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# Veganism as a Cultural Phenomenon

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**VEGANISM AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON**

Emma S. Frawley

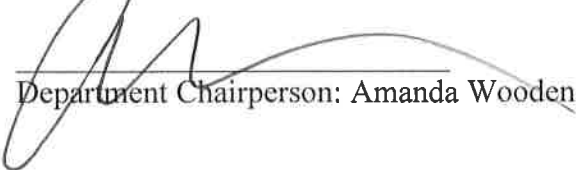
A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council  
For Honors in Environmental Studies

April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017

Approved by:

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I owe a special thanks to the nineteen individuals who participated in the interview process. Their insights, experiences, and stories are the backbone of this thesis, and made it all the more meaningful.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present research is a social science exploration into the adaptation and transition to veganism through the experiences of nineteen interviewees to interpret veganism as a cultural phenomenon. It questions the way in which societal, moral, and physical environments both shape and inform a sense of meaning and action behind an individual's decision to become vegan. Through six narratives, which describe the interviewee's social, geographical, educational, ethical, health-related, and environmental justifications for veganism, and an explanation of interviewee's transition to and perception of the barriers to veganism, this study uses idealist ethnography techniques to reflect the dynamism and intricacies of a lifestyle free of animal products. It details the significance of viewing veganism through a cultural lens to present veganism as a meaningful strategy for employing personal values through action as a response to broader world issues.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### *a. Research Question*

This research uses the narratives of nineteen interviews to chronicle and assess how veganism can be seen as a cultural phenomenon. A vegan can be described as someone who “chooses not to consume any animal foods, including meat, poultry, game, fishes, shellfishes, dairy products, eggs, and honey” (Appleby, 2013, p. 292). This interpretation of veganism can be expanded, as noted by The Vegan Society, to encompass “a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of and cruelty to animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose” (The Vegan Society, 2017, p. 1). Both of these definitions highlight the exclusion of animal and animal derived foods from one’s diet, but the second importantly notes that veganism can further limit the utilization of any animal-based products as a part of a multifaceted lifestyle choice. In this sense, the significance of veganism expands beyond solely that of a diet to serve as an everyday behavioral practice. Ultimately, I seek to interpret **how the adaptation and transition to a lifestyle free of animal products can be seen as a cultural-scale reaction to the societal, moral, and physical environments that individuals find themselves in.** I suggest veganism is a cultural phenomenon because of its interpretation as a behavioral choice within a broader, collaborative context; it is something that impacts and is impacted by many dimensions of life and has supra-individual meaning.

There is a diverse array of values, objectives, and experiences that are fundamental to veganism, something I know from my own transition to veganism and exposure to its ‘code of behavior.’ And while this exposure is what piqued my interest in the subject, it allowed me to recognize that there was much about veganism that I was not cognizant of. Through this thesis, I sought to gain insight into how these values, objectives, and experiences both vary and concur

from person to person, and how they inform and shape a person's transition to veganism. A set of ethnographic-style interviews with vegan individuals, mostly vegan individuals, and individuals whose businesses support veganism provided the substance for questioning how the adaptation and transition to veganism can be seen as a cultural-scale reaction. This resulted in the depiction of a journey to veganism with a series of shared themes. These themes are presented as narratives in Chapter 4: the social narrative, the geographical narrative, the educational narrative, the ethical narrative, the health narrative, and the environmental narrative. I suggest that the narratives showcase both the significance and meaning behind veganism (the *whys* of veganism) that are the foundation for the transition to veganism and the need to overcome specific barriers (the action, change in behavior, or the *how* of veganism). Through the lens of the interviewees, the transition to veganism is presented in Chapter 5, and the barriers to veganism and how to overcome them are presented in Chapter 6. Thus, the journey to veganism was described as one of deeper meaning and another of behavioral action, the former of which establishes how the latter takes place. Similar to the way in which culture is "a residual category... the very medium through which change is experienced, contested, and constituted" (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987, p. 95), the interviews, through their description of the significances and processes of becoming vegan, shed light on the question of the ways in which veganism can be characterized as a cultural phenomenon.

### *b. On Culture*

Because I am asking about the extent to which the choice to become vegan and the transition to veganism is a cultural-level response, it is important frame to a theoretical understanding of culture. "Culture" was Merriam-Webster's word of the year in 2014, chosen because of the spike in number of searches for its definition on the dictionary's website

throughout the course of the year (Rothman, 2014, p. 1). This fact alone reflects the apparent sense of confusion about what culture truly means. Cultural geographers have defined the term as “the structured, traditional set of patterns for behavior, a code or template for ideas and acts... and [something that] survives by transfer *not* through biological means but rather through symbolic means” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 105). This definition suggests culture is the combination behavioral patterns that are justified by their symbolism. Furthermore, “it becomes a medium of meaning and action,” where “culture ‘itself,’ [is] subtly theorized and understood to be deeply connected to other spheres of human activity” and “is, perhaps, not a thing but rather an identifiable process” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 103). In this sense, culture is the mechanism by which values are expressed in a tangible way.

