

Perceived benefits of following a vegetarian diet: A qualitative study of vegetarian college students

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Abstract

Objective: The overall aim of this study was to examine a variety of beliefs, perceptions and barriers that are inversely associated with maintaining a vegetarian diet for college students.

Design: Interviews were conducted that included questions on meal patterns and food consumption, nutritional and health beliefs, perceived barriers and benefits, and personal values of following a vegetarian diet.

Setting: California State University, Chico.

Subjects: Four students were selected from the Chico State campus population. Two of the subjects selected follow a vegetarian diet, while the other two subjects follow a vegan diet.

Results: For all participants, the most important personal belief for following a vegetarian diet was that of the health benefits. Other personal beliefs included nutritional benefits, the diet being a random decision, and following the diet related to animal rights. All four participants noted similar personal habits surrounding meal patterns and consumption such as a diet consisting of vegetables and grains and not purchasing food on campus. Furthermore, all participants felt there was a strong outside perception of all vegetarians being animal rights activists. Other perceptions felt from non-vegetarians included that of vegetarians being all activists, environmentalists, judgmental, nutrient deficient and health obsessed.

Conclusions: This research found that health and the ethical treatment of animals were the main motivators for participants' vegetarianism. While the participants reported a range of perceptions felt from those not following a vegetarian diet, such as all being activists, environmentalists, and health obsessed, the primary perception felt among the

participants was that of being all animal rights activists. The data indicates that the participants all follow similar dietary habits and also have similar meal patterns. This provides insights into the identities of the participants, and the perceived barriers and benefits of maintaining the diet for college students. The factors identified from this research study should be taken into consideration for future planning of food available to students following a vegetarian diet on campus.

Introduction and Literature Review. Vegetarianism has become a popular diet choice among many Americans today and it has also been reported to be a growing trend among many young people as well (Santos and Booth, 1996). Meat is a controversial food and it may be considered to provide health benefits to some or to provide adverse health effects for others. Compared to diets that include meat, plant-based diets contain less saturated fat and cholesterol, and are also often higher in fiber, antioxidants and phytochemicals (Lea and Worsley, 2000). However, with the growing number of individuals who sustain vegetarian diets, these people can also be at an increased risk for not meeting the needs for some nutrients.

Beliefs often influence attitudes, which in turn influence behavior choices. Attitudes and beliefs surrounding foods are often the key determinants of one choosing whether or not to consume a particular food, such as meat. Health is not the sole reason given by consumers for the reduction or avoidance of meat consumption (Lea and Worsley, 2000). There are a number of factors that are associated with negative beliefs surrounding meat. These factors can include beliefs about nutrition, barriers and benefits of vegetarianism, number of vegetarian friends and family members, personal values, customs, or demographics. Specifically, those following a vegetarian diet may face barriers when moving to a new place, and especially during college when dining is often in a cafeteria setting.

A study conducted by Lea and Worsley identified that the most important predictors of the belief that meat is intrinsically unhealthy were the perceived benefits of vegetarian diets, which were all positive predictors. These predictors included the perceived links between vegetarianism and peace, animal welfare and environmental benefits, and the overall health benefits of the diet. The findings from this study suggest

that cognitions play a role in the decision to not consume meat in addition to other influences such as health beliefs and social concerns.

Fox and Ward (2008) differentiate the moral bases for 'health vegetarianism' and 'ethical vegetarianism'. Health vegetarians avoid meat in order to derive certain health benefits or to lose weight, while ethical vegetarians are seeking to minimize harm to animals for food consumption. There are many motivating factors behind students following a vegetarian diet, and the transitional period while studying in college can alter or increase one's personal feelings surrounding their dietary choice. In addition to personal commitments, vegetarianism has been linked to concerns with the environment and the ecological impact of meat (Fox and Ward, 2008).

When vegetarians go to college, or when college students become vegetarians, they may be concerned with how difficult it might be to choose foods they can eat. Dining systems can vary from university to university and the beliefs students have about not consuming meat may become a hurdle in college when presented with different food availability and accessibility than in a previous residence. Even though most schools are including more vegetarian options on campus for students who adhere to this diet, it can still become a burden for many students to find an abundance of vegetarian options. College students are often faced with financial restraints, busy schedules and other obstacles to maintain a balanced diet. For vegetarians, following the diet in college may not always be easy, and new barriers may be presented for these students to face.

