

What about Fish? Why Some “Vegetarians” Eat Seafood and Implications for the Vegetarian Movement

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Vegetarians do not consume the flesh of animals but may choose to consume certain animal byproducts. However, many self-identified vegetarians continue to eat fish and seafood, despite claiming membership to a group that is morally opposed to killing animals for food. Collective identity within social movements is essential to group solidarity and effectiveness, and differing collective identities within movements can lead to internal division. This study sought to identify the reasons that some “vegetarians” will abstain from meat but continue to eat fish and seafood, and the resulting implications for the vegetarian movement as a whole. Analysis of discussions from seven online forums reveals a lack of shared understanding of the definitions of “vegetarian” and “meat” and lack of familiarity with the term “pescetarian”, a person who abstains from all animal flesh except fish and seafood. A lack of consensus for which animals deserve protection under the vegetarian movement is also present. Definitions of vegetarianism, justifications for consuming fish, the social influences at work among pescetarians, and the resulting implications for the vegetarian movement are discussed.

Keywords: vegetarian, pescetarian, fish consumption, collective identity, vegetarian movement

Introduction

Vegetarianism has been around since ancient times, but has only begun to take shape as a social movement in the United States since the mid 1800s (Roe, 1986; Whorton, 1994). As a diffuse movement, vegetarianism seeks to promote change through lifestyle and individual action rather than strictly through formal organizations, relying on a collective “community of meaning” to serve as the movement’s foundation (Haenfler, 2004). By advocating refrain from meat consumption, the vegetarian movement is closely linked to the animal rights movement which proposes that all sentient animals have inherent rights that must not be denied by humans (Beers, 2006).

Vegetarianism is defined as the abstaining of all animal flesh from one’s diet, with animal byproducts such as milk and eggs an optional inclusion (North American Vegetarian Society, n.d.). Motivations for becoming a vegetarian include ethical, health, environmental, and religious beliefs as well as concern over food safety (Barr and Chapman, 2002; Fox and Ward, 2008). Three percent of the U.S. adult population identify as vegetarian, which means that there are approximately 6-8 million adult vegetarians in the United States (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2011). However, some self-identified vegetarians have reported continuing to eat fish and seafood (Vinnari, Montonen, Härkänen, and Männistö, 2009; Worsley and Skrzypiec, 1998; Jabs, Sobal and Devine, 2000; Barr and Chapman, 2002; Haddad and Tanzman, 2003), distancing themselves from the philosophy of the vegetarian movement.

Researchers have identified several reasons why people choose to forego eating mammalian and avian food animals but continue to eat fish and seafood, a diet known as pescetarianism. Fish are often seen as being less similar to humans than other food animals (Barr and Chapman, 2002) and from an evolutionary perspective, are typically viewed as ranking lower than humans on the phylogenetic scale, and therefore are not thought of as deserving the same moral consideration that is thought to be owed to humans (Brandt and Reyna, 2011). Fish are generally not perceived as intelligent animals

(Phillips and McCulloch, 2005; Hills, 1995), another important predictor of which animals are deemed acceptable for eating (Ruby and Heine, 2012), and have been characterized as lacking expression and emotion (Bekoff, 2007). Individuals may also continue to consume fish for the touted health benefits when apprehensive of a vegetarian diet (Verbeke, Sioen, Pieniak, Van Camp, and De Henauw, 2005; Reis and Hibbeln, 2006) or to avoid uncomfortable social situations (Jabs, Sobal and Devine, 2000). In most cases of vegetarians who choose to eat fish, it is likely that several of these factors are in play.