Thus, when I refer to cultural phenomena throughout this thesis, it is best understood through the theoretical framework for culture as proposed by Don Mitchell. He suggests that culture is not an ontological thing, but rather a reflection of and product of real contexts – such as capitalism, racism, colonialism, etc. In this sense, “culture” is not an end point of conversation, but rather a starting point: it has the potential to explain the actualities of societal, ethical, and physical circumstances. The research produced in this thesis parallels this framework, and in turn, is a small contribution to the literature around it. As elucidated on through the personal histories, values, motivations, and actions of the interviewees, veganism can similarly be approached as a reflection and product of real contexts – like violence in factory farming, impacts of industrialized agriculture, social hierarchies, geography, pursuing inconvenient food choices, and more. Veganism, through this lens, comes to be through its relationship to complex and dynamic realities. This understanding of culture is one that attempts to expand on its deeper meanings and present it as something contextual.



Some sociologists suggest that culture can further be defined as a process with certain steps, where “first, it offers an image of culture as a tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems. Second, to analyze culture’s causal effects, it focuses on strategies of action, persistent ways of ordering action through time. Third, it sees culture’s causal significance [in] providing cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Culture, therefore, applies values and experiences to the organization and execution of particular behavioral choices. As echoed by Mitchell, this notion of culture recognizes its ability to function as a response to certain contexts.

Furthermore, culture is something inherently collective, as it originates from “shared knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and artifacts” (Gill, 2013, p. 1). By doing so, a culture is able to foster “similarities across individuals or entities within a group, ensuring that participants have many self-similar neighbors to observe” (Gill, 2013, p. 1). The shared ideologies and behaviors between and among people are the basis of how culture is created and survives. Because of this, interpreting cultural phenomena necessitates understanding how and why they come to be out of the context of shared ideologies and behaviors. Similarly, this thesis requires an in-depth understanding of how veganism is a response to experiences and perceptions in various societal, moral, and physical environments, how veganism is shared between the people who choose to practice it, and, therefore, how these connections are inherently cultural. This means that parsing out the shared ideologies (i.e. as revealed in the narratives) and shared behaviors (i.e. the transitions, the addressing of barriers) are of special importance to this thesis. The narratives are a mode to understand the theory and meaning behind the reality and action of veganism, which in turn informs how veganism can be interpreted as a cultural phenomenon.

*c. Significance to Environmental Studies*

A deeper understanding of the adaptation and transition to veganism is relevant to the field of environmental studies for a number of reasons. The modes of transition to and significance of veganism can potentially reflect how the lifestyle serves as a response to societal, moral, and environmental challenges. As veganism becomes increasingly popular in the world around us -- with 1.4% of American population being vegan in 2006 (Craig, 2009, p. 1627s) and 2% of the American population being vegan in 2012 (Edwards, 2013, p. 124) – an in-depth investigation into its importance from members of the vegan community is valuable to any peoples or organizations interested in the connection between dietary choice and culture. There is a practical significance to identifying the ways in which culture and society shape individual decisions in order to negate serious issues, like climate change. NASA announced that July of 2016 was the hottest month since modern record keeping began; and this year is on track to become the hottest in history, as the pace of warming is 20 times faster than historical averages (Milman, 2016, p. 1). Spiking temperatures have severe consequences that most people are aware of: sea level rise will shrink coastlines and destroy ecosystems for a wide range of species, unprecedented weather patterns, like flooding, drought, and hurricanes, will become more frequent and more intense, and fluctuating and unpredictable temperatures will impact everything from migratory patterns of pollinators to the success of crop yields. These are worldwide changes that will worsen until direct, individual level choices, rather than abstract policy recommendations, become more common. Veganism has been shown to mitigate these ramifications, an extensive discussion of which is found in my literature review. Furthermore, veganism has the ability to combat public and personal health issues, like reducing the propensity and threat of heart disease, lowering risk for certain cancers, and fighting obesity.

Additionally, this project is an important foundation to understanding the ways in which personal dietary and lifestyle choices can positively influence the world around us. Veganism is an example of a large number of people making serious commitments to improving lives beyond their own, and it is a way to reintroduce compassion and awareness into everyday decisions. It requires conscious choice, with decisions founded on the principles of equality and improvement of life.

*d. Personal Significance*

This thesis is an undertaking especially close to my heart. I became vegan almost two years ago, triggered by my love of animals and an increasing awareness of environmental issues made possible by the environmental studies degree I'm pursuing. This lifestyle has opened my eyes to the world around me, and it has made me more compassionate. Being vegan is one of the only long-term, tangible changes I have made in my life to try and make the world around me a better place. I want to be able to make veganism more understandable and adoptable to others. This thesis is one major way I can see doing so. I expect that the significance veganism has had to me will be mirrored in the significance for many other vegans, further establishing this lifestyle choice as one of cultural meaning.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODS

I combined two research techniques for this thesis, the first of which was a literature review followed, second, by a set of in-depth interviews. The literature review served the purpose of this thesis by engaging me with research to establish a theoretical and scientific background to veganism, questions of culture, and ethnographic research methods, the results of which will subsequently be shown in Chapter 3. The interviews served the purpose of this thesis by informing the bulk of my exploration into the adaptation and transition to veganism. Because I am questioning the role of meaning and action in the vegan community, and how these reflect collective cultural tendencies, interaction and dialogue with members of the vegan community is an essential technique to gain insight into these questions. The goal of the interviews was to discover how and why individuals come to this lifestyle so that their assessments of choice and action regarding veganism could become connected and cohesively pulled together through my writing. Thus, the literature review and interviews best informed a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the many facets of veganism.

