heart disease, and many worried about hormones and antibiotics in meat products. Indeed, some meat-eaters reported that they had cut back on their meat consumption due to health concerns.

However, meat-eaters also paradoxically use health as a reason for why they consume meat, citing the nutritional value of protein gained through meat consumption. In the most extreme cases, participants believed that it was impossible to live a healthy diet without meat, and lacked knowledge of vegetarian protein sources. In turn, some vegetarians gave up meat for health reasons (i.e. to focus their diets around vegetables, and limit their saturated fat and cholesterol intake), while other vegetarians were motivated by an ethical concern for animal welfare. Participants who gave up meat for ethical reasons expressed less worry about how their health might be impacted by a vegetarian diet (e.g., low iron levels), and were primarily concerned about not being part of a system that hurt animals.

Theme #5. Meat Eating and Environmental Awareness

When it came to environmental awareness, some meat-eaters expressed awareness about the connections between meat and environmental problems, like greenhouse gas emissions. While some meat-eaters expressed a desire to cut back on or alter their meat consumption habits to help the environment, others expressed little concern or awareness of the connections between meat eating and environmental sustainability. A significant number of meat-eaters did not identify any environmental problems associated with the meat industry.

Many vegetarians in our study were deeply concerned about the ecological consequences of meat-eating, and believed that their vegetarian choices were better for the environment. Even if they didn't think they were going to "save the world", they believed that a vegetarian diet was an important step to lighten the impact of their consumption habits on the environment.



Picture source; <http://mytoba.ca/life/green-diet-for-the-new-year/>

We thank you for the time and attention that you brought to your participation in this study. Your responses will help improve our understanding of why people from diverse social backgrounds choose a diet that includes or avoids meat. Updates on future publications from this research will be posted on Dr. Johnston's website: <https://josejohnston.com/>