Social movements such as the vegetarian movement are reliant upon collective identities for structural and motivational purposes (Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Haenfler, 2004). Collective identity has been defined by Polletta and Jasper (2001, p. 285) as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.” The solidarity developed by members of a collective identity can lead to an “us versus them” sentiment towards non-movement members as well as other groups within the same movement when collective identities differ (Saunders, 2008). Strong collective identities provide structure and guidelines for individuals within diffuse movements, in addition to providing a basis for commitment to the group and its ideals (Haenfler, 2004). Factionalism within movements in the form of horizontal hostility between subgroups can occur when one minority group is viewed as more mainstream than the other (White and Langer, 1999). In the case of the vegetarian movement, the solidarity of “true vegetarians” is threatened by pescetarians seen as more aligned with non-vegetarians than vegetarians.

While many studies have examined the reasons people decide to give up eating meat (Jabs, Devine and Sobal, 1998; Barr and Chapman, 2002; Fox and Ward, 2008), little research has been conducted on why some people will identify as vegetarian while continuing to eat fish and seafood. Empirical exploration of these reasons through qualitative methods could provide insight into commonly held beliefs about fish and vegetarianism. This paper addresses the lack of a cohesive collective identity

of vegetarianism as evidenced by “fish-eating vegetarians” and postulates what this discord could mean for the vegetarian movement and, consequently, the animal rights movement.

Methods

The present study relied on directed and qualitative content analysis of online discussions from vegetarian, vegan, and pescetarian oriented forums. Forums were selected by using a search engine to generate top results for “vegetarian forum” and “pescetarian forum”, and were selected for use based on whether or not the forum was currently active and had at minimum a section devoted to vegetarian-related topics. Discussions pertaining to fish-eating vegetarians, pescetarians, fish, and seafood were retrieved from www.veggieboards.com, www.vegpeople.com, www.happycow.net, www.hipforums.com, www.vegsoc.org, caloriecount.about.com, and pescetarians.lefora.com over a five year period from January 2007 to August 2012. All discussions contained posts from more than one individual with the exception of the pescetarians.lefora.com forum where several new forum members posted their reasons for becoming pescetarian in one or two paragraphs. In total, 194 discussions were analyzed, with a total of 3,673 posts ranging in length from one paragraph to several pages of text (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of analyzed discussions and posts from seven online forums pertaining to vegetarianism and pescetarianism.

Discussion Forum	Moderated/Unmoderated	Number of Discussions	Number of Posts
www.veggieboards.com	Moderated	52	2098
www.vegpeople.com	Moderated	15	414
www.happycow.net	Moderated	2	33
www.hipforums.com	Moderated	13	216
www.vegsoc.org	Moderated	8	71

caloriecount.about.com	Moderated	15	534
pescetarians.lefora.com	Moderated	89	307

Code development relied upon both conventional and directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Existing theories for fish consumption, such as health concerns and perceived lack of intelligence, were used to develop several codes pre-analysis, while further codes were generated as text analysis progressed. Sections of discussions were assigned to codes using themes as a unit of analysis rather than relying simply on linguistic units such as words or sentences. While this created variation in data entry length, it ensured that the essence of each theme was captured for analysis. For the sake of anonymity, no names or screen names were used in recording data from the forums.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed a lack of shared understanding of the definition of vegetarianism among vegetarians and pescetarians as well as a lack of consensus regarding which animals should be excluded from a vegetarian diet. Fish and marine invertebrates exist in a gray area of acceptability for some self-defined vegetarians and vegans, and are not typically seen as morally objectionable by pescetarians. Several themes regarding fish consumption were revealed from text analysis, and were grouped into three main categories: **Definitions**, **Justifications**, and **Social Influences**. Themes relating to **Definitions** of vegetarianism included Conflicting Definitions of Vegetarianism, Fish are Not Meat, and “Veg” is Cool. **Justifications** for eating fish included themes such as Health Concerns, Taste and Convenience, Phylogeny, Natural Food Chain, Fishing is better than Factory Farming, and Transition Stage. Religion, Culture, Family, and Commercial Influences were all determined to be **Social Influences**, as they shaped and reinforced the views held by forum posters. Evidence of discord among vegetarians

and pescetarians was found in every forum, and indicates that the blurred boundaries between these groups may be detrimental to the cohesiveness of the vegetarian and animal rights movements.