### *a. Interviews*

The interviews are the most critical method I employed to understand how veganism functions in personal environments, and the most significant amount of my time was dedicated to conducting them over the course of three months<sup>1</sup>. The nineteen individuals I interviewed were

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<sup>1</sup> Before the interviews began, I submitted an IRB proposal to the Bucknell board. In my submission I addressed the significance and goals of the thesis, the age group I would be interviewing (over 18), consent, anonymity, and how I would be conducting the interviews and using the data. I felt prepared to conduct interviews after having experience with the process in previous Environmental Studies courses at Bucknell, such as Environmental Research Design (ENST 302). The interviews were recorded on an AngLink digital recorder, which was locked in a personal drawer during the interview period. The interviews were deleted off of the recording device once they were fully or partially transcribed onto Word documents. The Word documents were located on a thumb drive and deleted after use to further ensure anonymity of the interviewee. Each interviewee was given a typed handout to keep before the interview started which addressed their participation, consent, and anonymity according to standard practice as approved by the IRB. After the interviewees read this information, they were asked both off and on the recording device if they consented to the interview and if they consented to the interview being recorded.

either vegan, mostly vegan, vegetarians who seriously considered veganism, or individuals associated with a business that supports veganism. Mostly vegan individuals are those who are vegan most of the time, and if not, are vegetarian. I aimed for diversity in the types of individuals interviewed based on dietary habit (namely how long they have been vegan), gender, age, ethnicity, race, education, and occupation – as some literature supports that vegans and vegetarians tend to fall into similar demographic backgrounds (Aguilar, 2015). Seventeen of the interviewees were interviewed because of their dietary lifestyle, and two interviewees, one of whom happened to also be vegan, were associated with local businesses that support vegan endeavors. The interviews with business owners were an important reflection into why and how veganism is applicable to career choices, and how veganism has changed over time in a more commercial setting. The demographics of my interviewees are shown in **Table 1** on the following page.

Two demographic categories to note are ethnicity and highest education level, which follow important patterns. 90% of my interviewees were white, and all of the interviewees were college-educated. This could be explained by sampling limitations – such as choosing a smaller sample size to employ ethnographic analysis or the constraints of research in a college town – but in some ways it inherently reflects that vegan individuals tend to be white and/or well educated. Nevertheless, the demographics demonstrate the heterogeneity of veganism, in that vegans cannot solely be distinguished by one demographic category.

<b>Total count</b>	Dietary informants	17
	Business-owner informants	2
<b>Gender</b>	Men	8
	Women	11
<b>Age Group</b>	18-22	3
	23-30	1
	31-45	7
	45+	8
<b>Location</b>	Rural	13
	Suburban	2
	Urban	4
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	17
	Black	1
	Hispanic	1
<b>Highest Education Level</b>	Bachelors	7
	Masters	1
	PhD	11
<b>Employment</b>	Student	3
	Postdoctoral Assistant	2
	Professor	7
	University Administrator	1
	Artist	2
	Business Owner	2
	Governmental Worker	1
	Dental Hygienist	1
<b>Dietary Choice</b>	Vegan	14
	Mostly Vegan	2
	Vegetarian	3
<b>Length of Dietary Choice</b>	Less than 1 Year	4
	1-4 Years	4
	5-10 Years	6
	11+ Years	5

### Interview Technique

The nineteen individuals were recruited over email to determine their interest in participation, and to organize a meeting time and space of their choosing. Because I asked about personal motivations and dietary histories, working with a small number of respondents was best

for thorough responses and applying ethnographic research methods to the process. The interviews therefore relied on a probing of values and interconnectedness of ideas in a conversationalist, comfortable manner. This method reflects the concepts of idealist ethnography, where “the success of the research comes in its ability to portray the interpretations and experiences of the participants” (Greener, 2011, p. 82). I wanted to gain an authentic comprehension of how veganism makes sense to the people I talk to, and how their decisions surrounding veganism fit together.

Because of this, I tried to make the interviews themselves conversational and relaxed, so that interviewees felt comfortable bringing whatever they felt necessary into the discussion. This was a manner to explore personal lifestyle choices and actions, and how they were shaped by their own perception of the environments they are surrounded by. Furthermore, my role in determining the direction of the interview was minimal: each interview began with demographic questions, followed by my asking of their dietary choice and if they could describe their history with the dietary choice in any way. This initiated discussion around veganism from which the interviewee could describe their journey. Depending on how the interviewee directed the discussion (i.e. wanting to talk about their personal health history, or wanting to discuss raising children, etc.), I brought with me a diverse list of questions designed to assess what influenced an individual to consider veganism and what characterized their transition process. I wanted to gauge a connection between choice and action. These were both general and specific queries meant to facilitate and develop how the interviewees recognized their personal values, and how societal, moral, and physical environments perhaps played into their own choices and actions. This is an attempt to identify the experiences that shaped the development of values in the interviewees, and how and when those experiences and values were aligned with veganism. The

types of questions prompted discussion during the interview included:

- How would they describe veganism and what does it mean for them?
- How long they have been practicing veganism?
- What kind of diet are they transitioning from?
- Who and/or what factors inspired them to become vegan?
- Are some factors more important than others? (Animal welfare, cost, nutrition, the environment, etc.?)
- What made the choice easy?
- What social relationships affected their shift (vegan ‘gurus’, social pressures, social acceptances, family, spouses, friends)?
- Do they have a family of their own and how does veganism play into their relationships as a spouse or with children?
- What kind of eating habits did they have growing up?
- Where were they living when they decided to become vegan? Did that play a role or not? What kind of living situation was it?
- Did they educate themselves on certain aspects of veganism? If so, how?
- What are the educational/vegan resources they like to use the most?
- How did they formally make the transition (gradual, all at once)?
- What about veganism do they believe is misinformed or misunderstood?
- What is their “strictness” of veganism? (Gelatin, makeup, leather, wool, honey?)
- What is the most meaningful part of being vegan?
- How have they (if at all) seen veganism change in their time since being vegan? (Become easier, more accessible, become more expensive,
- How have they impacted other people who have considered a vegan diet, if at all?
- Are there any tangible health differences?
- What made the choice to become vegan difficult (any perceived barriers)? Are some aspects of veganism more difficult than others (socially, economically, nutritionally)?
- What do vegetarians consider a barrier to becoming vegan and have they ever been vegan?
- Are there aspects of veganism they choose not to follow? What are they and why?
- What are the vegetarians’ frequencies of consumption of non-vegan products?
- How have (if at all) plant-based foods been incorporated into business operations? Why or why not?
- Have demands for plant-based food options changed over time?
- How does consumer patterns influence operations, and what consumer patterns do they foresee?  
What are the organizational goals of their business and how does this relate to plant-based lifestyles?
- How does veganism affect cost?
- How does the region influence their business and consumer food choices, if at all?
- Who are the main customers?  
Where are ingredients and products sourced and why?



There was no time limit of the interviews in order to facilitate conversation, and, on average, they lasted between one and two hours.

### Interview Mechanics

I transcribed interviews after all nineteen were completed, as transcriptions are meant to allow the analyst to gain an appropriate understanding of repeated themes for developing theory (Greener, 2011, p. 88). However, because transcribing is a time intensive form of analysis, I transcribed the first several interviews in whole before choosing to transcribe the majority, but not all, of the rest, according to my sense of effectiveness of the process. The interviewees are referred to by a numerical identifier (1-19) when they are quoted in written text for subject protection: [9] in reference to Interviewee 9, or [11] in reference to Interviewee 11, etc. In some cases, relevant demographic information is included if necessary to the context of the statement. For example, if the context is discussing health, the quote will have more significance if it is known the interviewee was older.

### Interpretation of Interviews

With the interviews as the crux of this thesis, my goal was to pull together the personal involvement, exposure, and awareness of vegan ideals between participants to comprehend the way in which these experiences have moved through society on a cultural level. Including interviews with those who have considered veganism or support vegans was a manner to expand my understanding of the hindrances and complexities of dietary choice that may not be obvious to (or taken into account by) vegan individuals. My writing, analysis, and conclusions, therefore, were developed out of an understanding of where the literature review and the results from interviews converge. This was an inductive approach to build theory based on data found in research through the incorporation previously existing theoretical ideas about a topic. Thus, I

formulated the data from my interviews in a way that captures similarity and difference between participant's responses, from which I can "conceptualize" their meaning and "most accurately capture what is going on" (Greener, 2011, p. 97). Through this technique, I hoped to echo the nature of idealist ethnographies, where assessing participant's results requires "attempting to capture the spirit or essence of what participants have discussed," of which the product will be the "shared understandings between participants and researchers that the research has produced, often without claims to truth, but instead validity being assessed through the collaborative processes" (Greener, 2011, p. 80). This required pulling together values, objectives, and rationales between participants in a cohesive, detailed manner. Importantly, the results of the interviews and their compilations were not meant to prove or create an objective "truth" about veganism and culture – instead, it was an attempt to relay the significance of and transformation to veganism through the lens of members of the vegan community to identify common ground. This thesis is not an assertion of fact, but an interpretation of the values, experiences, and processes of the interviewees' journey to veganism.

The analysis done by Kari Norgaard in her ethnography "Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life" (Norgaard, 2011) was a source of inspiration for me. Norgaard combined social science theory with extensive interviews to understand climate change denial in a rural town in western Norway. While the town, Bygdaby, experienced climate change first-hand (late snowfall, warming waters), Norgaard recognized a general apathy for the issues amongst the town's citizens. Her analysis connected preexisting discourse, events, and policies regarding public perception about climate change with theory about social context – how social structure and consciousness impacts the way in which people talk and act (Norgaard, 2011, p. 211). She transcribed and presented her interviews in a way that formed a story between her

interview participants, so that she had a narrative “about emotions and culture [and] how emotions shape conversations, awareness” that was specific to her study site (Norgaard, 2011, p. 208). Ultimately, she was able to combine grounded theory about her participants (their individual level reactions to climate change in their city, and how or how not this was influencing the culture of their city as a whole) with previously existing theory to support her results at a deeper level. The narratives presented in this thesis are a means to do the same: understand the interviews as a discourse shaped by the values invoked from deeply personal, social, and environmental interactions. Because of this, the interviews were crucial to my methods. They allowed me to combine shared meanings about the adaptation and transition to veganism through culturally significant lenses.

