

## McDonald's "Empirical Look at Becoming Vegan"

### COMMENTARY

McDonald (2000) offers insights from in-depth interviews with twelve long-term vegans. I have done similar qualitative work with two focus groups, and I have done a quantitative survey with 385 respondents recruited through vegetarian channels (MacNair, 1998). Several points McDonald made can be confirmed or expanded upon from these studies, and there are other important considerations in the investigation of becoming vegetarian or vegan.

As McDonald says, the current literature on becoming vegetarian or vegan is scant. One addition is recent figures on the percentage of the American population that is vegetarian. A Zogby Poll (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2000) shows that 2.5% of Americans - the vegetarians - never eat meat, poultry, or fish. Nine of the 968 polled - the vegans - also eat no dairy, eggs, or animal products.

My findings were similar to McDonald's on the importance of reading vegan materials to maintain a vegan lifestyle. Similarly, my focus groups' remarks echoed the travails of persuading others and finding social support. The interplay of emotion and logic is also echoed, with some people starting with one

and including the other. The survey (MacNair, 1998) suggested that those who became vegetarian because of animal concerns were more likely to answer that their initial impetus had been emotional. When health concerns were the beginning motivation, they were more likely to answer that they had used logic.

## **Expanding Motivations**

Compassion for animals is one of many motivations for becoming vegetarian or vegan. Health is another major one, with many studies and the American Dietetic Association clearly indicating that a well-planned vegetarian or vegan diet helps to prevent various diseases (Messina & Burke, 1997). Also common are environmental, world hunger, spiritual, aesthetic, and even anti-big-business concerns. This multiple reasoning is important. My focus groups, along with an informal e-mail survey of 54 vegans, confirm that adding reasons for being vegetarian or vegan is a common practice. Having more reasons bolsters the case for vegetarianism. This would be predicted by a variant of cognitive dissonance theory - not that there is any dissonance between belief and practice - but there is some tension between practice and relating with others who are critical of the practice. Thus, seeking further assurances that the practice is a good one is to be expected. It may be crucial to maintenance of the practice.

Those with animal concerns are likely to expand into health concerns for several reasons. One is illustrated by McDonald's (2000) report, "Cary's family was supportive, as long as he could prove he was getting the appropriate nutrients." Being knowledgeable about health is a defensive measure for avoiding social disapproval from close family and friends. Additionally, vegetarians who seek out other vegetarians as a means of social support will find that many of those others are knowledgeable and concerned about health. Such interaction can naturally increase interest in that perspective.

Conversely, those who start with health or environmental concerns often will add compassion for animals to their motivation. This provides another reason, thereby reinforcing the decision. Interaction with other vegetarians also will make this salient. Since behavior already is consistent with having an animal concern, such a concern can easily be added. It requires only an appealing intellectual commitment. It no longer requires difficult changes in behavior, since those changes have already been made.

Age also is a variable. The quantitative survey (MacNair, 1998) showed health concerns increasing with age. Animal concerns as the initial motivation decreased with age. The lines intersected at about 50 years, with health becoming a more common motivation as people age. One obvious possible explanation is that health concerns in general are more salient to people as they get older, and health concerns in diet would be expected to follow this trend.

Another possibility, however, adds historical circumstances to age. There is a difference between attitudes during the historical period when older people were younger and during the current historical period for today's young people. Many who might have become vegetarian on animal rights reasoning earlier in the century decided against it because they thought their health would suffer. Now, finding that their health would actually improve, they become vegetarian or vegan as older people. They do not include the animal rights reasoning because they would have to account for why they did not become vegetarians for that reason when they were younger. They already can account for why they did not do so for health reasons. Concern for animals has remained the same, but understanding of health has differed throughout the twentieth century.

## **Health Psychology**

The concern for health relates strongly to the concern for animals because both can lead to the same result in terms of dietary behavior. Therefore, psychological theories helpful to understanding a transformation can come not only from adult education, as McDonald (2000) suggests with Mezirow's transformation theory, but also from health psychology. Though the literature on learning to become vegetarian or vegan is sparse, health psychology has a rich literature on encouraging healthy behavior. This can include avoiding alcohol, tobacco, and high-fat diets. Though most of the health psychology work on diets is concerned with lowering fat and increasing fruit and vegetable intake, much of it can easily be applicable to elimination of animal products from the diet.

For example, a simple study of students found that those primed with positive thoughts scored highest on healthful behavior, those primed with negative thoughts scored lowest, and those primed with neither were in the middle. These researchers were building on the idea that "self-persuasion" is among the most effective techniques (Finch & Roth, 2000).

In my survey (MacNair, 1998), people indicated that they used the technique of thinking about the positives of vegetarian food when learning to follow the vegetarian diet, especially those who gave health as their initial concern. Those with animal rights as their initial reason tended to think of the negatives of meat. Nevertheless, the self-persuasion principle is the same. From stages of change to healthy behavior maintenance, with all their good and bad points, health psychology theories warrant attention for their applicability to this subject.