Definitions

A. Conflicting Definitions of Vegetarianism

A significant number of comments from the online forums referred to competing definitions of “vegetarian.” Some posters believed that vegetarians only refrained from eating red meat, while others thought that fish was an acceptable component of a vegetarian diet, and still others insisted that vegetarians consumed no animal flesh whatsoever. As one poster stated,

The diversity of types of meat-shunners [sic] coupled with the diversity of reasons for shunning meat creates a large array of different sub-types. So when people talk to different vegetarians, they find it hard to define what being a vegetarian actually is.

Comments such as this revealed that a single definition of vegetarianism may not apply to the current group of people who identify as vegetarian, though vegetarian organizations such as the North American Vegetarian Society may adhere to a more specific definition.

There was also confusion as to what the definition of veganism was, with several posters believing that vegetarians could eat fish and only vegans refrained from doing so because they were a stricter category of meat-abstainers. While relatively few posters argued that a vegetarian diet could include red meat and poultry, a surprising number of posters were adamant that the definition of a vegetarian diet was one that included fish:

I believe fish are very healthy for you and they're fine to eat. If you're vegan, that's another story, but I was taught that was okay. I never eat red meat though.

I must admit, I do, on occasion, eat fish. I've cut down more and more over the past year. And I will consider myself a vegetarian. There is no dictionary definition (don't listen to people who get angry with you, at least your intentions are there!!)

Belief that fish is a component of a vegetarian diet was often found in discussions that also addressed unfamiliarity with the term “pescetarian”, which refers to someone who has eliminated all animal flesh from their diet with the exception of fish and/or seafood. Many posters indicated that they had not heard the term pescetarian before, or believed that the word was not well known in society:

Until now I didn't know the word pescetarian but now I'm glad I do. I can finally get people off my back about how hypocritical I am and how I'm not a vegetarian. Up 'til now I've been saying that I'm vegetarian but I eat fish.

I think a lot of folks who have described themselves as vegetarian yet eat fish simply didn't know the term pescetarian. I sure didn't back when I was one...If you've never heard the word pescetarian, how can you describe yourself as that?

The word “pescetarian” is a young word that originated in 1993 and even after 17 years, it is still not a well known word. On the other hand, the word “vegetarian” has been around since the 1800s and is known by just about everyone.

These results indicate that much of the terminology confusion surrounding vegetarianism stems from the fact that many pescetarians are not aware of the term pescetarian, and instead refer to themselves as vegetarians, or vegetarians who eat fish. Pescetarians are often mistakenly placed under the vegetarian label by not only themselves but omnivores and vegetarians also. Many posters attributed this to the idea that giving up any form of meat is so extreme in mainstream culture that all forms of meat-restrictors are seen as belonging in the same category to those unfamiliar with the various groups of meat-avoiders.

B. Fish are Not Meat

Part of the reason for the confusion behind the definition of vegetarianism is the terminology surrounding the word “meat”. Many posters acknowledged that meat is often a separate category from fish and poultry, and for some, this idea that fish is not meat was the primary cause behind their inclusion of fish and seafood into their “vegetarian” diets:

I am glad someone asked this question because I was under the assumption that fish was ok. I didn't know fish was considered meat. I really am not trying to be a dummy, honestly I just didn't know.

I don't eat any meat whatsoever, so I consider myself to be a vegetarian...however, I do eat fish. Does this mean I'm not a “real” vegetarian?

The divide among posters who claimed that “meat” included all animal flesh and posters who agreed that “meat” referred to only red meat indicates how this terminology confusion can lead to the assumption that if a vegetarian does not eat meat, they will still eat fish. A few posters indicated that others would assume they still ate fish *and* chicken if they said they didn't eat meat, but most reported fish being the most commonly cited animal that did not meet the requirements of being “meat”.

