The Social and Psychological Well-Being of Vegetarians: A Focused Ethnography

by

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Abstract

Background: A vegetarian is a person who refrains from eating any type of animal flesh. Research has been established on the physical health implications of adopting a vegetarian diet. However, to date, there has been no qualitative study exploring social and psychological well-being of vegetarians.

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis was a) to provide a systematic review of the existing studies on the psychological well-being of vegetarians and b) to conduct original research that further explored the following: i) vegetarians' rationales for adopting their diet, ii) their self-perceived social well-being, and, iii) their self-perceived psychological well-being.

Methods: a) The systematic review involved searching several databases for primary research studies that examined the psychological well-being of vegetarians. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the review and then full texts of those articles considered potentially relevant were screened. The quality of the selected studies was assessed using Health Evidence Bulletins (Wales) questions to assist with the critical appraisal of an observational study. b) After a pilot study was conducted, a focused ethnographic approach was utilized to conduct this research. Data were collected through 19 individual interviews, three focus groups, as well as a series of participant observations at several vegan- and vegetarian-association events in Alberta. Interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, fieldnotes were taken during participant observations and materials were collected. Data were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results: a) After reviewing our search for relevant articles, seven studies were identified for inclusion in this study- all of which were cross-sectional. One study had low risk and one study had moderate risk of bias (both reported poorer health in vegetarians). Five studies (with inconsistent findings) had high risk of bias. Most differences in mental health measures were small and of doubtful clinical significance. b) Individuals decided to become vegetarian for a variety of reasons including improved personal health, improved animal welfare, and reduced environmental impact through diet. Vegetarians experienced many social challenges, including being teased and dealing with unsupportive friends and family, which could pose a threat to their social well-being. However, vegetarians also experienced many psychological rewards including a sense of pride and peace of mind knowing their values aligned with their actions.

Conclusion: There is little available evidence on the psychological well-being of vegetarians. Most studies have high risk of bias, and the evidence that does exist is inconsistent, although the higher quality studies suggest poorer psychological well-being among vegetarians. Further research is needed to investigate whether a causal relationship exists between vegetarianism and mental health. Individuals become vegetarian for a variety of reasons. Others may not agree with their diet choice and this can affect their self-perceived social well-being. However, the self-perceived benefits to psychological well-being associated with adopting a vegetarian diet seem to outweigh any of the perceived threats to their social well-being.

Preface

The pilot study of this thesis located in Appendix A led to an accepted publication: **Torti J**, Mayan M, Carroll L. (2016). A Pilot Study of Vegetarian Motivations and Social Well-Being. *University of Alberta Health Sciences Journal*. I was responsible for data collection and analysis as well as the manuscript composition. Mayan M and Carrol L contributed to the interpretation of the results and manuscript edits and provided final approval of the accepted manuscript.

This thesis is an original work by Jacqueline Torti. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGCAL WELL-BEING OF VEGETARIANS: A FOCUSED ETHNOGRPAHY", No. Pro00043423, DECEMBER 13, 2013.

Dedication

"Food serves two parallel purposes: it nourishes and it helps you remember. Eating and storytelling are inseparable—the saltwater is also tears; the honey not only tastes sweet, but makes us think of sweetness; the matzo is the bread of our affliction." ~Johnathan Safran Foer

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I would like to acknowledge the vegetarians who participated in this study. I appreciate the time they took to share their experiences and their journey with vegetarianism. Without them, this thesis would not be possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was a) to provide a systematic review of the existing studies on the psychological well-being of vegetarians and b) to conduct original research that further explored the following: i) vegetarians' rationales for adopting their diet, ii) their self-perceived social well-being, and, iii) their self-perceived psychological well-being. I begin this thesis with an introductory chapter that defines and provides context for key terms and concepts that are relevant to understanding my thesis topic, including: vegetarianism and the vegetarian identity, and notions of health and well-being including physical, social, and psychological well-being. In addition, I define my research purpose and objectives and establish a justification for conducting this research. I position myself within this research to set the stage for the entire thesis. Lastly, I outline the organization of the remainder of this thesis document.

Vegetarianism

The vegetarian diet excludes the consumption of animal flesh products. The term "vegetarian" was coined in the mid 1800's by the Vegetarian Society, which was a British charity established to promote the vegetarian diet (N. Fox & Ward, 2008). It has been suggested that "veg" stood for vegetation and the remainder of the word came from the term "arian" adapted from "agrarian" meaning of the land; essentially meaning living off the vegetation of the land.

Vegetarianism is most often defined as a diet in which an individual chooses to abstain from eating any form of meat, poultry, or fish (Weinsier,

2000). However, there are many different variants of vegetarian diets, including vegetarian diets that include dairy and eggs (lacto-ovo vegetarianism), vegetarian diets that include dairy but not eggs (lacto-vegetarianism), vegetarian diets that include eggs but not dairy (ovo-vegetarianism), and vegetarian diets that do not include any animal products (veganism) (M. A. Fox, 1999). There are also more restrictive forms of vegetarianism, such as diets that consist of foods only in their raw uncooked form (raw/living foodist) and diets that consist of only plant based foods that are harvested in a manner that does not cause any harm to the plant itself (fruitarian) (Langley-Evans, 2015). Other terms are used to describe what might be referred to as quasi-vegetarian diets, such as a pescetarian diet (a diet that does not contain meat or poultry but does contain fish), a "weekday vegetarian diet" and "semi-vegetarian diet", that is, a diet in which the consumption of meat and/or poultry and/or fish is restricted but not eliminated.

Prevalence of vegetarianism. Surprisingly there is little in the peer-reviewed scientific literature to allow a clear estimate of the prevalence of vegetarianism. However, the popular press, marketing analysts and special interest groups have shown interest in the issue, and have conducted their own surveys. Although these surveys have not been peer-reviewed, leaving serious questions about the representativeness of their samples and quality of the information, they provide a source for and snapshot of what interested individuals find when they search the internet.

One of these sources suggests that there are approximately 375 million vegetarians worldwide (Figus C., 2014). An article in the 2013 edition of the

Vegetarian Times (a monthly vegetarian magazine), reported on the survey 5,050 American respondents and found that there were approximately 7.3 million vegetarians in the United Sates (approximately 3.2% of the population) and that 22.8 million (10%) of Americans followed a "vegetarian-inclined" diet (Vegetarian Times, 2013); the authors of the article claim this survey was statistically representative of the population of the United Sates.

Another study, conducted in 2009 in the United Sates by Harris Interactive for the Vegetarian Resource Group, surveyed a national sample of 2,397 adults and found that 3% of Americans never consume meat; and the group estimated that there are approximately 6-8 million vegetarians in the United States (Stahler, 2009). Propensity score weighting was used for gender, age, race, religion and socio-economic status in an effort to improve the representativeness of the sample against the United States population, however, since this was a non-probability sample, the sample may still be biased (Stahler, 2009).

In Canada, the Vancouver Humane Society commissioned an online poll, and estimated that 8% of Canadians define themselves as vegetarian, and an additional 33% of Canadians reported reducing their meat consumption (Pippus, 2015). This survey also reported province-specific data for British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec, and found that 13%, 8% and 7% in each province (respectively) identified themselves as vegetarians (Pippus, 2015). Again, this survey was not subject to peer review, so findings should be viewed with skepticism.

While it is still unclear what the current prevalence of vegetarianism is, it is thought by some that as concerns for animal welfare and the environmental impact of dietary choices increase, along with mixed messages about the potential personal health implications of eating meat, the number of individuals becoming vegetarian is also likely to increase (Papadopoulos, Arpasanu, & Pavlovska, 2014). Certainly there has been an increase in articles and stories on vegetarianism in the media and grey literature sources, which suggests increasing interest in the diet. For example, in a 2013 edition of Vegetarian Times, Elizabeth Turner (Editor in Chief of Vegetarian Times) stated that "The vegetarian sector is one of the fastest-growing categories in food publishing… it's a dedicated group of consumers that is growing daily." (Vegetarian Times, 2013, para. 7). In addition, Bill Harper (Vice President of Vegetarian Times) stated that "A vast number of people are seeking to reduce their meat intake, creating a rapidly growing market for all things vegetarian." (Vegetarian Times, 2013, para. 6). The idea that vegetarianism is increasing also has some support from data presented by marketing analysts. For example, in the United States in 1996, the vegetarian food market was approximately $310 million and increased to $1.5 billion in 2001 (Mintel International Group Limited, 2001). Other market analysts have also indicated that the demand for vegetarian foods is steadily increasing and that dairy and meat alternatives are at an all-time sales high, which they believe suggests a greater interest in and uptake of a vegetarian inclined diet (Crawford, 2014; T. Morgan, 2014).

In addition to marketing trends, the amount of research into vegetarian nutrition in the professional and academic world has also grown. Sebate et al. (1999) found that between the years of 1966-1995, the biomedical literature on vegetarianism had increased from only 10 articles a year in 1966 to approximately 76 articles per year in 1995 (Joan Sabaté, Duk, & Lee, 1999). Moreover, during that time frame, the type of research conducted had also changed; studies in the 1960's focused largely on questions about the nutritional adequacy of a vegetarian diet and studies in the later 1990's focused more on the role a vegetarian diet in the prevention of chronic disease and illness (Joan Sabaté et al., 1999). Thus, although there are no peer-reviewed sources that indicate whether or not vegetarianism is on the rise, other sources would suggest that this is the trend. Thus, in reading the information available on the internet, vegetarians are likely to understand that they are in the clear minority, yet many also believe that their numbers are growing. This may have a substantial impact on the self-perceived vegetarian identity.

The vegetarian identity. Identity is a powerful concept that affects how others view us and how we view and manage ourselves. I am using the term "identity" to refer to those identities which are socially produced, based on our own and others' notions of sameness and difference and am guided by Bauman's (1998) conceptualization of identity:

> Everyone has to ask himself the question 'who am I, 'how should I live', 'who do I want to become' – and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer. In this sense freedom, is for the

> modern individual the fate he cannot escape, except by retreating into the fantasy world or through mental disorders. Freedom is therefore a mixed blessing. One needs it to be oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of one's free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error ... Self-construction of the self is, so to speak a necessity. Self-confirmation of the self is an impossibility (Bauman, 1998).

Individuals hold many different identities simultaneously; these identities may be based partially on such characteristics as age, gender, and ethnicity (Collins, 1993). Vegetarianism, however, is slightly different from many other identities in that the vegetarian identity is not fixed, it needs to be created, adopted and maintained. When an individual creates or adopts a vegetarian identity this becomes part of their self-perception along with their age, gender, ethnicity, etc. In addition, vegetarianism is generally accompanied by a distinct lifestyle (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). The adoption of vegetarian diet is not simply making a choice of which foods to eat or which foods to avoid, rather it is often politically, ethically and morally charged and often goes beyond the individual and stretches to wider social and environmental issues.

Identity affects and is affected by culture, values and beliefs. Although vegetarianism is arguably one of the oldest diets, it is also has been described by some as one of the most "taboo" diets in the world (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2011). This is because in many parts of the world vegetarianism can be viewed as a subculture within the larger dominant omnivorous culture, challenging the social structures and patterns, as well as the values and beliefs, associated with the dominant

culture (Cherry, 2006; Puskar-Pasewicz, 2011). This forms one of the key foundational elements of the vegetarian identity; that of a deviant identity.

A deviant identity refers to a socially constructed notion in which an individual is unable to, or chooses not to, follow a social norm and is therefore labeled deviant as a result (Goffman, 2009). In other words, what is deemed deviant is determined by society and this many vary from culture to culture. Therefore, social deviance does not always take on a negative connotation, rather it denotes that of which is different from the norm. In fact, it may be the case that individuals want to be considered deviant and want to be seen as different from the mainstream. Individuals taking on this positive deviant identity may see themselves as less dependent on mainstream culture and more of a critical thinker. For example, individuals may want to become vegetarian so they are seen as more health conscious, disciplined or compassionate compared to the omnivorous norm.

Conceptually, identity and diet have been described as inter-related in that identity is derived from, influenced, and altered through diet; and synergistically, diet is influenced and altered by one's identity (Bisogni et al., 2002). This leads to the idea that dietary choices nurture one's self-image and help form one's identity (Bisogni et al., 2002). For example, Jabs et al (2000) found that that becoming vegetarian influenced and modified participants' identities, social interactions and behaviours, all of which affect health and well-being (Jabs, Sobal, & Devine, 2000).

Health and Well-Being

In this section I briefly define concepts of health and well-being; the implications of these concepts for vegetarians will be elaborated on further in the next sections.

Our identity and our sense of well-being are arguably very much connected. Well-being can be thought of as the way individuals feel, function and evaluate their lives (Michaelson, Mahony, & Schifferes, 2012). Well-being is dynamic and is comprised of, but not limited to, physical, social and psychological processes. A positive state of well-being is not merely being free from illness; it is a dynamic process focused on change and growth.

Physical well-being. Physical well-being refers to an individual's health related to the body. Proper care and optimal health and functioning of the body promotes physical well-being (University of California, 2016). Physical well-being can be promoted through such things as being physically active, getting adequate sleep, and eating a healthy and nutritious diet. In contrast, infections, illnesses and diseases promote poor physical well-being. It has been shown that physical well-being is closely tied to social and psychological well-being (University of California, 2016).

Social well-being. Social well-being refers to how individuals function with other individuals and the environment around them; this includes personal relationships, the community and the environment (Michaelson et al., 2012). Social well-being can be promoted through developing healthy, meaningful and

supportive relationships. Developing this strong supportive network allows the development of communication, trust, conflict management, and assertive skills. In addition, healthy social networks can increase self-esteem and help to build emotional resilience. Poor social well-being includes aspects such as social isolation, unhealthy relationships, and lack of social support. Although individuals' social well-being is focused on the environmental context, it is also affected by their physical and psychological well-being, and vice versa (University of California, 2016).

Psychological well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) defined mental health as "state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (World Health Organization, 2014, para. 1). Similarly, psychological well-being can be described as the state of a mentally healthy person who "possesses a number of positive mental health qualities such as active adjustment to the environment and unity of personality" (Shek, 1992, p. 188) . In fact, the terms psychological well-being and mental health are often used interchangeably.

Due to the negative connotations and stigma associated with poor mental health, and the fact that the terms "mental health" and "mental health problems" are often understood as simply implying the absence or presence of psychiatric diagnoses, rather than the broader understanding of the terms promoted by the WHO, I have used the term "psychological well-being" in this thesis, and

understand psychological well-being to include one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Implications of Diet on Physical Well-Being

It is clear that the quantity, quality, and type of food we eat has a profound impact on our physical health. Certain types of foods and diets have been linked to obesity, heart disease, diabetes, certain types of cancers and mortality, while other types of foods and diets have been linked to a disease prevention, good health and improved longevity. Research on the impact of diet on physical well-being is slowly growing in volume and quality; however, the impact of diet on social and psychological well-being is less well understood (Miller, 2015; Van de Weyer, 2005).

Implications of Diet on Social and Psychological Well-Being

Our understanding of the social and cultural nature and meaning of food has been brought to the forefront in recent years, as described later in this document. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of diet on social and psychological well-being. This is despite the fact that the biopsychosocial model for viewing health has been widely accepted for several decades now, and it is recognized that psychological and social well-being are crucial elements of overall well-being (Nettleton, 2006). This has given rise to the current research project.

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this thesis was to provide a systematic review of the existing studies on the psychological well-being of vegetarians and to conduct original research that further explored the following: vegetarians' rationales for adopting their diet; their self-perceived social well-being; and their self-perceived psychological well-being.

Justification for This Research

Systematic review of psychological well-being. There is speculation in the literature as to why psychological well-being may be worse, may not differ, or may be better in vegetarians than non-vegetarians. For instance, it is has been suggested that since vegetarians do not consume meat, and some vegetarians do not consume any form of animal products, their diet may lack nutrients, such as long-chain n-3-fatty acids and vitamin B12, which may adversely affect neurological functioning and/or increase the risk of major depressive disorders (Bedford & Barr, 2005; Fenech & Rinaldi, 1995; Perica & Delaš, 2011). It has also been speculated that adopting a vegetarian diet may increase the risk of mental health problems because the major shift in identity that goes along with such a lifestyle change may increase the risk of psychological disorders in those who are more susceptible to such disorders (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that when one changes one's identity from an omnivore to a vegetarian, his or her psychological well-being may be compromised.

In contrast, there is the idea that vegetarians are more health conscious than non-vegetarians and thus may have higher levels of psychological well-being (Bedford & Barr, 2005). It has also been shown that adopting a vegetarian diet out of concern for the environment may improve one's psychological well-being (J. Sabaté, Lindsted, Harris, & Sanchez, 1991; Wilson, Weatherall, & Butler, 2004).

Like these speculations, the existing literature on the relative psychological well-being of vegetarians compared with non-vegetarians has inconsistent findings. Thus, I conducted a systematic review to formally identify consistencies and inconsistencies in the existing evidence, and to highlight areas of strength, weakness and gaps in the existing literature.

Investigation into vegetarians' rationales for adopting a vegetarian diet. The reasons why individuals become vegetarian may have an impact on their psychological well-being. As the number of vegetarians increase (as is the common perception), there is a need for further research to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations for adopting a vegetarian diet (Ruby, 2012). Therefore, part of the purpose of this thesis was to further explore the reasons behind choosing to adopt a vegetarian diet.

Much of the prior work examining the various rationales for choosing a vegetarian diet has used structured survey methods (Barr & Chapman, 2002; N. Fox & Ward, 2008; Lombrozo, 2009; Mann et al., 2006; E. A. Spencer, Appleby, Davey, & Key, 2003). This study adds to the existing literature by presenting a

deeper understanding of why individuals decide to adopt a vegetarian diet. Therefore, in addition to knowing, from survey studies what key factors influenced vegetarians' dietary decisions, I sought out participants' descriptions, in their own words, of their journey to vegetarianism and the experiences and thoughts that lead to their decisions to become vegetarian. This kind of exploration aligns with previous calls for additional research on the motivations behind becoming a vegetarian as the diet continues to challenge social norms (Boyle, 2011). An exploration of the motivations behind becoming vegetarian may also provide deeper insight into the self-perceived social and psychological well-being of vegetarians.

Investigation into self-perceived social and psychological well-being. There have been no previous qualitative studies examining the self-perceived social and psychological well-being of vegetarians and the role vegetarians believe their dietary and lifestyle choices have in those aspects of well-being.

The current study is important research because the perception, particularly in North America, is that more and more individuals are adopting a vegetarian diet. Individual perception, grass-roots surveys and publications, and marketing and media trends suggest that vegetarianism is on the rise. If this is true, this is potentially the result of individuals becoming more environmentally conscious and more cognizant of where their food comes from and how that impacts the health of humans and non-human animals (Radnitz, Beezhold, & DiMatteo, 2015). As such, as vegetarian diet can have cultural, environmental and political implications that extend beyond the individual. For these reasons, there

is a need to come to a better understanding of the reasons why individuals choose to become vegetarian as well as the broad health implications of a vegetarian diet. Understanding how vegetarians are culturally situated can help to improve the lives of vegetarians by creating information to guide best practices and determining what services or projects can be developed or supported. Vegetarianism in Canada is greatly understudied, and there is a strong need to expand our current understanding of the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians in the Canadian context.

In conclusion, the current body of research on the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians is limited, inconsistent and lacks the direct voice of vegetarians themselves. I contend that it is important to examine how adopting a vegetarian diet impacts all aspects of well-being, not just physical health. Research is needed at the exploratory level to really understand the reasons behind the adoption of a vegetarian diet and to learn what social and psychological changes in perceived well-being are experienced after this transition. Arguably, a vegetarian diet is much more complex than eliminating certain foods; it can affect the way individuals live and interact with those around them and the way individuals think and feel about food, all of which can have profound implications on an individual's well-being.

Positioning Myself

The notion of insider or outsider status is somewhat contested in qualitative research. It has been suggested that insider/outsider status be viewed

along a continuum versus viewed as a dichotomy (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mayan, 2009). Therefore, the researcher can never truly be an insider or an outsider, rather one's insider/outsider status changes and is negotiated as relationships form and the research is conducted. Due to the complexity of social interactions one cannot place themselves as an insider or outsider based on a single characteristic (Mayan, 2009). For example, I may be considered an insider as a vegetarian, but I may be considered an outsider to vegans. As a female, I may be considered an insider amongst other female vegetarians but an outsider to male participants. Being an insider does not make me superior or inferior as a researcher, it makes me a "different type of researcher" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 61). What is seen a strength of an insider researcher is seen as a weakness of an outsider researcher and vice versa (Mayan, 2009).

Based on this continuum I would place myself closer to an insider position, however this places certain cautions on me as a researcher. In taking on an emic perspective it has been recommended that in order to reduce potential biases and improve the trustworthiness of a study, it is important that the researcher be transparent by positioning themselves within the research. By making one's experiences and predispositions known to the reader, the reader can construct their own opinion of the validity of the research. This notion of conducting research as an insider will be explored further in relation to the various research paradigms in the section on the qualitative researcher paradigm. Here I will outline my experiences as a vegetarian.

For me, the transition to a vegetarian diet was full of social challenges, but at the same time was morally and ethically rewarding. I met many other vegetarians along the way who were able to offer support, advice and insight to their own experiences as a vegetarian. Through this, I realized that I shared many social and psychological challenges and rewards with other vegetarians. After searching through the literature and realizing there was (a) very little literature in this area and (b) few support resources available to vegetarians in this area, I decided this phenomenon was worthwhile exploring.

It was not until university that I decided to make the switch from an omnivorous diet to a vegan diet. This decision was sparked by a course I took in my undergraduate degree, "*Animals and Human Society.*" We learnt about animals in every aspect of society from animal rights, animals used as food, entertainment, experimentation, to cultural attitudes and social meanings of animals. It was in this course that I confirmed and acted upon my desire to be a vegan. There were many reasons why I was motivated to transition into a vegan lifestyle. The first and foremost was animal rights. What I had learned in that course, and witnessed throughout my life, was that animals have the potential to be compassionate beings and they convey emotions including excitement, fear and pain and I did not want to contribute to their suffering. Given my background in health and physical education, I was also motivated by the reported health benefits associated with consuming fewer animal products and more fruits and vegetables. Potentially improving my health while at the same time improving the welfare of animals seemed like a win-win situation to me.

I would most definitely describe my transition as an emotional and social journey. It was during that course, in one of my seminars, that I verbalized for the first time that I was a vegan. For some reason, to this date I could not tell you why, this was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I was nervous, my heart was pounding in my chest, my palms were sweating; to me, it was a huge step. When the words came out of my mouth "I have decided to become vegan" there was, at first, panic, then a huge sigh of relief when those around the room were smiling and passed on their words of encouragement. I then began verbalizing this to other people outside of my seminar room. I still felt shy and even remember flushing in the face when I would tell people. It did become easier to verbalize over time, and eventually I was proud and happy to tell others I was a vegetarian. This was not something I blurted out down the hallways, or skipped around singing about it, but if it came up in conversation, I addressed it. And to my surprise, it came up quite often.

I had a variety of reactions to my decision. Some individuals, such as my mother, were fully supportive, others were indifferent, ("to each their own" attitude) and still others highly contested my decision. Regardless of the stance individuals took, the most common reaction was "Why?". I started explaining to people that it was an ethical decision I had made. Some found this inspiring and explained that they shared my beliefs on the welfare of animals, but that they could never become a vegetarian because meat tasted too good, or it would just be too hard to give up. Others disagreed and felt this was a silly reason to become a vegetarian. At first I did not mind the variety of reactions I was receiving, but

eventually dealing with those who contested my decision became frustrating and tiresome. I did not want to get into a debate every time I ordered a meal without meat, bought tofu, or asked for a veggie burger. I struggled finding a balance between standing up for what I believe in, or just agreeing with what others were saying, and reminding them that it was personal decision. Even just telling people I was a vegetarian was a challenge.

Then there were social settings. Socializing around food became an internal struggle. This was not a struggle to avoid eating meat but rather, I felt like I was constantly an imposition. When going over to someone's house I felt bad when people would stress over what to feed me. Worse yet is when they made an honest attempt to provide me with vegan food, but served vegetables with butter, or baked goods made with eggs. I felt terrible refusing to eat what they had provided, but at the same time I wanted deeply to stick with my vegan ways. When going out for dinner, I felt as through people constantly felt the need to adjust their restaurant decision in order to suit my needs. Although appreciated, I still felt I was an imposition to others.

One of the positive things that came from my transition into a vegetarian diet was a sense of pride and accomplishment. Despite the social challenges faced, I felt good about my decision to not eat meat or animal products, feeling that I am positively contributing the welfare of animals, the preservation of environmental resources, and my own physical health. I felt a sense of clarity and purpose. Being a vegetarian still brings me joy today, and I am continuously learning on my never-ending journey of vegetarianism.

Thesis Organization

This is a mixed formatted thesis. The primary approach is a traditional format. However, one of the chapters is a systematic review. Because of the structured reporting guidelines (i.e., PRISMA) for systematic reviews, this is reported in the thesis as a stand-alone research study (Chapter 3) (Moher, Liberati, Tetzalff, Altman, & The Prisma Group, 2009). The current chapter, **Chapter one**, has provided a general introduction to the topic, an overview of the purpose of the research, the rationale for conducting this research, a discussion of what this research contributes, and a statement of my position within this research.

Chapter two will provide a broader and more thorough review of the published literature on the various rationales for becoming a vegetarian, the social well-being of vegetarians, and the psychological well-being of vegetarians.

Chapter three reports a systematic review of the literature on the mental health of vegetarians. As indicated above, this is reported as a stand-alone paper in order to comply with systematic review reporting standards.

Chapter four outlines the interpretive paradigm and my ontological and epistemological viewpoints.

Chapter five outlines the qualitative research methods used in conducting this research. The feasibility of these methods was determined through a pilot study on the psychosocial well-being of vegetarians (*Appendix A: Feasibility Pilot Study*).

Chapter six provides a summary of the participants' characteristics and discusses the details of the interviews and focus groups conducted along with a summary of the accounts of participant observation. Although a short chapter, this information is presented as a separate chapter since it presents findings that are common to the next three chapters which are the results chapters.

Chapters **seven, eight and nine** contain the results and discussion in relation to the research purpose. **Chapter seven** outlines the results and discussion of the rationale for becoming a vegetarian, with the aim of exploring the reasons behind vegetarians' lifestyle change. In this chapter, I outline *why people choose to become vegetarian.*

Chapter eight outlines and discusses the results related to the self-perceived social well-being of vegetarians. In this chapter I outline *how people on a vegetarian diet describe their social well-being.*

Chapter nine outlines and discusses the results related to the self-perceived psychological well-being of vegetarians. In this chapter I outline *how people on a vegetarian diet describe their psychological well-being.*

Lastly, **chapter ten** provides conclusions to integrate the findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I provide a broad and thorough review of the published literature on the various rationales for becoming a vegetarian, as well as the physical, social and psychological well-being of vegetarians.

Rationales Behind a Vegetarian Diet

Vegetarianism, the practice of excluding meat, poultry and fish from one's diet, can be traced back to ancient Greece with philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato who documented the ethical and spiritual aspects of vegetarianism (C. Spencer, 1996). These rationales for a vegetarian diet carried on into the 18th century with a focus on the moral and metaphysical aspects of the diet. It was believed by some that it was immoral to kill innocent animals for food, and further that by consuming the flesh of innocent animals one would taint the human soul (Taylor & Wynne-Tyson, 1965). Others, such as Thomas Tryon, believed that meat was nutritionally inferior to fruits and vegetables because meat decomposes and rots more quickly than fruit and vegetables, and by consuming meat you are subjecting your body to the same form of putrefaction and decomposition (Whorton, 1994).

During the romantic era (late 18th and 19th centuries), vegetarianism again became a more recognized way of life as the humane treatment of non-human animals came to the forefront (Whorton, 1994). In the early 19th century, along with a new emphasis on evidence and scientific investigation, there was a shift from the moral and metaphysical aspects of vegetarianism to a focus on diet and

health. Lambe was one of the first researchers in the early 1800's to document his experience on a vegetarian diet, reporting that he had cured himself and others of illness through a meat-free diet (Whorton, 1994). However, the majority of medical professionals and laypersons continued to believe a diet that included meat was the healthier option. Later, in the early 20th century, inclusion of meat in the diet was still considered the healthier option, but there was also a growing focus on the importance of increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables in order to maintain good health (Whorton, 1994).

Today, many individuals are raised from birth to be vegetarian primarily due to religious beliefs including the: Seventh Day Adventists (believe the consumption of meat weakens the physical, mental, and moral strength of an individual), Orphic-Pythagorean religion (believe that upon eating an animal, its soul would be transferred to the eater), Sufi religion (mystical belief in the unity of life), Buddhist religion (belief in avoidance of unnecessary suffering) and the Jainism religion (a belief in non-violence) (Walters & Portmess, 2001).

Today, there is a variety of reasons individuals choose to follow a vegetarian diet. Although some individuals are raised as vegetarians, an increasing number of individuals in the Western society choose to transition into a vegetarian diet out of concern for non-human animals, personal health and the environment (Ruby, 2012).

Concern for non-human animals. Many people adopt a vegetarian diet out of concern for non-human animals that arise from the poor conditions in

which many animals are raised for food, the distress animals experience when they are removed from their natural environment, and the ethics of depriving animals of their natural lifespan. Concerns are also centered on inhumane killing and slaughtering practices, which animals raised for food are subjected to, in addition to unnecessary pain and suffering (Kalof, Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1999; Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012). Many vegetarians believe that advocating for the rights of non-human animals gives a voice to those who cannot speak or advocate for themselves (Edwards, 2007).

Concern for the environment. The proponents of vegetarianism that are concerned for the environment believe that a meat-based diet contributes to land-degradation, pollution, and the depletion of earth's dwindling natural resources. They believe that a vegetarian diet, on the other hand, benefits the environment, reduces waste, reduces one's carbon footprint, and is even a method of alleviating word hunger (Kalof et al., 1999; Robinson-O'Brien, Perry, Wall, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009).

Concern for personal health. It has been reported that many vegetarians adopt a vegetarian diet because they think it is a healthy diet. A study by Fox and Ward (2008) found that some vegetarians directly associated their shift to a vegetarian diet to improved physical health. Individuals have also reported becoming vegetarian, not only because they think it will improve their health, but because they also believe it can actually cure illnesses and ailments (Kalof et al., 1999; Ruby, 2012). Therefore, many vegetarians explained that they chose to give up meat because they wanted to cure their body of an illness, or they thought that

a vegetarian diet would help to prevent them from getting an illness or disease later on in life (N. Fox & Ward, 2008).

Physical Well-Being of Vegetarians

Although the intent of this thesis is to focus on social and psychological well-being, the literature review would be incomplete without a brief discussion of the research on the physical implications of a vegetarian diet. The largest studies on the health impact of a vegetarian diet are two prospective cohort studies; the Adventist Health Study (which has two separate cohorts) and the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition-Oxford Study. The Adventist Health Study (cohort one) started in 1974 and followed approximately 35,000 Seventh Day Adventist. Starting in 2002, a second cohort was established and followed approximately 95,000 participants from the United States and Canada (Butler et al., 2008). The Oxford study followed approximately 65,000 participants, which was oversampled for vegetarians to ensure an adequate sample of that group (Riboli et al., 2002). These were large studies with sufficient power to identify associations and with a prospective design, which provides us with some degree of confidence about temporal sequencing (i.e., outcome data were clearly collected subsequent to the baseline data, so reverse causation is unlikely). However, even well-conducted cohort studies are subject to more biases and confounding variables than a well-conducted randomized controlled trial (RCT). The two cohort studies are described below, along with a comment on some important limitations, which should be considered in interpreting the findings.

The authors of the Adventist Health Study reported that following a vegetarian diet was associated with a lower body mass index, lower prevalence and incidence of diabetes, lower blood pressure, and a relative reduction in mortality from natural causes compared to a non-vegetarian diet (Butler et al., 2008; M. J. Orlich et al., 2013; Pettersen, Anousheh, Fan, Jaceldo-Siegl, & Fraser, 2012; Rizzo, Sabaté, Jaceldo-Siegl, & Fraser, 2011; Serena Tonstad, Butler, Yan, & Fraser, 2009; S Tonstad et al., 2013). The authors also reported that, on average, vegetarian males lived an average of 7.28 years longer than their non-vegetarian counterparts and female vegetarians lived an average of 4.42 years longer (Fraser & Shavlik, 2001). The baseline data for the Adventist Health Study consisted of information from a 50-page questionnaire using self-reported data. Although these data were extensive, there were several sources of potential measurement error. It has been shown, for example, that questionnaire respondents are likely to over-estimate their physical activity levels while under-estimating their weight (W. Willett, 2012). In addition, the cohort may not have been representative of the general population, as the sole source of participants was from Seventh Day Adventist churches, and thus findings may not generalize to the non-Seventh Day Adventist population.

The European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition-Oxford Study concluded that a vegetarian diet is associated with a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease and the authors found an inverse association between a diet based on plant-based foods and presence of type II diabetes (Lassale et al., 2015; Zamora-Ros et al., 2013). However, like the Seventh day Adventist study, the

analyses were based only on baseline data on diet and lifestyle factors, therefore any changes to diet or lifestyle that may have affected the outcome could not be taken into consideration. Again, because this was an observational study and data were collected via self-reported measures, there is almost certainly some degree of measurement error involved. In addition, although the baseline measures of both studies were extensive and both employed multivariable analyses, like all observational studies, they are subject to residual confounding by unmeasured factors and by errors in the measurements of the confounding factors they included.

Other evidence frequently cited on health benefits of a vegetarian diet comes from cross-sectional studies and a RCT. One example of a cross-sectional study found that, compared to those who eat meat, individuals who followed a vegan or vegetarian diet had lower body weight, less fat mass and less obesity compared to those that ate meat (T. Key & Davey, 1996; T. J. Key et al., 1999). However, only gender, age and length of time participants had adhered to their diet were considered; other potentially important factors such as physical activity were not considered. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, in cross-sectional studies, the temporal association between diet and weight is unclear. As such, the lower rates of obesity or other health benefits cannot be attributed to a vegetarian or vegan diet alone. It is equally plausible that obese or otherwise healthy individuals are less likely to adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Randomized studies provide stronger evidence on health benefits of diet. One such study concluded that a vegetarian diet leads to lower blood pressure

compared to diets that contain meat (Beilin, Rouse, Armstrong, Margetts, & Vandongen, 1988; Rouse, Armstrong, Beilin, & Vandongen, 1983). In a cross-over randomized controlled trial, normotensive (normal blood pressure) omnivores were randomly assigned to one of three dietary groups: group one ate their normal omnivorous diet for 12 weeks (control group); group two ate a vegetarian diet for six weeks and then went back to their normal omnivorous diet for six weeks; and group three ate their normal omnivorous diet for six weeks and then were assigned a vegetarian diet for the following six weeks (Rouse et al., 1983). In both diet intervention groups, blood pressure fell during the times when participants followed a vegetarian diet. In this study, the mean systolic blood pressure dropped 6mm Hg and the mean diastolic blood pressure dropped 3mm Hg. In addition, blood pressure rose again when those in group three returned to their normal omnivorous diet in the last six weeks of the trial, and remained consistent in the control group (Rouse et al., 1983).

Although this reflects a small effect size, the fact that there was a change in blood pressure over this short period of time (six weeks) may suggest that a longer time on a vegetarian diet might produce further decreases in blood pressure. The researchers adjusted for several potentially confounding factors including age, body mass index, heart rate, fluctuations in weight, and initial blood pressure. However, one of the limitations of this study was that the process of randomization was not described, so it is unclear whether random allocation was conducted appropriately. In addition, as with most randomized controlled trials involving dietary interventions, the participants were aware of the dietary

group they were assigned to and the authors suggest that there is potential for the vegetarian diet to have had a placebo effect on participants' blood pressure (Rouse et al., 1983).

Given the evidence available, it is difficult to be certain about the physical health implications of vegetarian diets. For example, research has shown that individuals who follow a vegetarian diet also tend to also be more physically active, more highly educated, consume less alcohol and be non-smokers (M. Orlich, Singh, & Sabaté, 2013; M. J. Orlich et al., 2015; Shridhar et al., 2014). Therefore, it is difficult to tease out whether the observed health benefits are associated with a vegetarian diet or with a combination of these other healthy practices and factors. In addition, since, on average, those following a vegetarian diet consume more vegetables than those on a non-vegetarian diet, it has been suggested that any health benefits of a vegetarian diet might simply be due to an increased consumption of fruits and vegetables rather than the absence of fish, poultry and meat in the diet (W. C. Willett, 1999).

Despite the difficulty in ascertaining the physical health of vegetarian, the American Dietetic Association has issued the following statement:

> It is the position of the American Dietetic Association that appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including

> pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes. (Craig & Mangels, 2009, p. 1266)

This statement, released in 2009, confirms that, in the views of the American Dietetic Association, an *appropriately planned* vegetarian diet *can be* a healthy diet. Therefore, a vegetarian diet could actually be an unhealthy diet. For example, a diet of pop, chips and candy and a diet of fruits, vegetables, and nuts can both be vegan, but one diet is obviously healthier than the other. The American Dietetic Association also stated that vegetarian and vegan diets "may be beneficial in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases" (Craig & Mangels, 2009, p. 1277). Therefore, given this statement, some vegetarians may adopt a vegetarian diet because they think it will improve their physical health and reduce chronic disease.

The recommendations provided by the American Dietetic Association are based on the physical health aspects of a vegetarian diet. Social and psychological health did not appear to be a consideration in the development of their position statements.

Social Well-Being of Vegetarians

The social well-being of an individual can be broadly understood as a state in which sufficiently trusting and reciprocal relationships are developed with others, such that an individual feels included and is part of a social network (Ingrosso, 2014). Social well-being is important to the overall health and vitality of an individual (Payne, Potter, & Cain, 2014). The World Health Organization

(WHO) defines health as "... a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1946, p. 100). This definition has been widely adopted as a universal definition of health and highlights the importance of social well-being to the overall health of an individual. The WHO also completed a school health information series that focused on creating an environment that fosters social and emotional well-being, with emphasis on the importance of how feeling accepted for who you can lead to positive health outcomes, including feelings of success and valuing one's social network (WHO, 2003).

It is important to have balance in terms of good physical, psychological and social well-being. When this balance of positive well-being is disrupted and one of the areas falls short, the overall health and well-being of an individual suffers (Strine, Chapman, Balluz, & Mokdad, 2008). For example, poor social well-being can manifest as feelings of loneliness, isolation, stress, anxiety and depression, which negatively affects the mental health of an individual (Luo & Waite, 2014). These feelings can actually weaken one's immune system and cause ill physical health, disease, and even increase one's risk of death (Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014; Luo & Waite, 2014). For example, Luo and Waite (2014) conducted a nationally representative longitudinal survey of older adults in China and determined that lonely adults faced an increased risk of death, in addition to poor social and emotional outcomes, compared to individuals who felt a sense of belonging.

Both social and physical well-being can be affected by diet. At first glance, food selection, meal preparation, cooking and eating may seem like quite simple practices. However, upon closer investigation they are quite complex and are heavily influenced by cultural and societal factors as well as individual perceptions (Back & Glasgow, 1981; Jabs et al., 2000). In many North American homes, it is custom that certain holidays, including religious holidays, are centered around meals in which the main focus is often meat, poultry or fish. For example, traditional Thanksgiving and Christmas meals include turkey (or sometimes roast beef); Easter meals typically include ham or lamb; and meals on Good Friday and Christmas Eve, the custom among many is to serve fish. Another example is the practice of serving gefilte fish for Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. Not surprisingly, deviations from cultural and societal eating norms tend to be strongly resisted and are even seen as unnatural (Back & Glasgow, 1981; Jabs et al., 2000). Despite the fact that vegetarianism is increasing in North America, a vegetarian diet is a deviation from "normal" dietary practices, and to the extent that food is a central part of the holiday celebration, a vegetarian in an omnivorous family can remain somewhat excluded from the family traditions. This dietary choice is sometimes even viewed as a threat to those following an omnivorous diet and may cause discomfort for those that eat meat (Rothgerber, 2014). Despite the lack of accurate evidence on the prevalence of vegetarianism in North America, it is clear that individuals following a vegetarian diet remain a minority, compared to their omnivorous counterparts, regardless of

any trends there may be for an increase in vegetarianism (McStay & Cunningham, 2009).

