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**Meat-Eating Justification and Relationship
Closeness with Vegetarian Family, Friends, and
Romantic Partners**

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PRESENTATION**

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Abstract

Vegetarians/vegans report negative reactions upon disclosing their diets. Meat-eating justification beliefs were hypothesized to relate to negative responses and relationship closeness. Results showed that denial and dissociation justifications were significant predictors of lower closeness. Hierarchical justification significantly predicted higher closeness. Significantly higher closeness for frequency and diversity was seen before diet change, however strength of influence significantly increased after diet change. A significant interaction showed frequency was significantly lower after diet change for friends and family members, but significantly higher for romantic partners. The findings may aid in developing therapeutic interventions leading to strengthened relationships.

Doctoral Capstone

Problem

Despite vegetarianism offering positive changes for health, animals, and the environment, there are still **many nonvegetarians who do not approve of others choosing the diet** (Shapin, 2007). Those who choose vegetarianism often report **negative consequences** when their dietary choice is revealed including negative comments, lessened contact, dissolution of relationships, and derogatory remarks (Beverland, Wahl, & de Groot, 2015; Rothgerber, 2012; Twine, 2014).

The **reactions to vegetarians** have been shown to **relate to omnivore** expectation of judgement, the mere presence of a vegetarian/vegan, positive vegan messaging, and omnivore demographics rather than any actions on the part of the vegetarians/vegans themselves (Bresnahan, Zhuang, & Zhu, 2016; Merriman, 2010; Minson & Monin, 2012; Twine, 2014).

Purpose

The purpose of this quantitative, survey based study was to explore the **relationship between meat-eating justification beliefs** (pro-meat, human destiny/fate, health, religious, hierarchical, denial of mind, dichotomization, avoidance, dissociation; Rothgerber, 2012) that an individual holds and the **closeness of relationships** (frequency, diversity, strength, total; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) with friends, family members, and romantic partners who became vegetarian/vegan.

Significance

This study addressed the **gap** between research which stated that **adopting a vegetarian/vegan diet** often carries social **relationship consequences** and research which illustrated that **beliefs individuals hold about meat consumption** can affect their interactions with vegetarians, their views of vegetarians, and their acceptance of vegetarian diets.

The findings may aid in the development of strategies aimed at lessening negative consequences for those who choose a vegetarian/vegan diet.

Theory

Theory of planned behavior (TPB) states that concepts of attitude toward an action, the societal norm toward the behavior, and perceived control over participating in the behavior combine to create intention (Ajzen, 1985).

Meat-related cognitive dissonance theory (MRCD) holds that the presence of a vegan/vegetarian causes omnivores to think about and preemptively feel the need to justify their own meat-eating behavior and results in meat-related cognitive dissonance (Rothgerber, 2020).

Relevant Scholarship

Studies have shown that many vegetarians experience negative reactions and negative relationship consequences as a result of becoming vegetarian (Beverland et al., 2015; Twine, 2014); including negative comments, lessened contact, and microaggressions (Lerette, 2014; MacInnis & Hodson, 2015; Twine, 2014).

MacInnis and Hodson (2015) found that vegetarians are regarded by omnivores at the same level as other marginalized groups such as atheists and blacks; with less regard to those choosing the diet for moral reasons rather than health reasons.

Omnivores express negative feelings toward vegetarians/vegans in response to expectation of judgement, positive vegan messaging, and disproportionately from male omnivores to female vegetarians/vegans (Bresnahan et al., 2016; Merriman, 2010; Minson & Monin, 2012).

Research suggests that the presence of vegetarians/vegans, especially during times/activities involving meat consumption, often elicits discomfort for omnivores (Rothgerber, 2020; Twine, 2014).

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent do omnivores' justification beliefs toward meat consumption relate to closeness of relationships?

RQ2: To what extent does relationship type relate to closeness of relationships?

RQ3: Does relationship type influence closeness of relationships?

RQ4: Does diet type influence closeness of relationships?

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 190 persons meeting the requirements of citizen of the United States, Canada, Australia, or Great Britain, over 18 years of age, with a current friend, family member, or romantic partner who adopted (and remains on) a vegetarian diet at least six months but not more than five years prior to the study.

Procedures

A cross-sectional design with a survey-based methodology was used to compare the following variables: omnivore meat-eating justification beliefs, closeness of relationship, diet type, and personal relationship type.

Data were collected through SurveyMonkey using the Meat-Eating Justification scale and the Relationship Closeness Inventory completed twice (retrospectively, for the relationship as it was prior to the friend, family member, or romantic partner adopting a vegetarian diet; a second time for the current relationship).

Analyses

Data analyses were done using SPSS edition 24 software to perform standard multiple regressions (RQs 1 and 2) and a 2x3 factorial MANOVA (RQs 3 and 4).