C. “Veg” is Cool

Another theme from the forum discussions was the idea that being veg*n (vegetarian or vegan) is considered fashionable or trendy. Some posters claimed that this was the reason that fish-eating “vegetarians” would rather call themselves vegetarian than pescetarian:

...it was quite obvious to me at that point, that what it boils down to, is, that she'd like to think of, and describe herself as, a vegetarian, rather than actually having to be one.

My friend actually won't call herself pescetarian because she wants people to think she's vegetarian.

This theme was mostly referenced by vegetarians and vegans reflecting on acquaintances rather than pescetarians reflecting on their own actions. Several accounts of people creating their own definition of vegetarianism simply to acquire the vegetarian label were discussed on the forums, and in these cases the person in question was typically outspoken about their “alternative” lifestyle, implying that desire for attention and association with the vegetarian culture were the underlying motivations for their actions.

Justifications

A. Health Concerns

An anticipated reason for fish consumption was health concerns when giving up meat and other animal products. Many posters indicated concern for adequate protein intake, as well as other essential nutrients, as justifications for continuing to eat fish:

I am choosing not to eat meat for a few reasons, but would like to include some fish in my diet to maintain some lean protein, other than just the meat alternatives.

I still eat fish and seafood (more as a treat than a regular part of my diet) because I want the omega 3s [sic] and the B12 without buying expensive supplements.

Fear of protein deficiency was an important motivator for including fish in one’s diet, though most vegetarians and vegans were quick to assert that a meat-free diet could provide completely adequate nutrition if properly executed, and that protein deficiency was not a concern in their lifestyles.

In addition to concerns regarding adequate nutrition on a vegetarian diet, some posters mentioned that the addition of fish for health benefits was due to medical conditions that made maintaining a strict vegetarian diet difficult:

This is because I have really heavy periods and though I do take vitamins to make up for what I'm missing from meat, for my body it isn't enough. At that time of the month I can get really weak if I don't at least eat fish. Fish does have protein and iron in it.

I recently became pescetarian after twenty three years of strict vegetarianism. I don't tolerate soy, vegetable proteins, or most legumes and beans very well due to digestive conditions I have, and to add to that, I also have severe hypoglycemia...I also don't want to eat eggs anymore...but I do need a good protein source...

A few posters stated that a doctor had specifically recommended that they include some form of animal protein in their diet, while others made no mention of where their preconceived notions of nutrition came from. Forum discussions related to health suggest that there is a prevailing notion of the necessity of animal protein as a major component of a healthy diet within American culture.

B. Taste and Convenience

Taste of fish and seafood were often cited as reasons for being unable or unwilling to give up eating fish on an otherwise vegetarian diet. While many posters claimed to no longer care for the taste of red meat and poultry, a large number of posters said that food such as sushi was a taste that they were unable to give up:

Though my eventual goal is to be vegetarian, quite frankly I really enjoy sushi and have found it very difficult to give up... I do really enjoy the vegetarian sushi options as well, but I still get cravings for non-veggie sushi and sometimes I cave.

I planned on becoming a complete vegetarian, but I absolutely love fish (I spend probably 200 bucks a month on sushi alone, I am obsessed with it; my favorite thing in the world).

Pescetarians and vegetarians alike agreed that the taste of fish was one that was particularly difficult to replicate in a meat-free diet. For some, giving up fish and its distinct smell was the easiest stage of their transition, but for those who enjoyed fish and seafood for its unique flavor, there was no replacing the real thing.

Convenience was another important factor in determining whether to include fish in one's diet. Many posters claimed that finding suitable vegetarian options when dining out was difficult to near impossible, yet fish and/or seafood was almost always available in most establishments:

Being a pescetarian is more practical than being a vegetarian since things like tofu are not always available, but fish is available in most places.

He was completely vegetarian but he travels a lot for work and they always have company dinners at steakhouses and really nice restaurants. He just got tired of always eating side salads for dinner, and most of the time those places will have a shrimp or shellfish option on the menu.