Research from the UK indicates that people hold the most positive convictions toward their own diet and the most negative convictions about diets that are different from theirs (Povey, Wellens, & Conner, 2001). Because vegetarian diets differ from that of the majority, social interactions with non-vegetarians are often challenging, especially when others resist or resent a vegetarian's dietary choices (Elorinne, Kantola, Voutilainen, & Laakso, 2016). Some vegetarians have experienced hostility from family and friends as a result of their diet although, over time, tolerance for the vegetarian's dietary choices appears to grow (Greenebaum, 2012). It could also be the case that vegetarians resist or resent omnivores' dietary choices. For example, some of the vegetarians in Greenebaum's (2012) aggressively defended a vegetarian diet through 'in your face tactics' which led to conflict with non-vegetarians.

Despite the increased popularity of vegetarianism, social scientists have paid relatively little attention to the social implications of being a vegetarian in a largely omnivorous society (Jabs et al., 2000). More specifically, there has been little research on how adopting a vegetarian diet influences an individual's social well-being. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to explore the self-perceived social well-being of individuals who have adopted a vegan or vegetarian diet. The research aims to discover how individuals on a vegetarian diet describe their social well-being and if they perceive their social well-being to be related to their choice of adopting a vegetarian diet. It is important to study the social

implications of a vegetarian diet and its influence on social well-being as this is a core component of an individuals' overall health, which remains understudied. This novel research allows us to better understand vegetarianism situated within an omnivorous-dominated society. We need to find ways to establish the value of different diets and find relevant social factors that may influence well-being. As the number of people becoming vegetarian increases, it is important to understand and support their social well-being.

Psychological Well-Being of Vegetarians

The study and theorizing of psychological well-being has a long history with key scholars such as Rogers, Maslow, Bradburn and Ryff. Rogers conceptualized psychological well-being as becoming a fully-functional individual in society (Rogers, 1961). Rogers (1961) stated that in order for an individual to grow and realize their full potential they need to be in an environment that offers authenticity, acceptance and empathy. Maslow similarly regarded psychological well-being as the attainment of self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). According to Maslow (1968), by realizing and fulfilling one's potential, one finds meaning in life and achieves psychological well-being. Some of the classic work done by Bradburn (1969) identifies psychological well-being as happiness. In Bradburn's view, psychological well-being is composed of two separate dimensions- positive and negative affect. That is, they are not on opposite ends of the same continuum and the presence of one does not necessarily predict the absence of other (Bradburn, 1969). Instead, Bradburn posits that assessment of happiness is an overall judgement that people make by comparing

their positive and negative affect. Therefore, by decreasing negative affect and increasing positive affect, happiness or psychological well-being can be enhanced.

Although there are differences between the theories and conceptualizations of psychological well-being, Ryff (1989) highlighted their similarities and developed a cohesive picture of psychological well-being, which incorporates these different dimensions reflected above. In her view, psychological well-being can be understood as consisting of characteristics such as self-acceptance (positive attitudes towards oneself), positive relationships with others (ability to love and the capacity for friendship), autonomy (independence), environmental mastery (active participation in and sense of control in one's environment), purpose in life (sense of meaning) and personal growth (realizing and acting on one's potential) (Ryff, 1989).

Psychological well-being is important as it contributes to the overall health and well-being of an individual. When we have good psychological well-being we are better able to live our lives to our fullest potential. For example, a strong state of psychological well-being can help to improve our relationships with others, maintain our physical health, and allow us to better handle stressful situations (Carol D Ryff, Burton H Singer, Edgar Wing, & Gale Dienberg Love, 2001; Carol D Ryff, Burton H Singer, Edgar Wing, & Gayle Dienberg Love, 2001). A poor state of psychological well-being, on the other hand, can lead to unhealthy relationships, which can negatively impact our social well-being, and in turn negatively affect our physical health (Aked, Marks, Cordon, & Thompson, 2008).

This research used both a systematic review method (this stand-alone study is reported in the next chapter) and qualitative methods to explore the self-perceived psychological well-being of vegetarians. For the qualitative portion, the thesis research focused on the following: How do people on a vegetarian diet describe their psychological well-being? And do they perceive their psychological well-being to be related to their choice of adopting and maintaining a vegetarian diet? This research contributed to a deeper understanding of the perceived psychological risks and benefits associated with a plant-based diet.

Chapter 3: A Systematic Review of the Psychological Well-Being of Vegetarians

Abstract

Background: A vegetarian diet is one that excludes the consumption of meat, poultry and fish. The physical health implications of a vegetarian diet have been widely studied. However, very little is known about the psychological well-being of vegetarians.

Purpose: To conduct systematic review of the psychological well-being of individuals who adopt a vegetarian diet.

Search Methods: We searched Prospero, Ebsco Discovery Service (EBSCO Host), Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (Ovid EBMR Reviews) (1991-Present), PubMed- UA Access (NCBI) (1966-Present), EMBASE (OvidSP) (1974-Present), CINAHL (EBSCO Host) (1937-Present), and PsycINFO (OvidSP) (1887-Present). We also searched the references of all relevant articles. Our search was limited to the English language and from 1980-Present.

Selection Criteria: We included studies if they were primary research studies, if the majority of participants involved were over the age of 19, and if a vegetarian diet was followed. Research on semi-vegetarian diets was included if separate data on complete vegetarians was available. We excluded studies if they were not primary research studies, if the majority of participants were under the age of 19, and if there were no vegetarian-specific findings.

Data Collection and Analysis: Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the review and then full texts of those articles considered potentially relevant

were screened. The quality of the selected studies was assessed using Health Evidence Bulletins (Wales) questions to assist with the critical appraisal of an observational study. All relevant articles' data were recorded in a data extraction table for clarity and analysis.

Results: We retrieved 200 articles. After 24 duplicate articles were removed and 163 articles were excluded based on titles and abstracts, we reviewed the full text of 13 articles. An additional six articles were removed because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, leaving seven studies, all cross-sectional. One study had low risk of bias and one study had moderate risk of bias (both reported poorer mental health in vegetarians). Five studies (whose findings were inconsistent) had high risk of bias. Most differences in mental health measures were small and of doubtful clinical significance.

Conclusion: There remains little available evidence on the mental health of vegetarians. All studies found were cross-sectional and most studies had high risk of bias. Findings from studies with high risk of bias were inconsistent, while findings from the other two studies suggested poorer mental health in vegetarians. Further research using longitudinal designs is needed to investigate whether a causal relationship exists between vegetarianism and mental health.

Introduction

Vegetarianism appears to be an increasingly popular lifestyle choice in Canada, and around the world. People express many reasons for becoming vegetarian, including, but not limited to, a desire to improve health and well-being, to protect the environment, to reduce harm caused to other living beings, and to live a violence free lifestyle (Vesanto & Davis, 2008). A vegetarian diet can be defined as a diet that excludes eating meat, poultry and fish (Vesanto & Davis, 2008). Within this definition there are many different types of vegetarian diets, all of which exclude the consumption of animal flesh. These include: a *vegan diet* that excludes eating any animal product including dairy and eggs; an *ovo-vegetarian diet* that excludes eating dairy products; a *lacto-vegetarian diet* that excludes eating eggs; and a *lacto-ovo vegetarian diet* that includes consuming dairy products and eggs (Vesanto & Davis, 2008).

There have been numerous research studies conducted on the physical health implications of adopting a vegetarian diet. Physical health benefits reported in the literature include weight loss, a reduced risk of chronic diseases (heart disease, hypertension, type two diabetes, cancers) improved longevity, and a reduced risk of consuming environmental contaminants (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Junshi, 1994; Key et al., 1998; Marsh, Zeuschner, & Saunders, 2012). However, there has been relatively less attention paid to the mental health or psychological well-being implications of a vegetarian diet

The mental health and well-being of vegetarians is an important phenomenon to study. There are reasons to believe that the mental health of vegetarians may differ from non-vegetarians. For example, proper levels of omega-3-fatty acids and vitamin B12 are linked to healthy neurological functioning and it has been reported that vegetarians, and more so vegans, are lacking in these nutrients, particularly if their diets are not well planned (Bedford & Barr, 2005; Fenech & Rinaldi, 1995; Perica & Delaš, 2011). In contrast, there is evidence that suggests that vegetarians are more health conscious than omnivores and that adopting a vegetarian diet out of concern for the environment can support good psychological health (Sabaté et al., 1991; Wilson et al., 2004).

However, others have suggested that apparent differences between the psychological well-being of vegetarians and non-vegetarians is an artifact of the differing characteristics of the populations rather than the diet itself. For example, vegetarians typically share socio-demographic characteristics with those who are at a greater risk for depressive disorders, such as being predominantly female and residing predominantly in urban areas (Michalak, Zhang, & Jacobi, 2012). The relationship between mental health and vegetarianism remains unclear. Therefore, this current study reports a systematic search, critical appraisal and synthesis of the current published literature on the psychological well-being or mental health of persons who adopt a vegetarian diet.

Methods

Literature search. We searched seven electronic databases: Prospero, Ebsco Discovery Service (EBSCO Host), Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (Ovid EBMR Reviews), PubMed- UA Access (NCBI), EMBASE (OvidSP), CINAHL (EBSCO Host), and PsycINFO (OvidSP) for studies reporting on mental health/well-being or psychological health/wellbeing of vegetarians. The search was conducted in June of 2014 and each database was searched from 1980 to present. Ebsco Discovery Service, PubMed- UA Access, EMBASE, CINAHL, and PsycINFO searches were limited to the English language and journal articles only. Controlled vocabulary and key-word terms representing vegetarianism and its variants were combined with controlled and vocabulary key word terms, including, but not limited to, mental health, mental illness, mental well-being, psychological health and psychological well-being. Two health-sciences librarians at the University of Alberta independently reviewed the search strategy. The detailed search strategies for each database can be found in *Appendix B: Search Strategies Utilized in Each Database Searched.* In addition, the reference lists of studies meeting our inclusion criteria (listed below) were screened to ensure that the search was comprehensive.

Study inclusion criteria. Studies were included if all or the majority of the participants were adults mostly over the age of 18, and if there were data and findings on mental health or psychological health of participants who followed a complete vegetarian diet, defined as a diet that excludes consumption of meat, poultry and fish. We included randomized or quasi-randomized trials, cohort

studies, case-control studies, cross-sectional studies, case series and qualitative studies. Studies were excluded if they pertained primarily to children, if there were no mental health or psychological well-being findings specific to vegetarians (as defined above), and if the article was a case report, letter to the editor, review or opinion paper. After retrieving the search results, citations were imported into reference-managing software, duplicate articles were excluded and screening for relevance to the topic of mental health/psychological well-being in vegetarians was conducted.

Screening. Using the a priori inclusion and exclusion criteria listed above, the first author (JT) screened titles and abstracts for potential relevance to the review. Both authors (JT and LC) screened full texts of those articles considered potentially relevant, and reasons for exclusion were recorded.

Quality assessment. JT and LC independently assessed the methodological quality of the selected studies using a modified version of the Health Evidence Bulletins (Wales: HEBW) questions to assist with the critical appraisal of observational studies (this form was modified slightly to meet the purpose of this systematic review) (Weightman, Mann, Sander, & Turley, 2000). The plan was to use the Cochrane Collaboration Risk of Bias Tool to appraise clinical trials; however, only observational studies were found. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus. The HEBW criteria were used to assist with the evaluation of the impact of selection bias, information bias, and confounding on the results of a study. We did not use a quantitative score or a cutoff point to determine the internal validity of studies (Greenland & O'rourke, 2001; Jüni,

Witschi, Bloch, & Egger, 1999). Rather, the HEBW criteria were used to assist reviewers in making an informed overall judgment on the internal validity of studies (Carroll, Cassidy, Holm, Kraus, & Coronado, 2004; Carroll et al., 2009; Spitzer, 1995; van der Velde et al., 2007).

Data extraction. A data extraction table was developed and included the following: citation information; study design; participants (setting, population, sample size), the studies' definitions of vegetarian; a description of the vegetarian group; a description of the comparison group; the mental health outcome(s) (a description of the outcome and the scale/measures used) and key findings. JT independently extracted the data from the included studies, LC reviewed the data extraction for potential discrepancies and JT created a table (*Table 1: Data Extraction Table)* to summarize the data extraction.

Synthesis and summary of study results. Using the evidence tables as a basis for the synthesis, findings were reported by study design, taking methodological quality of each study into consideration in reporting the evidence and the strength of the evidence. The strongest evidence of the effect of a vegetarian diet on psychological well-being would come from well-conducted randomized and then quasi-randomized trials. Methodologically sound cohort and case control studies would provide stronger evidence than cross-sectional studies (where temporal associations cannot be determined) and case series (studies with no comparison group), which provide the weakest evidence, and both of which should be considered hypothesis generating rather than hypothesis testing. Furthermore, within each study design, the critical appraisal identifies risk of bias,

and those studies with low risk of bias are considered to provide stronger evidence than those with high risk of bias.

Table 1: Data Extraction Table

Citation & Study Design	Participants (Setting, Population, Sample Size)	Definition of Vegetarian Sample & Comparison Group	Mental Health Outcome (Description and Scale/Measure)	Key Findings
Baines, S., Powers, J., & Brown, W. J. (2007). How does the health and well-being of young Australian vegetarian and semi-vegetarian women compare with non-vegetarians? *Public Health Nutrition, 10*(5), 436-442. doi:10.1017/S1368980007217938 Cross-sectional study design.	9113 female participants, age 22-27 years old, based in Australia.	Vegetarian group was defined as those individuals that did not eat meat, poultry or fish. Compared vegetarians and semi-vegetarians (excluded red meat but consumed poultry and fish) to non-vegetarians (consumed red meat).	The Medical Outcomes Study Short Form Health Survey SF-36. Summary score for mental health (MCS).	The mental health of non-vegetarians was better than that of either vegetarian group. Depression and related symptoms were more commonly reported by vegetarians. Vegetarians were 2-3 times more likely to report deliberate self-harm. Vegetarian women were also more likely to report taking prescription medications for depression.
Beezhold, B., Johnston, C., & Daigle, D. (2010). Vegetarian diets are associated with healthy mood states: A cross-sectional study in Seventh Day Adventist adults. *Nutrition Journal, 9*(26), 1-7. doi:10.1186/1475-2891-9-26 Cross-sectional study design.	138 healthy Seventh Day Adventists in the Southwestern United States. 60 Vegetarians and 70 omnivores. In the vegetarian population there were 28 males and 32 females and in the omnivore population there were 33 males and 45 females.	Vegetarian group was defined as those individuals who excluded animal flesh products from their diet. Compared vegetarians to their omnivorous counterparts.	Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) and Profile of Mood States (POMS) Questionnaire	Vegetarians reported significantly less negative emotion than omnivores. Better mood amongst vegetarian participants
Cooper, C. K., Wise, T. N., & Mann, L. (1985). Psychological and cognitive characteristics of vegetarians. *Psychosomatics,*	20 vegetarian participants living in the United States. 8 male participants and 12 female participants.	No definition of vegetarian group. Although it was reported that 85% never ate poultry and 65% abstained	8 different psychometric tests: HSCL-90 to assess psychological distress along 9 primary dimensions; IBQ measures attitudes that suggest	Vegetarians were more symptomatic than non-vegetarians but less so than a psychiatric population.

26(6), 521-527. doi:10.1016/S0033-3182(85)72832-0 Cross-sectional study design.		from eating fish. Analysis of variance was conducted on vegetarians who occasionally consumed poultry and fish to those that did not consume poultry and fish. No significant differences were found on the HSCL-90, IBQ, EPI, HOQ or the LOC. Unreported whether there were differences on the Portable Rod and Frame Test, EAT, or The Buss-Durkee Inventory.	inappropriate or maladaptive modes of responding to one's state of health (hypochondriasis, disease conviction, psychological vs. somatic concerns, affective inhibition, dysphoria, denial & irritability); The Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) measures personality in term of two independent dimensions (extroversion-introversion and neuroticism-stability); The Buss-Durkee Inventory (evaluates hostility); The Rotter Locus of Control (LOC) scale quantifies the person's concept of control over his or her fate; The Portable Rod and Frame Test assesses cognitive style in the form of psychological differential; Eating Attitudes test (EAT) measures the kind of eating behaviours and related cognitions that are often seen in anorexic women; The Hysteroid Obsessoid Questionnaire (HOQ) measures personality traits.	
Kadambari, R., Cowers, S., & Crisp, A. (1986). Some correlates of vegetarianism in anorexia nervosa. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 5*(3), 539-544. doi:10.1002/1098-108X(198603)5:3<539::AID-EAT2260050310>3.0.CO;2-O Cross-sectional study design. Retrospective analysis of case	Anorectic population in England with data collected between 1968-1979. 200 participants (179 female; 21 male) (98 non-vegetarian and 77 vegetarian). Did not report the age of the participants, some of these participants may have been under the age of 19. They just reported the age of onset of their eating disorder.	Compared vegetarians to non-vegetarians. Vegetarian was defined as absent, occasional, usual or severe. (No definitions of these labels provided). They did not clearly define vegetarian and non-vegetarian.	No measure identified. Examined case notes.	Vegetarian group showed greater intensity of current 'weight phobia."

notes.

Lindeman, M. (2002). The state of mind of vegetarians: Psychological well-being or distress? *Ecology of Food and Nutrition, 41*(1), 75-86. doi:10.1080/03670240212533 Cross-sectional study design.	Looked at vegetarian, semi-vegetarian and omnivorous women in Finland. Study 1: Participants ages ranged from 13 to 74 (mean age of 29) therefore the majority of participants were over the age of 18.197 omnivorous, 69 semi-vegetarians and 42 vegetarians. Study 2: Participants ages ranged from 16-54 with a mean age of 22.3 therefore the majority of the participants were over the age of 18. 148 omnivorous, 60 semi-vegetarians and 17 vegetarians	Semi-vegetarians were defined as those who avoided red meat or only ate fish.	Study 1: Depression was measured with the short form of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale. Self-esteem was measured by Rosenberg's (1979) Self-Esteem Scale. Appearance dissatisfaction and weight dissatisfaction were measured by the Visual Analogue Scale (VAS). Symptoms of eating disorders were measured by the short form of the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT). Study 2: View of the world was measured by the World Assumption Scale (WAS)	Study 1: Vegetarian and semi-vegetarian women had lower self-esteem and more symptoms of depression and eating disorders than omnivorous women. Study 2: Vegetarian women had a more negative view of the world than semi-vegetarians or omnivorous women did.
Lindeman, M., Stark, K., & Latvala, K. (2000). Vegetarianism and eating-disordered thinking. *Eating Disorders, 8*(2), 157-165. doi:10.1080/10640260008251222 Cross-sectional study design.	Study 1: Excluded (participants under the age of 19). Study 2: 124 Participants, mean age of 27.19 (age range 17-72). 11.3% of the sample were vegetarian.	Vegetarians were defined as those individuals who avoided red meat, poultry and fish.	Symptoms of eating disorders were measured by Eating Attitudes Test (EAT) and Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI).	Vegetarians had higher total scores for both EAT and EDI. Vegetarians scored significantly higher on certain subscales including ineffectiveness, interpersonal distrust, and maturity fears.
Michalak, J., Zhang, X. C., & Jacobi, F. (2012). Vegetarian diet and mental disorders: Results from a representative community survey.	4181 participants living in Germany. Ages ranged from 18-79. Completely vegetarian (N=54) and predominantly vegetarian (N=190) were compared with non-	Participants were asked *"Do you currently follow a vegetarian diet (no meat) or did you follow a vegetarian diet in the past?"* and could	Psychiatric diagnoses were measured by the computer-assisted version of the Munich Composite International Diagnostic Interview (M-CIDI). Examined depressive disorders, anxiety	Vegetarians displayed elevated prevalence rates for depressive disorders, anxiety disorders and somatoform disorders.

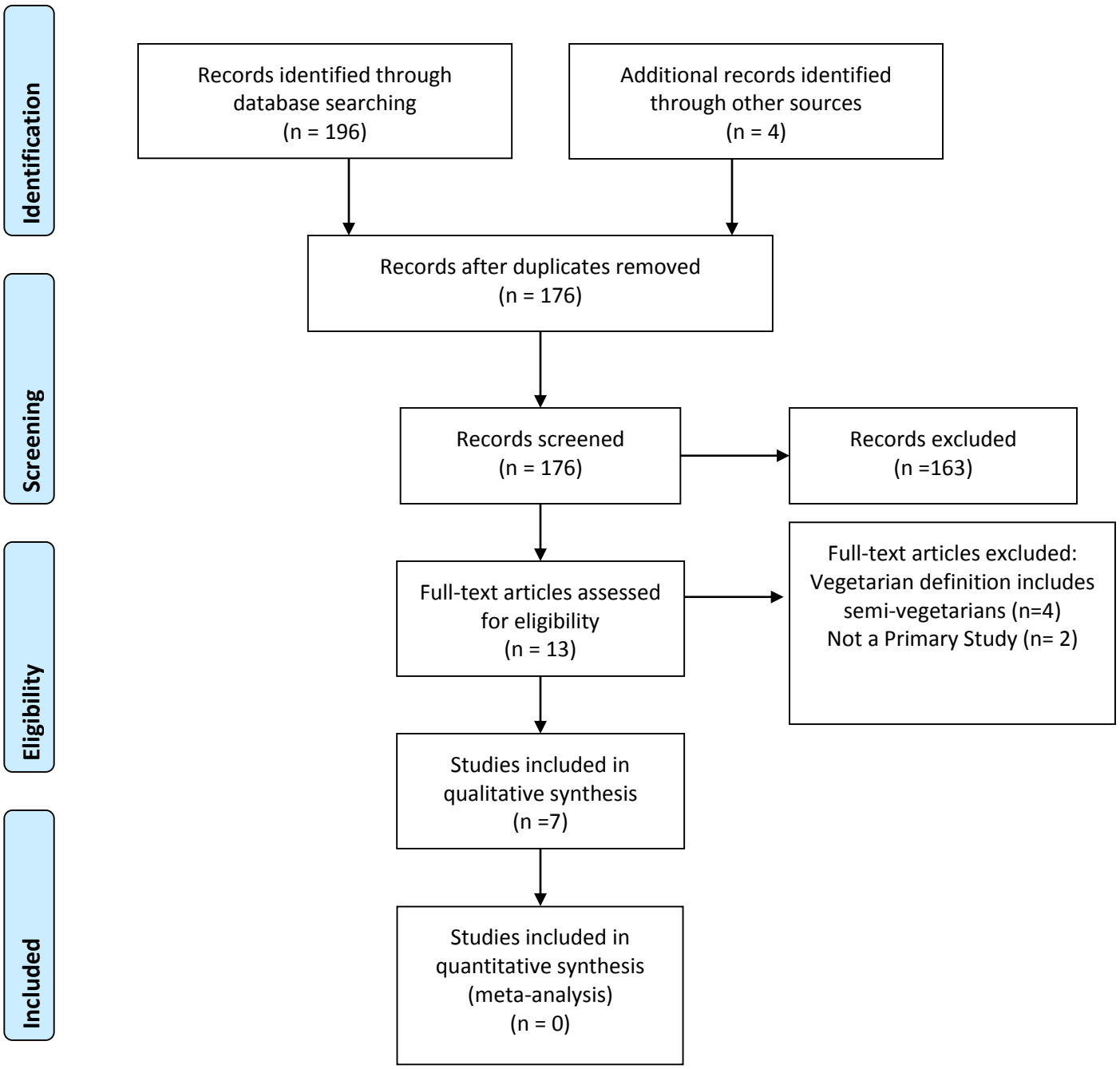
International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 9(1), 67. doi:10.1186/1479-5868-9-67 Cross-sectional study design.	vegetarian participants (N=3872) and with a non-vegetarian socio-demographically matched subsample (N=242).	answer *"no, never", "yes, completely", or "yes, predominantly."* The word meat in German excludes poultry.	disorders, somatoform disorders and syndromes and eating disorders.

Search Results

Study selection. Our search yielded 200 results. 24 duplicate articles were removed, resulting in a total of 176 unique articles. For each of the 176 articles, titles and abstracts were screened; resulting in the exclusion of 163 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria specified a-priori. Thirteen full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility. Of these, four articles were excluded because they were studies of semi-vegetarians, therefore their "vegetarian" population would have consumed at least some meat, poultry or fish. An additional two studies were excluded because they were descriptive case reports of a single patient. Seven articles met the inclusion criteria for this systematic review. The synthesis was qualitative rather than quantitative (meta-analysis) since there was substantial heterogeneity across studies.

As per the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses) statement, search results from the different stages of this systematic review are displayed in a flow chart (Moher, Liberati, Tetzalff, Altman, & The, 2009) in *Figure 1: Search Results*.

Figure 1: Search Results



Study designs. All seven studies were cross-sectional studies and are summarized in Table 1. That is, the studies involved data collection from a specific population at one specific point in time. Cross-sectional studies are useful for comparing characteristics of different study samples. For example, cross-sectional studies allow for the comparison of vegetarians and non-vegetarians in regards to mental health status. However, the design does not permit temporal or causal inferences (Levin, 2006).

Critical Appraisal Results

The results of this systematic review are presented in order of our level of confidence of the research findings. Through our critical-appraisal methods, we examined the risk of bias and the authors' ability to establish a clear relationship between explanatory and dependent variables and then assigned a quality rating of ++ (low risk of bias, thus we can be confident in the results), + (moderate risk of bias, thus we can be somewhat confident in the results) and – (high risk of bias, therefore we cannot be confident in the results).

Low risk of bias: confident in the results. There was only one study with low risk of bias. This was a study by Michalak and colleagues that examined the relationship between a vegetarian diet and mental disorders. This study contained 4181 participants aged 18-79, sampled from a representative national survey. There were 54 complete vegetarians, 190 predominant vegetarians and 3872 non-vegetarians. Vegetarians and predominantly vegetarians were compared with socio-demographically matched subsample of non-vegetarians (N=242). The

German National Health Interview was used to assess somatic and mental disorders and Examination Survey's Mental Health Supplement (GHS-MHS) and mental disorders were assessed by a standardized individual face-to-face diagnostic interview by clinically trained interviewers per the criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed; DSM-IV). The authors found that vegetarians had a higher frequency of mental disorders (Michalak et al., 2012). Despite this study being judged as having low risk of bias, there were still some weaknesses in the study. The design (cross-sectional) does not permit causal inferences, so we cannot conclude that being a vegetarian led to poorer mental health, nor that poor mental health led to vegetarianism. A single item defined vegetarians in this study indicating that they either did at one point or currently exclude meat from their diet, and the authors of the study noted that "meat" in this context excluded poultry. This may have led to misclassification. However, if there were misclassifications of non-vegetarians as vegetarians, this would likely bias the observed findings toward the null, and thus would suggest that the mental health differences between groups may be underestimated.

Moderate risk of bias: somewhat confident in the results. There was only one article in which we were somewhat confident in the results. This study, by Baines et al, explored differences in socio-demographic characteristics, health status and health service-use in a representative sample of 9133 young Australian women (22-27 years old), defined as vegetarian, semi-vegetarian and non-vegetarian. This sample over-represented women living in rural and remote areas, with some over-representation of women with higher education. They concluded

that vegetarians had poorer mental well-being, as determined by a higher prevalence of depression (single item measure) and anxiety, and lower scores on the mental well-being quality of life indices compared to omnivores (Baines, Powers, & Brown, 2007). However, given the unadjusted analyses, we cannot be confident that diet is the only factor distinguishing levels of well-being. In addition, the differences in mental health are very small and unlikely to be clinically important and health-care utilization has been shown not to be valid when measured using self-report (Bellón, Lardelli, de Dios Luna, & Delgado, 2000; Roberts, Bergstralh, Schmidt, & Jacobsen, 1996). Again, this was a cross-sectional study, so we cannot make temporal inferences about the relationship between diet and well-being.

High risk of bias: little confidence in the results. The remaining five articles were also cross-sectional and deemed to have high risk of bias, thus we can have little confidence in the results. A study by Beezhold et al. utilized a convenience sample of 60 vegetarian participants and 70 non-vegetarian participants all of whom were healthy Seventh Day Adventists in the United States. They compared the mood of vegetarians who never eat fish with the mood of their healthy omnivorous counterparts. Mood was the outcome of interest, but at least some of those who were depressed were excluded from the study (via exclusion of those on antidepressants or high POMS scores). The number excluded was differential by dietary group, which would introduce bias toward the null for vegetarians. In addition, the use of a convenience sample suggests that the samples are unlikely to be representative, thus introducing possible selection

bias. The authors concluded that vegetarians were happier than non-vegetarians (Beezhold, Johnston, & Daigle, 2010).

Cooper and colleagues looked at the psychological and cognitive characteristics of a convenience sample of 20 vegetarians in the United States. The authors provided no clear definition of vegetarian participants. It was reported that 15% of vegetarian participants ate poultry and 35% ate fish. An analysis of variance was conducted to assess the questionnaire-score differences between vegetarians who occasionally consumed poultry and fish to those that did not consume poultry and fish. The authors found no significant differences on the HSCL-90, IBQ, The Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI), the Hysteroid Obsessoid Questionnaire (HOQ) or the Rotter Locus of Control (LOC). It was unreported whether there were significant differences on the Portable Rod and Frame Test, The Eating Attitudes Test (EAT), or the Buss-Durkee Inventory. The authors reported that vegetarians were more symptomatic than a "normal" population but less so than a psychiatric population (i.e., in comparison with test norms). The authors conclude that vegetarians show minimal deviations from normal omnivorous controls on psychometric testing and further deduce that vegetarianism does not necessarily coincide with psychopathology (Cooper, Wise, & Mann, 1985). However, since the sample was a convenience sample, there is no evidence that the participants are representative of the vegetarian source population and there was furthermore no evidence that participants came from the same source population as the tests' normative samples. Thus, there is a high risk of selection bias.

A study published in 1986 by Kadambari et al examined the correlations between vegetarianism and anorexia nervosa. This was a retrospective analysis of a series of patients with anorexia nervosa via hospital records in one hospital. Age of patients was not specifically reported, although age of onset of the eating disorder was recorded, and some may have been under the age of 19. Findings appear to be based on 180 records, although the numbers are discordant in this paper. The authors conclude that the vegetarian population in this study showed significantly greater intensity of avoidance of "fatness" than non-vegetarians (Kadambari, Cowers, & Crisp, 1986). Vegetarianism was divided into absence, occasional, usual and severe, with the last two groups being considered vegetarian, however, there was no operational definition provided for these categories or vegetarianism. There was no indication of blinding of those conducting the chart review, introducing the possibility of information bias, and there was no information provided on the source population or on selection factors to be hospitalized for anorexia nervosa in that particular hospital, introducing the possibility of selection bias.

Lindeman (2002) studied female Finnish summer-university students and high school students in two separate studies. The first study was a convenience sample of 197 omnivores, 69 semi-vegetarians and 42 vegetarians, ranging in age from 13 to 74. The second study consisted of 140 omnivores, 60 semi-vegetarians and 17 vegetarians, ranging in age from 15-54. Lindeman defined semi-vegetarians as those who avoid red meat but ate fish. Therefore, it can be assumed that vegetarians did not eat any animal flesh products, however poultry

consumption was unclear. Lindeman found that vegetarians had lower self-esteem and presented more symptoms of both eating disorders and depression than non-vegetarians (Lindeman, 2002). However, although these differences were statistically significant, they were small and unlikely to be clinically significant.

No diet-specific information about participant characteristics was provided about either sample, and, in study 2, there were two sampling frames used, with no information provided about the comparability of these two samples. This raises concerns about selection bias and confounding. In study 2, Lindeman et al. (2000) examined the relationship between vegetarianism and eating-disordered thinking in a convenience sample of introductory psychology students at two universities. The study consisted of female participants aged 17-72 (mean age 27.19). She reported that vegetarians had higher total scores for both the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT) and the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI), both signifying disordered eating/attitudes toward eating. Vegetarians had higher subscale scores on ineffectiveness, interpersonal distrust, and maturity fears. The authors conclude that vegetarianism and eating disorders are associated (Lindeman, Stark, & Latvala, 2000). However, although differences were statistically significant, they were small and of uncertain clinical significance. In addition, there was no clear definition of vegetarianism and no information provided on how vegetarianism was measured. There is no information on response rate, raising the question of selection bias, and the broad age range raises the question of confounding by age. Finally, generalizability is unclear, given the select sample.

Discussion

Seven studies met our inclusion criteria; all were cross-sectional. Five of the studies were judged as having high risk of bias. Only one study (one of the five with high risk of bias) found better mental health in vegetarians, however it should be noted that the differences in the populations studied may pose an explanation as to why these results differ from that of the other studies in this systematic review. This is the only study that clearly focuses on Seventh Day Adventists, who have a strong established support network and defined ideology associated with their vegetarian diet (Thygesen et al., 2013). All other studies found worse mental health in vegetarians than in the omnivorous groups, although some of the differences were small and of questionable clinical importance.

We conducted this systematic review to further understand and synthesize the available literature on this phenomenon. With only seven studies meeting our inclusion criteria, it is evident that there is little available literature on the mental health of those following a vegetarian diet and the few available studies are cross-sectional. Although the evidence presented in these studies is stronger than case series studies, the generalizability and findings of these studies are limited. None of the available literature can support a causal connection, or even a temporal relationship between mental health and vegetarianism. Only one study was judged to have a low risk of bias, one with moderate risk of bias and five were convenience samples and judged to have high risk of bias. Therefore, findings should be viewed with caution.

This systematic review has some limitations. Studies were limited to the English language. Therefore, we may have missed some studies published in another language. However, this systematic review does have strengths including the following: the use of six electronic databases to ensure a comprehensive search, participation of two librarians who independently reviewed the search strategies to reduce errors and maximize relevant search results, independent screening of potentially relevant studies, and independent-critical appraisal and data abstraction of the studies. We report the strength of the evidence on both study design and internal validity criteria, and consider the likely clinical significance of findings, not just the statistical significance.

Conclusion

We searched six databases for any type of original research (qualitative or quantitative) on the mental health/psychological well-being of vegetarians and found seven studies, all of which were cross-sectional quantitative studies. There remains little available evidence on the mental health of vegetarians and the evidence that does exist is inconsistent, although the higher quality studies suggest poorer psychological well-being among vegetarians. Most of the limited studies that are available are of poor methodological quality and their findings should be interpreted with caution. In addition, even though we included qualitative studies of mental health/psychological well-being of vegetarians in our search, no such studies were found. This review demonstrates the need for well-conducted qualitative and quantitative research studies in this area.

Chapter 4: The Interpretive Paradigm and Theoretical Perspective

Research Paradigms

A research paradigm is a set of assumptions that shape one's research (Egon G. Guba, Lynham, & Lincoln, 2011). Research paradigms hold both ontological and epistemological assumptions. Ontological assumptions are concerned with the nature of reality. Epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge is produced and about the relationship between the researcher and those being researched (Mayan, 2009). These assumptions differ greatly depending on which paradigm a researcher operates. For example, the positivist paradigm is associated with a realist ontology and objectivist epistemology which asserts that an objective truth or an objective reality exists apart from human consciousness (Egon G. Guba et al., 2011). However, an interpretative paradigm is associated with a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology which asserts that truths or realities do not exist apart from human consciousness, but rather are created by an individual (Egon G. Guba et al., 2011)

Validity of research and the researcher's role also vary greatly depending on the paradigm a researcher is operating from. Traditional positivistic paradigms assume the researcher's role is to capture an objective truth or an objective reality, assuming that knowledge is objective. This positivist lens set the stage for judging the validity of a research study. However, with the emergence and shift to different paradigms of thinking, our notion and understanding of validity has also shifted (Egon G. Guba et al., 2011). This has also affected how we view the role

of the researcher. For example, in traditional positivist thinking validity is based on the researcher's objectivity. However, in neopositivist thinking validity is based on the researcher's attempt to eliminate bias understanding that complete objectivity in research is impossible (Rooney, 2005). Taken even further, in postmodernist thinking validity is based on the researcher acknowledging and recognizing their subjectivities as a central component of the research (Rooney, 2005). Therefore, within an interpretivist paradigm "achieving validity in the positivist sense is impossible" (Rooney, 2005, p. 5) and so the interpretations of validity must correspond with the paradigm from which the researcher operates.

The Interpretive Paradigm

A qualitative researcher operates from an interpretive paradigm that takes into consideration social and cultural contexts. Interpretivism seeks to explore and understand the phenomenon in question; in the case of the current study, the phenomena of interest are the self-perceived social and psychological well-being of vegetarians. Any interpretive paradigm is guided by both ontological and epistemological assumptions that the researcher holds as well as the researcher's theoretical perspective (Creswell, 2013).

Ontology. In congruence with an interpretive paradigm, this research rejects the notion of a realist ontology and takes on a relativist ontology. A relativist ontology rejects the notion that our reality exists independently of our knowledge of it, rather we come to understand our reality through our social interactions and experiences. As such, our reality is socially constructed created

intersubjectively, and thus there can be multiple social realities (Egon G. Guba et al., 2011; Mayan, 2009).

Epistemology. Also in congruence with an interpretive paradigm, this research rejects the notion of an objectivist epistemology and takes on a subjectivist epistemology. A subjectivist epistemology rejects the notion of the researcher as a separate objective object from the participant and instead embodies the notion of a transactional and subjective production of knowledge (Mayan, 2009). That is to say that knowledge is co-created through the transactions of the researcher and those being researched. This means that when I conduct my research, I interact with the participants and the setting and together we subjectively come to an understanding of the phenomenon (Manning, 1997). As such, as a researcher I am thoughtful of how these interactions may shape the production of knowledge and speak to this throughout my thesis. It also means that I understand that there are multiple social realities and ways of knowing, and that I am just presenting one possible way of interpreting the phenomenon.

Multiple realities is a complex term with multiple interpretations. As mentioned previously the positivist paradigm asserts that there is only one true reality that it exists in the world we live in. However, an interpretivists view of reality asserts that there are multiple realities meaning that the reality of one cognitive agent (or one individual) is different from that of another individual (Lee, 2012). Qualitative research is concerned with these individually constructed human realities. The value in recognizing multiple realities is that qualitative research can account for cultural complexity and social interaction and our

interpretation of these can lead to an understanding of an individual's unique experiences.

In assuming that there are multiple realities and ways of knowing this research is situated both culturally and socially. Therefore, in congruence with an interpretive worldview, relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology the research is also approached through a constructivist theoretical perspective.

Theoretical Perspective: Social Constructionism

My theoretical perspective is social constructionism. However, I use the terms social constructivism (focused on individual learning) and social constructionism (focused on the production of knowledge) interchangeably as my theoretical perspective as a researcher encompasses both terms. Within the perspective of social constructionism, individuals develop meanings of their own experiences and because these meanings are subjective, they may vary from person to person and may even vary within an individual as they have multiple meanings that they prescribed to a particular experience (P. Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Therefore, as a researcher I am interested in these meanings and rely heavily on participants' stories and experiences. These subjective meanings are situated historically, culturally and socially and as such are formed through interactions with others and through the historical and cultural norms in which that individual lives and interacts. By observing individuals in their natural environments and asking open-ended questions, participants are able to develop

their own meanings of their experiences as they interact with me. It is through a social constructivist perspective that I also understand that my own background and experiences will shape my positioning as a researcher and my interpretations of the data.

Chapter 5: Research Methods

Research Design

Ethnography. Ethnography is a form of qualitative research in which the researcher seeks to describe and understand shared beliefs, values, and behaviours of a culture sharing group (Creswell, 2013). Ethnography is considered one of the oldest qualitative methods and is rooted in anthropology (Mayan, 2009). In traditionally ethnographic research, a researcher would immerse themselves fully into a culture. They would live amongst the population they wanted to study, participate in day to day activities, talk to the people and form relationships, learn the language, eat the food and experience the culture on an intimate level. The closer and more immersed the researcher was in the setting, the richer data they obtained and the closer they came to understanding a particular way of life.

However, how we view and conduct ethnographic research has changed considerably from traditional anthropological work. It is now recognized that culture appears in many different forms and is not restricted to a particular geographical location or ethnic group (Mayan, 2009). Although the definition of culture is less restrictive, the goal of ethnographic research remains the same; to describe a culture from the point of view of those who are part of that culture. This goal can be accomplished through different forms of ethnographic research including more targeted forms, such as a focused ethnography.