Findings

Denial and dissociation justifications significantly predicted lower closeness for diversity of activities ($B = -0.11, p < .05$; $B = -0.08, p < .05$) and lower total closeness for denial justification ($B = -0.23, p < .05$).

Hierarchical justification significantly predicted higher closeness for diversity of activities and total closeness ($B = 0.12, p < .05$; $B = 0.22, p < .05$).

In a 2x3 MANOVA, a main effect for diet type was found where frequency (time) and diversity of activities were significantly higher prior to the adoption of a vegetarian/vegan diet, and strength of influence was higher after the diet change [$F(3,185) = 15.093, p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .197$].

A significant main effect for relationship type was found where romantic partner had significantly higher frequency, diversity, and strength scores than friend or family member [$F(6,372) = 26.746, p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .301$].

A significant interaction was found between diet type and relationship type in which frequency was significantly higher for friend and family member before the diet change, however frequency was significantly higher for romantic partner after [$F(6,372) = 2.532, p = .02$; partial $\eta^2 = .039$] (see Figure 1).

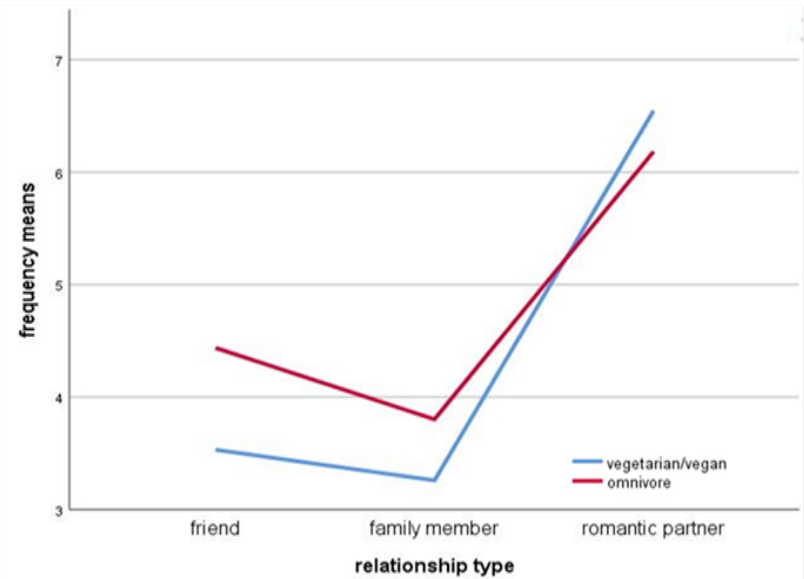


Figure 1. Mean Frequency Subscale Relationship Closeness Scores as a Function of Relationship Type and Diet Type

Interpretation

According to MRCD, meat-eating justification beliefs that are tied to moral concern, such as dissociation and denial, should result in greater cognitive dissonance if activities involve meat-eating as these beliefs tend to falter when presented with counter information (i.e., the presence of a vegetarian; Rothgerber, 2020).

Hierarchical justification should be unaffected by the presence of vegetarians as it is impervious to counter information, free of moral concern, and therefore is well insulated against meat-related cognitive dissonance (Rothgerber, 2020).

The results supported the expectation that being in the presence of a vegetarian negatively impacts the diversity of activities for those who hold the beliefs of denial and dissociation while positively impacting diversity of activities for those holding hierarchical beliefs.

Limitations

Generalizability of findings may have been limited by the requirement that participants were still in relationships with vegans/vegetarians as it is possible that relationships that ended may have ended due to the diet change.

Given that the greatest amount of negative consequences reported by vegetarians/vegans reportedly come from relationships consisting of female vegetarians/vegans and close male omnivore friends/family members (Merriman, 2010), it is possible that the current study underestimated the negative impact of diet change on relationship closeness as the sample had an underrepresentation of male omnivores.

Recommendations

Future research regarding the effect of meat-eating justifications on relationship closeness should incorporate both individuals within the relationship and may benefit from inclusion of relationships that have ended.

Future research should also sample in a manner that would ensure an equal or representative gender breakdown for both the omnivores and the vegetarians/vegans in the relationship.

The results of this study may be used to better inform therapists in addressing omnivore/vegetarian relationship issues. Ultimately it may make it easier for individuals to make decisions related to diet changes.

Social Change Implications

Strengthening relationships between omnivores and vegetarians is imperative as vegetarians in the United States has doubled since 1994 (Budger, 2017).

Recognizing which beliefs contribute to negative or positive consequences for vegetarians/vegans may help generate more positive responses toward vegetarians.

Making transitioning to a vegetarian/vegan diet easier can result in greater diet change success, leading to healthier lifestyles and ultimately positive impacts on the environment.

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