Lack of suitable vegetarian options prompted situations where compromise with one's diet was viewed as acceptable to avoid either going hungry or eating a meal that was not satisfactory to one's tastes. An underlying cause for compromise in public areas such as restaurants and company meetings appeared to be a desire to avoid confrontation regarding dietary preferences, as well as a desire to avoid being viewed as an extremist.

C. Phylogenetic Scale

Discussion board participants tended to view fish as being "low" on the phylogenetic scale, an evolutionary scale that ranks animals from the most simple to the most complex, as opposed to mammals which were viewed as "high":

... I also think it's important for people who care about the welfare (or rights) of animals to recognize that there is a sliding scale of sorts, between different classes of animals. The brain structures of fish and amphibians are lacking in some features and capabilities that are present in mammals and birds. Reptiles might be a borderline case, while mollusks and arthropods are sufficiently primitive in their central nervous system development that I don't think there's much of an ethical issue there. (One important exception being various species of octopus, which are well-known to be quite intelligent, and seem to have an emotional life, relate to humans, etc.)

The previous comment highlights just how complex the common classification system became when posters tried to segregate animals into various classes, as exceptions to the rule can prove difficult for individuals seeking a way to justify their treatment of an entire group of animals. As noted above, mollusks and arthropods were typically viewed as very primitive animals located near the bottom of the phylogenetic scale, where it is assumed that animals possess little to no mental activity or capacity for pain, yet an exception was made for the octopus due to its “high” intelligence, as this attribute places it in a class of animals more similar to humans.

For many posters, perceived intelligence and sentience were important factors in how they viewed and valued fish and marine invertebrates, in addition to appearance and similarity to humans. In fact, many posters stated that they felt fish and marine invertebrates were “closer” to insects in regards to the phylogenetic scale, categorizing them as distantly from humans as possible:

Though I am vegetarian I am considering eating fish because there doesn't appear to be any great ethical concern to not eat most kinds of fish...It doesn't appear to me that crustaceans, for instance, have much more sentience than insects, and thus there isn't really anything morally wrong with eating them. I find the same to be true about the majority of fish. I am confident that larger creatures like octopuses are likely quite sentient, and thus shouldn't be killed. Nonetheless, unless I am mistaken, it seems that the majority of fish that are generally eaten more or less resemble a bug's sentience.

I think mammals (and birds) have feelings and personalities...Personally, I think that fish are not warm blooded animals and most seafood is more related to insects than mammals.

Another reason given for eating fish and seafood rather than other animals was that fish are difficult for humans to relate to, either because of their appearance or their relatively unfamiliar habitat.

This sentiment was summed up by one poster explaining why people feel less empathy towards fish:

One thing that did occur to me though, was how comparatively easy it is for people to identify with land and air animals, which we see in their natural state, sometimes keep as pets, and grow familiar with by observing their movements and facial expressions... But fish are different- they do have faces of course, but they don't so much have facial expressions. Their faces give away nothing, so it's easy to surmise that they are basically feeling nothing... So for many reasons fish seem a lot more alienated from us, creature-wise, unless we happen to spend years observing and studying them... People don't feel bad for what happens to fish because it's harder to imagine themselves in the place of the fish.

Fish were consistently seen as “less like us” by both pescetarians and vegetarians, and therefore were regarded as less relatable and deserving of moral consideration. Perceived “cuteness” appeared to be a common precursor for being relatable, and was mentioned by several posters as a reason for the inclusion of fish over mammals in one’s diet:

I personally know people who are “cute vegetarians” (or uglytarians? [sic]) - they will only eat animals that are not cute. For example, cows are cute, pigs are cute, chickens are not, fish are not.

I think it's because they are so different from mammals and birds in a way that humans can't or won't relate to them. They're scaly, they're not cute and cuddly, you can't pet them, they live in a totally different environment, that sort of thing.