In addition to barriers such as cost and convenience for vegetarian students, they may also be faced with a non-physical barrier such as outsider judgments. Vegetarians are often scrutinized and criticized for not eating meat, as well as questioned about their diet choice. College students following a vegetarian diet may be labeled as strong activists, environmentalists and health obsessed. Furthermore, the student population represents an age group that often passes judgment before being properly educated on the subject. These outsider perceptions are also important to consider as barriers for vegetarian students following this diet while in college.

The aim of this qualitative research study is to examine the perceived benefits and barriers for college students following a vegetarian diet. It is important to evaluate the beliefs, barriers, and perceptions that vegetarian students are faced with when adhering to

this diet in school. The specific target group was four students enrolled at California State University, Chico and student perspectives surrounding vegetarianism will be examined by means of interview. Interviews will explore vegetarians' own perspectives of how health, ethical and environmental beliefs motivate their food choices, barriers that they face following the diet while in school, and outsider perceptions felt surrounding their dietary practice.

Methods. A list of questions was first developed to identify participants' personal beliefs surrounding following a vegetarian diet, personal food habits and meal patterns, barriers to adhering to the diet, in addition to outside perceptions from other individuals related to their diet choice.

Table 1: Interview Questions

Is there any restaurant or grocery store in particular you go in Chico that caters to vegetarians, what do you order at this restaurant?

Do you find you cook your own food more often as a direct result of following the diet? What kinds of dishes do you cook?

Why did you make the choice to go vegetarian and how long have you followed this diet?

Have you adapted any further beliefs towards vegetarianism over time?

Does your decision for following a vegetarian diet have any links to the nutrition benefits that have been implicated such as it being a diet lower in saturated fat, and also what other nutritional links do you believe are true for vegetarianism?

Do you feel there are any misconceptions surrounding those who are vegetarians and have you ever been in a situation where you have had to defend your diet decision?

What kinds of vegetarian options are available to you on campus?

Do you find the vegetarian options are often changing?

Do the vegetarian dishes appear just as exciting as the dishes offered with meat?

Do you feel that this campus takes into account diet restrictions students may have as a whole?

Do you ever feel like there aren't enough choices for vegetarians?

What do you think are perceived vegetarians' roles in terms of the environment and animal rights on campus?

Does your choice to follow a vegetarian diet have to do with avoiding killing animals for food consumption?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Data Collection and Interviews. Four students attending California State University, Chico were selected based on their dietary choice to follow a vegetarian diet. All four

participants are students currently enrolled at the university. The selection process was conducted based on a referral method and random selection. Participant A is a twenty-year old female from Pleasant Valley, California and presently adheres to a vegetarian diet. She is currently studying Nutrition and also works as a cake decorator at a local grocery store. She decided to become vegetarian three years ago, randomly, after realizing she wasn't consuming much meat. Participant B is a twenty-four-year old female from Nevada City, California and she is currently studying Mathematics and has followed a vegetarian diet for almost ten years. She decided to become a vegetarian after learning of the health benefits associated with the diet. Participant C is a twenty-seven-year old male from San Diego, California. He began following a vegan diet two years ago after being advised by a Chinese herbalist that it may help with the stomach problems he was suffering from. He is currently enrolled in the Masters of Nutrition Education program and has been living in Chico for seven months. Participant D is a twenty-five-year old female currently studying Anthropology and has never been enrolled in a nutrition course at Chico State. She has followed a strict vegan diet for about five years and stopped eating meat 'cold turkey' after watching a disturbing video on YouTube of an animal being slaughtered for food consumption.

The researcher of the study conducted all interviews and the four participants were open-endedly interviewed about avoidance of meat in general and about the reasons for their choice of vegetarianism. Furthermore, the participants were asked questions surrounding the barriers they face while in college with following the diet and any outsider perceptions they currently feel or have felt since adapting to a vegetarian diet. Three women and one male were selected and in addition the participants consisted of two vegetarians and two vegans for the interviews. The interviews were conducted throughout the month of March 2012 and each interview was conducted individually and lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes in length. All of the interviews were conducted on the Chico State campus in different locations such as the student center (BMU), Holt Hall classroom and the library. The interviews generally began by asking each of the participants their age, major and hometown. The responses from the participants were all typed during the interview and afterwards were carefully read over to identify themes and

to categorize participant responses in groups based on their opinion for each topic. Each participant in the study was later coded as Participants A, B, C, and D, respectively.

Results. All four of the participants identified the health benefits associated with a vegetarian diet as a personal reason for the choice of following the diet. Other beliefs surrounding the choice for the diet include nutritional benefits, being a random decision and animal rights. All four of the participants followed a similar diet of vegetables and grains and also all had similar meal patterns, which included dining off campus. The most frequent perception felt from outsiders for all participants was that of all vegetarians being strong animal activists (PETA). Cost and convenience were the two identified barriers for following the diet at Chico State, excluding Participant D who felt no barriers in following the diet. Other recurring themes appeared in the interviews and the participant responses are summarized in the table below.