## **The Process**

One of my major interests in both the survey and focus groups was to look at the various techniques of becoming a stable vegetarian over the course of time. Most people described their techniques as follows: (a) the decision made, they gradually phased out meat (including poultry and fish), a process that commonly took from six months to three years; (b) they made a sudden decision, but their meat consumption had been going down for some time; or (c) they suddenly went from large meat consumption to none. Many in the latter category replaced large consumption of meat with large dairy consumption. This can lead to an iron deficiency, which does not occur when plant foods replace meat (Messina & Burke, 1997).

Those who checked off a large, sudden change comprised a particularly interesting category. The more in-depth focus groups showed that those who said they had used this technique nevertheless had more phasing in than they originally had acknowledged. One who said she simply had decided one day that she would not eat meat continued to eat fish for several more years before it occurred to her to stop. She said she did not know why it was not obvious to her. Another said he had gone on a meat-eating binge and then given up all animal products for Lent, an abstinence he maintained. Nevertheless, he had indicated a long period before that of getting vegan cookbooks and trying various dishes, building up his ability to maintain a varied and nutritionally balanced diet.

McDonald (2000) comments on the difference, derived from Habermas, between instrumental and communicative learning. This could be seen as the difference between building self-efficacy in dietary practices and having a

commitment to the ideals of vegetarian or vegan dietary practice. In this division, the three most common techniques can be seen as follows:

1. Those who make a decision to become vegetarian and then phase out meat gradually are those who make the commitment and build self-efficacy in a long but stability-building process.
2. Those who make a sudden decision to become vegetarian but whose meat consumption had been going down for some time are doing the process in reverse. They build self-efficacy first. When they are comfortable with their instrumental knowledge, they make the commitment to the idea.
3. Those who go suddenly from large meat consumption to none vary. Some really have had their meat consumption going down, but, as they build their instrumental knowledge, their estimation of what constitutes a large amount of meat becomes gradually more restricted. Others make the idea commitment and then move to fish or dairy substitutes before actually phasing them down or out. Still others go from large meat to vegan diets. However, since my probing of individuals who thought they had done this showed that the situation was more complicated, much more work needs to be done in this area. A simple check-off on a survey clearly is insufficient. There may be many unconscious processes involved in the move to become vegetarian or vegan.

McDonald put it this way: “Vegans interested in teaching others should not necessarily be discouraged by an apparent lack of interest or gentle resistance but should provide enough information to plant a seed that may, after a period of dormancy, sprout into the daylight.” This can be accomplished by several mechanisms. Self-efficacy in vegetarian practice may be building up during that dormancy period, making a decision easier when the point comes that practice does not have to change much. Linda, one of my focus group participants said that after reading of animal cruelty she was pleased to have a good reason not to eat that “nasty stuff” any more. Over the years, her meat eating had declined because she felt in much better health when she did not eat meat. Additionally, of course, there is the mechanism that always comes with the psychology of persuasion: Some people simply need time to think about an idea or to hear about it several times before they are ready to take it seriously.

This does say something about the “catalytic experiences” that McDonald cites. Linda had one by way of a mailing from an animal rights organization, but she readily admitted that she had become more receptive to the message. Such messages are around continually, but receptivity to them may build up more gradually. Preparation may have preceded the sudden flashes of insight. One of the advantages of a qualitative technique, whether interview or interactional focus group, is the ability to go beyond what people originally would check off on a survey and go into greater depth about what previous background had given the catalytic experience such power.

It was also clear in both the survey and the focus groups that a two-step process is very common. Many people become vegetarian first and after some years become vegan. Some of this may be due to historical circumstance. Vegetarianism was more prevalent among activists in the 1970s. Lately, more vegan activists have arisen. We may find a more recent trend toward moving directly to a vegan diet. However, it also may be that the two-step technique is a sound one for stability of diet. When one has built self-efficacy in being a vegetarian, with all the practical and social difficulties that entails, then a further transition to becoming vegan is easier. Becoming vegan may seem much less daunting to a vegetarian than to a non-vegetarian.

A major implication of this point is that those who wish to move more people to learn a vegan lifestyle can expect to utilize not only persuasion, but also the practical side of vegan practice. Persuasion to make a commitment takes a short time, but the process by which the persuasion comes may be lengthy. People who cannot be persuaded to follow a vegan diet (or other vegan practices, such as avoiding leather, wool and silk) can be persuaded to do so partially.

Some people find that simply breaking the firm idea that something is not a meal if it does not have a meat, poultry, fish, egg, or dairy component is a major achievement. It may be a necessary step before any further progress is made. Fewer animals would be put under factory farming and slaughterhouse conditions if large numbers of people simply had vegan meals once a week. Those who are doing this once a week are more likely to be persuaded to do so twice a week than those who are not. Having a vegetarian meal is not nearly as intimidating an idea as transforming one's whole diet. It does, however, make the transformation more likely later.

The practical versus the ideological, the instrumental versus the communicative, the self-efficacy versus the mental commitment may be on separate tracks for different people. For some, one may come first, for others the other, and others may have an interaction between the two that causes gradual progress.

There may be various differences in gender, age, ethnic background, educational background, family relationships, friendship networks, proximity of other vegans, availability of vegan food, experiences, and personality. The literature is only beginning in this area, and we have only the broad outlines of a start in understanding the process. McDonald's (2000) study is an important contribution, and we need many more in-depth qualitative studies and hypothesis-testing quantitative studies on this aspect of the relationship of humans to other animals.

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