The requirement of an ability to feel pain in order to receive moral consideration was another divisive issue among forum posters. While most posters acknowledged that it was likely fish do feel pain, some were not convinced that this was true, and there was even more uncertainty with regards to pain awareness in marine invertebrates:

I am against fish farming (or raising any kind of sentient beings for the purpose of eating them) but I choose to eat fish mostly because the majority of fishes we consume cannot feel pain.

I'm all for shrimp or crustacean farming though, they honestly don't have the capacity to feel anything at that level.

Since the “sliding scale” classes invertebrates as lower animals, there was a general consensus among pescetarians and vegetarians that animals such as shrimp, clams, and mussels were not capable of feeling pain, and therefore it was viewed as a lesser evil to consume these animals. Vegetarians were more likely to see eating marine invertebrates as more acceptable than eating fish, while vegans tended to believe that all animals should be afforded the same considerations whether they were “lower” or “higher” on the phylogenetic scale.

D. Natural Food Chain

The concept of a natural food chain in which humans are meant to eat the creatures “below” them was revealed in analysis of discussions as a justification for eating fish. In this theme, there is no real “blame” placed on people who choose to eat meat because it is seen as the natural order of things, and people are merely fulfilling their niche:

... to catch a fish that has been born in the wild and eat it, I see as simply fulfilling my natural design as a prey [sic] animal and providing myself with prey/meat. The fish was born in the wild and its life being taken by me is of little difference than if it were taken by a bear or other animal. The animal has lived its life and been taken as a prey animal more or less as intended by the design of this world. Thus the circle is completed as it was intended to be.

Fish were made for people to eat them.

Many references to a natural food chain also used the comparison of animals finding food sources in the wild to the actions of humans who eat meat. Placing humans within the “natural” world in this way relieved posters of the cognitive dissonance commonly encountered by people who seek to eat meat while simultaneously avoid harm to animals. Pescetarians and omnivores were the main proponents of this theme, with vegetarians and vegans more likely to assert that humans are not obligated to eat animals as part of a “natural” food chain.

E. Fishing is better than Factory Farming

Environmental concerns were prevalent in the online forums, and many vegetarians, vegans, and pescetarians cited this as an important motivator behind their diet choice in addition to humane concerns. Pescetarians were more likely than vegetarians and vegans to believe that fishing practices were more humane and environmentally friendly than factory farming, though some vegetarians and vegans also felt the same way:

The elimination of chicken and beef seem like obvious benefits to me. The food we use to feed these animals could be used to feed more people instead. But this isn't the case with fish.

They [pescetarians] do not want to be responsible for the inhumane conditions in slaughterhouses and the conditions the animals live in before their slaughter...It's better for the environment to not have these large ranches full of animals to be slaughtered.

A consensus was reached among many pescetarians and vegetarians that fish were a better alternative to factory farmed animals due to the health risks associated with farmed flesh:

My main reason for not eating other meat is because of the hormones/antibiotics/disgusting methods of feeding and raising [sic].

The stuff injected into cows and chickens is MUCH worse than what fish get into their systems in the wild.

While some distinction was made between wild-caught and farm-raised fish with regards to health concerns, many posters grouped both sources together, claiming that fish as a whole were free from the harmful additives often found in red meat and poultry. This allowed some posters to justify retaining fish and seafood in their diets while excluding other animals.

F. Transition Stage

Vegetarians, vegans, and pescetarians alike described the inclusion of fish in their diet as a transition stage between an omnivorous diet and one without any animal flesh. As many posters described, the transition often begins with cutting out red meat first, then poultry, then fish and possibly animal byproducts last:

For me I think it's a transitional stage...I haven't eaten beef, pork, chicken, turkey etc in over 2 months and maybe eventually I will cut out fish...I think it's hard for a lot of people to instantly eliminate all these things from their diet.

Some posters noted that in addition to providing them with time to adjust to vegetarian meals, a transition period helped them to stick with a vegetarian diet and not return to eating meat:

I remember when I first decided I wanted to go veggie, for moral reasons, I used pescetarianism as a kind of stepping stone for about a month while I eased into vegetarianism, learnt about nutrition/food choices etc.