Table 2. Participants’ responses of vegetarianism

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
Personal Beliefs				
Health benefits	X	XX	XX	X
Nutritional benefits	X	X	X	
Random choice	X	X		
Animal rights				XX
Quasi-vegetarians			X	
Personal Habits				
Vegetables & grains	X	X	X	X
Don’t eat on campus	X	X	X	X
Cook at home	X	X	X	X
Outside Perceptions				
All activists	X	X		XX
PETA (animals rights)	X	X	X	XX
Environmentalists		X	X	
Judgmental			X	
Nutrient deficient				X
Health ‘freaks’				X
Barriers				
Cost	X	X	X	
Convenience	X	X	X	

(X- general opinion, XX- strong opinion)

Personal Beliefs and the Vegetarian Diet. The most frequent personal belief that was mentioned in each interview was that of the health benefits of vegetarianism. All the participants in the study associated positive health with the dietary choice to avoid meat. Each participant mentioned certain health components of following a vegetarian diet such as increased fiber, phytochemicals and less saturated fat. More specifically, Participant B said, “I also began to read a lot about the diet and realized that it does have health benefits, so over time I think that became incorporated into my beliefs...just the health related parts of the diet. My decision to keep a vegetarian diet all this time, which has been about ten years, really has a strong link to my dad’s health problems. He has Type II diabetes and heart disease. Most of the time a lot of the saturated fat from a person’s diet comes from meat sources, so it just has made sense for me personally not to include meat in my diet.” Participant A had a similar opinion regarding the health benefits and mentioned, “Then I learned later about the health benefits and cultural relevance to it. Higher consumption of phytochemicals generally and ya know less saturated fat and all that other stuff, more fiber.”

Additionally, Participant C reported a specific health issue of stomach problems that motivated him to adapt to the diet. Participant C stated, “I was having stomach problems and I went to a Chinese herbalist, gave me teas, and put me on a vegan diet and a lot of the GI distress went away.” Participant C also said, “When a person sees a YouTube video or something about the killing of animals and then wanted to go vegetarian, it probably won’t last very long.” This idea of being ‘quasi-vegetarian’ or even adapting to vegetarianism not in the complete sense addresses the tendency for some to make the decision to follow the diet, but then later decide to eat meat again. The motivation to become vegetarian may also affect the longevity of the diet for some. The desires to avoid killing animals for human consumption was the main reason offered for become vegetarian for Participant D. Her perspective included that animals should not be killed or mistreated for human consumption. Participant D said, “...I consider myself an animal rights activist. I believe in animal rights and not the exploitation of animals.” The beliefs for participant D were centered on alleviating the needless suffering and deaths of animals for human consumption of meat, while feeling compassionate for the welfare of animals.

Personal Habits and the Vegetarian Diet. Another common topic discussed by each of the participants was that of their food and meal patterns. All four participants had a similar diet of vegetables, grains, rice and beans. Furthermore, it was the same case for all the participants that they cooked and brought all their food from home to campus and did not purchase any foods while on campus. Even more surprising, many of the participants didn't even have the knowledge of the food offered on campus. Participant A said, "I don't know, I never eat on campus. I never buy food here. For me I became vegetarian around the same time I started cooking for myself." Participant B had a similar habit but did have some idea of food options on campus by saying, "I don't really eat on campus. I do buy granola bars and fruit which are good snack options." Also, for Participant B not eating on campus was the same habit for him. When asked about the kinds of vegetarian options available on campus he said, "I have no idea, I don't eat on campus. I know they have Cliff Bars in the bookstore." Participant D had a stronger feeling about the campus food selection, but still she did not make many purchases on campus. She commented, "I do think that with vegetarian diets becoming more and more popular campuses should take this into account. Having substantial dining options for students is important and just different things to eat."