Focused ethnography. A focused ethnography is a more concentrated form of ethnographic research that is aimed at exploring a specific research question or a specific issue (Chuang & Abbey, 2005). Focused ethnographies are context specific. For example, many focused ethnographies are conducted within a single culture, community, organization, or social situation (Chuang & Abbey, 2005). Within these contexts, focused ethnographies are conducted on a few or limited number of individuals. In addition, focused ethnographies are typically time sensitive and are conducted in a shorter amount of time compared to traditional ethnographies. Through this focused ethnographic research study, my aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of the self-perceived social and psychological well-being of vegetarians in Alberta. Although in a focused ethnography, less time is spent in the field compared to a traditional ethnography, this approach still generates a great depth of knowledge and focuses quite intensively on data analysis (Knoblauch, 2005). In the current focused ethnography, data were collected using participant observation, one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

Setting

The current study was conducted within the setting of Alberta, a Canadian province in which cattle ranching has a deep history as part of the lifestyle and economic foundation of the province. Alberta beef has been described as a central feature of Albertan identity (Blue, 2008). Although this is not true for all Albertans, Alberta beef is popularly viewed as a strong provincial symbol linking

the cattle industry to the ranching heritage. In many ways, cattle ranching might be seen as engrained in Alberta's culture.

More specifically, the observations, interviews, and focus groups took place within Edmonton, the capital city of Alberta. Edmonton is a mid-sized city that has a higher percentage of young and working class individuals compared to other Canadian provinces and cities (Nichols Applied Management, 2014). The population in Edmonton is growing and this has attributed to a large influx of young migrant workers in addition to a number of young adults starting families (Nichols Applied Management, 2014). Of the migrants living in Alberta, the majority (38%) are from somewhere else in Canada, whereas 25% are from outside of Canada (Nichols Applied Management, 2014). Therefore, given the recent trends in population growth in Edmonton, some of the participants included in this study have resided in another Albertan city or town or were from another Canadian province. Therefore, depending on when they became a vegetarian some participants were able to provide insight and experience to being a vegetarian in places outside of Edmonton and even Alberta.

Data Collection

The sites and individuals. Vegetarian organizations are generally designed to promote and support vegetarians in their diets. Vegetarian organizations have been around since the early 1850's and started out very focused, promoting one particular aspect of the vegetarian reform, such as religion or animal rights (Smart, 2004). Since then, vegetarian organizations have expanded their focus to include concern for the environment, health promotion,

and an alternative diet-based approach to healing (Lindeman et al., 2000). More recently, vegetarian organizations have also been established to provide individuals of a similar mindset an opportunity to receive mutual support in a society where vegetarians are the minority (Smart, 2004). Vegetarians who are part of these organizations see their membership as an opportunity to "reinforce acceptability and overcome negativity" (Smart, 2004, p. 88).

Three established vegetarian groups in Edmonton were used for participant observation and were also used to enroll some of the participants for individual interviews and focus groups. These groups included: The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta; The Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta; and their sub-group Raw Vegan Edmonton. I am a member of each of these groups and attend events put on by these organizations. In addition to this, I served as the President of the Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta from 2013 to 2014.

The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta (VVUA). This group of approximately 130 members is concerned with the political, social, environmental, moral, and health issues of an animal-product-inclusive diet, and seeks to promote a broader adoption and heightened awareness of vegetarian and vegan diets. The VVUA seeks to achieve this by improving access to appealing and healthy vegan and vegetarian dietary options for University of Alberta students, faculty, and the greater Edmonton-area; this is done by promoting the benefits of a vegetarian and vegan lifestyle in an inclusive, positive, and conflict-free manner (The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta, 2013) .

VVUA provides social networking opportunities, support, and educational materials for those who are interested in reducing their consumption of animal products, those who are interested in adopting a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, and those who are currently vegetarian or vegan. The VVUA is not affiliated with any outside group.

The Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta (VVoA). This is a registered, non-profit society formed in 1989 to serve people who are interested in learning about, adopting and/or maintaining a vegan or vegetarian diet. VVoA is a non-political and non-religious organization run solely by volunteers. They strive to be a reliable source of information concerning vegan or vegetarian health, the environment and animal rights issues. The VVoA regularly organizes social events such as potlucks, dinners, club meet-ups, public advocacy, and bake sales. They also host speakers and films for educational purposes. You do not have to be a vegan or vegetarian to participate in their events (Information adapted from www.vofa.ca/).

Raw Vegan Edmonton. This is a sub-group of the VVoA that focuses on raw vegan awareness and education. This group highlights the benefits of a raw food diet including improved health, environmental conservation, decreasing the cruelty to non-human animals, mental clarity, spiritual awareness and simplicity. Although formally part of the VVoA, many members associate only with Raw Vegan Edmonton, thus it is presented as a distinct group. Raw Vegan Edmonton regularly hosts education sessions (e.g., cooking classes, guest lectures, potlucks). Participants do not have to be raw vegans to attend events or be a part of the

group (Information adapted from rawveganedmonton.com). This group was the third of three settings for the participant observation portion of the study, and a recruitment source for the interviews and focus groups.

Additional recruitment avenues. For the interviews and focus groups I also recruited participants outside these organizations, as there may be differences in social well-being between those who belong to vegetarian organizations and those who do not. Specifically, people on a vegetarian diet that are part of these organizations may have an established support network; vegetarians outside these organizations may lack the same level of social support. Thus, I also recruited University of Alberta graduate students including members of the University of Alberta Graduate Professional Development Centre. Recruitment strategies are described in detail after the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria. The following inclusion criteria were used for individual interviews and focus groups. These inclusion criteria could not be directly applied to participant observation, as I had no control over who attended the organizations' events. In order to be eligible for inclusion as a participant for interviews and focus groups, individuals had to be 18 years of age or older, English speaking, have chosen to transition from a previously non-vegetarian diet to a vegetarian diet, and currently following a vegetarian diet. The definition of vegetarianism used for inclusion in this study was following a diet that excluded all forms of animal flesh (meat, poultry or fish). Therefore, vegans (who also exclude other animal products such as dairy products and eggs) were also included as part of this study. All individual interview and focus group

participants provided written informed consent for participation and audio-taping. This study [study ID Pro00043423] received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (*Appendix C: Ethics Approval*).

Recruitment and sampling strategies for interviews and focus groups. I recruited participants through the VVoA (which included Raw Vegan Edmonton) through announcements in the organization's newsletter and through making oral presentations at VVoA events. Participants were also recruited from the VVUA by posting on the organization's Facebook wall and making announcements at their biweekly meetings. In addition to the former approach, participants outside of these organizations were recruited through posted notices using the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and the Graduate Professional Development Centre list-serves. I also explained the study to potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria, asking them to watch for recruitment postings and to contact me if they were interested in participating.

Participants were purposefully sampled using the "big net approach" by spending time mingling with potential participants in order to purposefully select those most likely to contribute to the research. The "big net approach" was used for the following reasons: to facilitate opportunistic sampling (making sample decisions during data collection); maximum variation (seeking diverse variation among participants- i.e. both males and females, different ages, vegans and vegetarians, new vegetarians and experienced vegetarians, those who are part of a vegetarian organization and those who are not part of a vegetarian organization); and criterion sampling (having all participants meet the inclusion criterion)

(Creswell, 2013). These strategies helped to ensure rich data collection and also act as a guard against sampling bias (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006).

Finally, sampling also took place through "snowballing" and word of mouth. For example, I asked participants to pass along information of my study to their vegetarian friends, family members and acquaintances (Creswell, 2013). Recruitment ended when a level of data saturation had been reached.

Data sources. Data were collected via three different sources: participant observation, individual interviews, and focus groups. These data generation strategies were consistent with a focused ethnographic approach and provided data triangulation, strengthening this research. Although this section primarily deals with describing strategies for data generation, it is important to note that data generation and data analysis occurred simultaneously.

Participant observation. Participant observation is the most common method used in ethnographic research in order to gain insight into the unique cultural elements or phenomenon of the group or culture being studied. Ethnographic researchers are able to gain this insight over time, with repeated observation of a defined population, and through repeated analysis.

Participant observation involved attending various social events, meetings, and talks hosted by the VVUA, VVoA and Raw Vegan Edmonton. During this time, I was a complete participant and my research was overt. I had been a member of the Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta (VVoA) and Raw Vegan

Edmonton (a subgroup of the VVoA) for over two years prior to the start of the study. Therefore, some participants were aware of my research and others were not. Because the participant observation was completed in naturalistic settings that were open to the public, and took place in public places, individual informed consent was not required for this portion of the study. Risk to participants during participant observation was considered minimal and no participants were personally identified in relation to this observation. This strategy for participant observation was approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

During the events, there were limited opportunities to take fieldnotes, so brief jottings or scratch notes were taken in order that my participation not be disrupted. These jottings were clarified and expanded as soon as possible after the event to ensure that important details were not forgotten and in order to transform them into fieldnotes (Rothe, 2000). I kept both descriptive and reflective fieldnotes. Descriptive fieldnotes focused on what I observed in the field, whereas my reflective fieldnotes built onto my descriptive notes by describing my own personal learning and reflected on my role as primary-data collection instrument (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). In addition to this, supplementary data were collected. Supplementary data included documentation such as photographs, PowerPoint presentations, and film descriptions.

In order to ensure my fieldnotes were relevant and as detailed as possible, I followed Chiseri-Srater and Sunstien's (1997) guide to fieldnotes (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2011), which includes the following fieldnote content:

- Date, time, and place of observation
- Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site
- Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, tastes
- Personal responses to recording of fieldnotes
- Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language
- Questions about people or behaviours at the site for future investigation
- Page numbers to help keep observations in order

Individual interviews. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to elicit rich responses and capture participants' experiences and perceptions. This semi-structured interview guide was pilot tested prior to the study to ensure appropriateness and clarity. These pilot interviews were not included in the analysis of this study. The interview guide started with broad, general questions that were deemed less sensitive and then moved into more focused questions that touched on more personal and intimate topics. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. In addition, jottings were taken during the interview. These jottings were combined with the audio recordings to provide a summary of the interview and to jumpstart data analysis while the audio recordings were being transcribed. The interview guide is attached as *Appendix D: Interview Guide.*

All interview information was confidential. Participants' anonymity was maintained in the transcribed data and identifying information was not attached to any information provided. In addition, participants will not be identified in any

publication or presentations arising from the study. The study findings will be presented in summarized form only. The study data will be kept in a secure location in the School of Public Health for at least five years after the study is done.

Focus groups. Focus groups are an important part of data collection in certain types of qualitative studies because they allow participants more time to reflect on their responses and allow participants to draw from one another's experiences. This may elicit responses that would otherwise not have surfaced in individual interviews (Lofland et al., 2006). A focus group guide consisting of open-ended questions was developed. The focus group guide is attached as *Appendix E: Focus Group Guide*. I conducted focus groups when the individual interview process was near completion, which permitted further exploration and expansion of concepts or topics that arose during analysis and required further investigation (D. L. Morgan, 1997). At the point of initiating focus groups, psychological well-being of vegetarians was close to the point of data saturation, whereas issues of social well-being were much more complex and required further exploration. In addition, I judged psychological well-being to be a more appropriate discussion for individual interviews due to the more intimate nature of the topic and believed some participants may not feel comfortable discussing personal psychological matters in a group setting. Therefore, the focus groups focused primarily on rationales for becoming vegetarian and social well-being. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

All focus group information was confidential. Anonymity was maintained in the transcribed data and participants' identifying information was not attached to any information provided. I asked that all focus group participants keep the identification and content of the focus groups confidential. Although I cannot guarantee that participants will maintain the confidentiality of the discussion, those taking part in the focus group were asked to keep confidential the identity of persons and all information that is discussed in the group. In addition, similar to the individual interview participants, focus group participants will not be identified in any publication or presentations arising from the study. The study findings will be presented in summarized form only. The study data will be kept in a secure location in the School of Public Health for at least five years after the study is done, as per University of Alberta ethical requirements.

Data Analysis

Given that this was a focused ethnography, and in order to maintain methodological coherence, a qualitative content analysis was performed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mayan, 2009). Content analysis is a widely used and accepted data analysis method among health researchers (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Qualitative content analysis can be understood as an analytic approach that is both empirically and methodologically sound. Performing qualitative content analysis involved analyzing text through a systematic classification design, while taking into consideration the context of the data being analyzed and using a series of step-by-step procedures (Mayring, 2000). The goal of qualitative content

analysis was to "provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe‐Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

Content analysis has its roots in quantitative research. Researchers such as Lazarfeld and Lasswell set the stage for content analysis in the 1920's and 1930's when it became a popular analysis method among quantitative researchers (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It was not until the 1950's that content analysis became widely critiqued for superficial methods and lack of applicability to qualitative research (Mayring, 2000). Key theorists such as Atheide, Mostyn, Ritsert and Wittkowski aimed to develop a qualitative form of content analysis that was both reliable and valid (Brenner, 1985; Mayring, 2000). In recent years, these forms of qualitative content analysis have been widely used in a variety of health-research studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). There are three main approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional (inductive), directive (deductive) and summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Inductive qualitative content analysis involves developing categories from the text using a rigourous form of reductive procedures. Deductive qualitative content analysis involves use of a preconceived category or set of categories and assigns these to the text being analyzed. Summative content analysis involves an analysis of the underlying context of word frequency counts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For the purposes of this research, I used conventional or inductive qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000).

The first step of qualitative content analysis in the current study consisted of reading through both the interview and focus group transcripts, along with the fieldnotes taken during participant observation, from beginning to end to gather a holistic sense of the data. The goal was to examine the content of the transcripts and fieldnotes and draw a connection to the meaning and implication of my research purpose. For the focus group data, particular attention was paid to analyzing the data at both the individual and group level; that is, focusing both on individual ideas and experiences while at the same time capturing group dynamics and the interaction between the focus group participants. In particular, emphasis was placed on capturing areas of agreement and disagreement in order to come to a better understanding of how viewpoints emerge and change within the group setting.

The next step when analyzing the transcripts and fieldnotes was identifying key words, sentences and paragraphs that reflected patterns within the data and making notes to facilitate thinking about the data; this process is known as coding (Mayan, 2009). For example, a participant might state that their friends joke around and make fun of their decision to become a vegetarian; this might be coded as "teasing/mocking." Once the data were coded, categories were developed and the specific words, sentences and paragraphs that were identified and coded were placed into the appropriate categories (Mayan, personal communications, 2012). From there, sub-categories were created if the patterns in the data required sub-categories to help organize the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Each category and subsequent sub-category was then summarized with a

written description. Lastly, in order to draw conclusions and provide meaning to the data, themes were developed to explain how the categories were related (Mayring, 2000). Definitions were created for all themes and examples from the data were used to establish and exemplify these definitions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Trustworthiness

The definitions and measures of rigour vary considerably between and amongst disciplines. The positivist paradigm asks questions about the reliability, validity and generalizability of data to ascertain whether or not set research is rigorous. However, Mayan (2009) emphasized the dangers of applying these positivist approaches and conceptions of validity and rigour to qualitative research. Instead, qualitative researchers like Guba and Lincoln suggest using the concept of **trustworthiness** in place of rigour in qualitative research (Egon G Guba & Lincoln, 1981). For the purposes of this research, I have adopted Lincoln and Guba's definition of trustworthiness as it best fits this research study and my epistemological standpoint.

In 1985, Lincoln and Guba adapted their criterion of trustworthiness to include concepts such as credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). **Credibility** assesses whether the results of a study accurately represent participants' viewpoints. **Dependability** examines the extent to which the methods used and actions taken were clearly outlined and could be repeated. **Confirmability** examines the extent that the results could be

confirmed by other researchers or the extent to which the study is shaped by the participants, and not the researcher's biases. Lastly, **transferability** refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be applied to other settings or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I used several strategies to enhance the **trustworthiness** of this research. For example, I conducted a focused ethnography, which is a well-recognized and well-published approach to qualitative inquiry, enhancing the trustworthiness of the research design (Creswell, 2013). My supervisor and two of my thesis committee members reviewed my work, which helped to maintain trustworthiness of the research process (Willis, 2007).

Credibility was maintained in this study through data triangulation. That is, I collected data using three different data collection strategies; participant observation, focus groups and interviews (Willis, 2007). In addition, to ensure that I understood the meanings of participants' responses and that they would be accurately interpreted in the results section, during the field work, interview and focus groups I used probes, such as "are you saying that…?" or "can you give me an example…?".

To ensure **dependability,** I kept an audit trail, which can be found in *Appendix F: Audit Trail*. This is a documentation of my work throughout the research process. I recorded such things as ideas for adapting the interview guide and adding any additional questions that arose from the interview data.

In an attempt to ensure the **confirmability** of this study's findings, I kept a

reflective journal where I recorded my thoughts throughout the data collection and data analysis stages of my research (Willis, 2007). Confirmability was also maintained by practicing reflexivity throughout the research process. This is crucial in this research considering that fact that I am vegetarian, which may lead to concerns that I may lack objectivity in studying this phenomenon. However, studying a group from the perspective of being a member of that group can be an asset, especially when conducting qualitative research and using a focused ethnography (Lofland et al., 2006). Being "close" to the phenomenon under study lets a researcher to collect rich and meaningful data and to become intimately familiar with a particular setting, allowing the researcher to interact closely with those being studied (Lofland et al., 2006). For example, being a vegetarian allowed me to have a better understanding of participants' viewpoints and experiences. In addition to this, I used my knowledge and experience to develop relevant and important questions that were meaningful to the participants. My being a vegetarian also greatly facilitated recruitment and sites for participant observation, as I am part of several organizations and social groups where I have established a rapport and have access to several vegetarians.

It is important to note that no form of research is completely objective or value free (Mayan, 2009; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). It is impossible in both quantitative and qualitative research for the researcher to demonstrate absolute objectivity. Some level of subjectivity is always imposed upon the research, including the selection of the research questions, the methods chosen, the write-up of the results and the dissemination of one's findings. However, subjectivity in

research is almost synonymous with bias which "refers to predisposition or partiality" (Ogden, 2012). Researchers are products of their environments and as such they bring in their predispositions and values into the research. Yet, this subjectivity is not necessarily a bad thing, and when conducting a focused ethnography, objectivity and "distance" from the research may actually result in the inability to collect worthwhile, rich data (Lofland et al., 2006). In qualitative research "the real imperative is for researchers to be aware of their values and predispositions and to acknowledge them as inseparable from the research process" (Ogden, 2012, para. 5).

I recognize that as a qualitative researcher I played a critical role in knowledge generation. I took on an active role and I was the key instrument in the data collection process (Creswell, 2013). I asked the questions during interviews and focus groups, I made observations during participant observation, and I recorded fieldnotes. Ethnographic research requires that the researcher engage in direct learning through both social and physical involvement during participant observation (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Therefore, I was directly involved in the generating the knowledge from this study because I observed, formed relationships, had conversations, and engaged with participants on a deep level. Therefore, it required that I was reflexive about my role as the researcher, my relationship to the phenomenon under study and that I understood how that affected data collection, data analysis and the conclusions drawn from this research.

However, as opposed to focusing on how objective or subjective one's research is, Mayan suggests our main focus should be on how rigourous one's research is (Mayan, 2009). Reflexivity was used as a tool to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of this study. Reflexivity plays a role in the researcher's chosen paradigm, research questions, data collection and data analysis. Reflexivity can be defined as a process in which the researcher constantly thinks about his or her role in the research by engaging in critical self-evaluation and self-talk, in order to identify biases, preconceived notions, and personal beliefs that could impact the research (R. Berger, 2013). It is essentially the researcher taking a step back and critically thinking about what his or her "situatedness" within the research means, and how that may affect the conduct and the outcomes of the research (R. Berger, 2013). The goal of reflexivity in qualitative research is to allow the reader to come to a shared understanding, with the researcher, of the extent to which a researcher's subjectivities could influence the research process and for the researcher to be critically aware of these subjectivities. It is important to note that reflexivity does not guarantee the elimination of bias. Rather, this awareness helps to minimize researcher bias, enhance the quality of the research being conducted, and add to the trustworthiness of the study's findings (R. Berger, 2013).

By positioning myself within the research and sharing my journey of vegetarianism with the reader, I have attempted to make my experiences and predispositions known. Being a vegetarian has led to my curiosity about vegetarians' well-being and contributes to my passion for doing this research.

Since all research is conducted from a biased perspective, according to Willis, the key concern is not the bias itself but how the bias is dealt with throughout the research study (Willis, 2007).

My bias is dealt with in the following ways. First, I acknowledge those biases and values through having shared my story of how I became a vegetarian and about my experience transitioning into a vegetarian diet. Second, I was reflexive throughout the research process and gauged when I saw my own biases influencing the research study and strived to balance my views with the views of the participants. Third, I received ongoing support, critiques and advice from my thesis advisory committee. As non-vegetarians, they were able to provide a different perspective and point out issues or biases that I may have overlooked.

Lastly, in terms of **transferability**, the conclusions from this study are not designed to be quantitatively generalized; rather, the conclusions from this study are context specific. However, by providing a rich description of the setting and participants' accounts, the results may be abstracted and applied across different settings (Willis, 2007). Therefore, using the rich description provided, one's own judgment can be used to determine if the findings can be justifiably applied, for example, to other Canadian provinces or to other dietary choices.

Further, trustworthiness involves methodological coherence of the research conducted. In the current research, methodological coherence was demonstrated in the following way. My research was guided by my research purpose; that is, to explore the psychological and social well-being of people who follow a

vegetarian diet. I explored this through a focused ethnography, which is coherent with an interpretivist/constructivist epistemological standpoint. Finally, a qualitative content analysis, as was performed in this study, is coherent with focused ethnographic approaches since it provides a rich description of the research findings (Mayan, 2009).

Chapter 6: Accounts of Participant Observation, Interviews and Focus Groups Including Participant Characteristics

Participant Observation

Throughout this research I engaged in four accounts of participant observation. The nature of the fieldwork is outlined briefly below. Both descriptive and reflective fieldnotes were taken during each participant observation.

Participant observation one.

- Community Group: The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta.
- Date, Time & Location: Monday February 22nd 2014, 5:30pm-7:30pm, Café Mosaic (10844 82 Ave NW, Edmonton, AB T6E).
- Description of the Event: This was an informal event and a chance for university students to "veg out" after midterms. We went to Café Mosaic for vegetarian food and drink.
- Note: One of the participants present at this event also took part in an individual interview prior to the event; none took part in the focus groups.

Participant observation two.

- Community Group: Raw Vegan Edmonton.
- Date, Time & Location: Tuesday March 4th 2014, 7:00pm-9:00pm, King Edward Park, Small Hall (8008 81 St NW, Edmonton, AB T6C 2V4).

- Description of the Event: This was a film showing of "Forks Over Knives." Forks Over Knives examines the provocative claim that most, if not all, of the degenerative diseases that afflict us can be controlled, or even reversed, by rejecting our present menu of animal-based and processed foods. Website: www.forksoverknives.com
- Note: None of the individuals present at this event took part in the interviews or focus groups.

Participant observation three.

- Community Group: The Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta.
- Date, Time & Location: Saturday March 15th 2014, 2:00pm-4:00pm, Padmanadi (10740 - 101 Street, Edmonton, AB, T5H 2S3).
- Description of the Event: Dr. Ze'ev Gross, a family physician, discussed how a vegan diet changed his own and the lives of his patients who were willing to try it. He gave a guest lecture on "Where do you get your protein?". This guest lecture was followed by a vegan buffet lunch.
- Note: None of the individuals present at this event took part in the interviews or focus groups.

Participant observation four.

- Community Group: The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University Alberta.
- Date, Time & Location: Wednesday March 26th 2014, 5:00pm-7:00pm,

Education Building, Room 129, University of Alberta.

- Description of the Event: Dr. Howard Nye, a profession in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Alberta, gave a presentation on why everyone should be vegan. He provided an ethical argument against the consumption of animal products.
- Note: Two of the individuals present at this event took part in the individual interviews prior to attending the presentation; none took part in the focus groups.

Individual Interviews

Data saturation was reached with 19 semi-structured individual interviews, which were conducted between January 2014 and April 2014. Purposeful and maximum variation sampling resulted in variation among participants, briefly described as follows: 15 of the 19 interviewees were female and the other four were male; nine participants were vegan and 10 were vegetarian; participants had been vegetarian/vegan for an average of 7.5 years but ranging from a few months to over 20 years; nine of the 19 participants were not a part of any vegetarian organizations. The participants were a relatively Eurocentric group and were culturally homogeneous, only two participants were of non-European decent (Chinese and Indian). The interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour in length and on average were 48 minutes long.

Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted in addition to the individual interviews in March of 2014. This number was chosen since it has been shown to take approximately three focus groups to reach saturation, as was the case in this study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The first focus group consisted of three male participants, the second of four female participants and the third focus group consisted of three female participants. Nine of the participants were vegetarian while only one focus group participant was vegan. The average length of time participants had been vegetarian for was approximately 7.5 years, with a range of 9 months to 15 years. Of those individuals participating in the focus group, half were members of a vegetarian community or organization, while the other half did not belong to such a group.

The focus groups were gender homogenous, which, although not intended, had the consequence of allowing a good conversational flow. The male participants especially appeared to bond based on shared gender and the associated experiences as a male vegetarian. The small number of participants in each focus group was ideal for this study as it allowed participants more opportunities to share their experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The participants in each focus group had not met one another prior to participating in the focus group, which was an asset to the discussion, as their unfamiliarity with one another led to a more detailed discussion. Of the 10 focus group participants, five of the participants had also participated in individual interviews, but were spread out among the focus groups (two participants in focus group one, two

participants in focus group two, and one participant in focus group three). The other five participants had not been involved in other aspects of the study. The focus groups ranged from 1 hour to 1 hour and 42 minutes in length.

Note: In the subsequent results chapters, sex-appropriate pseudonyms are used to differentiate participants while protecting their confidentiality. For example, if a quotation came from a male individual's interview it would be followed by a name [*Jeffery*]. If a quotation came from a focus group, it is followed by a name and the letters FG which stands for "focus group" [e.g., *Jeffery (FG)*]. If an example came from my fieldnotes, it would be followed by the participant observation number from which the fieldnotes were taken [*Participant Observation One*]. Data from the focus groups, interviews and accounts of participant observation were combined to generate the results in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 7: Rationales Behind a Vegetarian Diet

Results

Participants reported having adopted a vegetarian diet for three main reasons: concerns for animal welfare, personal health concerns, and environmental concerns. There were also several unique reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet and some participants expressed more than one reason for having adopted a vegetarian diet. Descriptions of these reasons, along with supporting quotations are outlined below. In addition, this research found that most participants could recall and reflect on the exact moment when they decided to become a vegetarian.

Concerns for Animal Welfare

One of the prominent reasons for becoming vegetarian was participants' concerns for animal welfare. Whether their motivation stemmed from a particular movie or reading a book, a sense of guilt, a deep connection to animals, or a traumatic experience, these participants were deeply concerned for the welfare of non-human animals.

Many participants believed that a meat-based diet contributed to the unnecessary pain and suffering that animals, raised for food, endure. Changing their diet to exclude meat was a way to avoid causing harm to non-human animals. Many participants talked about how they could not find a just cause for eating meat, and discussed the idea of how humans do not need to consume meat

to survive; averring that by eating meat, they would be contributing to the unnecessary pain and suffering of animals. Their motivations stemmed from their knowledge of the poor living conditions of many animals raised for food. They cited examples such as unsanitary conditions, inadequate medical attention, unnatural diets, gestation pens, poor treatment, abuse and poor well-being. Participants also believed that the meat industry, the way we eliminate animals, and the slaughtering techniques used are very inhumane. By avoiding the consumption of meat, and hence not supporting the meat industry, participants felt they could circumvent animal suffering to some extent.

> "For some people it's just health related, but not for myself it wasn't, it had nothing to do with my health, it had everything to do with animal welfare." *–Marilyn*

> "…there are better ways to do it, and the overall consumption, the way it's produced, and how it gets to the supermarket to our tables is incredibly inhumane, incredibly flawed, just malicious, ignorantly malicious in a lot of ways, when there are much better systems out there that, we've eaten meat for thousands of years, we know how to do it that doesn't require gestation pens and animals being in a trough, where the best quality of beef actually comes from the last few cows that are so full of endorphins they begin to tenderize themselves, which is just disgusting." *–David*

> "I guess animal ethics; I just don't think there's any moral justification for the exploitation of non-human animals…" *–Melissa*

Some individuals' ethical motivations stemmed from watching a movie or reading a book. Many participants explained that reading a book like "Eating Animals" influenced them to become a vegetarian. Participants explained that reading these books and learning about the unethical practices of farming animals for food "opened their eyes" and made them question food-production practices.

> "I mean the thought of animals suffering also doesn't make me happy. The book Eating Animals, that's a good one." –*Jody*

For others, it was watching a documentary on the food industry or factory farming that motivated them to switch to a vegetarian diet. They spoke of the powerful imagery and lasting effect these resources had on them. Films such as "Earthlings" and "Forks over Knives" were noted as some of the most influential documentaries having a significant impact on their dietary choices. Participants noted that these films had a lasting effect on their moral conscience and caused them to think about their food on a much deeper level.

> "…the documentary that I watched in 2009 where animals are kept in these really small, or were like caged up and like chickens are kept in these unsanitary conditions and they're so distressed and they're picking at each other, coming down with diseases and being placed on antibiotics and just living a really horrendous life and not something that I would associate with animals that we eat... So I think it was a real awakening watching that documentary." –*Linda*

> "Not just watching horrible clips on YouTube, that's shock value, but actually watching a film like Earthlings. I think that was the one that cemented it, that it wasn't just gonna be I'm doing this and I'm enjoying it, it was I'm doing this and it's not gonna change, I'm not gonna go back, if I have to find alternative means to supplement nutrients or whatever after watching that film in particular there's no going back, you'd be a horrible human being to do so." –*David*

Another reason individuals expressed for becoming vegetarian was a sense of guilt when eating meat. Prior to adopting a vegetarian diet, some participants indicated that when they ate beef or chicken they felt guilty afterwards, as if they were doing something wrong. For many, this sense of guilt was enough to drive them to change their diet. Clearly, these participants had prior concerns and discomfort about eating meat, and it appeared that this engendered guilt, which

grew to the point of making a dietary change. They described feeling "deep down" that eating meat was not necessary, that it wrong, and unfair to non-human animals.

> "I've always really cared about animals and I've always felt a bit of guilt eating meat. That's what I guess first started planted the seed in my head I guess you could say is that I always felt a bit guilty thinking did this animal have a good life and then I became perturbed that there is no way to find out if the animal had a good life." *–Debbie*

> "I didn't like eating animals and it made me uncomfortable and I actually thought about what the actual thing was that I was eating, just didn't make me happy that I was eating animals, so eventually I just resolved to cut it out completely." *–Sara (FG)*

> "Vegetarianism was just kind of obvious. The idea of eating animals was gross to me, just felt wrong. There wasn't really anything in particular that happened but just thinking about it, why am I doing this, it's not a good idea…Like all of it was just so inhumane and I didn't really want to be associated with that." *–Jill*

In addition, some individuals expressed a deep connection to animals, often from a young age, which led them to a vegetarian diet. Some participants described themselves as youngsters having made a connection between the meat that was on their plate and the living animal that it used to be. They described themselves as having a genuine concern for all animals, regardless if they were companion or farm animals. It was this deep connection to animals that started the process of deciding to adopt a vegetarian diet.

> "I feel like probably around that age is when you really actually start to make those connections about the world around you, so as soon as I got that information I was like where do we draw the line? Why do we love some and kill others? And that's what the real change was." *–Marianne*

> "I was thinking about animals as objects kind of, and I didn't really think about that much. And I just started thinking in Ecuador they do actually

> have intelligence, pigs are like as far as three or four-year-olds apparently. And chickens are proven to be really intelligent too. And then when I thought about it, later on from a biological perspective, to think that somethin' has a perception of the world, that's just crazy when you think of how complex perception is rods and cones and all the phenomenality of that. And it just doesn't seem right to take that away just for a burger on a plate." –*Justin*

> "I must've been two or three, but when they said we were having a turkey for Thanksgiving I thought we were bringing a live turkey, I was so excited for our new pet. I was so excited, and then I saw this frozen deformed fleshy thing and my mom has this picture of me just looking horrified looking at it." –*Gina*

One participant had a traumatic experience that prompted her to become vegetarian. Seeing an animal being slaughtered and then having it served to her on a plate upset her and made her rethink her eating habits.

> "I went back to my hometown and it's a small little village in southern China. And basically you select the animals that you want to eat and they slaughter it in front of you and they present you with this extravagant meal with different types of meats, and I couldn't eat any of it. So I guess just seeing the animals being slaughtered really upset me and it was really gruesome." -*Linda*

Thus, compassion for non-human animals was a key motivation for many participants to become a vegetarian. The thought of subjecting animals to harm, when it is not necessary, left feelings of guilt for individuals when they ate meat. Thus, for some vegetarians, the motivation to choose a meat-free diet stemmed from a combination of a desire to eliminate the guilt felt when they ate meat, poultry or fish and feel good about their foods they were eating, combined with a desire to reduce the amount of harm caused to animals.

Personal Health Concerns

Another prominent reason for becoming vegetarian was personal health concerns. Adopting a vegetarian diet to improve one's health and well-being came up often in the interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Weight loss, weight maintenance and improved overall health were some of the most common health reasons for becoming vegetarian.

For some participants, weight loss was an important health and aesthetic concern that prompted a vegetarian diet. Some participants considered a vegetarian or vegan diet to be a good way to lose weight or maintain a healthy body weight.

> "So I said I know it's not gonna be the exercise for me, so it has to be what I'm eating that's gonna control my weight." *–Jennifer*

> "I did some research and I read that it had a lot of health benefits for it, and when I came to university I gained a lot of weight, so I was like OK, maybe this is the answer to try and get me back on track. And so I became vegan…" *-Jennifer (FG)*

Some participants clarified that the choice of a vegetarian diet was initially prompted by the desire to lose weight, although other motivations may have emerged at some point.

> "And I think my initial reasons for becoming a vegetarian were weight related, I thought protein was fattening." *–Claire*

For other participants, their reasoning went beyond the aesthetics and health benefits of weight loss to improved overall health. This included goals of

reducing their risk of disease and illness, decreasing their cholesterol levels, improving their overall physical health, and improving their nutritional profile.

> "I got kidney stones and they said to stop eating as much red meat and watching your diet more. And then I started researching a little bit about how to eat better, I realized that meat is not very necessarily healthy for you to be eating it, so that was the other reason." *–Nathan*

Some stories were quite dramatic, such as a description by two women *(Participant Observation Two*) of having undergone near death experiences, which motivated them to change their diet completely and adopt a plant based diet without meat.

Others attributed friends' and family members' illnesses to diets that included meat. Seeing family members with chronic diseases eating an unhealthy diet motivated then to adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet, believing it could decrease their risk of getting certain diseases. Some participants also relayed their belief that a vegetarian diet could cure serious diseases such as cancer and encouraged their family members to also adopt a vegetarian diet to improve their health. One such individual (*Participant Observation Three*) stated that as he started to age the people around him started to age too. He talked about his friends and family members were either dying, becoming sick, getting diagnosed with a chronic disease, putting on weight or becoming increasingly less energetic. He mentioned that he gets a bit of "reaction" and people are quite surprised to learn he is a vegan (given that he is a middle-aged man). He said, others can laugh and question his decision but he is content knowing he is contributing positively to his health. He also talked about his mother having been recently diagnosed with cancer and said

that he is trying to teach her to eat vegan to reverse her cancer (he's seen documentaries of this being done).

However, some participants used the rationale of health concerns as the "public" reason for becoming vegetarian, finding it more socially acceptable than their true reason for their dietary choice. For example, during an interview, one participant initially described his primary reason for becoming vegetarian as concern for his health.

> "I think I relate that to health perspective. For me, most likely the primary reason is the health perspective. My mother was diagnosed with colorectal cancer, which I think there's a link to her intake of red meat…" *–Mike*

However, later in the same interview, when we delved deeper into his experiences as a vegetarian, and perhaps after feeling more comfortable in the interview, Mike revealed that his actual reason for becoming a vegetarian was out of concern for animals, not for health reasons. He indicated that he had never verbalized this before. He went on to say that he had always felt that the more socially-acceptable response to the question "Why did you become a vegetarian?" was because "health reasons".

> "Between you and I and between the recording, I've never said that, I'll be really very honest here, I think it's more of an ethical animal perspective, why I'm like that in my decision, but I feel like going on a social acceptance sort of thing and I'll bring the health point." -*Mike*

One participant directly linked health and well-being of animals with her own health. She explained how animals are treated inhumanely and were fed an unnatural diet, which sprouted concerns about her own health when consuming these products.

> "…and then stemming from the ethical reason there's the health reason as well. Well do I want to consume animals who are pumped with all these antibiotics and who are sick and who are fed unnatural diet? So I wasn't sure about that either, so I guess there's many underlying reason for why I became a vegetarian." *–Linda*

Concerns for individual health and well-being seemed to be a common rationale for a vegetarian diet. Although their underlying motivations may differ (weight loss, avoiding disease and illness, curing disease and illness, connecting other issues to their health), concerns for their physical health were evident. However, for some participants it was not their own health alone that motivated them, but health concerns combined with concerns for animal welfare and the environment.

Environmental Concerns

Lastly, when it came to prominent reasons for becoming a vegetarian, environmental concerns were common amongst participants. Many participants reported having adopted a vegetarian diet to improve the health and well-being of the planet and those that inhabit it. Some of the main reasons stated for becoming vegetarian were the inefficiencies of farming animals for food and concerns about climate change.

There was a common concern about the detrimental impact that mass food production and factory farming have on the environment. This was true for both land animals, such as cattle and pigs, as well as fish and concerns about water. Participants cited land degradation, pollution, inefficient use of resources, overuse of natural resources and global warming as reasons for becoming vegetarian.

Many participants felt that their eating habits had a strong impact on the environment and felt they could contribute positively to the health of the environment by giving up meat.

> "It just makes me sad to see the environmental impact of factory farming, etcetera and so I wanted to really reduce my footprint and I felt like eating has a lot to do with that." –*Jody*

> "Well I think there's a massive environmental impact too when it comes to the mass production of animals, and animal agriculture. Obviously it really contributes to emissions and to the pollution of ground water, to water consumption just to raise animals, takes a lot of water. And land use, there's a lot of forest destruction and that, deforestation to accommodate livestock." –*Marilyn*

> "And then with fish it's just straight up overfishing, I mean various fish stocks all over the world are collapsing so really we kinda need to change the approach that we eat fish. And it's very hard to get even truly sustainably caught fish, stuff like shrimp is something like 90% of the catch is thrown away. I feel like by eating shrimp you're endorsing that and I couldn't. So I mean now I'm way less focused on the inhumaneness of the meat production because I think the environmental issue is way more pressing for mankind as a whole..." -*Jeffery*

The thought that a meat-based diet is an inefficient way to eat and gain nutrients also came up in the environmental argument. The idea that foods such as grains and corn are grown in large quantities in order to feed the livestock, which in turn, feeds humans that eat that the livestock, was raised by some participants as being an inefficient use of energy and resources. Participants reported that by taking on a vegetarian diet they could limit their contribution to what they perceived as the inefficiencies and wastefulness of farming animals for food.

> "I'm concerned about land being cleared for livestock, and it also seems a bit wasteful to me the amount of crops that are grown just to feed livestock as opposed to just feeding people directly. It's not an efficient way of getting calories and you know when there's so many hungry people in the world I just don't see it as being a good choice, a good use of land and

> resources and water, and then there's also just the pollution of it all." - *Jody*

> "…'cause of environment reasons like increased pollution, you need more land to produce meat, and that sort of thing." *–Jeffery (FG)*

> "… then I sort of learned about all the other things, so about environmental destruction, about how much grain animals consume compared to how many humans don't have food who could be eating grains. Factory farming, I learned more about, pollution, all the other kinds of things that come up in arguments for not eating animals." – *Marianne*

Further environmental concerns were centered on climate change and the increasing damage that global warming causes in our environment. Participants talked about the role of livestock farming and meat production in climate change. In addition, participants were concerned with the politics surrounding the meat industry and the negative effect that large agricultural organizations are having on smaller companies and local markets.