I very genuinely enjoyed the interviews as part of the thesis process. They connected me to individuals with whom I shared similar virtues, but also were able to enlighten me to the nuances of veganism I had never considered. I appreciate and owe much gratitude to those who dedicated their time to talk with me. Their insight is valuable to the understanding and broader application of veganism to the field of environmental studies.

### *b. Literature Review*

I reviewed literature describing social movements, culture, and ethnography, as well as literature on the impact and measured benefits of veganism on climate change, personal health, and moral and ethical queries that shape individual identity associations with veganism. I aimed for diversity in the types of publications within the review, and sourced publications from digital libraries like JSTOR, GreenR, and Google Scholar, as well as the Bucknell Library system. The majority of my resources were scholarly articles and books, in addition to a few newspaper articles (*The New York Times*) and press releases (The United Nations). The results of the

literature review allowed me to approach writing this thesis from an inductive and logical foundation, as seen in the following chapter.

*c. Discussion of A Content Analysis*

The resources that a vegan uses to inform their decision to transition to the lifestyle can be seen as an important aspect to understanding the journey itself: these are the mechanisms of education that perhaps guide and inspire individuals about veganism. Because of this, I recognized the value in examining resources that target the adaptation and transition to veganism. I began a content analysis of vegan resources before I began interviewing. However, I realized I was filtering what I accepted as necessary sources to guide veganism. For example, I reviewed vegan outreach websites and non-profits, lifestyle blogs, and YouTube accounts. But this was potentially inaccurate. I recognized that instead of performing the content analysis myself, a more qualitative and realistic approach would be to let my interviewees inform me of their influential resources, if any. I adopted this method to more coherently and directly analyze who and what advises veganism. I therefore incorporated questions about resources into my interviews (as noted above: Did you educate yourself about certain aspects of veganism? If so, how?) to gauge this information. The opinions and advice on this subject became another relevant subdivision of the interviews – information that could be compared and contrasted between interviewees in my writing. I was especially interested in how the resources functioned for the interviewees: whether the importance was placed on educating themselves on *why* to become vegan or *how* to become vegan. This required assessing if the resources are founded either in mechanical action, in terms of a resource giving direction and presenting a set of results from that direction, or, contrarily, how the content is founded in a movement, in terms of an author discussing their personal and communal level experiences with veganism. Both of these

types of resources are useful in that they educate individuals about the lifestyle choice, but they can differ on whether they incorporate tractable guidance, advice, and direction as opposed to motivations, justifications, and passions about veganism. (For example: Are cookbooks or vegan memoirs used more often? Which is perceived as more influential and helpful?) Thus, I explored whether or not the content used by the interviewees taught them *how* to become vegan or *why* to become vegan, if the interviewees preferred one type to the other, or utilized both. The description of resource use can be found in Chapter 4 on the educational narrative, section C.

### CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

*“Veganism has been much ignored in research and is presently viewed in a similar way to vegetarianism before its current vogue. If it is considered that vegetarianism challenges conventional culture, it could be suggested that veganism challenges the same conventions to a greater degree” (Povey, 2001, p. 16).*

The following literature review serves as a background to recognize and examine scholarly works related to the vegan “identity,” the science that supports and contributes to understanding the vegan movement, and the role of ethnography. Considered below are the works that were important to shaping my understanding of the narratives from the interviews I conducted, and to developing a theoretical framework for qualitative data analysis – as I want to combine existing concepts about veganism, dietary choice, and social action with concepts from my interviews. This is a pragmatic technique introduced by Barney Glaser in the 1980s, a sociologist who suggested “purely inductive research is neither possible nor necessary” (Greener, 2011, p. 96). I reviewed literature about coordinating and producing ethnography to best understand how I should approach my writing and to provide additional insight into my interview process and analysis. The literature review also describes the aspects of veganism I needed to delve into more deeply once completing the interviews. This is mostly because they were infrequent, but mentioned, topics of conversation, such as the environmental impact of veganism – something that necessitates a solid, scientific discussion, and the details of which are not regularly known or conversed about during the interview process.

#### **a. *Cultural and Identity Associations with Veganism***

There are several works of literature that chronicle the meaning of a vegan identity. Sachi Edwards, in her article “Living in a Minority Food Culture: A Phenomenological Investigation of Being Vegetarian/Vegan,” is one of them. Her depiction of the vegan identity focuses largely on

feelings of isolation: the ways in which vegans can feel social awkward and judged for their decisions. She asserts, “For those who do not have self-imposed dietary restrictions, understanding what it feels like to live with them can be difficult. Vegetarians and vegans constitute a unique kind of minority group; one based on choice, not by biological trait” (Edwards, 2013, p. 114). I found this an important point to highlight: that vegans, while in many cases may feel criticized or like an outsider, do this out of choice and not by some biased, societal default. Sachi continues by saying the way in which vegetarians and vegans perceive and experience everyday things in a different way by opting out of the norm. For example, she uses discourse about the societal importance of food, i.e. the integral role food has in the sense of hospitality and shared community. Is it rude to say “no” to someone whose offer will impact one’s connection with the community? How does one navigate potlucks and Thanksgiving dinners? Edwards addresses here the distinct “difficulty in distinguishing between rejecting a food instead of rejecting who is serving it” (Edwards, 2013, p. 122). In this sense, veganism and vegetarianism can be alienating from various food “communities.” Nonetheless, because vegans choose to be a part of what she describes as a food minority, this is a testament to their character and dedication. She states, “If it is easier and more convenient to eat meat, yet someone still chooses not to, they clearly have a strong commitment to their reasoning” (Edwards, 2013, p. 118). The choice to become vegan is not an arbitrary or groundless one.