Vegetarianism and veganism is NOT something that happens overnight. Some vegetarians start out as pescetarian in order to ween [sic] themselves off slowly, to avoid "falling off the wagon" so to speak...

A few posters decided against continuing on with the transition to a meatless diet, but many more were successful in achieving their goals and only relied on the transition phase for a limited amount of time. Once they were vegetarians or vegans, the use of fish as a necessary component in the progression from an omnivorous diet to a meatless one was viewed as more acceptable by posters as it was a temporary inclusion that resulted in less harm to animals over the long term.

Social Influences

A. Religion/Culture/Family

Social influences from family, culture, and religion were also important factors in determining how forum users view fish and vegetarianism. In some religions, fish are not considered to be meat, and therefore are seen as acceptable in a vegetarian diet:

I think people have trouble with the fish thing because the Catholic Church has people convinced that fish isn't meat, because they allow it on meatless Fridays during Lent. At least that's where my friends get their ideas about fish.

It's not just Catholics who don't consider fish to be meat. The Jewish religion is the same. The Kosher rules forbidding eating meat with dairy don't apply to fish, only land animals. Fish is routinely eaten on a bagel with cream cheese, and it's Kosher... I've always assumed that these practices played a large role in the general public not considering fish to be "meat", and thus assuming that vegetarians would eat fish.

A surprising number of posters cited the Catholic Church's practice of meatless Fridays as the main reason for the terminology confusion behind fish not being classified as a type of meat; however there are several religions that make a distinction between fish and other food animals. This distinction has pervaded society to the point where most posters were aware of the fact that fish are allowable on meatless Fridays and under certain kosher guidelines, even if they were not practicing members of those religions.

Local culture was also mentioned as a reason for including fish and seafood in one's diet, particularly in regions where these animals have an important economic role:

The main reasons behind this are because I live in a culture that is very much connected with the sea and up until recently almost entirely dependent on it - eating fish is a part of my way of life.

Some posters indicated that fish was so strongly tied to their culture that they would be viewed as social pariahs for choosing to eliminate fish and seafood from their diet. The desire to be accepted within one's own culture was a strong motivator for deciding to continue eating fish.

Family was another commonly cited reason for either believing that vegetarians eat fish or eating fish and seafood while otherwise being a vegetarian:

Growing up, my family was "vegetarian, but we eat fish" so that's what I knew. It's hard to see that a "fact" you've been raised with is untrue.

I eat fish only rarely, but mainly because I am stuck living with my parents and they force me to.

Similarly to the cultural influence, posters did not wish to go against the beliefs and desires of close relatives who they had personal interactions with and often looked up to. Many of the younger posters indicated that they would discontinue eating fish once they left home, but that eating fish was a compromise they had reached in the interim to assuage parents concerned with their otherwise vegetarian diet. These concerns were often related to fears about protein inadequacy in a vegetarian diet, with parents insisting that their children eat at least fish to ensure they received enough protein.

B. Commercial Influences

Commercial influences from such sources as restaurants, stores, magazine articles, and cookbooks also served as social influences shaping individuals' beliefs about fish and the vegetarian diet. It was not uncommon for forum users to state that fish is fish and meat is meat, often citing "real world" references that reinforced the idea that these two categories are indeed separate:

"Meat" isn't a biological term. It is a food term, and in the vast majority of usages, it doesn't include fish. You have your meat course, and your fish course. They are separate. Your Italian menu separates main courses by "pesce" and "carne".

Walk into just about any grocery store or restaurant in the U.S. and you will see "meat" separated out from poultry and fish. Additionally, every cookbook I've ever owned treated them as separate categories as well.

One poster even noted that as she was discussing this very subject with online forum members, she looked at her microwave and realized that "fish" was given a separate cooking function from "meat". Several vegetarians remained convinced that the meat label included fish, while others agreed that there exists a distinction in the English language, and that it would be prudent for vegetarians to explain that they do not partake in meat, poultry, or fish when explaining their dietary choices.