> "And if we want to continue living on this planet we're going to have to make choices because global warming is not slowing down and livestock production is the number one cause of that. And the UN's been telling us since the '90s to reduce our meat consumption, so I can say that all I want but we have very conservative international government organizations telling you to stop." *–Melissa*

> "I have a problem with the environmental degradation, I have a problem with their practices leading to the spread of infectious diseases, I have a problem with them pushing out small farmers, I have a problem with them patenting things like rices that are needed for people in the developing world. So I have a serious problem with big agra." *–Bailey*

An interesting and unexpected finding amongst some of those who held strong environmental motivations for becoming vegetarian was a seemingly incompatible respect for hunters. However, this may have arisen out of a sense that hunting one's own meat, is less reprehensible than buying meat at a store.

One participant used the term "conscious omnivore," indicating that she appreciated that at least hunters know where their food comes from and what it takes to get it on their plate. They expressed having more respect for someone who hunts and eats their own meat than someone who is ignorant of where their food comes from. In addition, they perceived hunters to be less wasteful, more environmentally cautious and to have a deeper connection to animals than non-hunters, values which vegetarians shared.

> "And so I know everyone really well and a lot of people are vegetarian or conscious omnivores. So a lot of people… they do their own hunting. So I think that's kind a cool too. They know that the processing and the mass production isn't a good thing, but they're like I still wanna eat meat, so they go out and get it themselves. I think that's an interesting aspect too." *–Jennifer*

> "I think more traditional ways, such as hunting, I'm not against it. I'm not a hunter but I'm not against people that hunt and that hunt for their food, I think that's how we became who we are is by doing that." *–Mike*

> "I believe in the slow food movement that's happening, where groups are going out and teaching bow hunting in season and how to use the entire animal, and then break everything down and use everything. I think it's great. It's not supporting supermarkets and it's not supporting factory farming. So as a vegan people are often taken aback by that." *-David*

> "But I find sometimes hunters are even closer to me on the spectrum than most general, let's say meat eaters or people because they have that connection with 1) killing an animal, and 2) the environment." *-Danielle*

Environmental concerns were cited as a major motivator for individuals to adopt a vegetarian diet. In these participants' minds, the desire to reduce one's carbon footprint and promote sustainability is directly related to the health of our planet and the health of human beings.

Unique Reasons

Beyond concerns about the well-being of non-human animals, human health and the environment, there were a number of unique motivations for becoming a vegetarian. These motivations for becoming vegetarian did not fit clearly under one of the prominent motivations.

Several participants described themselves as being "disgusted" at the sight and taste of meat.

> "Yeah, people say 'Don't you miss the taste?', I'm like 'No, not even close.' it's disgusting to me. Well, as like any decaying flesh would be disgusting." -Melissa

For these individuals, a strong textural and visual aversion to meat prompted their meat free diet. For others, the motivation was a simple dislike of meat.

> "I think it was I've never been overly attracted to the texture of most meat growing up, so that was one thing. I did moderately enjoy some meals with meat but not most of it…" *–Mike*

> "I started thinking about meat it actually isn't delicious, it's everything we do to it to add flavour to it. Then I started thinking about it 'cause living in South America you eat just meat or tasteless vegetables, so it was kind of a shocking, yeah it's not delicious. And then I was thinking what is the reason to eat meat, there isn't really a good reason that I could come up with, so that's when I decided to become a vegetarian." -*Nathan*

> "…not really caring for meat, being uncomfortable with it. I think now it's transitioned into kind of I feel like I don't personally need it to feel well. And so taking it would be more than I deserve." *–Janice (FG)*

Experiences while traveling abroad was the reason why one individual decided to give up their omnivorous lifestyle. Being exposed to foods that they found

aversive to eat and drawing connections between these foods and other forms of animals was enough to cause one participant to dislike meat and give it up all together.

> "Whereas living there it was a struggle to eat anything and then trying to force yourself to eat these parts of an animal that you wouldn't want to eat, forcing yourself to eat animals you wouldn't want to eat, like monkeys…. once a monkey has been boiled to get all its fur off it looks too human, and then when you skin it and start hacking it apart, you get the little portions, like a half a ribcage, or a hand, or something like that it shocks you into…. they're freakishly human, and then that got me thinking where is the line between what's acceptable to eat, what's not acceptable to eat." *–Nathan*

> "And some of the other animals that I ate that I wasn't OK with eating were parrots, which I had a pet parrot at home. So we're eating these things and it just kind of shocked my system into why do we eat meat, why do I eat meat, made me question it." *–Nathan*

For this individual, experiencing vegetarian ethnic and cultural foods while traveling also made him realize how appetizing a vegetarian diet could be.

> "I spent six weeks travelling through south India and saw an entire lifestyle that was very welcome and open to the vegetarian lifestyle. The food was amazing, better than the food here, better than anywhere I've ever eaten and it was all vegetarian fare, or vegan depending on the communities I was in. So that made me rethink what's the importance of eating meat." *–Nathan*

For one female participant, feminist values led her towards a vegetarian diet. She had a strong view that all living beings should be treated equally and saw vegetarianism as a way to resist what she described as the patriarchal nature of the meat and dairy industries.

> "Well, I guess it's anti-speciesism, if as a feminist I want control over my reproductive organs, I think that should extend to all animals, and I think humans too are animals, and the fact that we exploit female animals for their eggs and their milk and we take their children away, we artificially

> inseminate them, all those violations which we can never have consent for. And I just think it's a very patriarchal instrumentalization of animals that is unnecessary. I have thousands of reasons, but I just don't see how humans feel entitled to the bodies of others who have their own interests in living, and it's not to be in service to us." *–Danielle*

"The Moment"

One of the interesting phenomena that arose from the interviews and focus groups was that participants could recall the distinct moment they decided to become a vegetarian; a moment where their thought process changed and they decided they could no longer eat meat.

> "I watched one of those documentaries and then I was 100% committed and I never really looked back. It was definitely not gradual. There was a moment that 'I don't like this at all. I need to think about this more' and then I watched the documentary and it was like, OK, I knew I was done before this but now I'm really done." *–Debbie*

> "So I started riding horses when I was probably six or seven, and we got horses that came from the slaughterhouse, they had just purchased them off the truck because they saw them and they were really nice they went to an auction. I was talking to my dad and I rode one of the horses, and he was such a sweet horse and I was like I don't know how anyone could have eaten them. How can someone eat a horse? And he's like well how can someone eat any animal, it's just another animal. And I was like oh. And he was like oh no. Yeah, so I stopped eating red meat." *-Marianne*

> "So I think it just comes from like love of animals, it clicks at some point when you're a kid, and it clicks differently for people I think. Some people are like oh a cow is beef and no big deal, but some people it's like a mind blowing thing, like whoa, that's not cool." *–Jessica*

> "And I remember thinking, in fact I remember it really clearly, I don't know why, but I remember going upstairs and sitting in my room and thinking it's more authentically who I am to eat this way, and I just felt really good about it. I don't know, it seems like such an inconsequential thing to feel so whole about, but it really did." *–Claire*

In addition, most participants could remember their last non-vegetarian meal. For some participants, it was when they were half way through their meal and mid bite that they decided that did not want to eat meat anymore.

> "So I planned my last meat meal on the day before I moved out of home, had my mom's spaghetti sauce, I moved into residence, and quit eating meat." *–Janice (FG)*

> "I'm pretty sure I was 19, I'm 41 now. The last meat I ate was a tuna fish sandwich and I couldn't finish it, I was half way through and I was like OK this is it 'cause I guess there was a lot of, I don't know, unease…" - *Alisha (FG)*

> "Cause I remember that night and I always had eggs in the morning for protein before I went for a run. And then I woke up the next day and I was gonna make eggs, and I literally was like holding the egg and I was like I'm done with this. So that was a distinct moment…" *–Jessica*

> "And then my dad got a cat fish that hadn't been filleted or anything, and we have cats and I was like oh, it has a little face. And that's when I stopped fish." *–Marianne*

Discussion

Food is fundamentally important to everyone. What is really interesting is the variation in food choices and the reasoning behind these choices. The aim of this part of the research was to explore why people chose to become vegetarian. Although some participants were vegan and others were vegetarian, there were commonalities in the reasons cited for adopting a meat-free diet. The commonalities were as follows: concern for the welfare of animals; concerns about one's individual health; and concern for the environment.

The animal-welfare and personal-health motivations are consistent with previously published knowledge on the motivations for becoming vegetarian. For example, in a qualitative study conducted in the United States and Canada of vegetarians' motivations, improving animal welfare and reducing harm to animals, along with personal health emerged as the primary motivators for adopting a vegetarian diet (N. Fox & Ward, 2008). In that study, participants also discussed their view that becoming vegetarian prevents future health threats. Similarly, the current study found that vegetarians who adopted their diet for health reasons sought to avoid chronic disease and improve their health. However, the current study also found that vegetarians' may be misinformed about the health benefits of vegetarianism. For example, participants talked about becoming vegetarian after a near-death experience (due to health problems) and others relayed their beliefs that following a vegetarian diet can cure cancer and other forms of chronic disease. So not only were participants adopting their diet to improve their physical health, but also to cure or rid their bodies of life threatening illnesses. Because this information came from the participant observation data collection component, it was unclear whether in these cases, a vegetarian diet was used as a substitute for effective medical interventions. If so, this is potentially a matter of substantial concern, and this speaks to the importance of publicizing accurate information about the benefits and limits to the benefits of a vegetarian diet.

However, contrary to my findings, environmental reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet were very uncommon in the study by Fox and Ward (2008), with

only one of 33 participants citing having adopted a vegetarian diet primarily for environmental reasons (N. Fox & Ward, 2008). Other studies have also suggested that health and animal ethics, but not environmental concerns, are the primary motivators for becoming vegetarian (Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998; Janda & Trocchia, 2001; Radnitz et al., 2015; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997). Perhaps this is because environmental motivations may have been categorized by respondents and/or researchers as ethical motivations as they both fall under the envelope of altruistic motivations benefiting the environment and animal welfare. This may also be a result of when this research was conducted compared to those studies identified in the literature. Most (but not all) of these studies were conducted ten to 20 years ago, therefore the lack of prior findings in relation to environmental motivations may be because of recent heightened concern and awareness of environmental concerns and their relationship with food sources. The issues of climate change, the increasing number of natural disasters and dwindling natural resources are actively being brought to the public's attention in the popular press. In addition, despite the paucity of literature citing environmental motivations for becoming vegetarian, there is some evidence from the peer reviewed literature that a vegetarian diet can have a positive impact on the environment (Marlow et al., 2009; Joan Sabaté & Soret, 2014). Thus the results of the current study, in which environmental concerns was one of the key reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet, might reflect this more general attention and concern about the environment. One might expect that future studies will also

identify this as an emerging and common rationale among those choosing a vegetarian diet.

In addition to health, animal ethics and the environment, findings from this study indicated that there were a few unique and personal reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet. One of the less common reasons was simply a distaste for meat, and this has also been identified in other studies. For example, a study in the United States using survey data examined adult vegetarians motivations for adopting the diet (Hines, 2010). Participants were asked to rank general motivations including attempts to improve health, concerns for animal welfare, concerns about the environment, vegetarianism being part of their religion or decreasing world hunger. They were also given the option to identify other motivations and found that the most common added response was aversion to the thought/taste of meat, including comments about rotting flesh being disgusting and simply not caring for the taste of meat (Hines, 2010).

However, the findings in the current study around travel experience being the impetus for aversion to meat, and linking meat with a patriarchal society (i.e. vegetarianism as a political statement) seemed to be rather unique. This might mean that there are many unexplored unique motivations that go unreported in the literature. Understanding these unique reasons, along with mainstream reasons reported in the literature, may further our understanding of vegetarians' motivations and help us to better understand the experiences and viewpoints of vegetarians.

An unexpected finding was several vegetarian's statements of respect for hunters. Even though hunters deliberately cause harm to animals, many participants expressed the view that those who hunted and ate their own meat were regarded highly, compared to those who ate and purchased meat from a store. This may be because of the perception (accurate or not) on these participants' part that hunters share many of the same values as vegetarians, such as a deep connection with animals, a concern for the environment and concerns about mass meat production. These perceived shared values contribute to a sense of shared identity, allowing these individuals to hold a high level of respect for, and feel closer to, hunters than they did omnivores who did not kill the animal themselves. This deep connection and respect for hunters speaks to the power of shared identities and shared values and to the heterogeneity of vegetarians' ideas and conceptions about meat consumption.

Another surprising finding was the notion of "the moment". Participants spoke of recalling the distinct moment when they made the choice to become vegetarian. They can remember the place, time, what they were doing and what they were eating. For some, this moment was over 20 years ago but they could still recall the details of it. This is a finding that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been documented in the literature. The decision to become a vegetarian seemed to have such a profound impact on individuals that the moment they changed their diet had a lasting impression on them, suggesting that changing their diet was quite a profound phenomenon. One explanation for this may be that

it was a moment in their lives when they made a choice to defy the (omnivorous) societal norm, and adopted a new identity as a vegetarian.

For the most part, vegetarians and vegans appear to associate themselves with an identity that values such things as animal rights, the environment, and/or living a healthy lifestyle. Both vegetarianism as a diet, and vegetarianism as a lifestyle choice, are associated with a vegetarian identity. For example, a vegetarian diet is associated with eliminating the consumption of meat, poultry, and fish. Adopting a vegetarian lifestyle can be understood as moving beyond the vegetarian diet itself, and extends to such lifestyle choices as avoidance of products tested on animals (e.g., cosmetics and cleaning products), and not wearing or using leather products.

The results of this study are important because they add to understanding of why vegetarians and vegans give up certain foods and products. These findings complement the primarily quantitative literature on vegetarian motivations by using an open-ended qualitative approach, and capture direct quotes clearly understanding, from the participants' point of view, why they felt vegetarianism was the right choice for them. In addition, this study provides details into our understanding of the meaning these motivations. For example, this research answers the question of what a health reason for becoming vegetarian means. The rationales amongst health vegetarians may vary greatly as demonstrated by participants in this study. Health reasons could mean losing weight, curing disease and illness or promoting longevity. In the same way, it distinguishes between the

various rationales for animal welfare and the environment and provides an understanding of how vegetarians interpret these motivations.

Even though the core motivations expressed by participants (moral, health, and environmental motivations) are already prevalent in the literature, an understanding of individual's rationales for becoming vegetarian is imperative in understanding the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians. The reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet do not only influence food selection, but may also influence other lifestyle behaviours which are closely connected to an individual's health and well-being.

Chapter 8: The Social Well-Being of Vegetarians

Results

When asked to reflect on what social well-being meant to them, study participants listed such aspects as interpersonal relationships with friends and family members, as well as well-being related to their social surroundings. Participants generally had not anticipated the social implications of their decisions to abstain from consuming meat. However, a common thread in the findings from participant observations, interviews and focus groups was that becoming vegetarian had a profound impact on their relationships, both positive and negative. During the interviews and focus groups, I asked participants to reflect on their perceived social well-being in relation to their vegetarian diet. Well-being was not defined for participants, rather participants were given the freedom to reflect on and discuss their social well-being as they saw fit in relation to their vegetarian diet. Participants noted many social challenges in becoming vegetarian, but also noted many socially rewarding aspects that affected their social well-being. Of note, many participants reported that their social worlds changed drastically from what they had anticipated.

Social Challenges

When exploring social well-being, a common theme was the social challenges inherent in being a vegetarian in a largely non-vegetarian social setting. Here, the term social challenges were defined by the participants as events or situations that challenged participants' social well-being. These social

challenges included: travel, unsupportive friends, unsupportive family, teasing/mocking, stereotyping, social aspects of dining out, being a guest at someone's house/feeling like an imposition, avoiding social gatherings/social isolation, downplaying the fact that they are a vegetarian, fear of what others may think, talking to people about vegetarianism, being constantly questioned as a result of their diet, gender specific issues, and changes to one's social group. However, was that vegetarians also reported having developed many techniques to manage some of these challenges and enhance their social well-being.

Travel. Many participants expressed the difficulty in maintaining their vegetarian and vegan diets while travelling. Having traveled before as an omnivore, or having travelled with omnivores, made them realize the difficulty in embracing their vegetarian identity in new settings. This change in their social environment resulted in unfamiliar cuisine, language barriers, limited vegetarian options as well as cultural customs, which posed a challenge to their vegetarian diet and their interactions with the environment around them. In addition, participants sometimes felt excluded from the culinary scene, expressing that they chose not to consume many of the local customary dishes containing meat and animal products. Participants also felt less comfortable with their vegetarian identity in these new social environments, unsure of how their diet would be understood and accepted by others. This lack of comfort with one's identity in new social settings can pose a threat to participants' social well-being. However, participants did note that they went back to embracing their vegetarian identity when they returned home to their familiar social environment.

> …one conversation I had in a restaurant in Barbados, I asked if they had anything without meat on the menu, 'cause from what I was reading there wasn't. And the first response was we have chicken. I said that's still meat, I don't eat anything with a heartbeat, so do you have any wholly vegetarian food options? We have fish. So they were trying to help me, but not quite there." *–Nathan*

> "…when you're traveling it can be pretty awful. I mean when I was recently vegetarian I went on a trip across Europe and I ended up in Eastern Europe where all the specialty foods are sausages basically, that was quite difficult and I ended having to search for Chinese restaurants and stuff to get vegetarian food. And sometimes I do think it's a bit of a shame to go somewhere and not be able to try the specialty dishes, so I kind of toyed with the idea of when I'm travelling not doing it, but I just think it's kind of easier." *–Jeffery*

> "Yeah, for sure and travelling can be rough depending on what country you're going to. That's one time I'll break the veganism if I need to. If I'm going somewhere where it's gonna be tough and I'm not gonna be able to explain very well in another language. I'll go to being just vegetarian or eat in at the hostel a lot more, that sort of thing." *–Gina*

Unsupportive friends. Another social challenge participants expressed was having their friends be unsupportive of their vegetarian diet. Many commented on how difficult it was having their friends question or disapprove of their vegetarian diet. Being treated differently, and often negatively, as a vegetarian affected participants' sense of social well-being, leaving them feeling annoyed with and disconnected from others. As others began to treat them differently because of their dietary choices, vegetarians realized that their identity was no longer part of the cultural norm, and could be described as taking on a new and deviant identity (using the term "deviant identity" as described in Chapter 1 of this thesis).

This deviant identity associated with becoming vegetarian resulted from an identity transition from an omnivore to a vegetarian, in which socially marked differences differentiate the two groups. The idea of "boundary work" can be usefully introduced here. In sociology, the idea of "boundary work", as it applies to groups of people, refers to the process by which individuals differentiate themselves from others who are not part of their social group and, conversely, find similarities and a sense of shared identity amongst those individuals who are part of their social group. This creates a sense of group membership among those individuals considered part of the in-group and a sense of social exclusion for those individuals considered part of the out-group. More specifically, in the current context boundary work refers to the idea that vegetarians differentiated themselves from omnivores through their dietary practices, and, from participants' perspectives, omnivores seemed to have differentiated themselves from vegetarians. Therefore, as participants transitioned from omnivorous diets to vegetarian diets, their boundary work needed to be renegotiated as tensions arose in their existing relationships and they began to form new relationships.

> "Backlash from peers and from I guess "grownups", your parental generation. There's always the assumption that you can't live that lifestyle, you can't eat like that, it's not functional, it's not feasible, you're gonna be sick all the time. And it was a matter of just dealing with the persistent verbal repercussions of, are you doing this, are you doing that, being second guessed constantly, that's annoying as hell." *–David*

> "I only had one friend that kind of freaked out for a few minutes, she was like 'why Justin, why', and she was actually angry at me like she wanted to strangle me…" *Justin (FG)*

> "I personally hate to be looked at different, not that I care too much but I don't force myself to be in the group or part of the group, but I don't like to be looked at as being different just because of the way I eat." *–Mike*

Although this boundary work situated participants in a new cultural membership, which was associated with a deviant identity, the process also led to the formation of a sense of shared believes, values, and behaviours within the culture of vegetarianism. Social well-being is influenced by one's relationships with others and the meaning attached to those relationships, as well as a sense of culture and belonging. Therefore, social well-being is inherently dynamic in nature, not static. Interpersonal relationships and group memberships change over time, and these changes have an impact, positive or negative, on social well-being. For individuals making the decision to adopt a vegetarian diet and lifestyle, the resultant changes in relationships and transitions between cultural memberships may require synchronous boundary work to restore the sense of social well-being. As new cultural group memberships form and interpersonal relationships are renegotiated, this boundary work also solidifies the individual's newly developed vegetarian identity. Thus, the interactions among boundary work, cultural memberships, social relationships, personal identity and social and psychological well-being are complex and dynamic.

Unsupportive family. In addition to unsupportive friends and peers, many participants also had experiences with family members that were unsupportive of their vegetarianism. This was true regardless of why participants decided to become vegetarian and negative reactions from family members appeared to be harsher for vegans than vegetarians. This often left participants feeling annoyed

and disrespected by those close to them. Participants felt that their family members did not seem to understand their values and their choice was met with disapproval. Some participants felt that because their parents had worked hard to put food on the table and keep them healthy and strong their parents may have felt that their effort was minimalized and their values challenged.

> "It's kind of annoying sometimes [teasing] because I know what I'm doing and for the right reasons and they don't actually wanna sit down and talk about it and so it's just kind of something that you have to shrug off I think." –*Jill*

> "Oh it was very difficult to start with, it took years of acceptance, very difficult, and I'm from a very meaty background, and red meat, and big meat, and all of that. So it was very, very, very difficult." –*Mike*

> "Because they know who you are and you've been a certain way with them and all these years and suddenly you want to change and it's not going to be taken very well. And when I go back home to see my old friends and family they're like what? They still don't understand, they don't really, I don't want to say they don't respect my decision, it's I think they lack the understanding, they just don't understand." –*Linda*

Even before some participants became vegetarian, while they were considering changing their diet, they talked about having a general fear of how their family would react to their decision. This resulted in participants being apprehensive to tell their family members once they made the decision. Participants expressed being fearful that their family members would not approve or support their dietary choice. This negatively influenced participants' sense of social well-being as they feared others' reactions to their lifestyle choice and felt like they would not be accepted because of their vegetarian identity.

> "I think in their eyes they think they're [vegans] some extreme person, they're like why would someone do that, it's just so terrible, they're such a burden to society, and they're just so against it. It's so terrible, I feel like if I said that I wanted to become vegan like someone in the room would slap me on the face." *–Justin (FG)*

> "Yeah, definitely but I think this is a step first because people are not gonna be happy if you don't want cheese on your pizza or at least regular cheese anyway. So I think eventually because vegan cooking's what I experiment with but vegetarian seems more tolerable for others. So definitely there's a social thing that becoming vegetarian involves and I just have to take one step at a time 'cause not everyone's gonna be happy with your choices, and they're already unhappy, so I think if I'm going to be vegan they'll be even more distraught." *–Linda*

> "Because it's hard to not to eat meat, it's hard to avoid it because my family and friends they all love it and it's hard, you're always sharing meals together with people who are meat eaters. You're kind of expected to eat with them because you don't want to insult them. It's like this is the fish I made for us and you might think in the back of your head well I don't really want to eat it but I don't really have an excuse unless I'm a vegetarian. I can tell them about what I saw I mean I don't know. But anyways I just felt like I was pressured." *–Linda*

Some participants shared their frustrations with family members, such as grandparents, who were of an older generation and did not understand and even disapproved of their vegetarian diet. Some participants found their grandparents' unwillingness to accept their diet a source of frustration and felt that they needed to accept their grandparents' point of view, even though they may not agree with it, to avoid conflict within the family. In a focus group, Jennifer and Jody appeared to bond over their shared experiences with difficult family members. They encouraged each other to talk about the disapproval shown by their grandparents towards their diet.

> "My grandfather, he's so bad. He'll just say well if everyone ate like you people would be starving. I'm like, what? No. Yes, that's the truth, you

> need to eat meat 'cause then other people won't starve. I'm like I don't even wanna go here right now. You can't change their minds 'cause they're old and they have their ways of thinking." *–Jennifer (FG)*

> "It's just like my grandma who was not very supportive." *–Jody (FG)*

> "…but my grandma is always like, are you eating enough? She's concerned about my health ironically." -*Jody*

Other participants struggled with their parents not accepting their choice to become vegetarian, for most this was most often their father. Participants explained that there was some teasing/mocking from their parents and a general sense that the diet was not welcomed, nor was it well understood. Participants perceived this being a result of parents' concern for their physical well-being, the inconvenience of their diet on the family, and refusal to eat traditional family foods.

> "Well my dad for instance, he's a 'meatatarian' and it's literally every supper, every meal he's like 'Oh do you want some of this?' I'm like 'Dad, no I don't.' 'Are you sure? I made it special.' I'm like 'No, I'm not gonna eat it. If something changes you'll be the first to know, but until then the answer's no.' Or people are like 'Why don't you just try a little bit? Don't you miss it?' They're like 'What do you eat anyway, lettuce?' I'm like 'Yes, that's what I eat, lettuce.' [sarcastic tone]." *–Jennifer*

> "My family just thinks I'm bizarre. They're Albertans through and through, my dad likes a good steak, but it's good, I mean they love me so they listen to some extent when I try to say there's so much more under the surface that you don't see about a lot of this. And my dad thinks I'm just a granola munching hippy." *–Bailey*

Some participants believe that their parents rejected their vegetarian lifestyle because vegetarians are rejecting the food norms they were raised on. Food is so closely tied to emotion and expression, that the ways of expressing love through food become conflicted when there is a change is traditional family foods.

> "Because my dad at first was very resentful 'cause he's the cook of the family and he likes his proteins. His animal proteins rather. So it was really tough for him at first… My mom eventually told me that your father expresses his love through food and he just doesn't know how to do that with you anymore." *–Marilyn*

Siblings were also unsupportive. Although participants discussed the light-natured teasing they received from their siblings, they also spoke of how, over time, their siblings' discontent with their vegetarian diet started to bother them and affected their social well-being. Here the participant expresses her vegetarian diet as "the right thing", implying that her brother's diet is the wrong thing, which may play a role in their relationship dynamics. They both appear to be unsupportive of each other's diet.

> "But my one brother, I have two brothers, the one that lives with me and he's eating a lot less animal products but the other one doesn't even want to think about that and makes jokes about it and stuff and that's kind of annoying. That's frustrating because I know that I'm doing the right thing and I wish that he made an effort to understand what I was doing. But I'd say that's probably the most negative. I just try not to talk about it around him." *–Jill*

> "My sister that lives here… she'll invite me over for a roast and I'll be like really? …And I remember one meal over the Christmas holidays, literally everything had meat in it. Her Brussels sprouts had bacon infused or something. And so my partner and I sat there and we ate her beet salad, and there were multiple courses. And I think she does it sometimes to just sort of break me down or be difficult." *–Bailey*

Vegetarians also experience a lack of support from extended family members, especially at large family gatherings and around certain holidays. They experienced this as a threat to their social well-being. Even participants who had been vegetarian many years still had trouble with extended family members. Participants described being made fun of and having their diet and lifestyle

choices questioned by members of their extended family, which resulted in some participants avoiding family gatherings all together.

> "…family is supposed to support you no matter what, but one side of my family just doesn't really ever, it's just they're not gonna care. There's people who are gonna care, and they're just not gonna care, so there's no point in me even bringing it up, but it'd be nice if they did care, I'd feel more supported." *–Jessica*

> "I'm not really big for family holidays or anything but Christmas and Thanksgiving used to suck back when I did used to do it 'cause I get sick of hearing the same conversation all the time and people asking the same questions. I knew it would be extended family making fun of me for bringin' my own meal in a Tupperware. That was obnoxious but it wasn't, maybe I guess I could attribute my non-attendance at those events to them being not that supportive, especially on one side of the family." *–Gina*

For some participants, the negative reaction from family may be, at least in part, a genuine concern about that individual's nutrition, stemming from a firm belief that meat is an essential component of a healthy diet. However, this still appears to be experienced as a negative social experience.

> "Well every year is the same when I see them. It's like what, you don't eat meat? Or they're presenting me with a meal and I'm like I'm not going to have some chicken. Even after like two years they're like 'have some chicken'. I'm like 'I don't eat chicken' and they still ask 'why not even though I told them many times. And it's like it doesn't matter. And they're like you should at least eat some meat, it's good for you, give you some energy and got the vitamins." *–Linda*

Teasing/mocking. As part of the lack of support described by participants, teasing and mocking appeared to be common. Participants recognized that good-natured teasing is often part of a social relationship, but also talked about the comments and remarks being upsetting over time. They described feeling tired of

being teased, disrespected, and unsupported, which posed a threat to their social well-being.

> "I'd probably say dealing with people would be the most challenging part. Most of the time people are pretty good but I'd say that's usually the most challenging part is when people are being ignorant or teasing you and stuff like that is that's one thing you have to be mentally prepared for. I'd say that's the most challenging." –*Jill*

> "There are points where the, again it's all in good faith, but it's in good fun, there's just time you can only hear the same lame joke 10, 12 times a day before you don't want to joke back you want to tell them to go fuck themselves, like I'm actually getting tired of this. It seems like petulant bullying, and I know we're supposed to be just being dudes asserting themselves and joking around, but it just gets tiring." –*David*

Managing teasing/mocking. Some participants had developed strategies to help them cope with the teasing. Some work to take the teasing in stride, some remind themselves that the teasing comes from a genuine concern about their well-being, and others confront the teaser when it gets to be too much.

> "The one thing I guess is my dad's side of the family is Ukrainian and they eat a lot of animal products so I always kind of get teased there but I just bring my own food and eat the salads and stuff and it's never a big deal really." –*Jill*

> "It doesn't come from a bad place, it probably comes from a place of ignorance, once again not in the negative way or there's probably a part of them that maybe thinks that what I'm doing isn't healthy and they care about me and maybe they're trying to make me see that it is ridiculous or something like that." –*Debbie*

> "I guess once in a while it'll get to me, once in a blue moon. If they say something that's particularly ignorant, I won't retaliate but I'll definitely put my foot down and say, you know I don't judge you or bug you or comment on your lifestyle, I'd appreciate it if you left mine alone. I don't judge you for what's on your plate, don't judge me for what is or is not on mine and that's usually where it ends because I know that they are the way

> they are. I'm not here to change the world or change them so they can do what they want but I expect them to let me do what I want." –*Debbie*

Stereotypes. Much of the teasing and mocking that took place may have been due to stereotypes around vegetarianism. When vegetarian participants were asked if they have ever been stereotyped because of their diet, they generally expressed negative stereotyping.

> "I don't know, they still have all the assumptions made about you already, that happens. Sometimes no matter what you say to people or how good of a reason you give, you still get eyes rolling." –*Jennifer*

> "I think I was scared what people would think because there's a negative image about vegetarians in society that they're so extreme or so weird that we can't even relate to them." –*Justin*

Many expressed the view that other people automatically assumed they were judgmental as a result of being vegetarian/vegan. They had experienced others as assuming that vegetarians/vegans would not agree with their (the non-vegetarians') lifestyle choices, and as assuming that the vegetarian/vegan would negatively judge those who did not share the same perspective and principles. Yet the vegetarians in this study did not perceive themselves as being judgmental about others' dietary choices.

> "Well they think you're gonna judge them all the time, gonna be like that crazy vegetarian that has a picket sign at every meal." –*Justin*

> "I guess one more negative stereotype about both vegetarians and vegans is that we're judgmental of other people's diets. I already I think mentioned that too, that people are afraid that I'm judging them when they ask me about being a vegetarian. 'Cause I think there is that stereotype of the smug yuppie vegetarian." –*Sara (FG)*

> "I've had a lot of defensiveness because I think that when you tell someone you're a vegetarian or a vegan, they assume that you're attacking their lifestyle which it's not that way. Just because I'm vegan or a vegetarian doesn't mean that I'm judging you for what you do but a lot of people make that assumption. They assume that by me being vegan, they're doing something wrong." *–Debbie*

Others expressed that they were often stereotyped as a "hippie", "tree hugger," "granola," and "animal freak."

> "There's no food in the food, daft fuckin' hippies, pardon my language. Tree hugging Saltspring Island. I live in BC so it's a lot more granola types there, basically that's what we are. Environmentalists, left-wing, hippies." *–Claire*

> *"*I don't think I'm the full on stereotype, I don't wear hemp to the job interview, I shower, I don't have dreadlocks, not that dreadlocks are bad, I don't have natural dreadlocks. I like trees and I don't hug them… So I'm probably treated differently for that reason. And being vegetarian's just sort of lumped into it." *–Claire*

> *"*But I found when I first went vegan it was very unusual I think and so I either got the West Coast hippy stereotype or people they're sort of look at me like I had two heads, like do you have some kind of health problem? Why would anyone choose this and if you're fussy about this, what else are you fussy about? I definitely got the opinion that I was deliberately trying to be different and I was deliberately trying to be unusual and that sometimes that meant I must be trying to inconvenience others." *–Sharon*

Vegans especially believed they were stereotyped as "hard-core extremists". Many vegans felt that others assumed they (the vegan) were self-righteous and better than everyone else. Participants did not think that was the case.

> "I know a lot of people that say I don't like vegans because they're all hard-core. They actually have said that before." *–Justin*

> *"*That's the part that I found in terms of the stereotype that somehow you're trying to be difficult or trying to be more righteous than the people around you…. You feel like you almost have to apologize for these somehow hypothetical other vegans who are beating people over the head with kale and juice smoothies." *–Sharon*

> *"*People think that you think you're better than them kinda thing. They think that you're bragging about it and it's like no, I'm happy that I am, and I feel like I'm doing the right thing, but I don't think I'm better than you…" -*Jill (FG)*

Managing stereotypes. Given the common experience of negative reactions to their diet, not surprisingly, quite a few vegetarian participants expressed the idea that they hide or downplay the fact that they were vegetarian. Therefore, when with non-vegetarians, rather than engage in boundary work to strengthen their vegetarian identity and cultural membership, they sought to avoid their vegetarian identity that would otherwise have distanced them from non-vegetarians and engendered negative perceptions, which would pose a threat to their social well-being. Hiding or downplaying their vegetarian identity was used as an identity management strategy to avoid stigmatization and seek acceptance from others, to avoid being viewed as "different", or to avoid being seen as a "problem".

To illustrate, the discussion during one of the participant observation sessions, around having dinner at someone else's house, was largely focused on downplaying the fact that they were vegetarian. In some cases, it appeared that this was not so much about trying to hide being a vegetarian but to try to avoid being seen as an imposition *(Participant Observation One)*. In other cases, concealment of their vegetarian identity was in an effort to "fit in" to avoid negative reactions. Others described waiting for others to initiate the conversation about vegetarianism, rather than bring the topic up themselves.

> "I try not to make it a big deal, I don't want them to feel like oh the vegetarian is making a big deal out of it. I just downplay it all the time as much as I can… because it kinda makes an us versus them kind of mentality. Because people automatically get attacked and then anything they hear they're gonna automatically dismiss." –*Justin*

> "I don't think I've ever, or that I can remember at least, ever brought up vegetarian, it's always been people initiating the conversation." –*Jennifer (FG)*

One of the other focus group participants agreed with Jennifer, explaining that she never initiates a conversation about being a vegetarian.

> "Normally I wouldn't bring it up like you said, it's other people initiating things [things surrounding vegetarianism]." –*Jody (FG)*

Others tried to tailor the conversation to the situation or to the individual(s) they are talking with. For example, they would often avoid the conversation if they do not know the individual very well, or they would alter their language a bit to avoid using the term vegetarian when they were talking to certain people.

> "I try to navigate that territory; I try to downplay it when I can. It's always a situation where you're just with the person briefly to give a whole life story about why I became a vegetarian, so it's just trying to find a balance. I don't really know how to do that so far, but working on it." –*Justin*

> "I won't say specifically I'm a vegetarian I'll say I don't eat meat." –*Sara (FG)*

Social aspects of dining out. Vegetarians expressed the challenges they had when dining out. Some of the challenges they experienced had to do with what participants believed to be inconsiderate behaviour, on the part of their friends and family, when choosing a restaurant to dine at or order food from.

> "One thing that makes me really angry is if we're in a restaurant and it's not a very vegetarian friendly restaurant and whatever, I ask for a dish without meat and my friends are like, well just bring the meat on the side and we'll eat it. You're missing the point. People have done that, the servers have done that

> and they've brought out the extra meat on a plate and I'm like this is my meal, this my decision and it makes me so angry." –*Jody*

> *"*Yeah definitely eating out. And while my friends are cool with me being a vegetarian that doesn't mean they're always thinking about that when they pick a restaurant or a place to go out to." –*Jody*

> *"*So there's a little bit of that social, it's not acceptance, there's a little bit of social sort of connotation of well he's different so I don't like to make that accommodation. So it brings a little bit of awkwardness..." –*Mike*

On the other hand, several participants felt when their diet was considered when choosing a restaurant to dine out, that they were imposing upon others. If they were invited to dine out in a group, they felt badly when people took their diet into consideration; as though they were limiting the dining experience of others.

> "I find that the actual dinner part is fine but the appetizer part is difficult because normally you get an appetizer you share it with your friends or you buy a few and you share them. I'm always like I don't wanna eat any of those, I feel like I'm being annoying. I'm not gonna pay for it 'cause I'm not gonna eat it. And then they're like well I guess then we have to get this so you can have something." –*Jennifer*

> "Because everyone enjoys their meat it's almost like having a vegetarian friend can be, sometimes I get the sense that I'm an inconvenience a little, like oh I gotta think about so and so, she's a vegetarian, we can't go to this restaurant, it's all meat, there's limited vegetarian options, she's not gonna be happy with this. And it's kind of bantering between them and I'm sitting right there. So sometimes I feel like I'm inconvenient..." –*Linda*

Many vegetarians, especially vegans, expressed their frustration with the limited amount of meal options when dining out. Not only was there a lack of vegetarian options to select from, but very little variety among the options that did exist. Vegan participants were even more limited in their options. Participants noted that most vegetarian options are just that, vegetarian and are not vegan friendly and

would often contain eggs or dairy products. Vegetarians felt that they should have the same rights as meat eaters and be able to eat a healthy and tasteful meal when they dine out. As such, participants felt isolated because of their diet and were reminded they were not part of the dietary norm.

> *"*So availability of food is my main concern. I don't think we should lower how much meat is there, 'cause it's nice for the meat eater that have lots of options, it's good for them, but I think we could definitely improve and do better at offering for vegetarians. Maybe it's a commercial issue that they think they won't sell it, maybe. I think if they offer it more they would sell it." *–Mike*

> **"**I do get frustrated sometimes, there's lots of restaurants I want to try, and it frustrates me that they don't have food options that are vegetarian, or they do but they have these fabulous, like intricate, really great looking meat dishes and then their vegetarian dish is like a salad, not an exciting salad just a salad." *–Bailey*

> "There's been a few times where I've been to places where I've asked can I get this without cheese, or is there anything vegetarian, they're like no, I don't even know what that means, there's nothing. I mean it's Alberta, right, so it's beef city." *–Marianne*

It was agreed upon by the group then when you go out to eat you typically choose from two options on the menu; a garden salad, or a salad without the meat, and a veggie burger, if they had one, and if it was vegan (*Participant Observation One).*

When asked about their social well-being, participants expressed frustrations that, in addition to the limited vegetarian options they have had bad experiences when trying to order a vegetarian meal. They explained that eating out in an omnivorous culture, where everyone assumes you eat meat, resulted in difficult social situations. This related not only to their dining companions, but to the interactions with the servers, too. For example, ordering a vegetarian meal often involved talking to the server about the ingredients of a dish and how the

food was prepared. Participants often felt awkward doing this when they were dining with a group, as it singled them out as a vegetarian and they felt that the servers were not happy having to accommodate a vegetarian.