Stepaniak et. al. (1998) presents a detailed understanding of assuming a vegan identity and the challenges of that process in her book “The Vegan Sourcebook.” Above all, she says, “a vegan is characterized not by what he or she believes, but by what he or she does. In other words, it is not enough to have the right thought; to be a vegan one must have the right action” (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 20). She suggests that the explicit behavioral choices taken by an individual

about veganism is what defines them as a vegan. In addition to championing the ideology of “practicing what you preach,” Stepaniak demonstrates the inherent goodness of veganism and how vegans identify with its empathetic tendencies. She claims, “At its core, veganism is a philosophy that champions love and peace. Hence, many vegans use this ethic to guide them in reflecting these qualities” (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 166). Veganism is a choice, therefore, centered on compassion: trying both to prevent harm while improving the lives of others (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 129). At the same time, veganism is a deeply personal choice, and Stepaniak explains that it’s an “effective way to commit to self-love,” in that individuals can embody an act of non-violence (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 167). Thus, the positive associations with a vegan identity are its foundation on love and non-violence, joy in sharing common values, and a connection with others. This supports viewing veganism as a cultural phenomenon in how Stepaniak highlights its collectivity and basis on meaningful principles.

On the other hand, Stepaniak confronts the difficulties in associating oneself as a vegan. So while “the transition to veganism is profound, often producing deep emotional changes, [and] is a source of great joy,” (Stepaniak, 161) it can also be very difficult as change is something viewed as unpleasant and avoidable (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 24). Transitioning to veganism can “create friction among family and friends, not to mention cultural pressures, the demand for conformity, and the personal desire for acceptance can challenge a vegan's confidence and self-esteem” (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 161). This is a predicament particularly to children and adolescents, those who face “tremendous peer pressure to conform” (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 170). It can be difficult to maintain such a lifestyle in an unsupportive environment, especially when identifying with something that confronts the norm. However, the challenges of vegan identity association are similar to the way in which “culture... can be specified as something which both



differentiates the world and provides a concept for understanding that differentiation” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 103). Stepaniak demonstrates how veganism differentiates individuals from others – but the differentiation is not necessarily an easy process.

Moreover, Stepaniak questions how an individual can change a behavior that is engrained in them. She rightly acknowledges that “numerous influences contribute to the development of our tastes, outlook, and beliefs, which combine to create our worldview—‘truths’ we accept, take for granted, and rarely challenge. For instance, you may ‘know’ that looking someone in the eye is a sign of honesty, but in some cultures, it is a sign of disrespect. Who is right? It all depends on your worldview—your cultural upbringing and your beliefs” (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 23). The challenges of veganism – especially when it comes to the transition to veganism itself – are confounded by the world in which an individual grew up in and is apart of. This makes identifying and associating oneself as a vegan tailored to unique experiences and values: something that can portray veganism as something either more compatible or more inconvenient for an individual. Regardless, this notion corroborates an understanding in this thesis that the environments an individual finds themselves in influences their adaptation and transition to veganism.

The work done by Christel Larsson (2003) most closely replicates what I undertook in this thesis. Larsson conducted in-depth interviews with six vegan adolescents – between the ages of 16 and 20 -- from a town in northern Sweden to interpret their process of becoming vegan through grounded theory and symbolic interactionism (Larsson, 2003, p. 61). Her results described transitioning to veganism as a status passage, or how the way the transition to veganism changes how an individual moves about and interacts with society. Larsson describes this process as one of “individual conversion,” something that is “most often a very personal

[transition], shaped by that person's unique biography and experiences" (Larsson, 2003, p. 64). Similarly to what Stepaniak offers in her portrayal of veganism, it is a lifestyle influenced by both external and internal contexts. While this results in a vegan community founded on a shared commitment to certain values and its process, it starts with an inquiry into personal values. Larsson's work ultimately identified, or better said, categorized, three types of vegans from their sample of six adolescents: the conformed vegan, the organized vegan, and the individualistic vegan. Conformed vegans were those who socialized only with other vegans and vegetarians, and because of this, they tended to follow the group and the group's decisions (Larsson, 2003, p. 64). Organized vegans were those anchored in vegan ideology: those who equated animals and humans, and demanded a sort of public attention by wanting to share their ideology with others (Larsson, 2003, p. 64). The individualistic vegan felt no need to identify themselves with other vegans. By doing so, they wanted to be respected by omnivores and those who did not follow their own dietary choice. Individualistic vegans, Larsson claims, were the most type likely to permanently remain vegan (Larsson, 2003, p. 64).

