Vegetarianism: 
Acceptance with Masculine and Feminine Ideals

Vegetarianism

Abstract

The objective of this study was to obtain qualitative data about the masculine and feminine stereotypes regarding vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is usually seen as a more feminine dietary choice. There is the generalization that emphasizes that ‘real men eat meat’. Focus was put upon the individuals’ motivation for becoming vegetarian, supplementation, preference on eating locations, and outside acceptance and comfort levels of their dietary choices. Interviews were conducted separately with three individuals: two males 28 and 21 years old, and one female 23 years old. Participants belonged to varying levels of vegetarianism, as well as having different motivators as to why they chose to be vegetarian. The two men interviewed had support from friends and females in their family, but the males within their families did not seem to fully understand or accept their motivating factors and tend to make fun of them for their choices. In conclusion, this study shows that the outlook on vegetarianism still has more of a feminine emphasis, while male vegetarians are not fully accepted yet.

Introduction and Literature Review

Vegetarians tend to be a small portion of a given population. In the past there was a stigma that went hand-in-hand with being a vegetarian from those who did not have much knowledge on the topic. Common reasons for becoming a vegetarian can be based on religion, ethics, health concerns, and the environment. Many people link vegetarianism to feminism. More women than men do tend to follow a vegetarian diet.
Some think that if a man decides not to consume meat he loses masculinity, while if a woman decides not to consume meat she is looked at as an elitist. The issue of nutrient intake and overall health is a concern of many who convert to vegetarianism.

As of 2008 only 3.2% of adults in the U.S. followed a vegetarian diet according to Rothgerberg. Since then, I feel there has been a rapidly growing population of vegetarians, both men and women, which cover many demographics. Even though vegetarianism is becoming more widely accepted, “(...) feminist-vegetarian critique are not accidental connections: Meat consumption is a symbol of patriarchy resulting from its long-held alliance with manhood, power, and virility” (Rothgerber, 2). Many men, especially college undergraduates, justify their eating of meat by “endorsing pro-meat attitudes, denying animal suffering, believing that animals are lower in a hierarchy than humans and that it is human fate to eat animals (...)” (Rothgerber, 1).

In Merriman’s qualitative study, surprisingly, women were more discouraged from becoming vegetarian by friends and family than the male participants, “(...) few significant differences between women and men who participated in the study; considerable variety in diet, behavior, and background was represented in both groups. However, one important difference emerged: none of the men met with disapproval from family or friends, whereas many women were challenged. Moreover, women were never confronted by other women. They met with disapproval only from family members and friends who were men” (Merriman, 422). Within Merriman’s study it is shown that female family members and friends of those interviewed were more willing to show support and help those who made the change to vegetarianism.
In this research I would like to find out how varying levels of vegetarians think society views them, the reactions family and friends had to them choosing to cut meat from their diet, and how they are able to follow the dietary restrictions that are included with being vegetarian.

**Methods**

The study participants include two males and one female, with an age range of 21 to 28. All participants are enrolled at California State University, Chico within the nutrition and food science major; two are undergraduate students, one is in the graduate school program. Participants were selected due to their varying motivations for and levels of vegetarianism. The first interview took place at Enloe Hospital, where the 23 year old female participant volunteers. She has been vegetarian her whole life and identifies herself within the lacto-ovo subgroup of vegetarians. The second and third interviews took place in my living room. The second participant was the 28-year-old male who identifies himself as a vegan, and has been for just under four years. The third participant was a 21-year-old male who followed a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet for under two months.

During each interview, the participants were all asked the same set of questions (listed in table 1). These questions were set up to let the participants go into as much detail as they felt comfortable with. Each interview lasted between 10 to 20 minutes depending on how in depth the participants chose to go into each of the questions. Due to the varying levels of vegetarianism, how long the participants had been vegetarian, and their motivations for becoming vegetarian, some of the questions were modified during the interview to fit the individual situation. Each interview was conducted in person.

| Table 1: Interview Guide Questions |
1. What sub-group of vegetarians do you consider yourself to be part of?
2. How long have you been vegetarian, what was the deciding factor for becoming vegetarian, was the change difficult to make, have you strayed from vegetarianism?
3. Are any of your friends or family members vegetarians?
4. Do your family and friends support your choice of being vegetarian?
5. How do people react when you tell them you are vegetarian?
6. Challenges: Do you prefer to cook meals at home, how difficult/easy is it to eat out, do you feel you are able to reach all of your nutrient needs/do you take supplements to fulfill nutrient needs?
7. How do you react when others eating around you are consuming meat?
8. What is your most missed non-vegetarian food?

Results and Discussion

Students with different majors are preferred, but the majority of vegetarians seem to fall in the nutrition and food science major.

Conclusion

From this study, I found that the male vegetarians were more likely to be teased by male family members for choosing to not stick to the masculine ideals of eating meat.
References

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