> "That could get into my nerve a little bit, sometimes it gets to the restaurant staff, sometimes it's even more awkward, sometimes they also bring an awkwardness by like OK no meat, what do you mean no meat? Well it's pretty simple, it's no meat. And sometimes you bring a dish, you're asking for a dish that has meat, you're asking for no meat and they still bring you meat, that brings a lot of awkwardness too and a lot of, again it comes back to I have to learn to lower my expectations." *–Mike*

> "I remember one particular occasion eating out with my husband and some of his friends, the only salad on the menu came with beef and I had to request it three times without the beef, it got sent back three times. They're like can you just pick the beef off? I'm like you know no, can I explain why I'm not gonna do that? So that part was challenging." - *Sharon*

> "Going out to eat is hard if you're not choosing the restaurant that's kind of a tough place to be vegan especially if you're going out with people who don't know you're vegan and I don't always feel like having the why am I vegan conversations. Sometimes I really want to avoid it, but sometimes people get offended when I say you know that's none of your business or it's for personal reasons… And I know that when a waitress comes around and I have to inquire about vegan options, everyone's gonna be like oh what'd she say, oh you're vegan, why are you vegan? It's like no can we please just eat, I don't wanna talk about it right now." *–Debbie*

Some of the participants even avoided eating out with others either because of the awkwardness of the situation. Others avoided eating out with others because of the limited meal options available to them. Both reasons placed limits on their socialization with others, although this was not always viewed as a serious limitation.

> "I do decline things sometimes, but I'm a fairly confident person so I'm not afraid to say to my friends if they're going to the Brazilian Barbecue, well of course I'm not coming because there's nothing I can eat there. And they can either change their minds or I can just not join them." *–Bailey*

> *"*I think my difficulty is eating out with people and finding, especially if you're the only vegetarian and they pick a place like Brewster's, the Keg would be the worst one, where there's just such limited option. They're like oh you can have salad, it's like well I don't want the salad today, give me some options. And so sometimes I'll just be like no you know what I don't feel like going out and spending money, it's just not worth it today, like I'll hang out with you some other time." –*Jody (FG)*

The experiences of eating out also varied greatly depending on the city or country participants were in, as well as the size of the community. Despite the expressed difficulties in dining out, participants stated that they were happy with the number of vegetarian options available in Edmonton. This made them feel as though their diet was accepted.

> "I think Edmonton's a bit better than Calgary, it has more vegetarian places and Calgary's way better than a town of 100 people, in a farm country. There's definitely some places that I would not know really where to eat, but Edmonton's a pretty nice place, we have vegetarian places on campus, even in residence they have a vegetarian option everywhere. They're actually making a huge effort. Whenever they have stir-frys they have meat, but they also have tofu. And soups, they often have at least one vegetarian soup, and they have numerous vegetarian marked sandwiches." – *Justin*

> "Well, before I lived here I lived in Helena, Montana and they did not have very many vegan options for going out. They had one Co-op where I could get substitutes and stuff but as far as eating out there were two places I could go. Edmonton actually feels like a pretty awesome step up." -*Gina*

Participants expressed that typically larger cities have a lot more to offer in the way of vegetarian food, however it depends on the culture of the city. For example, one participant who had lived as a vegetarian in both Toronto and Edmonton expressed that while both have vegetarian options, the dining experience was influenced by the culture of the city. She spoke of a "counter-culture" of vegetarianism in Alberta and how this affected the types of restaurants

available in Edmonton, where the mainstream culture is based on the cattle industry and meat consumption. Whereas, the culture of vegetarianism in Toronto seemed to be less of a political stance and more of a trend in cuisine within the city.

> "I found Toronto actually more difficult because I think vegan and vegetarian diets are more mainstream so they're often just another food option. Where I think Edmonton has such a strong ranching culture that there's such a strong counter culture, so there's more strictly vegetarian or vegan restaurants I think per capita. Whereas Toronto, right now all the hipsters love bacon, so bacon lattes, bacon everything, and Toronto, it's nickname is Hog Town because of all the pig slaughter they do. And that's their history so there's great vegan restaurants in Toronto but I find it's less politicized, even though they have such a strong animal rights movement. So I spent 2 months in Toronto last summer and I found myself being really depressed. It's like I can't go to a café where I don't smell bacon." – *Melissa*

Overall, despite the cultural variations amongst different cities, participants believed that dining out and maintaining a vegetarian diet were much easier in a larger city compared to small towns. This is due perhaps to the variety available, and a wider acceptance of vegetarianism. Participants expressed that their meal options in small towns were typically limited to potatoes and vegetables, as meat was the central component of most meals, with little attention to non-meat alternatives.

> "Yeah, school's OK, there's options, cities are easy, I've driven across Canada a few times and that was, you just have to pack right, ahead, and then you have to use Happy Cow to find the one restaurant in Thunder Bay, there might be two now. One in Thunder Bay, one in Sudbury, a few in Winnipeg. I mean I think it's growing. Home is really easy, cities are easy but yeah, I think the small towns." –*Melissa*

> "It was harder, I think in my home town, it's not actually Ottawa, it's a small little farming-ish country or country place." –*Danielle*

> *"*Growing up in rural Alberta there weren't a lot of options besides meat and potatoes and your general standard American diet." -*Sharon*

Managing dining out. Because dining out can be socially challenging for vegetarians, many participants avoided it, but others found a variety of techniques to help them manage. For example, participants would suggest a vegetarian restaurant to the group of friends or family members they were going out with, call the restaurant ahead of time to make inquiries about vegetarian options, or do their own research online prior to dining out to see what their options were.

> "…so if my carnist friends wanna go out for dinner, I usually just try and suggest a vegetarian restaurant, and that way I don't have to really deal with watching them eat the carcass. I mean I don't love it; I really hate the smell of animal fat being cooked." *–Melissa*

> "But if I'm joining a group or friends and stuff I always go online before and look at the menu and find out what I can eat so that I don't have to ask the servers a bunch of questions and kind of standout, so I'd say that's probably the most challenging part, yeah." *–Jill*

> "I guess restaurants who have a vegan night or a vegetarian night or restaurants who are all vegetarian like Nourish or Café Mosaics or that vegan food truck which is amazing, Padmanadi's and Veggie Garden. All those places are very welcoming and it's so nice to be there 'cause you know you don't have to explain anything. You know you don't have to tell them what you can or can't eat. You know everything on the menu is safe. You don't have to explain to the server that you're vegan and that you can't eat this and this and no shellfish and to double-check the salad dressing ingredients to make sure there's no fish oil. Yeah, vegan restaurants and places with vegan nights or places with vegan options 'cause then you know at least they're conscious of the vegan lifestyle." *– Debbie*

Being a guest at someone's house/feeling like an imposition. Not only does dining out in restaurants become a social challenge, but participants also expressed having difficulty being a guest at someone's house because of their diet.

> "I'm thinking of my friend [name] she's a good friend of mine and she likes to invite me over for dinner. She loves meat, and she always prepare lots of meat in her home, like when I go over sometimes I'm like 'I'm a vegetarian and there's one salad'…. I guess it doesn't feel very good." – *Linda*

> "…sometimes I wish they would understand when they invite me over that they would be more accommodating or considerate. Sometimes I feel like I'm not being considered. So that doesn't feel good." *–Linda*

> "You just want to say, thank you for making this food for me and including me, it's sucks that I'm a, no it doesn't suck that I'm a vegetarian, it's important and stuff but it's just… that's the culture again, people assuming that everybody eats meat." *–Alisha (FG)*

While it was a challenge being invited to someone's home for a dinner that does not take the vegetarian's diet into consideration, participants also reported that they felt guilty for "imposing" on the host or hostess when the meal does include vegetarian options. This sense of socially feeling like an imposition to others, challenges individuals' sense of social well-being as their values and beliefs pose a hassle for those who do not share those same values and beliefs.

> "I think there's a couple of things which I often feel awkward about, like if I go to someone's house, if someone invites me around for dinner or whatever, and I always feel slightly awkward for people that have to go out of their way to cook stuff. I wouldn't say it's stopped me going but I definitely feel very apologetic 'cause in the end it's my choice, and I do often feel bad that I'm foisting that on people by having to cook for me." – *Jeffery*

> "Yeah sometimes I feel like that and you feel like you're the black sheep or like you're imposing… you feel like people need to do a special thing for you, that they need to be accommodating, and I really hate that, I really hate feeling like that." *–Mike*

> "Sharing meals is a huge part in our culture, and people want to share meals with each other. And yes so in a way I feel I'm presenting an inconvenience…." *–Linda*

Managing being a guest at someone's house/feeling like an imposition.

Participants reported using several strategies to manage being invited to someone's home, including eating before they arrived, bringing their own food, offering to cook, and changing their perceptions of what eating a meal together means. For example, one woman no longer eats with others; she focuses on talking with others while they eat.

> "I always eat before I go. So… I don't make meal sharing, I don't emphasize, I don't think it's important. The eating, the meal part is not important to me. So instead I look at spending time with them and chatting with them, to me that's where it's important to me whereas they might think oh we should eat this, eat this, sharing a meal to me is probably different as how they see it." -*Linda*

During participant observation, one of the participants mentioned she was going over to a friend's place for dinner and asked the group how she should go about doing this, as she did not think her hostess knew she was a vegetarian. One participant advised her not to do anything. She suggested to just go, show up, eat what you can eat, and try not to make a big deal out of it or draw attention to the fact that you are a vegetarian (some individuals nodded their head as though they agreed). Another participant said to tell the friend that she was a vegetarian, but ask that friend not to do anything differently; make what they were planning to make, ask them not to do anything special and that you can make do with what is available. Another participant said that she often does not mention anything about her diet, but brings a vegan dish along, that way at least she has something to eat, and can hopefully show others that vegan dishes/food can taste good. Others suggested eating beforehand, or at least have a snack before going. (*Participant Observation One).*

Avoiding social gatherings/social isolation. For some vegetarians, social gatherings seemed to negatively affect their social well-being and other participants went as far as avoiding social gatherings altogether. Participants described themselves as growing tired of the teasing and mocking that took place at family gatherings, and others described themselves as feeling disconnected when with non-vegetarians.

> "Yeah, they acted like it was joking but I mean they did it every year and it was stupid and it wasn't funny… It was like, this is obnoxious and it gave me a reason to not go to any of those family events anymore…" – *Gina*

> "Definitely, it was definitely secluded. There were social gatherings that I avoided and that I felt I could no longer participate in or that I did not wanna participate in. I feel like my lifestyle was attacked a lot or questioned, constantly questioned." *–Debbie*

> "I avoided some dinners or some people who were particularly ignorant, I didn't really want to hang out with anymore because some people do respond with nothing mean against me but they say things that are hurtful that I might be able to tolerate with my family but with someone who's an acquaintance or a new friend, I'm not really willing to tolerate that from the get go. Definitely some people I avoided. *–Debbie*

Some individuals found removing themselves from social situations to be advantageous. These participants had either removed themselves from social situations where they felt unhappy, or in some cases found a new social circle to spend their time with instead. However, for some participants, removing themselves from social situations resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

> "I lost a lot of friends because of it, and also because of my mood. I changed a lot, I was very isolated, I spent a lot of my time alone." – *Marilyn*

> "Definitely lonely… Definitely secluded and I felt attacked a lot." - *Debbie*

Talking to people about vegetarianism. Some described taking a strategic approach to talking to people about vegetarianism, by talking about vegetarianism very carefully to avoid upsetting others and to portray vegetarianism in a positive light.

> "Yeah, you have to be very careful how you approach the situation." -*Jennifer*

> "I don't want to eat that. I always avoid saying can't 'cause then they say, 'are you celiac, are you this?' I'll never say I can't eat that. It's I don't want to eat that. I make it very clear that it's not that I can't, I'm making a conscious choice not to. There's a difference between not being able to and not wanting to. It's, no, I don't want to eat the casserole or no, I don't want to eat this…" *–Debbie*

> "I didn't say that I gave up meat and I didn't call myself a vegetarian for a very long time, I said I just prefer not to eat meat is how I phrased it to just about everybody. And everybody seemed to be OK with it." *–Nathan*

In addition to choosing the right language, participants also talked about the importance of catering their conversation to the interests and style of the individual they are talking with. Participants explained that if they felt the person was going to react poorly to a conversation about vegetarianism, they kept the conversation simple and brief, providing little detail on their vegetarian ways. On the other hand, if a person seemed genuinely interested and receptive of their vegetarian identity, then they might elaborate, and discuss their dietary/life choice in greater detail.

> "If people seem receptive to it, I definitely wanna tell them about the good experiences I've had with it and how awesome I found the experience but I don't wanna hoist that on people when they don't want it 'cause then I don't feel like I'm helping my cause at all." *–Gina*

> "Sometimes I won't answer. If they'll say why are you a vegetarian? I'll say it's for personal reasons and I'll end it at that because sometimes that

> conversation with that aggressive person is just not worth my time, energy and the frustration that comes afterwards. Usually, my answer is the same for everyone and sometimes if they ask me to elaborate… sometimes I'll elaborate but usually my go to answer for everyone is it's because I love animals and I leave it at that. If they want more information, sometimes I'll give more information but at the end of the day it is a really personal choice. I feel perfectly fine and at ease with saying it's for personal reasons." *–Debbie*

In addition to downplaying being a vegetarian, some cope with social interactions by downplaying the real reasons for their vegetarianism. Again, some participants felt certain reasons for becoming a vegetarian may not be accepted and understood by others. Opposed to being upfront and honest about their reasons for becoming vegetarian, they may try to avoid a threat to their social well-being by masking their true reasons for the diet. The intent behind this is to be more socially acceptable and to avoid confrontation with others. For example, in one of the focus groups, when Michelle explained that she "tiptoes" around her reasons for being a vegetarian, others in the group were nodding their heads and agreeing, as if they used the same technique or approach.

> "I don't necessarily address that as the first [reason for being vegetarian], like well because I believe in animal rights. It's like well, you know, I just don't like to eat meat and I've been doing it for a long time and it's just a personal choice and tiptoeing around the explanation rather than just addressing it." *–Michelle (FG)*

In another focus group, the topic came up again. Janice explained how she tailors her conversation based on her perceptions of the person she is talking to. Jennifer agreed with Janice and explained she does the same thing, and tries to keep the conversation short.

> "Depending on who it is I'll give them varying degrees of truth about it. Some people, I'll just give the answer I gave you. But if I think that might be too touchy feely for them I'll just be like oh, I don't really like it." – *Janice (FG)*

> **"**I think I find I do kinda tailor my answer to who it is. Most of the time I just try to be brief and be like I just don't eat it." – *Jennifer (FG)*

Participants also talked about how important it is to avoid offending others when they are talking about vegetarianism. As mentioned above, participants chose the language used to talk about vegetarianism very carefully and catered their conversation to the individual, allowing for flexibility in their responses. These were important techniques to avoid offending others.

> "I try not to make people feel bad. That's the fear whenever you bring up something that's morally charged…" *–Bailey*

> "I don't know but it's odd but I always have more fear, even to this day where I feel like I should be really much more comfortable, I've been doing this for a long time and I do know why I'm doing it, and I have a strong sense of identity period…. But in these new situations, a new job, or people that you don't know very well I still feel that, OK how are they gonna size me up from this, I don't wanna offend anybody… *–Alisha (FG)*

> "I don't wanna offend them even though I do have my beliefs that, you know whatever, I believe in animal rights and all of those important kinds of things but yet what I'll often say isn't necessarily that... *–Michelle (FG)*

Despite being very careful about talking to others about vegetarians, participants still felt that people were offended by the conversation. Participants also went on to explain that when this happens, the other individual often becomes defensive and then the conversation turns in a direction they had been trying to avoid in the first place.

> "People get really defensive…. And I don't even have to say anything to prompt their defensiveness, and that says a lot right there. 'Cause I think at their core a lot of people know that something they're doing is wrong and that things that happen are wrong, and that they could make a difference, they could make that choice. And I think a lot of the defensiveness is rooted in that because I can just tell people I'm vegan and they get defensive, they bristle." *–Marilyn*

Constant questioning. Participants described being "constantly questioned" about their vegetarian lifestyle, which they attributed to non-vegetarians' defensiveness about a diet that includes meat. The most common question seemed to be "Why?". Participants reported that they had initially enjoyed these discussions, but over time grew annoyed by the question and weary of the discussion. Some participants also expressed the desire to be accepted as a vegetarian with no questions asked. This perceived lack of social acceptance posed a challenge to participants' sense of social well-being.

> "Yeah, it's like an interrogation, or you always have to defend yourself. People are accepting of a lot of other things in this world, I just don't know why this one is such a hard thing for most people to understand. There are some people obviously that get it, but I feel like through my experiences the majority don't really." *–Jennifer*

> "I think the common thing is why, people always ask why, but then you get some people who will just be like oh that's interesting and not want to challenge it, and you'll get some people who will be like oh that's interesting, you're wrong." *–Jeffery*

> "But another part is how am I going to explain to others that I'm a vegetarian? So that's a huge one 'cause I feel like there's a lot of explaining to do and justifying why I choose what I choose, or for being this way. I think that would be the most challenging, having to explain to others, 'cause people never question someone who's a meat eater, they just assume that you are. But if you are a vegetarian or a vegan it's like oh tell me why, people are always curious and it feels like there hasn't been that acceptance 'cause you constantly have to explain the reason behind your choices. So that would be very challenging." *–Linda*

Part of the annoyance about the "Why?" question came from the feeling of having to defend their dietary choice. It appeared that vegans who had adopted their diet primarily out of ethical reasons struggled with this more so than vegetarians and those that adopted their diet for health related reasons. Similar to being asked why, constantly having to defend their dietary choice became frustrating and tiresome.

> "It's hard. I like it, but I also don't like it… I also would probably like it more if I didn't have to explain myself all the time 'cause it just gets so annoying." *–Jennifer*
>
> "For me the biggest challenge with veganism was the social aspects and having to be on the defense about veganism." *–Jessica*
>
> "Well, you're just constantly explaining or defending to people. And then it's put on you, as a vegan to, they always tell you to be friendly about it, just be compassionate, understanding, don't attack people. But we wouldn't say the same thing if it was about racism or sexism, as a feminist people aren't gonna put misogynistic porn on when they invite me over, but their gonna serve dead carcass in front of me." *–Melissa*

Managing the constant questioning. The vegetarians in this study had developed several techniques to manage the constant questioning that result from their dietary choices. Again, individuals often responded to the questions by choosing answers that were least likely to offend someone, and least likely to result in further questions and conversation.

> "…you try obviously not to offend people, but when people ask me why, although I do have ethical reasons behind it, I do often say it's a spiritual thing. And it's kind of true but it's kind of a swing 'cause I'm just changing ethics to spiritual but also I don't feel like myself, and I just don't feel right. I'm not a spiritual religious person, not like in a greater force, but I do meditate and I try to stay calm and just have a way about my life that's peaceful. I don't know what it all means. So I say it's spiritual 'cause…it keeps people away from the other questions... *–Jessica*

For it to be more socially acceptable, one participant even passed her veganism off as a temporary thing (even though she had no intentions of going back to eating meat), something she was trying out for a bit. She found that if she was open to going back to a diet that included meat, she was not questioned as much and did not feel the need to defend her diet.

> "Well, something else I tell people if they're like you're a vegetarian, I'm like yeah, for right now, but in the future I might go back. You kinda say that to defend yourself too I find. It's like oh OK, yeah. Oh she doesn't hate it that much. I find that one kind of like a good one to avoid argument. They're like yeah, maybe in the future, you don't know what's gonna happen. Whereas I'm thinking on the inside no." *–Jennifer*

Gender specific issues. Males seemed to encounter some gender-specific challenges that posed a threat to their social well-being. They reported being often teased, mocked and made fun of because of their vegetarian identity. They were called names and had their sexuality, sexual orientation and masculinity questioned.

> "Like it's like that steak and beer, and eggs, and steak and lobster, and when you're in a group of guys and say you're a vegetarian, they're like oh are you also homosexual?... You're gay, you faggot, you're a pussy, it happens quite a bit actually." *–Mike*

> "A lot of it comes in jest, but it is a persistent thing, there is that emasculating approach where you're not as manly as other dudes." *–David*

> *"*…are you a woman, are you gay, why don't you eat meat, you need to eat meat to be a man, all the typical macho…." *–Nathan*

Change in social group. As the results show, many aspects of being a vegetarian can pose a threat to social well-being. For some, the challenges were so extreme that they eventually changed their social group after becoming

vegetarian. Participants expressed that they wanted to spend their time with those that valued and supported their lifestyle, and sometimes that meant dropping their current friends and getting new ones. Therefore, it would seem an individual's perceptions of others changed when he or she became a vegetarian. For example, vegetarians talked about becoming less tolerant of those who do not share their moral or ethical values, negatively affecting their social relationships with those individuals.

> "I have vegan friends, I have friends who eat mostly vegan. I have friends who are not quite as strict as [Name] and I are, which irritates me. And I do still have a few friends from my past who aren't, but it is a constant source of resentment for me. But I have a good social life at this point." –*Marilyn*

> "I started wanting to meet people who I guess wanted to have deeper conversations. I guess you could say that the superficial friends that I may have moved on from later on in life I may have moved on from earlier because I wanted to have those insightful and intelligent and I'm not saying people who aren't vegetarian aren't intelligent. I'm saying they're not willing to usually have those conversations about certain ethical things and I like having those conversations because I think they're very important. *–Debbie*

> "I find it's more common in the vegan and vegetarian community to find people who want to have those conversations. I guess that would have been an impact on a social life. You could say I was less tolerant towards some people and their attitudes." *–Debbie*

Social Rewards

Despite the social challenges that posed a threat to the social well-being of vegetarians, there was also a theme of social rewards. These included events or factors that enhanced an individual's sense of social well-being, such as supportive family members, supportive friends, and other vegetarians/vegans.

These feelings of being valued, included, and connected had a positive impact on the social well-being of vegetarians.

Supportive family. Despite accounts of unsupportive family members, participants did talk about a few family members that were supportive of their diet. This did not always happen right away and in many instances family members needed some time before they supported the decision. Family members came to accept that their diet was not just a fad, and that they had made a commitment to vegetarianism. Participants explained how nice it felt to be supported by their family even when they did not always understand the rationale behind their dietary choice, positively influencing their social well-being.

> "My parents, they were very hesitant at first, but the longer I've been involved in this kinda stuff the more supportive they are. So because of course it's easy for parents to pass things off as a fad, when you're that age [teenager] especially, and after a few years I think they figured out that I was really serious about it, and since then they've been super supportive. We'll go over there for Sunday supper a lot of the time and my dad will make a completely vegan meal." -*Marilyn*

> "I don't know if she understands the ethical side. I don't know if it's a little bit of ignorance and I don't say that in a negative way but she was supportive and she tried her very best to accommodate me when I came over." –*Debbie*

> "But my mom was really supportive, and my dad came around, they're very supportive now, they certainly came around." –*Marianne*

Supportive friends. In addition to having some supportive family members, a few vegetarians also had some supportive vegetarian and non-vegetarian friends. Having friends that were open minded and shared similar

values helped to support vegetarians' social well-being and maintain healthy social networks.

> "And also a lot of my friends have the same kind of views, 'cause that's just how we get along, so they're cool with me being vegan or they are vegan." –*Jessica*

> "I've never had it where I've told people I'm vegetarian, they're like oh yeah, good for you. But I guess I have had lots of other friends who have been vegetarian or have other dietary things, that's been kind of nice actually getting together and doing potlucks with these groups of people, because everyone understands and respects that there are dietary needs." –*Sara (FG)*

Other vegetarians/vegans. Being able to connect with other vegans and vegetarians seemed to be a very socially rewarding experience for many of the participants. Participants described their feelings of connectedness and belonging; they viewed other vegetarians as a source of support and associated them with a sense of community. It appears being around those who shared their vegetarian lifestyle helped to shape their identity in a positive light, enhancing their sense of social well-being.

> "…when you come across other people who are vegan or vegetarian, you already feel like you have some sort of community a little bit and you can talk… It's kind of an exciting connection you can have with people." –*Gina*

> "Being around people who are like minded and being able to vent and to I guess grieve together is another really good way. So you have to have a support network, it's hugely important." –*Marilyn*

> "It's been very rewarding just having that community and support from people from those groups [vegan/vegetarian groups]." –*Debbie*

Discussion

The aim of this section of the research was to explore the self-perceived social well-being of vegetarians. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observations, participants were able to share their experiences and discuss the social challenges that they faced as a result of their diet. Vegetarians have developed many strategies to help cope with some of the social challenges they may face. For example, to manage what respondents referred to as "the constant questioning" from non-vegetarians, participants described framing their answers in a way that is least likely to offend or invite unwanted dialogue. However, participants also discussed some of the experiences that they felt improved their sense of social well-being.

Although there are some socially rewarding aspects of vegetarianism, such as connecting with other vegetarians, choosing a vegetarian diet seemed to cause tension in relationships with others. According to Turner and Reynolds, this might be the case because people give preferential treatment to those who share a similar identity and/or share the same values (Turner & Reynolds, 2001). This suggests that, for example, vegetarians would be likely to favour or respect those who share in their values, i.e. other vegetarians. In the same way, individuals who consume meat would be likely to favour others who consume meat. This tension seemed to go both ways; not only are the vegetarians in this study uncomfortable with their unaccepting omnivorous friends/relatives, these friends and relatives are uncomfortable with the vegetarian's choice of diet, which is a rejection of the friends' and relatives' omnivorous diet. This suggests that the hegemony of meat

in diet has a profound impact on our identity and our social interactions with others. Values and beliefs play a strong role in shaping an individual's identity and there appears to be a disconnection between vegetarians' values and omnivores' values in this study. In Alberta, the dominant diet is omnivorous and judging by participants' experiences, they expressed being treated differently and saw their vegetarian identity as being stigmatized.

A recent and local example of this was highlighted in the Edmonton Journal (one of the city's newspapers). According to the news report, Marina Banister, a young woman living in Edmonton, is a volunteer for the Sustainability Committee on the Edmonton Youth Council. As part of her role on the committee she proposed that the city council serve vegan or vegetarian snacks at their long meetings to promote food sustainability. The backlash and media uptake of this proposal resulted in an unexpected turn for the youth group serving on this committee. Individuals responded to the proposal by calling the group "self-loathing liberal white guilt-suffering crybabies" and "veggie-nazis" (Simons, 2015, para. 6). Comments went as far as calling for the murder of any council member who votes in favour of vegetarian snacks (Simons, 2015). Marina was also the victim of sexist cyber-bullying as a result of her proposal and her diet. Comments such as "She looks great until you get her clothes off and she proceeds to just lay there exhausted from all that walking and not eating real food" (Simons, 2015, para. 13). Marina commented on all the reactions emerging through social media indicating that she feels meat is part of the Albertan culture and feels that if all this somehow leads to a public debate or discussion about food

sustainability, that she has no regrets (Simons, 2015). This story was reported after data collection for the current study was complete, and none of the study participants mentioned media/social media coverage as one of the difficulties they faced.

It is quite plausible that this form of social pressure has a negative impact on the well-being of vegetarians. For example, a recent study conducted in the United Kingdom looked at media references to vegans in 2007 (Cole & Morgan, 2011). They found that approximately 75% of the media coverage on vegans was negative and 20% was neutral, whereas on 5% portrayed veganism in a positive light. In the negative media, vegans were described as hostile or overly-sentimental individuals, their diet was described as an impossibly difficult diet to follow, ascetic and they were often ridiculed (Cole & Morgan, 2011). The authors conclude their analysis stating that the media is biased against vegans portraying them in a derogatory way, which they label "vegaphobia" (Cole & Morgan, 2011). This so call "fear of vegans" marginalizes vegans and is an example of the cultural reproduction of the omnivorous norm.

This marginalization could be used to explain some of the negative stereotypes experienced by the vegetarians and vegans in this study. Stereotypes are a result of social categorization in which individuals are assigned to a social group and judged accordingly (based on their differences from those who do not share that same identity and the similarities with those who do). Such social categorization has an impact on socialization in that it can both exaggerate differences between those assigned to disparate categories, and enhance a sense of

cohesiveness among those within the same category. When individuals are of a minority group, such as vegetarians, those exaggerated differences to the normative group (omnivores) can pose a threat to individuals' sense of social well-being. Thus, categorization allows individuals to defend their own lifestyles and beliefs by distancing themselves from other's beliefs and lifestyles.

Another example of this in the current study was vegetarians experiencing backlash from family and friends because of their diet. This was a major source of frustration amongst participants, whether it was in the form of a negative reaction to their vegetarian transition, teasing or mocking, or disagreeing with their diet. This form of social teasing can serve to differentiate the two groups (omnivore and vegetarian) and can serve to strengthen group membership amongst omnivores, provoking a sense of exclusion towards vegetarians.

What was interesting about these findings was the unsupportive nature of many fathers of the vegetarians, particularly for the female participants. This is consistent with the literature. For example, one qualitative study in the United States examined family and peer reactions to individuals adopting a vegetarian diet (Merriman, 2010). They found that male friends and family members were more likely to be unsupportive of female vegetarians dietary choices (Merriman, 2010). This may be due in part the inherent gendering of certain foods. For example, meat is considered masculine whereas vegetables are considered feminine. As Sobal states, "vegetarianism provides an identity that transgresses masculinity in Western society" (Sobal, 2005, p. 141). The fact that fathers are less accepting of their children adopting a vegetarian diet is an example of this

gender struggle. Beardsworth and Keil further hypothesize that the rejection of the diet the child was raised on can be interpreted as a rejection of the parent themselves (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). Since males are more likely to identify with meat eating, the child's oppositional choice of a vegetarian diet can intensify this feeling of rejection. This may also explain why the male participants in this study experienced teasing and mocking as a result of being male and vegetarian.

In addition to unsupportive paternal figures, the current study found generational differences in the level of support received for vegetarianism, which has not been previously documented in the literature. Parents and grandparents seemed to be less accepting of participants' diets than did friends and peers. Participants discussed how their parents and grandparents were raised on "meat and potatoes" or had raised animals for food for a living, and therefore, were not as open to a vegetarian diet as younger generations. It may be that parents and grandparents see the child or grandchild's adoption a vegetarian diet as a threat to their family traditions or their way of life, and are therefore less supportive.

This lack of support was demonstrated by teasing, mocking or making fun of individuals. This is consistent with other vegetarians' experiences documented in the literature. For example, one study found that negative responses to individual's adoption of a vegetarian diet ranged from "light" teasing to more serious reactions such as hostility and aggression (Chin, Fisak Jr, & Sims, 2002). This is important because these responses often left individuals feeling like they were being socially punished for their vegetarian diet, which could potentially lead to poor health outcomes (Chin et al., 2002).

In this study, the teasing/mocking, unsupportive friends and family, difficulty dining out, and the negative socio-cultural perceptions of vegetarians lead to a variety of social changes after adopting a vegetarian diet. For example, in some instances participants began avoiding social gatherings, hiding their vegetarian status and even making changes to their social network, including dropping old friendships. For some participants, this led to feelings of isolation and loneliness, all of which could take a toll on their social well-being. This finding is comparable to other research on vegetarians. For example, a study conducted in the Unites States found that vegetarians experience feelings of isolation and ideologically prefer to be around like-minded people, establishing strong negative social boundaries against those that do not share their vegetarian beliefs (Back & Glasgow, 1981).

Another interesting finding in the current study was that individuals who adopted a diet for health reasons experienced greater social acceptance of their diet compared to individuals who adopted a vegetarian diet for ethical reasons. This seem to be common knowledge amongst vegetarians in this study, as many vegetarians concealed their true rationale for becoming vegetarian providing more socially acceptable responses such as individual health reasons, personal preference, or the aversion to meat. Vegetarians in this study struggled to balance their true rationales for becoming vegetarian amongst the beliefs and norms of an omnivorous dominated society, while avoiding social conflict and seeking acceptance. This is consistent with findings presented by Romo & Donovan-Kicken (2012) who found that vegetarians wanted to be true to themselves but

also wanted to fit in. Vegetarians in this study described the ease in talking to other vegetarians about their lifestyle, but often experienced conflict when conversing with non-vegetarians about their lifestyle, leaving participants feeling as though they did not belong. Vegetarians tried to minimize omnivore's discomfort by avoiding talking about the moral implications eating meat and instead focus on topics that were less likely to offend others such as health (Romo & Donovan-Kicken, 2012).

However, despite these social challenges, this study found that there were also a number of socially rewarding experiences that contributed to their social well-being including some supportive friends and family members. Although some participants initially noted the negative reactions to their diet, most friends and family members grew to be supportive, or at least accepting, of their diet. It appears those who adopted a vegetarian diet primarily for moral or ethical reasons experienced greater backlash and more resistance of their diet, compared to those who adopted their diet for primarily for health reasons. Those health vegetarians also experienced negative reactions initially, but found others to eventually become accepting their diet. This was not generally the case for vegans, who primarily made their dietary choice for ethical reasons. In addition to supportive friends and family members, participants found connections with other vegetarians. Other research on vegetarians has also found that, once participants had become vegetarian, they develop relationships with other vegetarians and were drawn to like-minded individuals (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). The authors

suggest that this is likely because these relationships involve considerably less tension than do relationships with non-vegetarians.

This finding could also be explained using the notion of "boundary work" in the formation of social identity. For example, Yeh (2014) explored social identity formation with individuals following omnivorous, vegetarian and vegan diets. Boundary work can be described as the way in which individuals in particular social groups set boundaries in place to distinguish them from individuals in other social groups. Yeh posited that when an individual chooses to exclude animal flesh from their diet and adopt vegetarianism, they join a specific subculture that goes against normative social boundaries in most societies. He found that vegetarians formed an exclusive attitude towards meat-eaters on the basis that they consumed the flesh of other living beings and discussed the ignorant other (the meat-eater) (Yeh, 2014). On the other hand, vegetarians formed an inclusive attitude towards vegans referring to them as "we" rather than "they" or "the other" because they feel there is little ambiguity between their diets. This "we-ness" and "they-ness" formed an identity boundary between those who eat meat and those who do not, but from the vegetarians' perspective, there was no identity boundary between themselves and vegans. In other words, vegetarians emphasized the identity boundary that existed between themselves and meat-eaters but ignored the identity differences they had with vegans (Yeh, 2014). This suggests that although there are still differences between a vegetarian and a vegan diet, participants felt a sense of shared identity with other vegans and vegetarians.

Values and beliefs shape our identity and because the dominant diet is omnivorous, vegetarians are labeled deviant and their identity is stigmatized by society in which they live and interact. This research is important because it expands our current understanding of vegetarians' social well-being. In addition, it does this in Alberta; Albertan society can be viewed as one that promotes and normalizes an omnivorous diet. This might also be true for other provinces and territories in Canada. To date, the experiences of Canadian vegetarians are not well documented in the literature.

Chapter 9: The Psychological Well-Being of Vegetarians

Results

In addition to the social challenges and social rewards that participants felt influenced their social well-being, participants were also asked to reflect on their self-perceived psychological well-being, in relation to their vegetarian diet. Well-being was not defined for participants, rather participants were given the freedom to reflect on and discuss their psychological well-being as they saw fit in relation to their vegetarian diet. Participants understood psychological well-being to mean many things including their mental state, mood, emotions, and their overall health. Participants experienced some psychological challenges but seemed optimistic about the psychologically rewarding aspects of a vegetarian diet. Here, I highlight the two key themes psychological rewards and psychological challenges that participants felt influenced their psychological well-being.

Psychological Rewards

Participants talked about the psychological rewards of being vegetarian, which positively contributed to their sense of psychological well-being. Examples included an overall sense of improved well-being, having their values align with their actions, feeling happy as a vegetarian, helping the environment, saving animals, and feeling that the benefits of vegetarianism outweighing the challenges.

Overall sense of improved well-being. Many participants also described themselves as feeling healthier as a result of their diet. Participants discussed

becoming more health conscious and thinking more about their overall health and well-being. This included eating healthier and paying more attention to the types of foods they were eating and the perceived health benefits associated with them. These changes resulted in more energy, feeling less stressed and feelings of improved physical and psychological well-being.

> "Like when I became vegan I would also say I became a lot healthier too, health conscious, trying to eat lots of fruits and vegetables and kind of centering my diet around whole grains and that sort of thing and so yeah I'd say my health definitely improved in that way… And I really like it because I feel like I'm doing something that's good not just for my body but also for my mental health…" -*Jill*

> "So I found that I was eating healthier just by necessity and by choice, but being exposed to new foods. Kale is something I would've never in a million years eaten as an omnivore unless it was presented drizzled in some crazy dressing. As a vegan it's an easy go to but it's also so high in nutrients, so my energy levels. –*David*

> "I lost some weight, I also became more aware of my general health, so I think I've gotten in better shape since then, just brings more attention to your own physical wellbeing 'cause when you're thinking about why you're a vegetarian, if it is for health reasons then you should probably be taking care of yourself if health is now a priority for you." –*Nathan*

As participants reflected on their experiences as a vegetarian, they noted that feeling happier and healthier contributed to an improvement in their overall sense of well-being.

> "So on a physiological level I guess something is happening there and I love that." –*Linda*

This included feelings of both an increase in positive aspects of their well-being such as feelings of mental clarity and freedom and a reduction in potentially negative contributors such as anxiety and depression.

> "I mean just eating better and being healthier helps your mental health indirectly in any case." *–Bailey*

> "I feel more mental clarity. I feel like I'm seeing the big picture, there's not really a fog." *–Jill*

> "But I think part of it was very pronounced that I was nurturing my body and that led to a lot of a reduction in my anxiety level, definitely a reduction in feelings of depression, things like that." *–Sharon*

Participants also drew a connection between improved physical well-being and emotional and mental health. They talked about how a vegetarian diet improved one aspect of their well-being, which indirectly improved other aspects of their well-being. For example, when a participant's physical health improved they felt better overall.

> "Yeah, and then with that feeling emotionally better too 'cause when you feel physically well it does impact your emotional health and your emotional wellbeing." *–Michelle (FG)*

> "I think they're all inter-related [physical and mental health]. Physical health, that's a big part too because yes, every component of my life has increased in terms of satisfaction and well-being." *–Linda*

Values align with actions. Participants talked about their view that part of feeling good had to do with the fact that, as a result of their vegetarian diet, their values now aligned with their actions. Most notably, vegetarians that adopted their diet for moral reasons felt that their diet was ethically correct and therefore received a great feeling of satisfaction when they avoided the consumption of meat and other animal products. Ascribing to this new set of moral values provided vegetarians with a sense of purpose and virtue, which was deemed very important to their new identity. They viewed the synchronicity between their

morals and values and how they acted and ate as having led to feelings of improved psychological well-being.

> "I feel really good like morally, I feel like what I believe is actually lined up with my actions now whereas before I didn't feel comfortable with it but it was just kind of the status quo and it was easy so I kept doing what I was doing." –*Jill*

> "I'm living in a way that is consistent with my principles." –*Bailey*

> "By sticking to my values and it presents a lot less conflict in my mind. I think perhaps just removing that conflicting aspect of eating meat makes me feel better about myself overall. So it definitely has to do with these underlying values I somehow developed." –*Linda*

> "…my actions align with what I believe." –*Gina*

> "But just knowing that I'm doing things daily that reflect my morals I guess." -*Marilyn*

By having their actions align with their beliefs, participants experienced less guilt and stress over the foods they were eating. In addition, they experienced more feelings of authenticity, self-worth and a clear conscience.

> "…the stress of not having your beliefs line up with your actions. If I was eating an animal product, I'd try not to think about it but subconsciously you feel bad, you're not doing the right thing. That internal stress is gone now too when I eat I don't worry about it. I feel like I'm doing the right thing." –*Jill*

> "Well I feel more authentically myself, so that would be a part of my mental well-being." –*Claire*

> "I feel like it's almost given me more confidence in things, I felt maybe like a weight was lifted, I felt way less guilty almost. The things you didn't realize that maybe bothered you now that you aren't a part of it, I felt kinda released from." –*Danielle*

Happy as a vegetarian. Some respondents talked about being happy as a vegetarian. In addition, many individuals attributed an increase in happiness to

their vegetarian diet. Adopting and maintaining a vegetarian diet led to feelings of pride, a sense of freedom, and confidence, all which contribute to feelings of happiness.