Nonetheless, there are important distinctions to draw between Larsson's work and my own. I certainly found these results interesting, and considered the methods Larsson employed relevant to my own study. While there are benefits to comparing vegans of the same age group, type of transition (omnivore to vegetarian before becoming vegan), and home life (living with parents, attending high school), I do not think that Larsson's results are necessarily applicable young vegans in general, as her discussion and conclusion suggest. She worked with a very specified, homogenous group of individuals, which, I feel, could have limited the types of conclusions she could make about their identities. I also question whether or not the three categories she identified – organizational, conformed, and individualistic – can fully be understood and

described by such a small sample size. I hope, then, this thesis breaks through some of these limitations: in part by treating it as an ethnographic result, and not a categorized, finite description of identity, and in part by using more than three times the number of participants to gauge their own narratives.

Povey (2001), in an article published for the research journal *Appetite*, undertook a study to examine attitudes towards meat-eating, vegetarian, and vegan diets of 111 individuals in the United Kingdom, 25 of which were meat-eaters, 26 of which meat-avoiders, 34 of which were vegetarians, and 26 of which were vegans. Some of his more interesting results included the fact that only meat eaters thought eating meat was positive (Povey, 2001, p. 20), and that vegan diets were viewed as restrictive by those who follow other dietary practices (Povey, 2001, p. 21). Unsurprisingly, the respondents had the most positive reflections on their own diets, and the most negative reflections on the diets furthest from their own (Povey, 2001, p. 25). This suggests that individuals reaffirm their own dietary choices: something that can be positive for veganism in that it motivates individuals to continue with it, and something negative for veganism in that its status as a minority decision makes it appear even more unapproachable by non-vegans. Nonetheless, Povey addresses here how dietary choices are distinguished by what thoughts and feelings are associated with them, parallel to how culture can function as a differentiation of worldviews.

Furthermore, Povey assessed that vegans were against meat eating mostly because they view it as cruel, unhealthy, and the cause of environmental problems, in descending importance (Povey, 2001, p. 20). Vegans, either unintentionally or intentionally, assumed an “identity” of a healthy eater (Povey, 2001, p. 17). On the contrary, meat eaters tended to view veganism as nutritionally unbalanced, extreme, restrictive, unnatural, and boring (Povey, 2001, p. 20). His

results are important because they reflect the deep divide between individuals who follow different dietary practices on a level much more than “choice.” There are identity associations with each dietary practice that are interpreted on moral, nutritional, and behavioral levels. What’s more, it shows the contradiction between what people think healthy diet looks like: where meat eaters view veganism as nutritionally unbalanced, vegans view meat eating diets as unhealthy. The actual healthfulness of a diet is misinterpreted or skewed on each end of the spectrum. Thus, as Povey states, “the results highlight the extent to which such alternative diets are an interesting focus for psychological research” (Povey, 2001, p. 1).

Several other works addressed questions of vegan identities, though they were not necessarily the central focus of the literature. Muelrath and Barnard, whose book will be addressed fully in the following section, mention that plant-based diets need to be a sort of grassroots movement, with goals that can become acknowledged from an individual level that permeates to families and communities afterwards (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 30). This is applicable to the vegan identity in that it inherently requires individuals to associate themselves as vegan in order for the movement to be understood and applied on a larger scale. Elizabeth Capaldi, a psychology professor, briefly discussed the way in which food identities are shaped and influenced by society – i.e., how people associate themselves with what they eat. She identifies several studies that show food related values that are passed down from parent to child are more effective and long lasting than taste preferences (Capaldi, 1996, p. 255). This is a significant psychological response that can work for or against veganism. Capaldi claims that the more common plant-based diets become in a family setting, that “meat eating becomes more an issue of values and less one of mere preference. As a consequence, societal attitudes concerning meat consumption, and presumably, the transmission of attitudes toward meat from parents to

children, becomes more substantial” (Capaldi, 1996, p. 256). Thus, the values parents equate with certain foods plays a significant role in how children respond to those foods.

Lastly, Corey Fields introduced an important connection between identity development and behavioral decisions. Though his work focused on female knitting groups, his approach revealed applicable concepts to understanding vegan identity formation. Fields notes, “Identity theorists have long demonstrated that identity structures our behaviors as we move through the world and interact with culture. In identity theory, identities are the meanings that individuals associate with themselves. These meanings set the standard for behavior and have implications for meaning making and action. When behaviors are consistent with the identity standard, there will be internal and external validation of an identity. Negative feelings result when individuals do not live up to the identity standard” (Fields, 2014, p. 153). Like many authors have acknowledged, the vegan identity is associated with a call to action – making distinct behavioral changes – rather than just agreeing with them on a moral (or any metaphysical) level. The identity is reinforced, then, by commitment to the cause and the behavioral choices that come with it.

#### *b. The Scientific and Societal Views of Veganism As Related to Health*

The way the scientific community and society views veganism is a critical context for interpreting individuals’ decisions surrounding the lifestyle. Thus, it is important to have a comprehensive context of the healthfulness of a vegan diet on a physical, biochemical level, which is what I attempt to encompass here. Many of my interviewees discussed the importance of personal and generational health when choosing to become or stay vegan – how it makes them feel and why -- but none of them were nutritionists, physicians, or registered dietitians. This

section addresses the significance of health and veganism, as the relationship can be motivating for vegans.