Group Discord

Discord between vegetarians and pescetarians was prevalent among the online forums. Pescetarians often felt that they were being attacked by "elitist" vegetarians for not sharing all of the same beliefs, though they often pointed out that some beliefs were shared by both groups:

And stop hating us fish eaters. You alienate us when we're aiming at similar, though not identical goals... I hate reading EVERY freaking day on here about some "true veggie" who's so disgraced by us fish-eaters and "ohmygod I can't believe it, they eat fish, how horrible, they are not one of us, and we should outcast them just like any omni, they are all the same". It's arrogant and insulting...

The differing acceptability of fish and seafood was very frustrating to vegetarians who strongly believed that they were not being elitist by attempting to define what true vegetarianism entails:

Calling ourselves vegetarian/vegan isn't about labeling ourselves; it's a political statement and a lifestyle. People who eat fish yet call themselves vegetarian dilute the meaning of the word.

I guess it's because we eat the way we do for a reason... It's an ethical decision by and large, and we want people to know what our decision stands for. If people are allowed to lump us in with their idea of what veg*nism constitutes (which often involves eating SOME sort of meat), then our message, our desire to lead by example, is badly diminished if not lost entirely.

Numerous antagonistic comments between forum users were indicative of the division between posters who abstained from all animal flesh and those who felt that abstaining from mammalian flesh was enough to warrant inclusion within the vegetarian group. These sparring factions represent a broader picture of discord within the vegetarian movement regarding terminology and acceptability of various meat-abstaining individuals.

Discussion and Conclusions

Limitations of the current research lie with single-author coding, as there is no inter-coder assessment of coding consistency and directed content analysis may lead to coding bias. However, relevant text was identified prior to coding which may increase trustworthiness (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) and theory saturation for every theme was achieved as posts became repetitive on each forum. Theory saturation indicates that the themes themselves are reliable and applicable to the current study, though current methodology lacks generalizability. Additional research with actual movement participants is needed to confirm theories and findings noted in this study.

The findings support several previous theories for fish consumption (Barr and Chapman, 2002; Jabs, Sobal and Devine, 2000; Brandt and Reyna, 2011) and also reveal a lack of a shared definition of vegetarianism, lack of consensus on which animals are deserving of protection, and unfamiliarity with the term pescetarian. While there may not be much apparent harm in people labeling themselves as vegetarian when they are in fact either pescetarians or omnivores, there can in reality be more far reaching consequences for the vegetarian movement. “Impostors” of the vegetarian identity not only blur the boundaries between in-group (non-meat eaters) and out-group (meat eaters), they also undermine the group’s potential for collective action which relies upon a strong collective identity (Warner, Hornsey, and Jetten, 2007; Hornsey and Jetten, 2003). Without this strong collective identity to unite and guide proponents, the diffuse movement loses its shape and influence, and the perceived hypocrisy displayed by imposters may be used as ammunition by out-group members to undermine the integrity of the group’s moral position (Hornsey and Jetten, 2003). In fact, Smart (2004) found that pluralism and normalization of the vegetarian diet in the United Kingdom threatened the moral foundations of vegetarianism as constructed boundaries between groups became meaningless. Differing collective identities within a movement can lead to hostility between similar subgroups such as vegetarians and pescetarians (Saunders, 2008; White and Langer, 1999), and this divisiveness ultimately undermines the vegetarian cause.

Pescetarianism appears to be a growing class of meat-restrictors, though whether they will be fully recognized under the auspices of the animal protection community remains to be seen. Several studies have examined reasons for meat consumption in vegetarians, but none have fully explored the extent to which the discord over the definition of vegetarianism may hinder the efforts of the vegetarian and animal rights movements. This study suggests indications of division within the vegetarian movement and invites future qualitative research with movement participants to examine just how

significant an impact this may have on the success of this diffuse movement as well as the animal rights movement as a whole.

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