> I feel more free actually since I've become vegetarian. People often say oh you're probably so restricted and you're living a closed life. But I feel more open and more free, more happy than I have in such a long time, and it just feels so good all the time." *–Justin*

> "And backed by the experiences I've been, the way I've been feeling and after half a year being vegetarian I just thought something's changing, it's hard for me to describe, but I feel healthier, I feel happier, and just overall level of happiness experience after going on this vegetarian diet." *–Linda*

> "Something that I feel pride about, and I don't mean that in a self-righteous kind of way, I mean for myself I feel proud of myself that I've managed to be a vegetarian, and be a vegetarian for this long, and it was a very overnight decision for me, again, right, I went from eating my steak rare to being vegetarian, it was that quick. So I feel a sense of pride, or a sense of accomplishment that I've done this, I've made this lifestyle decision for myself and I feel better because of it. I feel better about who I am because of it." *–Michelle (FG)*

Feeling good about helping the environment. Vegetarians also experienced psychological rewards in relation to the various rationales behind their vegetarian diet. For example, for many participants, reducing their carbon footprint and helping the environment was one of the primary motivations behind their diet. In the same regard, knowing that their diet is contributing to the betterment of the environment left many participants feeling good about themselves and their diet, improving their self-perceived psychological well-being.

> "…feeling good about myself and that I'm doing the right thing for myself and for the earth and for the animals." *–Jill*

> "I mean the more you see studies about the greenhouse effect and all this stuff and all of the effects that animal production has on that and also just knowing animals personally, I think it all aligns really well and it's satisfying to know that I'm doing something about it every day." *–Gina*

Feeling good about saving animals. In addition to reducing one's environmental impact, many participants also became vegetarian to avoid the suffering and harm caused to non-human animals. In this regard, participants talked about feeling good about their diet because they knew they were not contributing to the unnecessary animal suffering. They saw their contributions as rewarding, indicating that their diet helped to improve their psychological well-being.

> "It's knowing that through my efforts without trying to be a preachy individual at the very least I have made a small difference in many lives." *–David*

> "The immediate reward was knowing that I wasn't participating in anything that harmed animals anymore." *–Debbie*

> "I guess it feels good not to eat animals… feels good knowing that no suffering happened for you to eat, so that's good." *–Nathan*

Psychological benefits outweigh the challenges. Participants reported experiencing immense feelings of strong psychological well-being, despite the feelings of sadness living in a world dominated by an omnivorous diet and acknowledging that most people will not understand their vegetarian ways. Participants expressed how sometimes it may take a gentle reminder, or that they need to go back and reflect on why they became (and continue to be) a vegetarian, and then they are reminded of the rewarding aspects of their diet, allowing them to set aside the challenges associated with vegetarianism.

> "I'm just always happy when I feel like I'm making a difference, or that I'm helping. I think that's what makes me feel good. Or if I'm ever having a bad day or there's no food at my house and I have to go to Safeway and buy myself something or if I'm somewhere with friends and they're eating appetizers I'm like I just have to wait, it'll be fine, it's my decision. But just when those kinda little things start to pile up I just remind myself that I am making a difference, that's what I like to do." *–Jennifer*

> "I noticed that sometimes I watch all the videos and goes on in the factory farms. I'll be crying and then my dad was like you're already doing all you can. I'm like but how can help. There is some frustration. Sometimes you do get into those dark places where you're like nothing's ever gonna change and no one's ever gonna care because I see forward and to how it's basically affecting our entire planet and also into the isolated situations of the pigs in the slaughter trucks going by. That does make me sad but as a baseline in psychological health, I feel better so I'm able to really buffer that." *–Danielle*

> "It's definitely overwhelming. But yet I definitely feel I think, I would feel worse if I wasn't a vegetarian, not just health wise. I do think that I would, I'd feel guilty."
> *–Michelle (FG)*

> "Like I just feel good about the decisions I'm making. Like I know some of them are difficult, like at least I've taken the time to think through and make the decision that I think is best, and I don't know that feels good I think." –Jill (FG)

Psychological Challenges

There were very little data available on the psychological challenges experienced by vegetarians, but participants believed these to be past and current events and situations that challenged their psychological well-being and included strategies developed to help cope with these challenges. These included: disordered eating, difficulty deciding when one's moral obligations end, and one atypical case of emotional instability and depression.

Disordered eating. Disordered eating (e.g., anorexia) is a substantial, and often life threatening, mental disorder. Three female participants had a history of an eating disorder prior to becoming a vegetarian, and believed that becoming vegetarian was a significant step toward psychological health.

> "…there was a bit of disordered eating going on too I'd say just in that restrictive sense of cutting out whole food groups…" –*Jody (Describing her pre-vegetarian eating patterns)*

Each of the three participants reported using veganism or vegetarianism to overcome their eating disorder, and thus conceptualized vegetarianism as contributing positively to their mental health. These participants developed anxieties around eating food. Some were diagnosed with an eating disorder and some were even hospitalized and treated for the disorder. Participants knew they needed to resume eating and to do so in a healthy way. Therefore, vegetarianism was used by these participants as a way of slowly incorporating healthy foods back into their diet.

However, vegetarianism was also used to allow participants to restrict their food intake, providing them with a sense of control over their eating, but in a more socially acceptable manner. Although participants talked about becoming a vegetarian to *overcome* their eating disorders and improve their psychological well-being, it could also be the case that vegetarianism was used to *manage* their eating disorder (i.e., to continue with the disordered eating, at least to some degree). Thus, although this was expressed as an improvement in psychological well-being (i.e., overcoming the psychological disorder), it may be rather that although being a vegetarian has social challenges, it is still more socially

acceptable than having an eating disorder. For example, their eating disorders led others to worry about them, which contributed to a negative identity around eating. When they changed their dietary habits to a more socially acceptable form of eating (i.e., vegetarianism being preferable, in others' eyes, to not eating), this shifted their social identity from one of negativity to one of health, positivity and acceptance, which in turn led these participants to feel better about themselves, and to see their psychological well-being as having improved.

> "I developed anorexia, and I was quite severely underweight and having a lot of anxieties regarding food. As I went into treatment for that and started looking more into basically how to begin eating again going from such a very restricted list of what I deemed to be safe foods…. So what it did do in a really positive way was to give me an opportunity to think about how did I actually want to eat, how did I feel comfortable eating, what was a way that I could still feel in control of my food and to feel that I was doing that in the healthiest way possible. And so for me thinking about what did I, A) enjoy eating, B) what did I feel comfortable eating, and C) starting to looking into OK so how do other people eat and what are my options…. So suddenly I felt like I could redefine my eating in a way that was entirely mine, it wasn't something I inherited from my parents from my childhood from small town Alberta, and it was something that still allowed me to opt out of certain foods if I felt uncomfortable with them in terms of that sort of restrictive mentality. But what I found was that maybe a year or two into my recovery from my eating disorder was that rather than vegetarianism and veganism being an opt out, I'm not eating that, it was also a way to opt in, so opt in to new foods, and fresh foods, and to feel that I had a really healthy and positive identity around my eating." –*Sharon*

Even though the participants viewed veganism as a healthy alternative to disordered eating, their friends and family members were still hesitant about the restrictive nature of their diet. However, over time their diet became more accepted by others in their life, possibly because it was a preferred alternative.

> "I think in the very beginning it [vegetarian diet] was viewed really negatively 'cause I was anorexic, so the whole food thing was that, so that

> was just one more bloody thing. So I think a lot was made of it then, at that point, but over time, I wasn't anorexic forever, and they came to see that it was just a decision, and they knew my reasons why, and it was all good." *–Claire*

Thus, for these individuals, the adoption of a vegetarian diet led to a substantial improvement in their mental health, since it was a way for them to manage their eating disorder.

Difficulty deciding when one's moral obligations end. Another challenge to the psychological well-being of vegetarians was the feeling among many participants that they could and should always do more. Some participants saw vegetarianism as a journey where they continued to learn and grow. However, the more they learnt about the health benefits, the environmental impacts, or the ways in which animals were treated, the more they felt guilty about their current lifestyle, feeling like they were not doing everything possible to support their cause. Some participants struggled with this, and talked about having to find a balance they could live with.

> "I feel like yes, I'm doing my part and that helps and that gives me strength to do it… There's still, there's always that frustration but I think you have to as a human get to your new normal of knowing all the bad things out there and you can't always let that bother you. All you can do is your proximate changes try to talk to other people…" *-Danielle*

> "I guess trying to figure out when you've done enough… It's the balance of living your life versus being a part of something bigger which is what I hope to do. I would definitely say the hardest thing overall is finding that balance." *–Danielle*

During one of the participant observations where Dr. Howard Nye, a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Alberta, gave a presentation on why everyone should be vegan. He provided an ethical argument against the

consumption of animal products. I noted that people in the audience seemed to struggle with the concept of human animals' moral and ethical obligation to non-human animals. Although it appeared those in the group agreed with the concept, they found it difficult to determine where their moral and ethical obligation ended. The question of "Where do you draw the line?" was a common concern amongst participants.

During the participant observation, there was a question and answer period after Dr. Nye's talk. This session was another example of the discussion around how far should our obligations go. Some of the discussion was on the consumption and use of honey. Some vegans do not consume or use honey while others do. It was determined through discussion amongst the group, that the fumigation methods used as well as the collection of the honey may cause injury, pain, harm and even death to the bees, therefore an ethical vegan would also avoid the consumption and use of honey.

This discussion on one's ethical obligations was furthered by discussing the use of palm oil as a common agent in vegan products (vegan butter, mayonnaise, etc.). The use of palm oil is leading to deforestation that could potentially lead to the harm of non-human animals living in the forests. Therefore, some vegans in the audience also avoided the consumption and use of vegan products containing palm oil.

This conversation around ethical obligations also came up in one of the focus groups. The women in the focus group talked about how there is no pure choice- that is, there is no choice that truly does not cause some sort of harm to

animals. They talked about buying organic foods but being cognizant of how the produce is fertilized, owning a car but knowing that this is not entirely vegan, trying not to wear leather shoes but knowing than non-leather shoes do not last long, which contributes to consumer waste and unfair labour practices, and buying fair-trade chap-stick but knowing it contains beeswax. Therefore, behaving in a way that is consistent with morals and values can become difficult at times. This is especially true when your moral and ethical beliefs go against mainstream culture. Although they discussed how difficult this was, they went on to explain that they just have to try and make the best choices possible, that promote the least amount of harm, and feel good knowing they have done their best. Thus, it is a balance between being strict with their diet, but also being realistic about what they can achieve with their diet.

> "I find it stressful sometimes for sure, like the ethical stuff I'm going around and around in my head about it. So that's why then I stop myself and say OK you're doing as much as you can, nobody can be like a super person that's like completely environmentally friendly, completely ethical, completely organic, completely non-GMO, like you can't, it's impossible…" -*Michelle (FG)*

Participants struggled psychologically to know when their moral and ethical obligations ended. Participants expressed reaching a point in their diet where they accepted that they cannot live a life that was completely moral and ethical in every way, although this threatened their sense of psychological well-being, participants learned to accept that they were doing the best they can within their own means.

Emotionally instability/depression. Only one participant described becoming depressed as a result of her vegan diet. Marilyn was a purely ethical vegan, meaning she adopted a vegan diet solely for animal rights and was highly involved in animal rights movements. This participant felt deeply about her ethical motives and did her best to avoid causing harm to animals. However, once she realized that she herself could only do so much (i.e. she developed a sense of helplessness to change the situation), she became depressed and developed anxiety over the fact that animal suffering was inevitable in the society we live in. Thus, it was not so much the diet itself that lead to reflections of negative psychological well-being, rather the awareness of animal suffering that came with the diet. This saddened her, to the point that she engaged in self-harm activities to cope with her emotional pain.

Marilyn's depressed mood also resulted in changes to her social habits. Most of Marilyn's friends and family members did not share her same concern for animal welfare. Due to her strong beliefs in animal rights, Marilyn found it hard to socialize with those who consumed meat, resulting in greater feelings of depression and social isolation.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to add to our understanding of vegetarians' self-perceived psychological well-being and the role their vegetarian diet/lifestyle played in this. By exploring questions related to psychological health, thought processes, feelings and emotions, this study is the first qualitative study of its kind

to develop insight into the psychological well-being of vegetarians. Participants were able to share their experiences, provide examples, and reflect on the impact a vegetarian diet has had on their overall health and well-being.

This research revealed some threats to psychological well-being in relation to a vegetarian diet. For example, one participant reported that she was clinically depressed and attributed this to the awareness of animal suffering that her vegan diet brought about. More specifically, becoming vegetarian was associated with an increased focus on how animals are treated and on the effect that a conventional western diet has on our environment. These realizations can lead to feelings of sadness, loneliness and depression.

Despite these negative emotions, most participants relayed their perception that adopting a vegetarian diet has improved their psychological well-being. After becoming a vegetarian, participants generally indicated they felt happier, developed a strong sense of pride and felt rewarded as a result of their diet. This suggests that a vegetarian diet may lead to a self-perceived improvement in psychological well-being.

One of the interesting findings was the number of female participants in this study that had experienced an eating disorder. Some of the research surrounding vegetarianism and eating disorders suggests a causal relationship, in which vegetarianism results in the development of an eating disorder. For example, research was conducted in Germany using a representative community sample to investigate the relationship between a vegetarian diet and mental

disorders (Michalak et al., 2012). The authors concluded that the decision to become vegetarian likely precedes the onset of an eating disorder (Michalak et al., 2012), although this could only be speculative due to the cross-sectional nature of the study. Although the current study is also cross-sectional in nature, participants clearly identified the opposite temporal relationship, stating that the eating disorder preceded (and was ameliorated by) the adoption of a vegetarian diet.

The finding in the current study is also consistent with other qualitative research findings. For example, narrative research conducted in the United States has also suggested that the adoption of a vegetarian diet helped to resolve eating disorders among female participants (Dean, 2014). One hypothesis that has been proposed is that the adoption of a vegetarian diet helps to shift the individual's attention away from a focus on issues around eating per se and on to issues around the well-being of animals, thus allowing these individuals with disordered eating to focus their energy on something much bigger than their diet (Hamshaw, 2011). Findings from the current study do not completely support this hypothesis, since although participants felt that a vegetarian diet helped them to overcome their eating disorder, their focus remained on themselves and their efforts to learn to balance food restrictions with incorporating healthy foods back into their diet. Thus, these findings did not support the idea that vegetarianism engendered a shift of focus away from the self and onto animal welfare. Therefore, direction of the causal relationship between a vegetarian diet and eating disorders remains unclear, which is not surprising given the cross-sectional design of the studies cited.

As outlined in the previous systematic review on mental health/psychological well-being of vegetarians, most of the limited number of methodologically sound studies suggest that vegetarians have lower levels of psychological well-being compared to non-vegetarians (Baines, Powers, & Brown, 2007; Lindeman, 2002). In contrast, although this study did not compare vegetarians to their omnivorous counterparts, only one of the 26 study participants attributed poorer mental health (i.e., feelings of depression) to her vegetarian diet. Findings in the current study suggest that participants believe that adopting a vegetarian diet had many rewards that positively contribute to one's psychological well-being. Opposed to feeling depressed or mentally ill, the majority of participants expressed feeling happier, vibrant, full of energy, and better about themselves as a vegetarian. Participants felt a sense of belonging and authenticity with their vegetarian identity, which contributed to positive feelings of psychological well-being reinforcing participants' vegetarian identity. It may be that the current findings reflect differences in sample characteristics or, alternatively, the lack of comparison with a non-vegetarian group (who might have reported even better psychological well-being). However, previous studies did not assess psychological well-being prior to the decision to become vegetarian, so cannot address the issue of whether psychological well-being improved or declined over time. Quantitative and qualitative studies which follow individuals through the transition to vegetarianism would help to clarify this question.

Chapter 10: Summary and Conclusions

Summary and Overview

The overall aims of this research were as follows:

- To conduct a systematic review of existing studies on the psychological well-being of vegetarians.
- To conduct a focused ethnography to the following ends:
    - To understand vegetarians' rationales for adopting their diet.
    - To understand vegetarians' self-perceived social well-being.
    - To understand vegetarians' self-perceived psychological well-being.

It was important to explore the experiences of vegetarians, especially their self-perceived social and psychological well-being because there is a major gap in the literature in this area. Although a vegetarian diet has been deemed an acceptable and healthy diet, the foundation of this assertion lies in claims related to physical health benefits of a vegetarian diet and the belief that such a diet reduces chronic illness and promotes longevity (Dewell, Weidner, Sumner, Chi, & Ornish, 2008; Fraser, 1999; Fraser, 2003; Key, Appleby, Spencer, Travis, Allen, et al., 2009; Key, Appleby, Spencer, Travis, Roddam, et al., 2009). This research set out to explore if there were other health/well-being implications to a vegetarian diet – i.e., do vegetarians feel that adoption of their diet has influenced their social and psychological well-being, and, if so, why? These are important

questions that needed to be explored. As vegetarianism becomes an increasingly popular dietary choice in Western society, is important to understand how this dietary choice impacts the well-being of this distinct sub-culture.

First, I reported a systematic review of the existing studies of psychological well-being of vegetarians. After a detailed search strategy and review of the existing literature, only seven studies were found on vegetarians' psychological well-being. Through an examination of these studies I have concluded that there is very little available evidence on the psychological well-being of vegetarians and the evidence that does exist is inconsistent and of generally poor methodological quality. Five of the seven studies were deemed to have high risk of bias (and therefore we can have little confidence in their findings). The remaining two studies were methodologically more sound, and both found vegetarians to have poor psychological well-being. However, both used a cross-sectional design, so no inferences can be made about the direction of this association. Although the search included both quantitative and qualitative studies, I found no qualitative studies on the psychological well-being of vegetarians, speaking to the lacuna of research in this area and further supporting the need for the current research.

A qualitative study design was chosen to explore vegetarians' experiences with respect to their reasons for becoming vegetarian and the impact of this choice on their social and psychological well-being. To best address the aims of the qualitative portion of the research, a focused ethnographic study was conducted. This involved three different forms of data collection: individual

interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. A total of 19 in-depth individual interviews were conducted with vegetarian participants. Three focus groups were also conducted constituting a total of 10 participants. Given that focus groups are effective with as few as three participants (Tracy, 2013), there was a minimum of three participants in each of the focus groups in this study. These interviews and focus groups were conducted until I felt I had reached a rich level of saturation. Four different accounts of participant observation also took place at events hosted by three groups; the VVUA, the VVoA, and Raw Vegan Edmonton. Detailed descriptive and reflective fieldnotes were taken at each event I attended. All interview and focus group data were transcribed and analyzed as the data collection process took place, along with reflective and descriptive fieldnotes. A qualitative content analysis was then used to analyze the data and write the results. A summary of the results from each of the main purposes of this research is provided in the sections that follow.

Rationales for a Vegetarian Diet

This study set out to explore the reasons why people become vegetarian. There were a variety of reasons why participants chose to give up eating meat, dairy or eggs. For some individuals, it was a strong sense of guilt when eating animals, which was connected to their compassion for animals and their intent not to cause unnecessary harm. For others, it was a concern for the environment, for earth's dwindling natural resources and the inefficiency involved in meat production methods. For some participants, it was a very personal decision made to improve their own health, a potential cure for a disease or illness they have not

been able to get rid of, or a spotlight on the future; wanting to ensure their health and longevity for years to come. There were also a number of very personal and intimately unique reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet, including interesting experiences while traveling and a commitment to the feminist movement.

However, for individual participants there was no single reason for becoming a vegetarian. Their diet may have started with a particular motivation, but as participants learned about and experienced vegetarianism, they found many more reasons to support their diet and lifestyle. For many, concerns for the environment were connected to the health and well-being of all creatures on the planet, including both human and non-human animals. Other participants made a connection between their own personal health and animal welfare, feeling good about their dietary decisions and promoting a feeling of wellness. A series of intertwined motivations, rather than a single reason explained participants' reasons for becoming vegetarian.

Interestingly, participants revealed that they would respond to those who asked the question of why they had become vegetarian in ways that they had found were socially desirable responses (i.e., reasons they believed would lead to less conflict), rather than the "real" reason. For the most part, I believe participants were upfront and honest with me about their reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet. Many also said that they tended not to disclose the true rationale for their diet to (non-vegetarian) others, for fear that their reasoning would be stigmatized or questioned. In fact, within one interview the participant talked to me about becoming a vegetarian for health reasons, only to state later in the

interview that his primary motivation for becoming vegetarian was actually animal ethics, something he had never expressed to anyone else before. It is evident that there are prevailing social pressures, to which vegetarians respond by masking their true motivations and passions for a vegetarian lifestyle. These powerful social pressures take the form of conformity in which vegetarians sought to avoid displaying opinions or behaviours that were not consistent with the omnivorous norm, and instead sought to alter their rationales (on a social level) to align with societal norms. Therefore, participants masked their true motivations to avoid being labeled deviant and provide a response that is more likely to be accepted by an omnivorous society.

Many participants remembered clearly a distinct moment when they decided to become a vegetarian; where they were and what they were doing. This transition to giving up animal flesh, and other animal products, truly went beyond diet alone and resulted in a shift on one's identity and lifestyle. As part of the decision to become vegetarian, participants reformulated their values, beliefs and behaviours. The idea that all of a sudden, vegetarianism "clicked" and they could not "unclick it" was a really interesting finding. After asking interview participants if they thought they would ever go back to their meat-eating ways, only one personal indicated that they would, if there was a more ethical and humane way to do so.

Social Well-Being of Vegetarians

This study also set out to explore the self-perceived social well-being of individuals who have chosen to adopt a vegetarian diet. When asked to reflect on

both the positive and negative social aspects of adopting a vegetarian diet, participants seemed to have an easier time discussing the socially-challenging aspects of vegetarianism than the socially-rewarding aspects. It was not so much that the vegetarian diet itself was challenging, rather it was following a vegetarian diet in an omnivorous society that made it challenging.

When asked to talk about the potential threats to their social well-being, participants described a variety of experiences that left them feeling "frustrated", "annoyed" and "tired". For example, many vegetarians experienced negative social repercussions as a result of their choice to become vegetarian. This was presented in a variety of ways, including unsupportive friends and family members, being teased and mocked as a result of their diet and having their dietary choices constantly questioned by others. Therefore, for the majority of the participants in this study, the initial reaction of others to their diet was unpleasant, but over time their friends and family grew to accept their diet. However, for some, friends and family members never grew to accept their diet and this negatively influenced their relationships, and in some cases, ended their relationship. Since food, eating and sharing meals is such a socially- and culturally-engrained experience, there was no escaping the challenges associated with their diet. Vegetarians began to anticipate negative reactions to their dietary choices and therefore had developed a variety of techniques to help manage the challenges they were facing and the challenges they expected to face.

Despite the negative experiences of vegetarians, there were also some socially-rewarding aspects of their diet that contributed to participants' self-

perceived social well-being. Some participants had friends and family members that were very accepting of their diet, despite not understanding the reasoning behind it, which led to feelings of being supported amongst the vegetarians. Participants also found that they were able to develop deep and intimate connections with other vegetarians, which provided them with a sense of inclusion and community. Interestingly, there did not appear to be inherent differences in social well-being between those recruited from vegetarian organizations and those recruited from outside these organizations. This may indicate that these vegetarian organizations do not play as strong a role in vegetarians' social well-being as do friends and family members.

Psychological Well-Being of Vegetarians

This qualitative study also set out to explore the self-perceived psychological well-being of vegetarians. I originally thought that it might be difficult for vegetarians to reflect on changes to their psychological well-being, especially those vegetarians who had been following their diet for quite some time. However, most participants talked about being able to recall very clearly the changes to their psychological well-being at the time of their transition. This may be due, in part, to the fact that this shift to vegetarianism was a major turning point in forming their identity. Many individuals decided to become vegetarian, in part, because they believed there would be benefits to their psychological well-being. Therefore, when asked to reflect on both the positive and negative psychological aspects of adopting a vegetarian diet, participants reflected more easily on the psychologically-rewarding aspects of vegetarianism than they did

about the psychological-challenging aspects. This is in contrast with their reflections on their social well-being.

When asked to describe the potential threats their psychological well-being that resulted from a vegetarian diet, many participants could not think of any, although one individual directly linked the adoption of her vegan diet to poor psychological well-being. She said that she had become a vegan as the result of the awareness she had gained about the treatment of animals raised for food. The longer she was vegan and the more research she did, the more depressed (her term) she grew with the way humans treat and disregard the lives of non-human animals. For her, a vegan diet brought with it a greater focus on animal suffering, which she found increasingly distressing. Hence, some individuals may experience psychological problems after becoming vegetarian. Therefore, vegetarianism does not universally improve psychological well-being.

However, the majority of participants in this study, when asked to reflect on their psychological well-being, felt a strong sense of improvement. Participants described themselves as feeling happier as vegetarians. The positive feelings appeared to be a result of the alignment of their values (i.e., valuing the health and well-being of non-human animals, health of the environment) with their actions (having adopted a vegetarian or vegan diet which was viewed as minimizing the negative impact on animals and on the environment). This alleviation of prior internal conflict contributed positively to their health. Participants talked about feeling lighter after adopting a vegetarian diet, as though a “weight had been lifted” and that they no longer felt guilty about what they were eating.

Tying it All Together

Participants decided to become vegetarian for a variety of reasons including improving and protecting their personal health and minimizing the harm caused to both animals and the environment. It was quite evident that there was no one particular reason behind an individual deciding to adopt and maintain a vegetarian diet; for most, there were a variety of reasons. These reasons were also dynamic, in that the reasons for becoming vegetarian were not always the most salient reasons for maintaining the diet. As they followed a vegetarian diet, participants described themselves as learning more about the positive effects of their diet, which supported their reasoning for becoming a vegetarian, and as they talked with others and perceived themselves as becoming healthier, they developed new rationales for their diet.

Considering that vegetarians choose their diet for multiple reasons, there is a complex connection between a distinct motivation for their diet and their perceived social and psychological well-being. As vegetarians' motivations continue to grow and change, this relationship becomes increasingly complex. When it comes to social well-being, findings from the current study suggest that those who tell others that they have adopted a vegetarian diet out of concern for animals experience more challenges to their social well-being than those who say that they have adopted a vegetarian diet for environmental or personal reasons. Participants expressed that telling others they were vegetarians for ethical reasons resulted in a morally-charged conversation that seemed to offend others.

This response from others may have been due to a perception (whether true or not) that the vegetarian was implying that he or she was ethical and by implication, the non-vegetarian was not. In participants' experience, non-vegetarians would then become defensive, which resulted in conflict or unwanted social confrontations. This situation may also reflect an instance of Spivak's concept of "othering", which can be described as a process, whereby those in the majority emphasize their difference from a minority group, redefining their power and majority status (Jensen, 2009). In situations when there was an apparent "othering" of vegetarians, participants perceived their social well-being to be threatened. However, those that relayed to others that they had adopted a vegetarian diet for primarily environmental or personal reasons did not seemed to experience the same level of "othering" as those that were primarily ethical vegetarians. Participants became aware of this social dynamic, which resulted in developing coping strategies which allowed them to avoid social conflict by concealing their true rationale for becoming a vegetarian and providing more socially desirable rationales.

However, when it came to psychological well-being, the pattern was reversed in that those who became vegetarian for primarily ethical reasons expressed higher levels of psychological well-being as a result of this decision. When participants were asked to reflect on any changes they had experienced to their level of psychological well-being, the majority of participants expressed that it had improved as a result of their own morals and values "finally" being aligned with their actions.

On the face of it, these findings are not consistent with the results of the systematic review. However, the quantitative studies could not comment on any changes in psychological well-being, whereas the participants in the qualitative study reflected on such changes, albeit retrospectively. Nor did the quantitative studies differentiate their findings by reason for becoming vegetarian. In fact, in some of the studies, the majority of vegetarians who were participants were raised as vegetarian as opposed to having transition to a vegetarian diet on their own. Therefore, the idea in this qualitative study that the psychological well-being came about as a result of "becoming true" to themselves in their beliefs and attitudes resulted in improved feelings of happiness pride and inner peace. Those raised as vegetarian may not have experienced this to the same extent. The same might said for those that adopted a vegetarian diet out of concerns for the environment. That is, developing a sense of altruism by becoming vegetarian and feeling that they were therefore less damaging to the environment contributed to feelings of self-worth and value. In contrast, those who made the decision to become vegetarian primarily for health or personal reasons did not express the same level of psychological improvement.

This connection between social and psychological well-being and the rationales for becoming a vegetarian is interesting. Even though ethical motivations are connected to perceived decrease in social well-being (especially initially), these motivations are also connected to improved psychological well-being. This could be because over time participants perceived that their social well-being eventually began to improve. As they formed new relationships,

redefined old relationships and found others who supported and understood their dietary motivations, they experienced feelings of improved social well-being, which lead to perceived internalized feelings of strong psychological well-being.

It is also possible that the social challenges actually reinforced this enhancement of perceived psychological well-being by distinguishing previous actions from current morals, values and lifestyles. In other words, having experienced this "othering", and its inherent threats to social well-being, participants were reminded of the changes they have made a result of their vegetarian diet, reinforcing and strengthening their sense psychological well-being as these changes lead to feelings of pride and moral soundness. This could be clarified with a longitudinal study that follows vegetarians' rationale, social well-being and psychological well-being from the time of the decision to adopt a vegetarian diet.

In summary, it seems that despite the social challenges experienced, participants found following a vegetarian diet psychologically rewarding. In addition, when participants were asked if they would ever go back to eating meat, only one participant indicated they would and only if there was a more humane way to do so. Therefore, despite the social challenges, the benefits to these participants' psychological well-being seemed to be enough motivation to maintain and sustain their vegetarian diet.

Is Vegetarianism/Veganism a Human Right?

This thesis would be incomplete without a brief section outlining the wider potential social and cultural implications of the findings of this research. Although none of the participants in the current study described having experienced actual discrimination (e.g., a denial of goods, services or employment) as a result of their vegetarianism, and none talked about vegetarianism or veganism as a human right, these issues have been raised in other settings. It is clear that vegetarianism extends beyond the individual. Even though food selection is seemingly an individual choice, it is also inherently social and cultural in its determinants and consequences. Individuals' food choices can have an impact on their own health but, as can be seen from the current study, food choices can also affect their interactions with their friends and family and their experiences interacting as members within a culture or society. This study focused on psychological and interpersonal aspects of social well-being. However, another potentially interesting avenue to explore is the notion of vegetarianism/veganism as applied to human rights and its associated policies. This thesis does not and cannot address the legal and philosophical complexities of these implications. However, as a debate that is currently occurring in other parts of Canada, the issue should be at least mentioned here.

For example, Chiodo (2012) has recently discussed the notion of veganism as a human right. In this article, Chiodo reviewed and commented on the (then) upcoming changes to the definition of "creed" in the *Ontario Human Rights Commission's Policy on Creed*, which were eventually implemented in December

of 2015. Historically, the definition of creed has been confined to religious beliefs and practices but since has been expanded to include more modern beliefs systems highlighting individual conscience (Chiodo, 2012).

Some are opposed to the idea of recognizing conscience as a creed in fear that there is no conceptual limit to the notion of conscience and in doing so we will weaken the concept and existing legislation (Chiodo, 2012). In other words, a valid law may end up conflicting with an individual's commitments making it difficult to determine a conceptual stopping point. Others counter this point by indicating that if a conceptual stopping point can be reach based on the definition of religion, that it can also be reached based the definition of a conscientiously held belief (Chiodo, 2012). In addition, the definition of creed would be held to the same limitations as religion with the Ontario Human Rights Commission indicating that "Human rights protections for creed do not extend to practices and observances that are hateful or incite hatred or violence against other individuals or groups, or contravene criminal law." (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 6). These limitations would help to alleviate the concern that any conscientious belief would be upheld.

According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission in order to be consider a creed the belief system has to meet five criteria:

- Is sincerely, freely and deeply held
- Is integrally linked to a person's self-definition and spiritual fulfilment
- Is a particular, comprehensive and overarching system of belief that

governs one's conduct and practices

- Addresses ultimate questions of human existence, including ideas about life, purpose, death, and the existence or non-existence of a creator and/or a higher or different order of existence
- Has some "nexus" or connection to an organization or community that professes a shared system of belief. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 19)

The Ontario Human Rights Commission brings up the notion of vegetarianism in their *Policy on Preventing Discrimination Based on Creed*. For example, the policy discusses creed-based food restrictions and the duty to accommodate. The policy states:

> Persons with a creed may have creed-based dietary restrictions or food practices. Such restrictions may extend to producing, storing, processing, handling, transporting or consuming food. Organizations have a duty to accommodate people's sincerely held creed-based food requirements, up to the point of undue hardship. Not doing so may infringe on a person's right to equally access, take part in or benefit from housing, services, employment, a contract, or membership in a union or professional association. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 100)

The following example using vegetarianism is presented in the policy document:

> A person in a mental health facility requires vegetarian food options, based on her creed. She is not allowed off the premises to find appropriate food, and

> she is not able to prepare her own food. The facility has a duty to accommodate her creed-based food requirements up to the point of undue hardship by making appropriate food options available to enable her to stay at the facility. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 100)

However, the policy also has limitations to the creed-based food restrictions. They state that the duty to accommodate does not hold true when it challenges the essential nature of the service provided by on organization. An example of this is provided within the policy document:

> It is not discrimination if a steak house that only serves animal-based products does not accommodate a vegetarian patron. Offering steak-related food items on its menu may be considered an essential nature of the service the steakhouse provides. However, a restaurant that already offers vegetarian food options may be required to accommodate a customer whose religion requires a vegetarian diet, by cooking a person's vegetarian meal using cooking utensils that have been cleaned and removed of any traces of meat, unless this can be shown to cause undue hardship. (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 101)

Therefore, given the new definition of creed, the notion of creed-based food restrictions and the inclusion of examples of vegetarianism being upheld as a creed in the policy, many vegans feel that they would be included under this new law. In addition, findings from this research certainly support many of the notions that define creed. For example, this research has indicated that *vegetarianism is a*

deeply held belief. The fact that participants had strong rationales for excluding meat from their diet and other animal products from their life, speaks to the idea of vegetarianism as a lifestyle choice that results in a change in one's core beliefs, values, and behaviours. This also speaks to the notion of *vegetarianism as an overarching belief system that governs an individual's lifestyle*. In addition, this research demonstrates that *vegetarianism is tied to personal identity and fulfillment*. Many individuals expressed changes to who they are as a person, how they interact with others, and their belief system, which are strongly tied to an individual's identity. Participants expressed positive changes to their psychological well-being, which were attributed to feelings of fulfillment and authenticity as a vegetarian, when their values finally aligned with their actions. Through this research *it is evident that there are communities, clubs, and organizations that practice and promote vegetarianism*. The last criteria, regarding *addressing the ultimate question of human existence* is harder to confirm through this research study. Certainly, many of the participants believed in the ethical principle of non-violence and the preservation of life. Further research would need to be conducted to determine if vegetarians meets this criterion.

If veganism were to be considered a creed this would give vegans the right to express their beliefs under the protection of the law. For example, the International Vegan Rights Alliance dictates that right to ethical veganism should be recognized both legally and socially. The alliance advocates for the right for vegans to be legally recognized as a minority group in order to be protected

against unfair treatment and discrimination (International Vegan Rights Allaince, 2016). So those rights of accommodation that are made on religious grounds may now be extended to include deeply held beliefs systems such as ethical veganism, which may not be tied to a particular religion (Csanady, 2016). Although this may be the case for vegans motivated by ethical grounds, it is unclear whether this policy would extend to all vegans (vegans motivated by personal health reasons, or environmental reasons) or to vegetarians.

How does this apply to Alberta and the wider Canadian context? The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is part of the Canadian constitution and therefore is applicable throughout Canada. In addition to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms each province/territory has its own set of human rights' laws that dictate the right to equal treatment in that particular province/territory. The Ontario Human Rights Code outlined briefly above, includes creed as a protected ground. However, in the Alberta, the Alberta Human Rights Commission recognizes religion as a protected ground and not "creed". According to the Alberta Human Rights Commission a religious belief is defined as "a system of belief, worship and conduct" (Alberta Human Rights Commision, 2016, What is meant by religious beliefs? section, para. 1). Therefore, unlike the Ontario definition of creed, which is linked to a deeply held belief, the Alberta notion of Religion is specific to religious beliefs and therefore, would like not extend to ethical veganism.

What would this mean for the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians? Again, this remains unclear. However, we could speculate that this may lead to a wider acceptance of vegetarians and provide more support for vegetarians on both moral and legal grounds. This research has shown that vegetarians' perceptions of social well-being involves feeling that their dietary and lifestyle choices are accepted. Although the linkage between increased perceptions of social well-being and psychological well-being was not explicitly made by participants, it seems highly likely that these are related. If lack of acceptance of vegetarianism/veganism extends to the need for protection under the law, this potentially has important consequences for well-being, and deserves study and consideration.

Strengths of this Research

During this research, I would categorize myself as closer to an inside researcher because the majority of my work involved observing and talking to a vegetarian population, of which I self-identify. In some ways, this insider position put me at an advantage compared to a non-vegetarian. Lofland and colleagues have emphasized the benefit of being emotionally invested in one's research. They suggest that conducting research that stems from a personal experience can improve the quality of a research project and help to ensure its completion (Lofland et al., 2006). In addition, as a vegetarian I was familiar with vegetarianism and I was able to have a better-shared understanding of participants' viewpoints and experiences. It has also been noted that insider researcher have the ability to "project a more truthful, authentic understanding of

the culture under study" (Merriam et al., 2001). I used my knowledge and experience to develop relevant and important questions and obtain rich data. Being an insider also greatly facilitated recruitment, as I was already a part of several organizations and social groups and had established rapport with these organizations and had access to several vegetarians. However, my insider position also required that I was constantly aware of how my presence shaped the research.

This research used a focused ethnographic approach, which is a well-recognized and well-published approach to qualitative inquiry, enhancing the trustworthiness of the research design (Creswell, 2013). Trustworthiness and credibility were maintained in this study through data triangulation (Willis, 2007). I collected data from three different sources: participant observation, focus groups and interviews.

The trustworthiness of this research was also maintained through the peer-debriefing process. Having my supervisor as well as two other members of my thesis committee (all non-vegetarians) review my work throughout the research process helped to maintain trustworthiness throughout the study (Willis, 2007). Peer-debriefing involved sharing elements of my research and interpretation with my committee members allowing me to think critically about my research and recognize any feelings that may affect my judgement (Greene, 2014). My supervisor and I went through a reflective peer-debriefing exercise where we took select coded transcripts and examined them in closer detail for any potential bias. I went through the transcripts and provided reflective notes on where my questions may have been leading, when I acknowledged the participant's feelings,

when I may have over-interpreted a finding or when certain points required further examination. My supervisor and I worked through these and identified strategies to overcome these issues. She also presented a different way to interpret the data, which I took into consideration. This process was conducted at the beginning stages of collection and analysis and became a reflexive tool used throughout the research process. Initial themes, categories and quotes were examined with my supervisor and my two committee members. Their input and feedback on these initial themes and categories helped to shape the analysis and findings of this research study. To ensure dependability and confirmability, I kept an audit trail by documenting my work throughout the entire research process (Willis, 2007).

Further, the research conducted was methodologically coherent. My research was guided by my research purpose, which was to explore the psychological and social well-being of people who follow a vegetarian diet. This was then appropriately explored through a focused ethnographic study, which is coherent with an interpretivist/constructivist epistemological standpoint. In congruence with focused ethnographies, a qualitative content analysis was performed to provide a rich description of the research findings (Mayan, 2009).

Limitations of this Research

My role as an inside researcher may have also had some disadvantages. Although researchers are never value-free, it is possible that my strong feelings about vegetarianism may have influenced the interviews and interpretation of data. Therefore, in being closer to an insider research position there is an

increased risk that I made assumptions about the data based on my prior knowledge and experiences (Greene, 2014). Although I attempted to minimize the potential of this by acknowledge this bias and engaging in reflexive activities such as bracketing, reflexive journaling, seeking out negative cases and critical peer-debriefing, it is possible that the study findings were affected by this.

Another limitation of this research was that some aspects of the study called for retrospective perspectives of vegetarians' experiences when they first transitioned into a vegetarian diet. Participants ranged in the amount of time that they had been vegetarian, from a few months to over 20 years. Therefore, for those that have been vegetarian for quite some time, it may have been difficult for them to accurately recall their exact experiences when first becoming a vegetarian.

In addition, those participants that took part in interviews and focus groups read through and signed a consent form that informed them of the purpose of the study. Therefore, because they were aware of the purpose of the study (to explore to social and psychological well-being of vegetarians) some participants may have provided the kind of answers they thought I wanted to hear or that reflected well on vegetarianism. This is known as social acceptability bias. Participants were reminded at the beginning of the interviews and focus groups that there are no right or wrong answers and questions were intended to be non-leading. However, some participants may not have wanted to report negative self-perceived social or psychological well-being as they could have perceived that as reflect poorly on

them or on vegetarians. By gathering a variety of experiences and highlighting negative cases I have done my best to overcome this bias.