Outsider Perceptions of Vegetarians. Each of the four participants had mixed opinions about the outside perceptions that were felt by others in following a vegetarian diet. However, the one central feeling from all the participants was the stereotype they felt from others that all vegetarians were animal rights and PETA activists. Specifically, Participant D felt strongly about this misconception and recalled a past incident and said, "Since my big decision is being an animal lover, I think people look to burn you if they find some flaw, like when I first became vegan I by accident wore leather or something, ha I got backlash from friends for it. I mean don't all people make mistakes!" For both participant B and C they felt they were often being judged by others or making judgments themselves on meat-eaters for their diet decision. Participant C said, "That was one of the big things when I switched over, my dad thought I was judging him even though I wasn't. I don't really care what people eat and it is completely their choice. And I don't have

Birkenstocks.” Participant A had started her vegetarian diet somewhat randomly and because of the perceived health benefits. However, she later developed her beliefs further into including animal welfare. When asked about perceptions she feels from others she said, “ That we are really big environmentalists and animal rights, liberated, and farming types of people. There is a general stereotype that we have a very black and white mentality about eating meat. Nope, more about inhumane practices.”

Barriers and the Vegetarian Diet. There were some common barriers mentioned among the participants felt for adhering to a vegetarian diet as a student. However, Participant D was the only interviewee who didn’t indicate any barriers. She said, “I can always find something, even if it is just a salad!” The two main barriers common among Participants A, B and C were that of cost and convenience. As a college student one is often on a strict budget in addition to following a busy schedule with school and sometimes work. Participant A said, “Foods that are vegetarian are often more expensive, so I just try to bring my own food and snack to campus. It makes things easier.” Participant B supported feeling these same barriers and commented, “...but personally I think it’s just more economical and convenient to bring my own food to campus.” Participant C felt those same barriers of cost and convenience and said, “...I think the availability has definitely increased. For me it’s about cost, too, and just more convenient and easier to make my own food.”

Discussion. The data in this study support previous findings that health is a significant motivator for vegetarians (Fox and Ward, 2008). The participants in this study offered a range of health-related reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet that include the nutritional benefits such as it being a diet lower in saturated fat and higher in phytochemicals and other nutrients, in addition to a vegetarian diet supporting animal rights. For all the participants, the perceived benefits of vegetarianism were in fact important predictors of adopting the diet.

However, it was clear from the findings that the association between diet and health for the participants later evolved into further beliefs while maintaining a vegetarian diet. For the participants who began vegetarianism as a health reason (B & C), their

dietary choice was linked later to other positive values associated with the diet such as animal rights, environmental concerns and the nutritional benefits. Participant B said, “I also read a lot about the diet and realized that it does have health benefits, so over time I think that became incorporated into my beliefs.” Participant C also valued the health benefits of the diet commenting, “I think it forces you to eat a bit more healthy because a lot of the stuff is plant-based.” Participant A, who began the diet as a random choice, later recognized the health and nutritional benefits and stated, “Then I learned later about the health and the cultural relevance.” For participant D, the ethical vegetarian, her values of not wanting to consume meat for animal welfare were later expanded into other perceived values of vegetarianism such as the health benefits, nutritional benefits and environmental benefits. Participant D said, “Yea, I mean in general by avoiding meat and meat dishes I think you tend to eat just healthier foods. I eat more vegetables by not eating meat. But I don’t do it to be healthy or anything like that, I am protecting my body and supporting our environment.”

The results from this research do support the findings from Fox and Ward that an initial health or ethical motivation may often be a starting point for a conceptual generalization. Participant B and C, the health vegetarians, subsequently adopted a wide range of other principles from vegetarianism such as nutritional values and animal welfare. Participant A on the other hand, who began the choice at random, afterwards added health, the environment and animal welfare to her list of reasons. Furthermore, participant D, who began the diet to support animal welfare, later acknowledged the health and nutritional benefits of the diet. The findings from this study indicate that an important element of vegetarianism is the incorporation of further beliefs and values after adopting the diet.

In order to obtain more conclusive results from this study, it should be replicated with a larger number of participants, as well as a wider range of age groups, ethnicities, gender, and areas of focus in school. Two of the participants were studying Nutrition, while the other two participants were studying Mathematics and Anthropology. The inclusion of Nutrition majors can be viewed as a limitation to the study because bias may be introduced from the participants studying nutrition in terms of their opinions surrounding health and diet. Furthermore, participants A and D chose to adopt a

vegetarian diet at random, while participants B and C chose to follow the diet for health reasons. Also, three of the participants were female, while only one participant was male. Responses may change with the inclusion of more male participants in the study. Lastly, the reasons behind vegetarianism for these participants may not be well representative because there are other reasons for adopting the diet such as religion or family practice. Therefore, by including participants that vary in reasoning for adhering to the diet, this may change responses to the interview questions.