There may also have been some differences between the vegetarians and vegans who volunteered to take part in this study and those that did not. For example, those who felt their well-being had improved may have been more likely to agree to participate than those who felt their well-being had decreased. To minimize this possibility, I engaged in three data generation strategies and strove for a heterogeneous group of participants using the principle of maximum variation in sampling. That is, I intentionally recruited both males and females, vegans and vegetarians, those new to vegetarianism and those have been vegetarian for a long time, those part of vegetarian organizations and those with no connection to vegetarian organizations. I also triangulated my data-generation strategies by engaging in participant observation in addition to conducting individual interviews and focus groups, in order to gather relevant information outside of the interview setting. However, those attending the events put on by the various vegetarian organizations are also likely different from those who do not attend these.

Another limitation of this study was the difficulty in determining the cultural context for participant observation. Unlike other, more anthropological ethnographic research studies in which one can immerse oneself for a prolonged period, there is no specific location or research setting that truly encompasses the cultural domains of vegetarianism. When attending various events hosted by the different vegetarian organizations, I could not be certain which participants were

vegetarians and which were omnivorous. However, being a participant observer at these events enhanced my understanding of the social and cultural aspects of vegetarianism within Alberta and contributed to my knowledge of both the self-perceived social and psychological well-being of vegetarianism. In addition, being a member of these 'in-groups', in which there was a shared identity, allowed me to deepen my understanding of vegetarians' experiences.

Lastly, conclusions from this study cannot be quantitatively generalized; rather the conclusions from this study are context specific but through the principle of transferability, these observations and conclusions can be abstracted and applied across different settings (Willis, 2007).

Significance of This Research

This research is consistent with the existing, largely quantitative, literature on why individuals decide to become vegetarian. It is well documented that concern for animals, the environment and personal health are some of the main motivating factors behind a vegetarian diet. This research supports these claims but also adds to our understanding by identifying several unique motivations, including the feminist movement and experiences while travelling.

In addition, participants involved in this research study were able to recall the distinct moment when they decided to become vegetarian. This experience has not been well-documented in the literature and contributes to the under-reported area of research on the transition into a vegetarian diet. The fact that the memory of the exact moment when participants decided to become a vegetarian is still so

vivid for many participants may suggest that changing their diet is quite a profound phenomenon.

This was the first research study to employ qualitative methods to explore the self-perceived social and psychological well-being of vegetarians. As evidenced by the systematic review conducted as part of this research, the small body of current literature on the psychological well-being of vegetarian is quantitative. Furthermore, it is limited in its design, and methodological soundness. In addition, it fails to take into consideration the complexity of social and cultural interactions on vegetarianism. A qualitative ethnographic approach to this research allowed me to develop a deep understanding of how vegetarians in Alberta live and interact with others. It afforded vegetarians the opportunity to express, in their own words, how they felt about their diet and their perceived social and psychological well-being- a key aspect of vegetarian research that is missing in the literature.

Future Directions

This research was a start to exploring the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians. Results from this research indicate that there is a need for further research in the area.

- The culture of vegetarianism in Alberta and the larger Canadian context. Very little research has been conducted on vegetarian life in Alberta. Since the ranching and beef industry is so imbedded in Alberta, vegetarians in Alberta may have unique experiences compared to those

living in other Canadian provinces. Further research is needed to explore the experiences of vegetarians living outside the province of Alberta.

- This research asked participants to reflect on their experience when they first became vegetarian, for some participants this was over 20 years ago so there was the potential for recall bias. Further research is needed to investigate the causal relationship between vegetarianism and mental health status. Although this research has found that participants perceived that their psychological well-being improved with a vegetarian diet, there are several quantitative studies that found the opposite (as documented by the systematic review, presented previously). Perhaps further phenomenological research into the transition to a vegetarian diet, at the time of transition, would uncover the lived experiences of these individuals and allow us to better understand the relationship between diet and psychological health.

Conclusion

Our food choices have a profound impact on our everyday life. It is evident through this research that selecting food, preparing meals and eating are largely social processes. Our food choices are shaped by the values, beliefs and norms of individuals, family members, the surrounding community and the local culture. In addition, certain foods hold profound social meaning. For example, depending on the cultural context, some foods are labeled as healthy, while other as labeled unhealthy; some foods are labeled ethical, while other foods are labeled unethical; and some foods are labeled environmentally friendly, while others are

seen as harmful to the environment. Therefore, the 'cultural logic' individuals ascribed to various foods can vary greatly depending on their diet (Beagan et al., 2015). This study on vegetarianism has demonstrated this.

This study found that individuals choose to become a vegetarian for a variety of reasons, mainly concern for non-human animals, their own personal health and the environment, as well as motivations that are unique to the individual.

Becoming a vegetarian resulted in an identity change, shifting from an omnivore to a vegetarian. At face value, becoming vegetarian might be seen as simply adopting a different diet, however it is much more complex than that. Vegetarianism and omnivorous diets are embedded in the cultural contexts in which an individual lives and eats. Vegetarians seemed to have a hard time fitting in and adapting to their new-found identity in the context of Alberta and in the context of their network of friends and families. The challenges they experience can have a profound impact on their self-perceived social well-being. One participant summed this up very well:

> "I don't feel like in Edmonton we live in a society that caters to vegetarians or vegans, I think they try, but overall it's hard, it's not easy. You have to put in a lot of effort I feel like to do it. So that's one thing though I hope for the future, I just kinda hope that people learn some of the things that I've learned and maybe we see a bit more of a shift." – *Jennifer*

The major challenges vegetarians faced were social in nature, and therefore there is a sense of hope for the vegetarian lifestyle. As individuals learn about the various ways our diets impact on own health, the health and well-being of non-

human animals and the health and well-being of the environment, vegetarianism, as a dietary choice, will likely continue to grow in popularity. The more common vegetarianism is the more likely social attitudes towards vegetarians will shift from that of the "other" to attitudes of respect and understanding, improving the social well-being of vegetarians. Therefore, despite the challenges to vegetarians' social well-being, these participants continued with their vegetarian diet and anticipated doing so for the foreseeable future. This is perhaps, in part, because they almost universally reported that following a vegetarian diet improved their psychological well-being. Thus, although vegetarianism led to social conflict, it was also associated with happiness, pride, authenticity and a sense of fulfillment.

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Appendix A: Feasibility Pilot Study

Introduction

An ethnographic research study is appropriate to explore the social and cultural context of vegetarians in Alberta. Since the foundation of most ethnographic studies is participation observation as well as other forms data collection including individual interviews, a pilot study was conducted to test the feasibility of this approach. This pilot study used a mini-ethnographic approach, which is a small scale ethnographic research study that is commonly used in pilot studies when a researcher wants to determine the scope of a research subject and explore preliminary data (Gale, 1993).

Therefore, purpose of this pilot research was to determine the feasibility of a larger qualitative study on the reasons behind choosing a vegetarian diet and to explore if and how social well-being and psychological well-being are affected during the transition to a vegetarian diet. The aim of this pilot study was to:

1. Assess the feasibility of using participant observation as a data collection tool.
2. Evaluate the ease of enrolling participants, to ensure an adequate sample.
3. Test and modify the interview guide.
4. Assess the feasibility of using an ethnographic approach to exploring this cultural aspect of vegetarianism.

Methods

This pilot study used a mini-ethnographic approach to assess the feasibility of using a larger scale ethnographic approach for my thesis. For the larger study, the plan was to collect data via both participant observation and individual interviews. The pilot study, therefore, involved both forms of data collection.

In order to assess the feasibility of using participant observation as a data collection tool, I was a participant observer at a bi-annual vegan potluck held by The Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta (VVoA). The VVoA is a provincial wide organization focusing on education, support and the promotion of a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. In congruence with data collection plans for the larger study, data were recorded using descriptive post-observation fieldnotes. I monitored the reaction of the VVoA to my presence as well as my ability to recall the experience well enough to make post-observation fieldnotes.

In addition to the participant observation component of the planned study, individual interviews were planned. I recruited participants through a different vegetarian organization known as the Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta (VVUA). This is a student-based group designed to bring together vegetarians across campus at the University of Alberta. The approach was to post a recruitment advertisement on the VVUA Facebook page indicating that I was looking for vegetarians to participate in a short interview about the transition into a vegetarian diet and their experience as a vegetarian so far. This was done to assess the ease of recruiting participants through this organization.

The initial interview guide was designed to collect information on participants' rationale for becoming a vegetarian and changes that they have noticed since becoming a vegetarian, both the perceived positive and negative changes. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the participant's experiences with vegetarianism and their transition into a vegetarian lifestyle. To assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the planned interview guide, two interviews were conducted using the guide. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results & Feasibility

Feasibility of participant observation. The Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta proved to be a good avenue to pursue participant observation. As the core vegetarian association in Alberta, they run regular social gatherings that bring together vegetarians from Edmonton and the surrounding area. They have an event calendar on their website indicating the various education and social events happening each month. There were variety of events, venues and opportunities for observation.

Being a participant observer at a VVoA event was a feasible method of data collection. Participants were not aware of the fact that I was collecting data during the event. In this setting, I also discussed my research ideas with participants. Participants seemed open to the idea of the research and some participants expressed interest in sharing their experiences. They mentioned the openness of the group and variety of events they put on. They seemed encouraging of the research and very supportive of my efforts.

Feasibility of sampling vegetarians. One of the purposes of this pilot study was to test the feasibility of securing vegetarian participants for interviews. Within a few days of posting the recruitment notice I received almost half a dozen responses to the advertisement. This suggested that recruiting participants through online postings on the various vegetarian organization websites and their other social media avenues (Facebook, twitter) would be an effective method to recruit vegetarians for the larger study.

Appropriateness of the interview guide. Two individual interviews were conducted to test the appropriateness and clarity of the interview guide. The initial interview guide had some strengths as a data collection tool. The open-ended nature of the questions asked allowed participant to speak freely about their experience. However, the interviews were relatively short in nature, averaging about 10-15 minutes. This lead to revisions that would elicit further detail and to the development of probing questions to ensure rich and meaningful data would be collected in the larger study.

Feasibility of an ethnographic approach. The fourth aim of this pilot study was to assess the feasibility of using an ethnographic approach. An ethnographic study is appropriate when studying a particular culture or sub-culture. Through conducting this pilot study, one of the most interesting observations was the dynamics of the Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta group. They appeared to be interacting as though they were a large family gathering for a vegetarian meal. It was evident that some members of this group were actually related, as there were many children there with their parents, and many couples

attended. It was also quite evident that some members of this group had known one another for quite some time. There were a lot of smiling faces, handshakes, and hugs between members of the group. Many knew each other by name and were having conversations on a personal level, suggesting they have met before. Not only was familiarity between the group members evident but they were also very welcoming to newcomers, such as myself. At the beginning of the gathering they explained what the society is about, the different events they hosted, and then we took turns going around the table and introducing ourselves and explaining the dish we had prepared for the group. The people at the potluck were extremely friendly and not shy to approach one another and introduce themselves. It appeared that this was an organization that embraced the culture of vegetarianism and lead me to believe that an ethnographic approach to this research may be the best qualitative approach to capture these cultural elements of vegetarianism.

Conclusion

In terms of feasibility, the VVoA event served as an appropriate and fruitful option for participant observation. The research was well received by the vegetarian population and people seemed interested in participating in the study. In addition, vegetarian organizations appeared to be a feasible option for recruiting interview participants, through posting recruitment advertisements online. The quick response rate and number of individuals that volunteered for the pilot study suggested that an adequate sample would be available for the larger study. The interview guide was strong and worked well for collecting the rich data I was seeking. The questions were appropriate, clear and understandable.

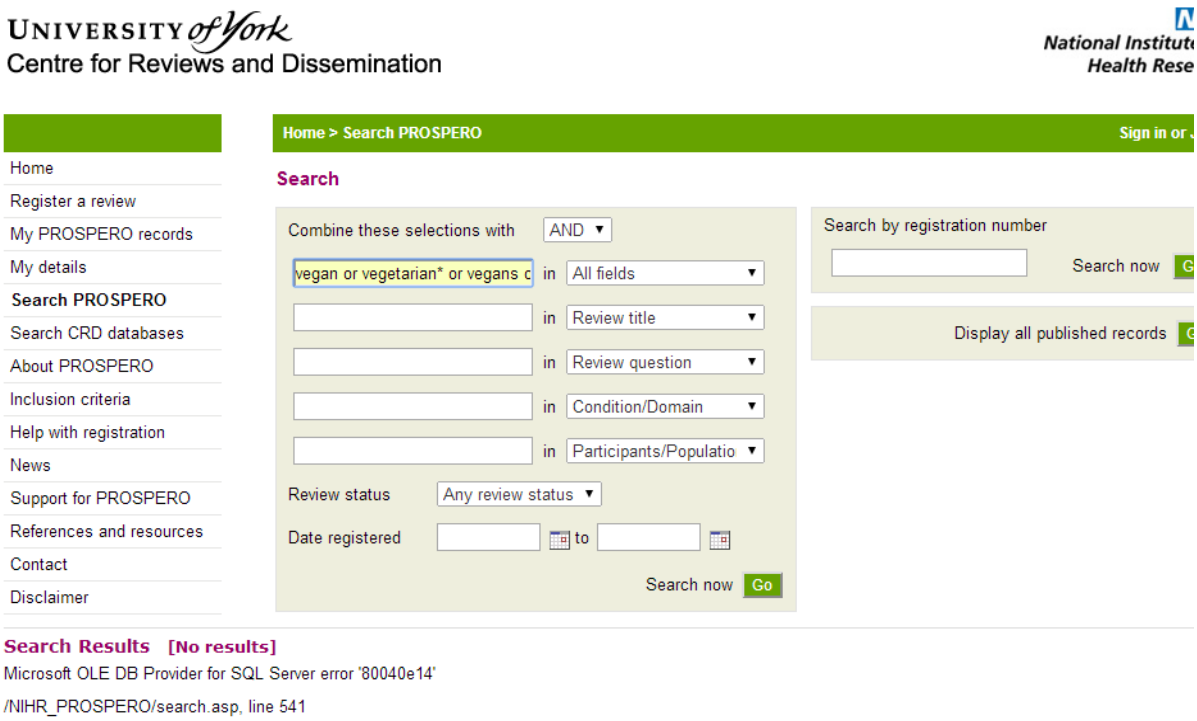
However, the pilot study showed that the interview guide needed to be considerably lengthened in order to elicit more information.

The findings from this pilot study support the idea that an ethnographic approach to studying vegetarians in Alberta seems to be both feasible and fruitful. Vegetarians in Alberta are easily accessible and seem willing to share their stories. In addition, these vegetarians appeared to have a "culture" in that they seem to have shared values and norms. Further research is needed to clarify themes identified in this pilot study and further explore the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians.

Appendix B: Search Strategies Utilized in Each Database Searched

Prospero

Searched: June 3, 2014



Search String: vegan or vegetarian* or vegans or veganism or meatless or "Meat free"

Limiters: None

Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (Ovid EBMR Reviews)

Searched: June 3, 2014.

Search String:

1 (vegetarian* or vegan*).mp. [mp=ti, ot, ab, tx, kw, ct, sh, hw] (283)

2 (mental health or mental well* or psychological health or psychological well* or psychosocial health or

psychosocial well*).mp. [mp=ti, ot, ab, tx, kw, ct, sh, hw] (7736)

3 (mental illness or mental disorders or psychological illness or psychological disorders).mp. [mp=ti, ot, ab, tx,

kw, ct, sh, hw] (5382)

4 1 and 2 (4)

5 1 and 3 (1)

6 4 or 5 (4)

Limiters: None

Ebsco Discovery Service (EDS)

Searched: June 3, 2014.

Search String: SU (vegetarian* or vegan* or meatless or meat-free) AND TX ("mental* health*" or "mental* well*" or "mental illness" or "mental disorders" "psychosocial health" or "psychosocial well*")

Limiters: Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Published Date: 19740101-20141231

MEDLINE [PubMed (UA Access)] (Version 1966-Present)

Searched: June 4, 2014.

Search String: ((((vegetarian[All Fields] OR vegetarian'[All Fields] OR vegetarian's[All Fields] OR vegetariana[All Fields] OR vegetarianas[All Fields] OR vegetarianek[All Fields] OR vegetarianer[All Fields] OR vegetarianere[All Fields] OR vegetarianism[All Fields] OR vegetarianismo[All Fields] OR

vegetarianisms[All Fields] OR vegetariano[All Fields] OR vegetarianos[All Fields] OR vegetarianov[All Fields] OR vegetarians[All Fields] OR vegetarians'[All Fields] OR vegetarianskaia[All Fields] OR vegetarianskeho[All Fields] OR vegetarianskej[All Fields] OR vegetarianskikh[All Fields] OR vegetarianskoi[All Fields] OR vegetarianskych[All Fields] OR vegetarianstvo[All Fields] OR vegetariantsev[All Fields] OR vegetarianus[All Fields]) OR (vegan[All Fields] OR vegan'[All Fields] OR vegana[All Fields] OR vegandiet[All Fields] OR vegandraj[All Fields] OR vegane[All Fields] OR veganer[All Fields] OR veganere[All Fields] OR veganin[All Fields] OR veganin's[All Fields] OR veganine[All Fields] OR veganischer[All Fields] OR veganism[All Fields] OR veganists[All Fields] OR veganov[All Fields] OR vegans[All Fields] OR vegans'[All Fields] OR veganskoi[All Fields] OR vegantalgin[All Fields] OR vegantine[All Fields] OR vegantophen[All Fields] OR veganzone[All Fields] OR veganzones[All Fields]) OR meatless[All Fields] OR meat-free[All Fields]) AND (("mental health"[MeSH Terms] OR ("mental"[All Fields] AND "health"[All Fields]) OR "mental health"[All Fields]) OR (mental well[All Fields] OR mental wellbeing[All Fields] OR mental wellness[All Fields]) OR ("mental health"[MeSH Terms] OR ("mental"[All Fields] AND "health"[All Fields]) OR "mental health"[All Fields] OR ("psychological"[All Fields] AND "health"[All Fields]) OR "psychological health"[All Fields]) OR (psychological well[All Fields] OR psychological wellbeing[All Fields] OR psychological wellness[All Fields]))) OR ((vegetarian[All Fields] OR vegetarian'[All Fields] OR vegetarian's[All Fields] OR vegetariana[All Fields]

OR vegetarianas[All Fields] OR vegetarianek[All Fields] OR vegetarianer[All Fields] OR vegetarianere[All Fields] OR vegetarianism[All Fields] OR vegetarianismo[All Fields] OR vegetarianisms[All Fields] OR vegetariano[All Fields] OR vegetarianos[All Fields] OR vegetarianov[All Fields] OR vegetarians[All Fields] OR vegetarians'[All Fields] OR vegetarianskaia[All Fields] OR vegetarianskeho[All Fields] OR vegetarianskej[All Fields] OR vegetarianskikh[All Fields] OR vegetarianskoi[All Fields] OR vegetarianskych[All Fields] OR vegetarianstvo[All Fields] OR vegetariantsev[All Fields] OR vegetarianus[All Fields]) OR (vegan[All Fields] OR vegan'[All Fields] OR vegana[All Fields] OR vegandiet[All Fields] OR vegandraj[All Fields] OR vegane[All Fields] OR veganer[All Fields] OR veganere[All Fields] OR veganin[All Fields] OR veganin's[All Fields] OR veganine[All Fields] OR veganischer[All Fields] OR veganism[All Fields] OR veganists[All Fields] OR veganov[All Fields] OR vegans[All Fields] OR vegans'[All Fields] OR veganskoi[All Fields] OR vegantalgin[All Fields] OR vegantine[All Fields] OR vegantophen[All Fields] OR veganzone[All Fields] OR veganzones[All Fields]) OR meatless[All Fields] OR meat-free[All Fields])) AND ((mental illness[All Fields] OR mental illnesses[All Fields] OR mental illnesses,[All Fields]) OR (mental disorder[All Fields] OR mental disorders[All Fields]) OR (psychological illness[All Fields] OR psychological illnesses[All Fields]) OR (psychological disorder[All Fields] OR psychological disorders[All Fields])) AND (("1980/01/01"[PDAT] : "2014/12/31"[PDAT]) AND English[lang])

Limiters: From 1980/01/01 to 2014/12/31, English

EMBASE (OvidSP) (Version 1974-Present)

Searched: June 4, 2014.

Search String:

1 (vegetarian* or vegan* or meatless or meat-free).mp. [mp=title, abstract, subject headings, heading word, drug trade name, original title, device manufacturer, drug manufacturer, device trade name, keyword] (5063)

2 (mental health or mental well* or psychological health* or psychological well*).mp. [mp=title, abstract, subject headings, heading word, drug trade name, original title, device manufacturer, drug manufacturer, device trade name, keyword] (183660)

3 1 and 2 (34)

4 limit 3 to (english language and yr="1980 -Current") (34)

5 (mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*).mp. [mp=title, abstract, subject headings, heading word, drug trade name, original title, device manufacturer, drug manufacturer, device trade name, keyword] (74440)

6 2 and 4 and 5 (3)

7 3 or 6 (34)

8 4 and 7 (34)

Limiters: English Language, 1980-Current

CINAHL (EBSCO Host) (Version 1937-Present)

Searched: June 4, 2014.

Search String:

S8	((mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*) AND (S1 AND S4)) AND (S3 OR S5)
S7	((mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*) AND (S1 AND S4)) AND (S3 OR S5)
S6	((mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*) AND (S1 AND S4)) AND (S3 OR S5)
S5	(mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*) AND (S1 AND S4)
S4	mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*
S3	(((mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or psychological disorder*) AND (S1 AND S2)) AND (S1 AND S2)) AND (S1 AND S2)
S2	mental health or mental well* or psychological health or psychological well*
S1	vegetarian* or vegan* or meatless or meat-free

Limiters: Scholarly Peer-Reviewed Journals

PsycINFO (OvidSP) (Version 1887-Present)

Searched: June 4, 2014.

Search String:

1. 1 (vegetarian* or vegan* or meatless or meat-free).mp. [mp=title,
   abstract, heading word, table of contents, key
2. concepts, original title, tests & measures] (257)
3. 2 (mental health or mental well* or psychological health or
   psychological well*).mp. [mp=title, abstract, heading
4. word, table of contents, key concepts, original title, tests & measures]
   (130994)
5. 3 1 and 2 (7)
6. 4 (mental illness* or mental disorder* or psychological illness* or
   psychological disorder*).mp. [mp=title,
7. abstract, heading word, table of contents, key concepts, original title, tests
   & measures] (89270)
8. 5 1 and 4 (7)
9. 6 limit 5 to yr="1980 -Current" (7)
10. 7 3 or 5 (12)
11. 8 6 and 7 (7)

Limiters: 1980-Current

Appendix C: Ethics Approval Form

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICE

308 Campus Tower
Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 1K8
Tel: 780.492.0459
Fax: 780.492.9429
www.reo.ualberta.ca

Notification of Approval

Date:	December 13, 2013
Study ID:	Pro00043423
Principal Investigator:	Jacqueline Torti
Study Supervisor:	Linda Carroll
Study Title:	The Social and Psychological Well-Being of Vegetarians: A Focused Ethnography
Approval Expiry Date:	December 12, 2014

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

William Dunn, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interview #_____
Date: _____

Vegetarian Identity

- You self-identify as a vegetarian, could you tell me about what you think a vegetarian is?
    - Why do you identify yourself as a vegetarian?

- Could you tell me how you became a vegetarian?
    - What motivated you to become a vegetarian?

- What kind of research did you do before making your decision?

- How do you feel about your decision to become a vegetarian?

- How long have you been a vegetarian for?

Transition Period

- What was the transition to a vegetarian diet like?
    - What did you find challenging about it?
        - How did you manage these challenges?
    - What did you enjoy about making the change?
    - How long did it take you to make the transition?

Social Well-Being

- How would you describe your social life prior to becoming a vegetarian?

- Do you feel being a vegetarian has impacted your social life or your social well-being? If so, how?
    - What was the reaction from your family and friends when you told them you had decided to become a vegetarian?
    - Can you talk a little about your family life as a vegetarian?
    - What is like being a vegetarian when you go out with friends?
    - How do you feel you are treated by others?
    - What sort of reactions do strangers have when you tell them you're a vegetarian?
    - We're you in a relationship when you made the transition into a vegetarian diet?

  - What was the transition like on your relationship?
  - Are you in a relationship now? Is your partner a vegetarian? What is that like?
  - Are there some places you have found easier to be a vegetarian (Home vs. away at school, Edmonton vs. other places?) Why do you think this is?
  - Has your friend group changed since you've become a vegetarian? How?
  - Can you tell me a little bit about the conversations you have with others around your diet?
  - Are other members of your family vegetarian? Any friends?
  - What has that experience been like?

Psychological Well-Being

- How would you describe your psychological well-being prior to becoming a vegetarian?

- Do you feel your transition to a vegetarian diet has had implications on your psychological well-being? Either negative or positive? If so can you describe these implications?
  - Do you ever feel stressed because of your diet? If so, what are the sources of that stress?
  - Do you feel you're happier as a vegetarian? Why or why not?

Physical Health

- How do you feel being a vegetarian has impacted your physical health?
  - How has it impacted your energy levels?
  - What kind of health benefits have you noticed?
  - Has the diet had a negative impact on your physical health in any way?

Wrap-Up

- What do you feel is the most challenging part about being a vegetarian?

- What do you feel is the most rewarding part about being a vegetarian?

- What continues to motivate you to maintain a vegetarian diet?

- Do you think you will always be a vegetarian? Why or why not?

- Would you encourage others to become a vegetarian? Why or why not?

Support

- Have you sought out a vegetarian community?
    - Do you know other vegetarians?
    - Do you have any sources of support?

- Is there anything else you'd like to add? Concluding thoughts?
- Would you be interested in participating in a focus group?

Appendix E: Focus Group Guide

Focus Group #_____
Date: _____

Introduction

Can you tell everyone about your motivations for becoming a vegetarian?

How do you think others view your choices?

Social Well-Being

Have you had any particularly negative experiences related to being a vegetarian? If so, could you tell us about your experience?

Have you had any particularly positive experiences related to being a vegetarian? If so, could you tell us about your experiences?

How did/do others react to your decision?
- Are they generally supportive?
- Do they contest your decision?

What aspects of your life, if any, do you feel have changed as a result of being a vegetarian?

How do you engage people in a conversation about vegetarianism? Do you use any particular strategies?

Have you ever tried to downplay or hide the fact that you're a vegetarian? Can you describe the situation?

Where do you think people get their ideas about vegetarianism?

How has your perception of vegetarianism changed since you became a vegetarian?

Have you ever tried to convert someone to a vegetarian? If so why? What was the process like?

How do you think non-vegetarians view you as vegetarians?
- Have you ever encountered any stereotypes of vegetarians?

Appendix F: Audit Trail

Intellectual Audit Trail

Documentation of how my thinking evolved and changed throughout my thesis. Whereas these notes were originally recorded I was doing interviews and reviewing transcripts, the following narrative is written in the past tense in order to create a coherent record of my thoughts and decisions during the research process.

My research paradigm. From the conception of this study I have viewed this research through an interpretive paradigm lens, taking into consideration social and cultural contexts. Within the interpretive paradigm I have challenged the notions of objectivity and strived to reach a relativist position that respects and values multiple perceptions of reality through a social constructivist theoretical perspective. I firmly believe that knowledge is subjectively created and maintained a transactional epistemological standpoint.

Questioning the methods. I started planning my thesis thinking that the study of the social and psychological well-being of vegetarians would be a phenomenological study. I think perhaps I chose this method originally because I felt comfortable with phenomenological inquiry- this was the chosen method of my master's thesis. I did originally feel that vegetarianism was a unique phenomenon in which the lived experience of individuals would provide depth and understanding into the social and psychological well-being of individuals. However, after I took a qualitative course in my PhD program; I considered changing my methods. I wrote a proposal as an assignment for Dr. Maria Mayan's

qualitative methods course, and she suggested that a focused ethnography may be a more appropriate method. I was uncertain at first, but did some research on ethnographic research and worked to familiarize myself with ethnographic research studies. It became clear to me that a focused ethnographic approach to studying the perceived psychological and social well-being of vegetarians would be very interesting because vegetarianism can be seen as a lifestyle and "culture" of diet. I also judged focused ethnography to fit well with my focus on social well-being, which emphasizes our interactions with those around us and the cultures, values and beliefs that shape our experience and one's identity as a vegetarian. Since I was intrigued with seeing and understanding vegetarianism as a culture, this is what shaped my methods.

Considering the feasibility of my study. Prior to my doctoral candidacy examination and proposal defense, I planned to focus on both vegetarians' perceptions of non-vegetarians and non-vegetarians' perceptions of vegetarians in order to understand well-being and the vegetarian identity. At my oral candidacy exam, it was determined that although this seemed like an interesting notion, it would be better to focus in on one perspective at a more in-depth level. Therefore, moving forward, my plan was to concentrate on vegetarians' self-perceived social and psychological well-being.

The interview guide. My planned interview and focus group guides were modified by the above decision, and a detailed description of the changes made and the rationale behind these changes can be found later in this audit trail.

Interpreting the findings. I had originally considered using a qualitative

data analyst software such as ATLAS.ti or In Vivo for my thesis. However, these programs can be quite costly and take quite some time to navigate. I also consulted with some of my peers and colleagues who have used these programs, and was told that the programs are prone to "crashing" and losing data. I had coded the qualitative data from my masters' thesis research by hand and felt that hand coding those data resulted in a greater and more in depth familiarity with the data. I had also (in my Master's work) developed detailed coding system and I felt comfortable applying this system to my PhD work.

Physical Audit Trail

Documentation of the various stages of my research study.

Identifying the research question. My research question stemmed from my experience as a vegetarian. I knew this would be both an asset and a potential source of bias for my study. Throughout the process of writing my research proposal, defending that proposal at my candidacy exam and conducting my doctoral research, my supervisor and committee members have emphasized the importance of reflecting on the role of my own beliefs and attitudes and identifying when my own biases have influenced the research. I believe that I have seen substantial and positive development in this self-assessment, but I acknowledge that there may still be aspects of my own biases influencing my conduct and interpretation of the research. I have included an account of these reflections in my thesis.

Developing a research proposal. I worked hard with my supervisor and committee members to developed a thoughtful proposal for my thesis. At the time

of my proposal development, the School of Public Health had strict guidelines that the research proposal adhere to the CIHR grant proposal guidelines. This lead to the challenge of including information and depth while adhering to strict page limits for the thesis.

Conducting a review of the literature. One aspect of my research was a systematic review of vegetarians' psychological well-being. I also did a literature review on social well-being; however, this was a narrative (non-systematic) review.

Selection of participants. In order to ensure that my interviews and focus groups were relevant to my research objectives, I conducted purposive sampling of vegans and vegetarians to participate in the interviews and focus groups. All participants that took part in the study had chosen to become vegetarian (this was an inclusion criterion). This inclusion criterion was important, as the experiences of those who were raised vegetarian may greatly differ from those who made a conscious decision to become vegetarian; and one of my research aims was to focus on perceived changes in social and psychological well-being resulting from this transition to their new diet and lifestyle.

Data generation. Individual interviews, focus group and participant observation were sources of for this research. I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews, three focus groups and four accounts of participant observation. I decided on the number of interviews and focus groups based on the level of data saturation reached during the analysis. In doing my initial analysis, I believed saturation to have been reached. The number of events and gatherings hosted by

the different organizations limited the accounts of participant observation. I chose to attend events hosted by vegetarian organizations for my participant observation as I felt this would yield the most fruitful data and provide the best context in which I could observe the culture of vegetarianism in Alberta. There was some discussion about doing participant observation by sitting in vegetarian cafés or restaurants but there is so much more uncertainty about the dietary identity of individuals in these circumstances that I did not use these settings as a source. I also chose to conduct the focus groups after most of my individual interviews had been conducted; this was so that I could revisit any categories or seek clarification on concepts that resulted from analyzing the individual interviews. Sampling was purposeful, in that I sought out individuals who had chosen to become vegetarian and who could articulate their experiences as a vegetarian. I decided on conducting both interviews and focus groups and believed that these were appropriate forms of data generation because they were consistent with a focused ethnography approach and allowed for individual exploration of well-being at an in-depth level. At the same time, focus groups allowed me to explore group interactions among vegetarians as they explored their own experiences of social well-being in relation to others' experiences. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim and I took notes while conducting these interviews and focus groups. For the participant observation, I took descriptive and reflective fieldnotes.

Data analysis. All data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, that is, analyzing text through a systematic classification design, while taking into

consideration the context of the data being analyzed and using a series of step-by-step procedures. I highlighted ideas and quotes in the fieldnotes and transcripts and these were coded into categories. Due to my interpretivist approach to the research, data analysis was an iterative process that involved reading through the data several times to clarify categories and identify and clarify conceptualizations.

Analytic Notes. The notion of a distinct moment of when individuals decide to become vegetarian emerged as a category when examining participants' rationale for becoming a vegetarian and their dietary transition experience. Quite a few participants identified a particular moment in time, a conversation, or a meal they were eating at the moment when they decided to become vegetarian. Could it be that a shift in identity was so profound that is had a lasting impression on vegetarians? Examples of this can be found in interview four, page three, lines 90-92; interview five, page six, lines 279- 288; interview six, page three, lines 108-111; interview seven, page ten, lines 468-474. As the interviews progressed this continued to come up as a theme.

> "It was around the time actually that I started dating my partner, we were eating at I think it's called Joey's, the one in South Common and I think I was eating fettuccini alfredo with chicken or something. I think he was eating a salad or I think they had a fake ginger beef dish or something like this. I was eating and I think he asked me do you know where that chicken came from? It stayed with me. A new seed was planted. I actually have no idea where that chicken came from and I don't like that. It really sat with me and I really didn't like it. I didn't like that I had no idea and maybe this is because I care about animals but I had no idea where that chicken came from. Who the distributor was? What slaughterhouse it went to for its final days or if it went outside, what it ate, if it was fed steroids or something weird like that or if they cut its beak off and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I guess it was that moment that I decided I really don't like this… It was definitely not gradual. There was a moment that I don't like this at all." (Interview 15, pages 3-4, lines 122-138).

I reacted strongly to this and believed that it might be a distinct category. I decided to address this further in the focus groups.

Travel was an interesting social challenge that I was not expecting when I embarked on this research. When asked about their social well-being, many participants drew a connection between social well-being and travel as a vegetarian. As I heard this, I wondered if this could be because travel is social phenomena where you learn about, interact with, and experience different cultures. Participants felt limited in their experience as a vegetarian, a social challenge that they do not recall having prior to becoming a vegetarian. Example of this can be found in interview one, page one, lines 26-27; interview two, page two, lines 51-56; interview six, page four, lines 143-149; interview nine, page four, lines 165-169. As the interviews continued, travel continued to come up as a social challenge that had the potential to impact their social well-being. This became more salient in my mind with narratives like the following:

> "Yeah, for sure and travelling can be rough depending on what country you're going to. That's one time I'll break the veganism if I need to. If I'm going somewhere where it's gonna be tough and I'm not gonna be able to explain very well in another language. I'll go to being just vegetarian or eat in at the hostel a lot more, that sort of thing." (Interview 11, page nine, lines 434-438).

I began to wonder at this point whether experiences while traveling can make an individual question their identity and compare their way of living to that of the culture of society of which they are travelling in: Perhaps this identity comparison can affect an individual's social well-being. I decided that I needed to explore this issue further in subsequent interviews and in focus groups.

Interview 12 was my first interview where the participant indicated that she felt her vegan diet directly and negatively impacted her psychological well-being, and we explored the issue in-depth, within the scope of her comfort level and emotional ability. Hers was a interesting perspective; that she felt so passionately about the well-being of non-human animals and she empathized with them so much so that, in her own view, it took a toll on her psychological well-being. She expressed anger at society; the way humans were ignorant of where their food comes from. It seemed that the deeper her passion for veganism grew, the deeper her depression and dismay with society. She said:

> "But I started viewing the world in a completely different light. I just had a revelation where there was a huge amount of awareness of all of the suffering, all of the animal suffering, the needless animal suffering that happens every day. And that people really do have the power to stop it and to not perpetuate it and they choose not to stop it. And it really caused a huge rift between myself and my family and my friends because I was so emotional and so hysterical most of the time and it's difficult to take someone that age and someone with that approach seriously. And unfortunately I think that's been kind of a deterrent for, when I was younger anyway, for some of my friends and family, they didn't wanna end up like me because I was just emotionally raw. But I guess it's just the continued knowledge that all of this horrible pain is happening and it could just not. And people don't seem to grasp the magnitude of it." (Interview 12, page 2-3, lines 82-93).

I needed to explore this further with other participants so I went back through my earlier transcripts to see if this is something I had overlooked; however, I could not find evidence of this. Despite being alert to this possibility in future interviews, no other participants disclosed that they have been clinically diagnosed with depression, nor did any talk about their diet leading to depression. Perhaps this is an outlier?

Contextual Audit Trail

Descriptive and reflective fieldnotes.

Participant observation 1.

- Community Group: The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta
- Date, Time & Location: Monday February 22nd, 5:30pm-7:30pm, Café Mosaic (10844 82 Ave NW, Edmonton, AB T6E)
- Description of the Event: This was an informal event and a chance for university students to "veg out" after midterms. We went to café mosaic for vegetarian food and drinks.

Descriptive fieldnotes.

Participants.

- Eight members (two males and six females) of the VVUA came to the event at Café Mosaic.
- I had previously met seven of the participants; two of the participants were either on the VVUA executive in previous years, therefore I had met with them previously to discuss ideas about the VVUA and to get an idea of how it was run in the past. One of the participants serves on the VVUA with me this year as a Vice President and assisted in organizing the events. I had met the other four participants at previous VVUA events. One participant was invited by a member of the group; she was not officially a member of the VVUA but had recently decided to start a vegan diet and was curious to meet other vegans/vegetarians.

- Five members of the group are currently attending the University of Alberta at either the graduate or undergraduate level. One participant was an alumna of the University of Alberta. One participant had graduated high school in Alberta and was currently working prior to starting her university career.
- Two members of the group are non-vegetarians (they eat meat) but joined the group in hope of learning about vegetarian options and with the goal of reducing their meat consumption.
- The rest of the group was either vegan or vegetarian and one participant had a gluten allergy.

Verbal and non-verbal.

- Because I did not record this event I have no direct verbatim quotations of verbal statements but can provided phrases in my own words about some of the topics discussed.
- When we arrived one by one there was a general discussion about the café and whether individuals had been there before.
- Most of the conversation at the beginning of the meal revolved around the menu.
- This menu was fully vegetarian with a lot of vegan options as well as vegetarian options that could be made vegan.
- Participants talked about the difficulty in making a decision on what to order. It was agreed upon by the group then when you go out to eat you typically choose from two options on the menu; a garden salad, or a salad without the meat, and a veggie burger, if they had one.

- It was interesting to see participants really take their time, exploring the whole menu, and wavering back and forth between menu items.
- We laughed many times explaining that we could not make a decision and that everything on the menu sounded delicious.
- When the waiter came along and ask how we were making out with the menu, the group had asked more questions than I have ever heard a waiter asked when out for dinner.
- A lot of the questions revolved around what the ingredients in these 'meat' free items were, where they got their ingredients from (what was local), questions around how things were made and prepared in the kitchen etc. (participants pointed to items on the menu).
- In addition to this, the one participant that was vegan and gluten free was given a special gluten free menu. However, when the participant ordered, the waiter had to explain to him that the item was not gluten free. This happened a number of times, and the participants seemed to be frustrated with the waiter (arms crossed). The waiter sat down with him and highlighted the options on the gluten free menu that were actually gluten free, the whole time apologizing that their gluten free menu was not up to date.
- The participant eventually was able to select an item. Afterward he indicated that this experience was not atypical and that this happens quite often; even more often in restaurants that do not specialize in vegetarian/vegan cuisine.

- I, along with a few others, ordered the mystery burger for dinner with a side Caesar salad, both of which were vegan.
- The food was delicious, from my perspective and others commented on the quality of the food, how well prepared it was, and the nice change it was from a garden salad, which is often the only vegetarian option at restaurants.
- At one point one of the participants asked the group for advice. She mentioned she was going over to a friend's place for dinner and asked the group how she should go about doing this, as she did not think her hostess knew she was a vegetarian.
- One participant advised her not to do a thing. Just go, show up, eat what you can eat, and try not to make a big deal out of it or draw attention to the fact, as it would be an inconvenience to her hostess (some individuals were nodding their head as though the agreed).
- Another participant said to tell them that you are a vegetarian but ask them not to do anything differently, i.e., make what they were planning to make, ask them not to do anything special and say that you can make do with what's available.
- Other participant said- I often do not mention anything, but I bring a vegan dish along, that way I at least have something to eat, and can hopefully show others that vegan dishes/food can taste good [paraphrased].
- Others mentioned that they ate beforehand, or at least had a snack before going in case there was nothing vegetarian to eat.

- I participated in this conversation, saying that I often tell my host/hostess prior to going over. I have had a few situations where I did not do this and then the hosts felt so terrible that I could not eat anything and said I should have mentioned something. I always try to give them a heads up so they are not surprised and offer to bring a vegan side/dessert.
- Most of the other discussion focused on non-vegetarian specific topics, such as school/careers, exams, studying, travel etc.…
- As I was leaving the event and saying goodbye to everyone and thanking them for coming to the VVUA event, two of the participants stood up to give me a hug (I was not expecting this).

Reflective fieldnotes.

- I had only met the participants a few times but it seemed there was/is a strong sense of connectedness and relationships that are slowly developing.
- Although there was only limited discussion during this participant observation relating to vegetarians' social and psychological well-being, I found I was learning a little bit about socio-cultural context of vegetarianism. For example, the discussion around having dinner at someone else house largely highlighted the tendency to downplay the fact that these individuals are vegetarians.
- This downplay of one's vegetarian identity seems to be more about the consideration of others, and not wanting to be an inconvenience than about considerations of oneself as a vegetarian. I had the impression from the

conversation that this downplay did not relate to trying to hide the fact that one is a vegetarian, but was focused on imposing upon others as little as possible.

- I had hoped more of the conversation would focus vegetarianism but a lot of it was centered on school and other things participants had in common outside of their dietary habits. This suggests that there are a variety of identities that individuals take on, not just a vegetarian identity- vegetarian is only part of how they see themselves.
- I did not want to steer the discussion or impose my research on the group, so for the most part, I sat back and listened; providing responses and input when I felt it was necessary to be seen as part of the group, but without posing specific questions to the group.
- A lot of individuals within this group were aware of my research project, although it did not seem to impact/impede the discussion that took place. I wonder if knowledge of my thesis research influenced the event or conversation (either positively or negatively).

Participant observation 2.

- Community Group: Raw Vegan Edmonton
- Date, Time & Location: Tuesday March 4th, 7:00pm-9:00pm, King Edward Park, Small Hall (8008 81 St NW, Edmonton, AB T6C 2V4)
- Description of the Event: This was a film showing of "Forks Over Knives." Forks Over Knives examines the claim that most, if not all, of the degenerative diseases that afflict us can be prevented, controlled, or even

reversed by rejecting our present menu of animal-based and processed foods. Website: www.forksoverknives.com

Descriptive fieldnotes.

What follows is the summary of the premises and claims made by the film, summarized from the film and from the film's website www.forksoverknives.com

- The film set the stage by stating that, despite the being the most technological advanced we have ever been, we are also the sickest we have ever been.
- An assertion in the film was that the rise in obesity, diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer rates; our over-reliance on prescription drugs; and medical operations all contribute to the increasing health care costs.
- The major claim made in the film was that the solution to all these problems is a vegan diet; that a vegan diet can reduce the risk of these degenerative diseases and can reserve them.
- The storyline portrayed Dr. T. Colin Campbell and Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn as under-appreciated and pioneering researchers and shared their personal stories and journey.
- Dr. Campbell is a nutritional scientist at Cornell University. According to the film, his research journey began with him trying to find a high quality animal protein that could be used to feed the malnourished in developing countries. During his research Campbell made the observation that those in wealthier areas of the country were consuming more animal protein than those living in poorer areas, and that those in the wealthier areas had

a higher incidence of liver cancer.

- Dr. Esselstyn is a surgeon and head of the Breast Cancer Task Force at the Cleveland Clinic. He made the claim that most of the diseases he was treating were not observed in parts of the world where little to no animal based foods were consumed.
- The film relays the story of Drs. Campbell's and Esselstyn's collaboration, which led to their assertion that degenerative diseases can 'almost' always be prevented and even reversed by adopting a whole-foods plant-based diet; which the film emphasizes is relatively unknown to the public.
- The filmmakers also follow several patients with varying chronic conditions from heart disease to diabetes and share their journeys as they are put on a vegan diet.

Participants.

- I arrived late to the event and when I entered the film was already playing and the participants were engaged.
- One man at the back turned around when I entered and waved his hand to signal I can come grab a seat.
- There were nine people at the film showing including five females, four males.
- The majority of the group looked to be middle aged with one younger girl about my age (mid-twenties) in the group.

- I had not met any of the participants before and none of them looked familiar to me.

Verbal and non-verbal.

- The hall itself was quite small with enough room for a few chairs and a projector screen.
- When I arrived the lights were off so it was quite dark, but you could still see/make your way around the room.
- Three of the people in the room were eating while watching the film. It did not look like food was served at the event, but rather they brought their food in a container from home.
- Once the film ended, the lights were turned on and there was some discussion, led by a facilitator, about the film.
- The facilitator asked the group to share their thoughts on what they had seen and asked them what they thought of the film.
- Two women in the front strongly asserted that doctors are not properly educated on nutrition. They said that physicians are knowledgeable when it comes to diseases and medicine but have studied very little, or maybe had a single lecture on nutrition. The women had also reported having received little support from their physicians when they decided to adopt a plant-based diet. Both women, although they did not go into detail, reported having had a near death experience which motivated them to change their diet completely, and led them to try to adopt a plant-based diet without meat.

- Other participants indicated that they thought others have been "brain-washed" into thinking that eating meat is healthy and good for you (giving the examples that children learn in school that meat is part of a healthy diet; the government advocates for it; people were raised eating meat, etc.).
- A lot of discussion focused on issues like "If others only knew.", or "If others only took the time to learn about where their food comes from and how it impacts their health.".
- There was some discussion around the difficulty of being a vegetarian in Alberta (comments arose regarding the beef industry being a driving force here in Edmonton; that people have a different mentality here than they do in a non-beef industry based province or area).
- Unfortunately, at this point I had to leave the event due to a previous commitment, so I could not stay hear the rest of the discussion.

Reflective fieldnotes.

- I am realizing that through these events it is difficult to draw out some of those psychosocial factors that influence vegetarians' well-being. However, although there was not a rich discussion on social or psychological well-being, I think I am still able to pick up some of the subtleties and use these towards my thesis.
- I think arriving late to the event (I was dropped off at the wrong location and had to walk several blocks to my new destination) hindered my

experience. Perhaps there would have been some introduction of group members, so I could have gotten a better sense of the group identity.

- I also think leaving early due to a previous commitment hindered the quality of data collected. The discussion was really just starting to flow as I had to leave.
- However, I am glad I still attended, I got to know a few members of the group and listen to some discussion, which I would otherwise not have.
- Possible theme/concept: Vegetarians seem to think there is a general lack of awareness or understanding of their diet/lifestyle, especially within the medical community.
- One of the other things I noticed is that those in attendance did not seem to question any claims made in the film. There seemed to be general consensus amongst the group that degenerative diseases can be prevented and even reversed through diet.
- The film very much presents the research in a way that suggest the rest of the academic community is trying to hide this valuable information about a plant-based diet because of the ties to medical community (pharmaceuticals, clinical procedures) and the over-powering influence of the food industry.
- Of course the people watching the film are in support of a plant-based diet and this film seemed to confirm their health motivations, which highlights the influence of media, anecdotes and strongly stated options from these self-proclaimed experts.

- I think this speaks to the social influences on vegetarians. Those following and promoting a plant-based diet seemed to accept at face value the evidence presented to them and left the film and discussion wanting to share their learnings with non-vegetarians.

Participant observation 3.

- Community Group: The Vegans and Vegetarians of Alberta
- Date, Time & Location: Saturday March 15th, 2:00pm-4:00pm, Padmanadi (10740 - 101 Street, Edmonton, AB, T5H 2S3)
- Description of the Event: Dr. Ze'ev Gross, a family physician, was a guest lecturer who gave a talk entitled "Where do you get your protein?" relaying his observations of how a vegan diet changed his own and the lives of his patients who adopted the diet. This guest lecture was followed by a vegan buffet lunch.

Descriptive fieldnotes.

Participants.

- There were approximately 25 participants that attended this event (some were moving in and out of the room).
- I had recognized a few participants from the Raw Vegan Edmonton Film showing a few weeks ago, others I recognized from a potluck last summer.
- However, I did not recognize the majority of the participants; there were a lot of new faces.

- The speaker started off by introducing himself, talking to us about his vegan diet and said that he has seen first-hand how a vegan diet positively changes his patients' health, reverses diseases and can be sustainable.
- Before he started with his guest lecture we introduced ourselves by name and shared where we were at in our journey of vegetarianism.
- Prior to this, he stressed that this was a non-judgmental group, that all were welcome (including non-vegetarians) and that the group "embraces everyone".
- To my surprise, the majority of the group said they ate meat. There were a few vegans and a few more vegetarians; but the majority were there because they were curious about a vegetarian diet/lifestyle.

Verbal and non-verbal.

- We gathered at Padmanidi's Restaurant.
- My first and foremost impression when I entered the restaurant was the smell of delicious Indian cooking.
- We met at the back of a restaurant in a private room.
- The room was quite small, especially for 25 people (All the chairs were taken and some people had to stand, the chairs were very close together).
- The lecture itself was focused on where vegetarians get dietary protein.
- There was a lot of discussion that this is a common question asked of vegetarians.

- The first half of his talk was spent discussing what he described as misconceptions about protein needs, and he described various sources of plant-based protein sources.
- He also discussed the amount of protein that humans need, positing that most people think we need much more protein than we actually do to achieve and maintain health.
- People in the room seemed very knowledgeable about the vegetarian sources of protein as well as protein requirements.
- There was an interesting discussion about the various types of protein and their contribution to muscle mass. Dr. Gross talked about the need for animal protein in one's diet being a "myth", and he told the group that the process of digesting protein from meat sources may actually result in a loss of calcium from the muscles, which in turn leads to muscles weakening over time.
- We then watched a series of videos about animal and plant-based proteins from www.nutritionfacts.org
- One of the videos claimed that the best source of protein is human protein, but of course we do not eat other human animals. The video made the connection between eating humans (cannibalism) and eating animals (which it labeled species cannibalism). This startled and upset some of the participants, and they explained that had not quite thought of eating meat as a form of species cannibalism. I think this highlights the influence of

media and deliberately shocking narrative that is clearly designed to persuade people towards a vegetarian diet.

- After the lecture we spent some time deciding as a group what the topic of the lecture would be next week (This particular physician offers vegetarian lectures once every two weeks).
- Suggestions came up and we decided on an examination of processed vegetarian meat alternatives, with the goal of discussing the health risks/benefits and nutritional information of these foods.
- After the lecture attendees were invited to stay for the vegan lunch buffet offered by Padmanadi's for $20.00.
- From what I could see, everyone stayed for the buffet.
- The food was very good and they offered jasmine tea, water, brown rice, steamed vegetables, ginger 'beef', eggplant curry, and a salad; for dessert there was a vegan brownie with fresh raspberries.
- I sat across from a young girl (she looked like she was in her early teens). She was there with her mom. During her introduction she seemed quite shy and introduced herself indicating that she was wanted to become a vegetarian so she was there to learn a bit about it and try some vegetarian food. She also seemed very shy during the dinner, not talking with anyone except her mother. However, she really seemed to enjoy the food as she went up for a second and third helping.

- Her mom seemed more skeptical about the food/group and her daughter's ambitions, she asked her daughter if she could see herself eating this way for the rest of her life.
- To the right of me there was a middle-aged man (55 years old). We chatted a little bit and I asked him how he got started on a vegan diet. He said that as he started to age, the people around him started to age too, and he talked about friends and family members dying, becoming sick, being diagnosed with a chronic disease, putting on weight or becoming increasingly less energetic. He mentioned that he gets a bit of reaction and people are quite surprised to learn he is a vegan (given that he is a middle-aged man). He said, others can laugh and question his decision to become a vegan, but he is content knowing he is contributing positively to his health. He mentioned his mother has been recently diagnosed with cancer and that he is trying to teach her to eat vegan in an effort to reverse her cancer (he has seen documentaries of this being done).

Reflective fieldnotes.

- One of the first things that came to mind was that the majority of individuals at this event consumed meat. Although I cannot apply strict inclusion criteria when conducting participant observation, I hoped to only be including participants that exclude meat, poultry and fish- this will still remain the inclusion criteria for the individual interviews and focus groups. So this made it challenging in some of my participant observation settings to know which individuals were truly vegetarian and which

individuals were simply interested in learning more about vegetarianism, but currently consume meat. In situations like this event, where we had the opportunity to introduce ourselves, it was clear which end of the vegetarian spectrum people were at (currently eat meat to raw food vegan). However, not all of these events had introductions like this so this is definitely something I needed to be aware of and take caution when drawing any conclusion based on participant observation, unless I am absolutely sure of their vegetarian status.

- Some individuals in the groups seemed convinced that a non-vegan diet was responsible for chronic disease and are even trying to convince family members of this, telling them that if they eat right, their illnesses will be cured.
- Perhaps the fact that most of the vegetarians in this group felt that their diet contributed positively to their health and helped to reduce their risk of chronic disease improved their sense of social well-being. When these vegetarians were surrounded by like-minded individuals who share their viewpoints on the health benefits of vegetarian diets, this value and understanding is reciprocated between themselves and their network of vegetarians, which could improve their sense of social and psychological well-being.

Participant observation 4.

- Community Group: The Vegans and Vegetarians of the University of Alberta

- Date, Time & Location: Wednesday March 26th, 5:00pm-7:00pm, Education Building, Room 129, University of Alberta
- Description of the Event: Dr. Howard Nye, a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Alberta, gave a presentation on why everyone should be vegan. He provided an ethical argument against the consumption of animal products.

Descriptive fieldnotes.

Participants.

- Approximately 28 people were in attendance (a few people came in late and a few people left early).
- The was a fair balance between the number of males and females and the majority of participants looked to be in their 20s. There were four older adults in attendance 50-60 years of age.
- The presentation started off with an introduction to Dr. Nye and his topic by Ken, an executive member on the VVUA. He explained that Dr. Nye would be providing a philosophical animal welfare argument.
- The guest lecture started off with an hour presentation by Dr. Nye followed by approximately 45 minutes of Q&A from the audience.
- I recognized two of my interviewee participants at the event.
- I recognized three people from previous VVoA events (all three on the VVoA executive).
- I had never met the rest of the participants.

- Dr. Nye's presentation focused on why he thinks, from an ethical standpoint, everyone should be a vegan. He presented an animal welfare argument indicating that eating animals and animal products causes harm to animals. He provided an anti-cruelty argument that the benefits of eating animals are trivial compared to the unnecessary suffering and pain caused to these animals. He presented an argument for veganism, likening the use of animals for food or other products to the mistreatment of less-abled humans and used the analogy of prejudices such as IQ-ism. He also talked about the farming conditions of egg-laying hens and dairy cows, and the slaughter of broiler chickens, pigs and cows raised for beef. He then went on to discuss humane alternatives.
- *Sub-Appendix 1* contains a copy of the slides used by Dr. Nye and pictures of the presentation. Since the detailed content of the presentation is captured in the PowerPoint slides, my notes will really reflect on the question and answer period during the second half of the event in relation to the content presented.
- As he was presenting I was observing the audience. Some members seemed quite shocked to learn about the inhumane treatment of animals raised for food, whereas others were nodding their heads agreeing, as though they knew the information already and agreed with what Dr. Nye was presenting.

  Verbal and nonverbal.
- Several people raised the topic of speciesism.

- Some participants simply thanked Dr. Nye for his presentation and commented that they agreed with the arguments presented, especially that of speciesism. There was some exploration of how and why human animals think they have the right to use their power to control non-human animals. The question was raised about why people did not use this power to better the lives of non-human animals.
- Others talked about being confused about how we can love and care for a dog or a cat as a cherished member of our family, yet we can raise other animals inhumanely for food without thinking twice about it.
- This was tied into a discussion about Dr. Peter Singer's controversial theories and philosophical standpoints.
- People in the audience really seemed to struggle with the concept of human animals' moral and ethical obligation to non-human animals. Although it seemed as though those in the group agreed with the concept, they found it difficult to determine where their moral and ethical obligation ended.
- The question of "Where do you draw the line?" was a common concern amongst participants. For example, an individual brought up recent research innovation looking at whether or not plants feel pain. And if plants do indeed feel pain, should we still be eating them. There was a general concern about how to live a lifestyle that truly minimized the pain caused to all living organisms.

- Dr. Nye had responded by commenting that he had not heard about this research about plants feeling pain before. But he made the argument that even if this was true, by eating a vegan diet you would still be minimizing the pain caused to plants. For example, plants are feed to animals raised for food, and then we eat the animals, which is an efficient use of plant power. By just eating the plants directly we would be minimizing the pain caused to plants.
- Another example of the discussion regarding how far our obligations go was the consumption and use of honey. Some vegans do not consume or use honey while others do. It was determined through discussion amongst the group, that the fumigation methods used as well as the actual collection of the honey may cause injury, pain, harm and even death to the bees, therefore an ethical vegan would also avoid the consumption and use of honey.
- This discussion was brought further by discussing the use of palm oil as a common agent in vegan products (vegan butter, mayonnaise, etc.). The use of palm oil is leading to deforestation that could potentially lead to the harm of non-human animals living in the forests. Therefore, some vegans in the audience also avoided the consumption and use of vegan products consuming palm oil.
- The topic of pets was then brought into the discussion. Because domesticated pets do not have a choice over whether or not they are wild or domesticated, is it fair and ethical to have non-human animal

companions? This also led to a discussion about horseback riding and animals used for labor.

- The discussion ended on the note that, whenever possible, we should choose options that do not inflict harm on non-human animals over those options that are more convenient to us.

Reflective fieldnotes.

- This audience was informed about the ethical issues surrounding a diet that includes meat, they were well aware of how animals were treated in the production of meat, dairy and eggs.
- They seemed to have deeply reflected on their lifestyle and choosing options in life that cause the least amount of harm to non-human animals.
- As the discussion progressed, I was drawing a connection between what some of the participants had discussed in individual interviews as well as in one of my focus groups, for example, one individuals interviewed really struggled psychologically with the amount of pain and suffering inflicted on non-human animals. Although they wanted to be well informed about their lifestyle choices and animal welfare, the more they learned the more depressed/frustrated they became with the human race and how we treat another species.
- There was also a linkage to the concept of "When is enough?". Vegans especially talked about not knowing where to draw the line and struggled knowing they are not doing everything they can to avoid harm to other living beings.

- I think this is an interesting connection between the data collected and I will keep this concept in mind as I analyze the data.

Interview Guide Revisions

Interview #_____

Date: _____

Vegetarian Identity

- You self-identify as a vegetarian, could you tell me about what you think a vegetarian is?
    - Why do you identify yourself as a vegetarian?
- Could you tell me how you became a vegetarian?
    - What motivated you to become a vegetarian?
- Added: What kind of research did you do before making your decision? (Added at Interview 1)

  Rationale: By getting people to talk about some of the research they may have done exploring vegetarianism it helps to open up some initial rationales that may otherwise be overlooked.
- How do you feel about your decision to become a vegetarian?
- Added: How long have you been a vegetarian for? (Added at Interview 1)

  Rationale: I added this question for basic demographic reasons as suggested by my committee members.
- Added: Transition period as separate section right after rationale- fits better here. (see below) (Added at Interview 1)
- Rationale: I thought it would be important to explore the transition period to see what kind of changes may have took place. This may help to open up some initial thinking for the well-being section of the interview and help me to identify probes to address later on.

- "What was the transition to a vegetarian diet like?"
    - What did you find challenging about it?
        - How did you manage these challenges?
    - What did you enjoy about making the change?
    - How long did it take you to make the transition?

Note: Social and psychological well-being questions were initially combined in the original interview guide, but I felt like more time needed to be spent on social well-being and psychological well-being separately to really explore things in a more in-depth manner.

Social Well-Being- Now a separate section of the interview guide.

- How would you describe your social life prior to becoming a vegetarian?
- Note: I changed the term social well-being to social life as it seemed easier for participants to talk about. When I started right away with social well-being participants were not quite sure what I was looking for so I eventually clarified by asking them to tell me a bit more about their social life. This seemed to have elicited more responses, from there we could dig deeper into social well-being.
- Do you feel being a vegetarian has impacted your social life or your social well-being? If so, how?
    - Added: What was the reaction from your family and friends when you told them you had decided to become a vegetarian? (Added at Interview 5)

Rationale: Reactions seemed to come up quite a bit in the interviews so I incorporated this question into the following interviews.

- Can you talk a little about your family life as a vegetarian?
- What is like being a vegetarian when you go out with friends?
- How do you feel you are treated by others?
- What sort of reactions do strangers have when you tell them you are a vegetarian?
- We are you in a relationship when you made the transition into a vegetarian diet?
- What was the transition like on your relationship?
- Are you in a relationship now? Is your partner a vegetarian? What is that like?
- Note: The original question: "If you have a significant other, what was the transition like on your relationship?" was confusing if they were not in a relationship. In addition, people wanted to talk about their relationships since becoming a vegetarian. (Changed in Interview 4)
- Added: Are there some places you have found easier to be a vegetarian (Home vs. away at school, Edmonton vs. other places?) Why do you think this is? (Added at Interview 3)

Rationale: People discussed social challenges being different depending on where they were. I added this question to see if this was also common among the rest of the interviewees.

- Added: Has your friend group changed since you have become a vegetarian? How? (Added at Interview 3)

  Rationale: Social dynamics indicated that a change in diet resulted in a change in some friendships, this came out in a few interviews and I wanted to further explore this.

- Added: Can you tell me a little bit about the conversations you have with others around your diet? (Added at Interview 7)

  Rationale: Language around their diet was starting to arise as a theme when I was analyzing some of the interviews. I felt this was an important aspect of social well-being (communication and understanding with others).

- Added: Are other members of your family vegetarian? Any friends? (Added at Interview 1)

  Rationale: After going back to my pilot interviews I felt this question was important to add as the interviewee with the easier transition mentioned knowing and being mentored by vegetarians.

- Added: What has that experience been like? (Added at Interview 1)

  Rationale: Follow-up question/probe.

Psychological Well-Being- Now a separate section of the interview guide.

- How would you describe your psychological well-being prior to becoming a vegetarian?
- Added: Do you feel your transition to a vegetarian diet has had implications on your psychological well-being? Either negative or positive? If so can you describe these implications? (Interview 1)
    - Added: Do you ever feel stressed because of your diet? If so, what are the sources of that stress? (Interview 1)
    - Added: Do you feel you're happier as a vegetarian? Why or why not? (Interview 1)

  Rationale: Needed to inquire not only about current state of psychological well-being, but any changes that may have arisen after transitioning to a vegetarian diet.

Physical Health

- How do you feel being a vegetarian has impacted your physical health?
    - How has it impacted your energy levels?
    - What kind of health benefits have you noticed?
    - Has the diet had a negative impact on your physical health in any way?

Wrap-Up

- What do you feel is the most challenging part about being a vegetarian?
- What do you feel is the most rewarding part about being a vegetarian?
- What continues to motivate you to maintain a vegetarian diet?
- Do you think you will always be a vegetarian? Why or why not?

- Would you encourage others to become a vegetarian? Why or why not?

Support

- Have you sought out a vegetarian community?
    - Do you know other vegetarians?
    - Do you have any sources of support?
- Added: Is there anything else you would like to add? Concluding thoughts. (Added at Interview 1)

  Rationale: Give participants the opportunity to share anything else they may want to revisit or had not had the chance to mention yet.
- Added: Would you be interested in participating in a focus group? (Added at Interview 1)

  Rationale: Was asking at the end of interviews anyways, thought I would add it to the interview guide as a reminder.

Focus Group Guide Revisions

Focus Group #_____

Date: _____

Introduction

- Can you tell everyone about your motivations for becoming a vegetarian?
- How do you think others view your choices?

Social Well-Being

- Have you had any particularly negative experiences related to being a vegetarian? If so, could you tell us about your experience?
- Have you had any particularly positive experiences related to being a vegetarian? If so, could you tell us about your experiences?
- How did/do others react to your decision?

  Are they generally supportive?

  Do they contest your decision?
- What aspects of your life, if any, do you feel have changed as a result of being a vegetarian?
- Added: How do you engage people in a conversation about vegetarianism? Do you use any particular strategies?

  Rationale: This came up a lot in the interviews, I wanted to further explore this and see if there were common strategies amongst the group.
- Added: Have you ever tried to downplay or hide the fact that you are a vegetarian? Can you describe the situation?

Rationale: This came up more often than I anticipated in the individual interviews, I want to know if others did so and see how others in the group would react to their actions if this is something they did.

- Added: Where do you think people get their ideas about vegetarianism?

  Rationale: Part of the hostility experienced by vegetarians may be due in part what vegetarians see as misconceptions about their identity. I wanted to know what vegetarians felt other thought about their lifestyle.

- Added: How has your perception of vegetarianism changed since you became a vegetarian?

  Rationale: Did their perceptions of vegetarianism perhaps change, or did they always see and view vegetarianism in a positive light?

- Added: Have you ever tried to convert someone to a vegetarian? If so why? What was the process like?

  Rationale: Pushy and self-righteous vegans came up as a theme that turned people off of vegetarianism. I wanted to know if anyone had experiences that might relate to this.

- How do you think non-vegetarians view you as vegetarians?

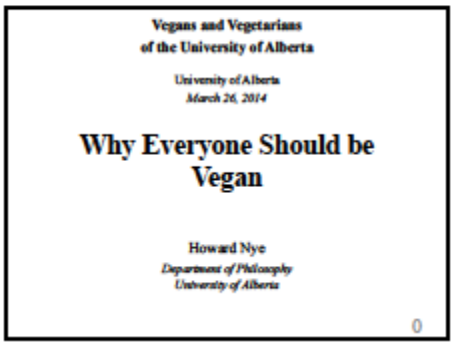
- Added: Have you ever encountered any stereotypes of vegetarians?

  Rationale: Several stereotypes came up in the individual interviews, I wanted to explore and confirm these stereotypes.

Sub-Appendix 1

4/

Dr. Howard Nye's PowerPoint presentation.


Vegans and Vegetarians
of the University of Alberta

University of Alberta
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Why Everyone Should be Vegan

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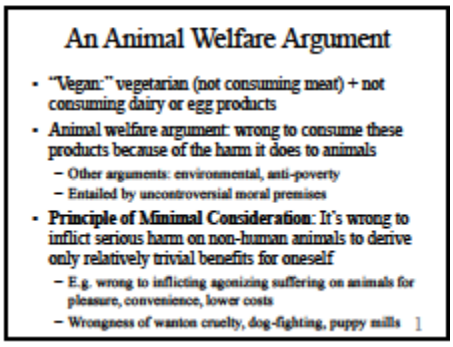
An Animal Welfare Argument

- "Vegan:" vegetarian (not consuming meat) + not consuming dairy or egg products
- Animal welfare argument: wrong to consume these products because of the harm it does to animals
  - Other arguments: environmental, anti-poverty
  - Entailed by uncontroversial moral premises
- **Principle of Minimal Consideration**: It's wrong to inflict serious harm on non-human animals to derive only relatively trivial benefits for oneself
  - E.g. wrong to inflicting agonizing suffering on animals for pleasure, convenience, lower costs
  - Wrongness of wanton cruelty, dog-fighting, puppy mills

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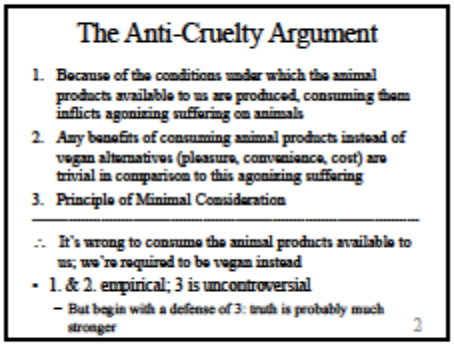
The Anti-Cruelty Argument

1. Because of the conditions under which the animal products available to us are produced, consuming them inflicts agonizing suffering on animals
2. Any benefits of consuming animal products instead of vegan alternatives (pleasure, convenience, cost) are trivial in comparison to this agonizing suffering
3. Principle of Minimal Consideration

∴ It's wrong to consume the animal products available to us; we're required to be vegan instead

- 1. & 2. empirical; 3 is uncontroversial
  - But begin with a defense of 3: truth is probably much stronger

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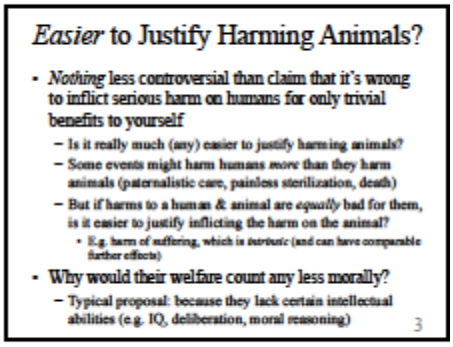
Easier to Justify Harming Animals?

- *Nothing* less controversial than claim that it's wrong to inflict serious harm on humans for only trivial benefits to yourself
  - Is it really much (any) easier to justify harming animals?
  - Some events might harm humans *more* than they harm animals (paternalistic care, painless sterilization, death)
  - But if harms to a human & animal are *equally* bad for them, is it easier to justify inflicting the harm on the animal?
    - E.g. harm of suffering, which is *intrinsic* (and can have comparable further effects)
- Why would their welfare count any less morally?
  - Typical proposal: because they lack certain intellectual abilities (e.g. IQ, deliberation, moral reasoning)

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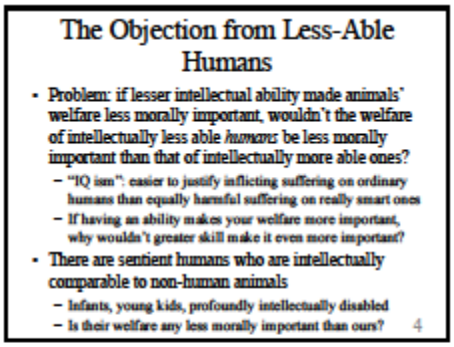
The Objection from Less-Able Humans

- Problem: if lesser intellectual ability made animals' welfare less morally important, wouldn't the welfare of intellectually less able *humans* be less morally important than that of intellectually more able ones?
  - "IQ ism": easier to justify inflicting suffering on ordinary humans than equally harmful suffering on really smart ones
  - If having an ability makes your welfare more important, why wouldn't greater skill make it even more important?
- There are sentient humans who are intellectually comparable to non-human animals
  - Infants, young kids, profoundly intellectually disabled
  - Is their welfare any less morally important than ours?

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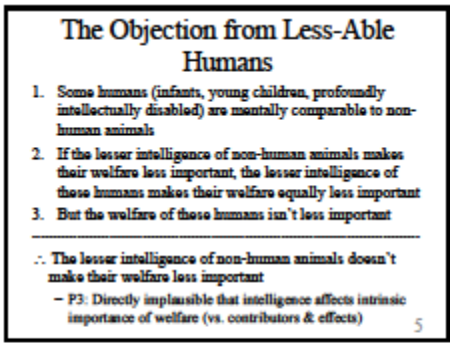
The Objection from Less-Able Humans

1. Some humans (infants, young children, profoundly intellectually disabled) are mentally comparable to non-human animals
2. If the lesser intelligence of non-human animals makes their welfare less important, the lesser intelligence of these humans makes their welfare equally less important
3. But the welfare of these humans isn't less important

∴ The lesser intelligence of non-human animals doesn't make their welfare less important

- P3: Directly implausible that intelligence affects intrinsic importance of welfare (vs. contributors & effects)

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Bare Species Membership?

- To reject 2 seems would have to accept:
- **Speciesism**: Bare psychology-independent species membership affects the importance of your welfare
  - In Sapiens? Psychologically identical aliens / hominids
  - In a smart species? Psych. identical super-chimps
  - In smart species sufficient but not necessary? Ad hoc
- What species membership actually amounts to:
  - Potential to interbreed to produce fertile offspring, psychology-independent morphology, phenotype-independent genotype, history of descent
- Looks *at least* as obviously irrelevant to intrinsic moral importance of welfare as sex, skin colour
  - Sterility, altered morphology, alternate histories
  - Discounting welfare on grounds of species as indefensibly arbitrary as discounting it on grounds of skin, sex

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At Least Minimal Consideration

- Seems lesser intelligence, species membership can do *nothing* to making a creature's welfare less important
  - **The Principle of Equal Consideration**: the welfare of all beings capable of welfare is equally morally important
    - As wrong to inflict harm on animals as equally great harms on humans
- Even if somehow intelligence & species *per se* mattered, couldn't matter very much
  - Upon scrutiny they seem *utterly* devoid of relevance
  - At most could matter only a little; *slightly* easier to justify inflicting harm on animals than comparable harm on us
  - *Clearly* couldn't make harming them so much easier to justify that you can do this for trivial benefits to yourself

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Farm Conditions for "Broiler" Chickens

- 99% of chickens raised under intensive "factory farming" conditions
- Sheds can house over 30,000 chickens
  - About one 8.5x11 sheet of paper of space per bird
    - When fully grown unable to move without pushing other birds, unable to stretch wings at will, unable to avoid dominant birds
  - Often not cleaned for over a year → ammonia
    - Respiratory disease, blisters
- Bred to grow and put on weight quickly
  - Leg problems & pain (90%, 26%)
  - Many collapse & die; no veterinary attention
- Grabbed by one leg and thrown into cages
  - Often dislocated & broken hips, wings, internal bleeding

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Slaughter & Egg-Laying Hens

- Often ineffectively stunned
  - Throats cut while conscious
- Many birds missed by throat-cutting machines
  - Up to 3 million scalded alive in the U.S. alone
- 8-9 egg laying hens crowded together in a cage; less than 1 sheet of typing paper each
  - Can't stretch even one wing
- Crowded conditions → pecking
  - De-beaking; no anesthetic
- Male chicks useless – discarded as soon as sexed
  - Suffocated, ground up alive
- Hens spent after 2 years, slaughtered

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Pigs & Dairy Cows

- More than 90 percent of pigs raised indoors under confinement conditions
  - Gestation and farrowing crates
    - Tail biting, cannibalism
  - Castration, tooth removal, tail docking without anesthetic
    - "floor taint" – flavor & cost
- Slaughter: same worries as with broiler chickens
  - Transport: crowding & weather 1 mil. die; 420 Kinjured
  - Often missed by blades and scalded alive
- Dairy cows separated from calves at birth
  - Distress; calves often die from neglect
- Males raised for veal
  - 16 weeks, tightly confined in semi-darkness
  - Too narrow to turn around; kept anemic simply for look

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Cows Raised for Beef

- Some raised in feedlots, some raised outdoors
- After 6 months - 1 year transferred to feedlots
  - Unnatural diet, digestive problems & pain,
  - ammonia & respiratory problems
- Operations without anesthetic
  - Branded without anesthetic
  - Castrated without anesthetic
  - Horns cut or burned off without anesthetic
- Can be ineffectively stunned by stun-gun at slaughter
  - Ditto for dairy cows (slaughtered after spent at 5-7 years)

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The Anti-Cruelty Argument

- What you get out of consuming these products:
  - Value of product – Value of vegan alternative
    - Taste, cost, convenience
    - Consensus among nutritionists: planned vegan diets at least as healthy (ADA & DC, 1997, 2003)
    - Vegan diets can actually be extremely tasty, economical, and convenient (Padmanadi, rice & beans, Tofurky slices)
- So consuming the standard, intensively farmed animal products available to us instead of vegan alternatives inflicts agonizing suffering on animals for only trivial benefits to ourselves
  - OK for standard animal products, but what about animal products marketed as "humane"?
  - E.g. cage free eggs, free range beef, hunting

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"Humane" Alternatives?

- While these are often improvements, they still inflict agonizing suffering
  - "Cage free" hens still housed in crowded sheds, de-beaked without anesthetics, male chicks suffocated / ground up alive, slaughtered at same locations & with same risks of improper stunning & live scalding
  - "Free-range": often only access to a small outdoor area; primarily crowded indoor confinement. Still castration, branding, tail-docking, de-horning, without anesthetic. Cows often still finished at feedlots. Slaughter at same locations; same worries about transit & improper stunning
  - Hunting: animals are often wounded and suffer for minutes, hours, days; > 3 million wounded ducks, 11% of deer died only after shot 2-3 times, crossbows 50% wounded

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What if We Made it *Really* Humane?

- E.g. keep under ideal conditions, then kill painlessly only after putting under a under general anesthetic
  - Not feasible on any large scale; but if on your own farm?
- Could painless death still harm animals?
  - Standard argument for why not (Singer, Khuse): painless death harms us only by frustrating our desires for the future. But farmed non-human animals don't have desires for the future, so painless death can't harm them
- But even if you lack desires for your future, death can still harm you by depriving you of future goods
  - Why death harms young children, depressed people who don't care about the future, and unrealistic teens whose only desires for the future will be frustrated anyway

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To What Extent Does Death Deprive Animals of Goods?

- Chickens can live 8-12 yrs (Broilers killed at 6wks, egg-layers at 2yrs)
  - Pecking order, delay gratification, alarm calls
- Cows 20-25 years (Beef @ 2 yrs, dairy @ 4-7 yrs)
  - Friends, grudges, eureka moments
- Pigs 6-25 years (@ 6mo)
  - Communication, video games, commands, memory; dogs, 3yr olds
- Deer: average wild LE: 2-16 years post first offspring
- Goods: enjoyments, ordinary experiences, relationships, solving challenges, playing, exploring, everyday activities

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Are the Benefits from Killing them Comparable?

- Compare what they lose in death to what mentally comparable humans would (legit even if speciesist)
  - Do you get more out of having 2 meals of chicken instead of vegan alternatives than someone at the mental level of a 6 month old would get out of a *decade* of life?
  - Do you get more out of eating beef / pork / venison instead of vegan alternatives than someone at the mental level of a 1 or 2 year would get out of decades of life?
- Seems any benefits of eating the animal products instead of the vegan alternatives are *utterly trivial* in comparison to years of goods for the victims
  - As such, principle of minimal consideration will condemn even painless killing of animals for these goods

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One Defense of Lethal Animal Agriculture

- "If we didn't raise animals for food, it's not like they'd have had what killing them deprives them of
  - They simply wouldn't have existed
  - So bringing them into existence and then killing them benefits them on the whole"
- Wouldn't seriously reason this way in other contexts
  - Suggests having human children, raising for few years, & killing them would benefit them on the whole
  - Suggests we should have children *for their sake*
    - Not doing so akin to not saving lives
  - Not like non-existent individuals are out there hoping desperately to be brought into existence

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- More Plausibly: bringing a creature into existence doesn't make her better off
  - It just makes her capable of being harmed & benefitted
  - Doing this doesn't make harming her by depriving her of continued existence easier to justify
  - If anything it imposes a special obligation on you not to allow her to be harmed, since you're responsible for her being vulnerable to such harms in the first place

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The Ethics of Contribution

- Principle of Minimal (& Equal) Consideration: since the benefits we get from consuming animal products are trivial in comparison to the harms this inflicts on non-human animals, we shouldn't consume them
  - But what can one person's purchases do?
- **The Rounding Up Model**: if R more people buy a dead chicken, a decision is ultimately made to raise, make suffer, and kill R more chickens
  - Buying 1 chicken has a 1/R chance of inflicting this harm on R chickens, morally like harming 1 chicken w/ certainty
- **The Principle of Contribution**: There's intrinsic moral reason to avoid being complicit in harmful practices (even if you make no perceptible difference)
  - 1,000 torturers press buttons each of which have imperceptible effects on the pain of 1,000 victims, after which all 1,000 victims are in excruciating pain

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