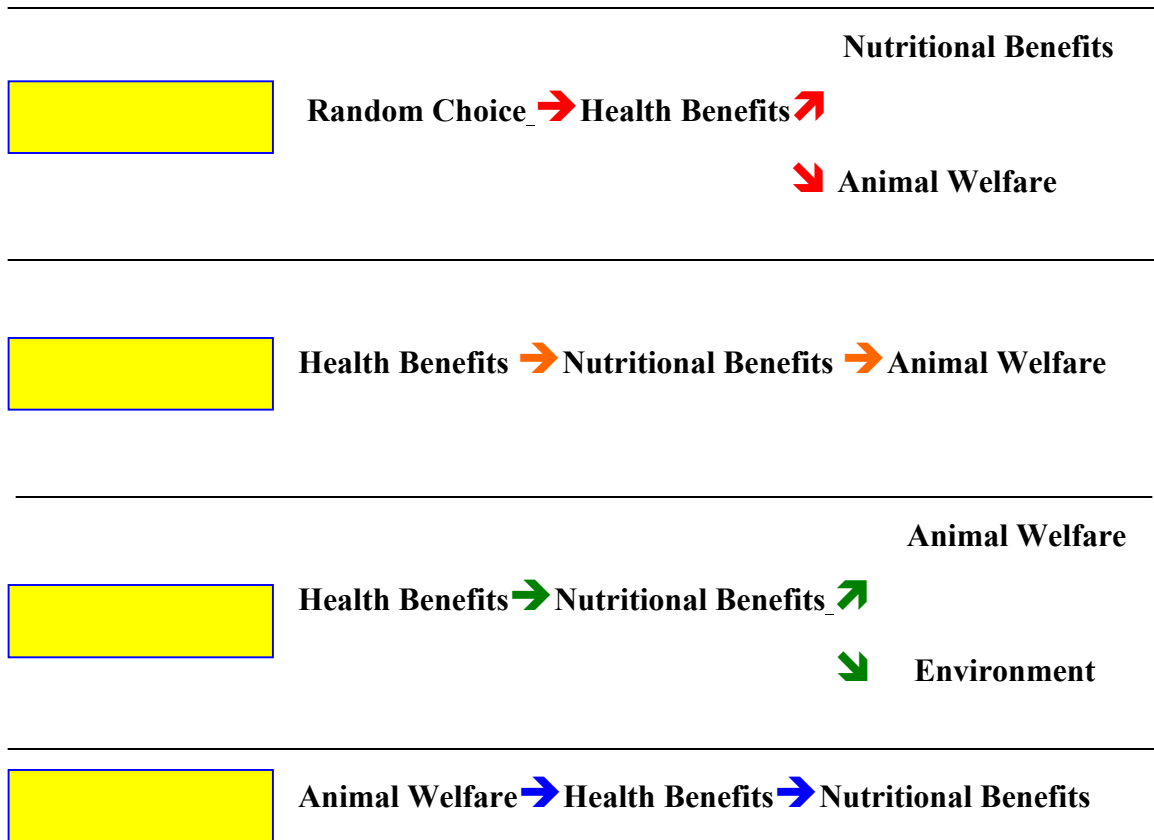


Figure 3. Vegetarianism trajectory of perceived benefits and value

Conclusions. The cross-sectional study design used was necessary in order to examine the current perceived barriers and benefits for college students attending Chico State. However, more extensive conclusions can be drawn from the observed associations surrounding the participants’ beliefs about vegetarianism and how their perceived benefits evolve by using a longitudinal study design, which would examine further how the participants perceptions change over time. Therefore, more extensive qualitative work

with a longer period of time is necessary to obtain more accurate conclusions as to the factors that may influence the beliefs surrounding meat consumption. Similarly, college students are in a time of transition and growth, so their views and opinions are constantly changing while adapting to their new environment. In addition, students are often in a time of financial constraint where cost and convenience play a role in their dietary habits. Lastly, identifying how the participants' vegetarianism perceptions and values develop while gaining more knowledge in school would be an important consideration for future research.

In conclusion, this study showed that motivations for vegetarianism are very complex, and motivations are constantly transforming and evolving over time, in terms of both their values and habits. Although one may begin a vegetarian diet for the health benefits, or as a random choice, or for animal welfare, it is evident that those adhering to this diet converge into adopting similar ethical and environmental beliefs. Although the participants had divergent paths to discovering the perceived benefits of the diet, it is evident from this study that convergence between the participants occurs in relation to their personal values and beliefs that change over the course of time. The avoidance of meat consumption is related to many inversely related factors such as the social, environmental, animal welfare, and health benefits of the diet. As society evolves and humans adapt to new environments while gaining more knowledge, motivations for vegetarianism may continue to evolve as well.

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