DeBoer (2011) offers interesting insight on the correlation between Western dietary standards and understandings (or misunderstandings) about health. She states, “During the last century, a nutritional transition made animals rather than bread the chief source of protein in Western countries” (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1259). The demand for meat has increased fivefold during this time period – from 45 to 229 billion kilograms (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1260). This is due in part to increasing population levels, but also because developing countries began to mimic the Western trend of eating high amounts of animal protein (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1260). This tendency has historical implications because the use of animals for multiple purposes was a way to distinguish status – i.e., those who consume more animal products are of a higher socio-political, socio-economic status. However, it also deepens the misunderstanding of the value animal versus plant-based protein. DeBoer references a Dutch study about plant-based protein substitutes, which ultimately exhibited the “large psychological distance between consumers and experts in their view of protein sources and the merits of plant-based proteins” (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1236). This implies, as DeBoer acknowledges, that “simple calls to reduce meat eating will not find much understanding among consumers and may even be counterproductive” (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1263). Animal proteins have long been considered, for right and for wrong, our primary protein source, making an appreciation for plant-based proteins difficult.

The narrative about Western dietary standards is echoed elsewhere. Tim Lang describes how “consumers in developed countries often believe that they have unimpeachable rights to consume what they like and that choice is a private matter. Yet the evidence is that the health and environmental consequences of how rich, developed country consumers eat today seriously

impinge on the commons” (Lang, 2009, p. 316). With an overarching public desire for choice, an ever-increasing population, and a food system that uses concentrated markets and farmlands to produce at maximum, public health has taken a back burner when it comes to the Western food industry. This fact, combined with the reality that making health-conscious choices is dictated by governmental structures, makes choosing an out-of-the-norm dietary practice even more difficult. This issue is further confounded by the way in which foods are stereotyped in Western culture: unrefined, whole foods are not advertised nor marketed for in a satisfying manner, unlike refined, processed foods. Have you ever seen a commercial for a vegetable that had a jingle and mascot? Capaldi (1996) briefly mentions this disconnect by stating, “unfortunately, a confounding exists in our culture between affective tone of contexts and palatability of foods: Foods that are not highly palatable initially (e.g. foods without sugar, fat, and salt) tend to be presented in coercive, negative contexts (‘eat your vegetables’), whereas palatable foods (those high in sugar, fat, and salt) tend to be presenting in positive contexts” (Capaldi, 1996, p. 130). So, while it can be easy to critique dietary choice on an individual, personal level, it is important to consider the subliminal and subconscious actors at play – especially in the modern food system.

Nonetheless, this consideration does not discredit the “ever-increasing numbers of people who are taking responsibility for their health [by going vegan], and giving themselves so that their families and communities may thrive” (Robbins, 1987, p. 172). Nor does this discredit the increasing number of scientific publications praising and justifying the health benefits of veganism. Winston J. Craig (2009), a registered dietitian and Professor of Nutrition, expounds upon these ideas by comparing micronutrient levels between vegan, vegetarian, and meat-eating diets. Those who practice a vegan diet have lower levels of saturated fat, serum cholesterol,

blood pressure, and calorie intake than non-vegans (Craig, 2009, p. 1627). They have higher levels of fiber, magnesium, folic acid, vitamin C, vitamin E, iron, and phytochemicals than non-vegans (Craig, 2009, p. 1627). Across all races and ethnicities, there was a reduced risk for heart disease, Type II diabetes, and some cancers among vegans (Craig, 2009, p. 1627). Disease-protection is an important consequence of consuming a vegan diet. Because vegans, compared to meat-eaters, consume more phytochemical-rich fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, their risk for stroke, ischemic heart disease, lung, mouth, stomach, colon, and prostate cancers are significantly reduced (Craig, 2009, p. 1628). Phytochemicals reduce the risk for cancer, especially, by interfering with the cellular processes necessary for the disease's progression (Craig, 2009, p. 1628). Similarly, Craig notes that the "consumption of isoflavone-containing soy products during childhood and adolescence protects women against the risk of breast cancer later in life, whereas a high childhood dairy intake has been associated with an elevated risk of colorectal cancer in adulthood" (Craig, 2009, p. 1628). And, notably, processed and red meat eaters have a significantly higher propensity for developing colorectal, liver, esophageal, and lung cancers, while eggs have "recently been shown to be associated with a higher risk for pancreatic cancer" (Craig, 2009, p. 1628). Data shows the clear health advantages to a plant-based diet, especially when it comes to disease protection, but much of this information is preliminary. More scientific studies should be conducted to further confirm and contrast dietary health benefits.

Vegan diets tend to be lower in omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, calcium, zinc, and the infamous B-12 (Craig, 2009, p. 1627). Low calcium levels are of special concern for vegans and non-meat eaters, as this can lead to low bone mineral density and increased risk for bone fracture. However, Craig notes consuming soy can effectively counterbalance calcium



deficiencies by inhibiting bone resorption. Omega-3 fatty acids are important for eye, brain, and cardiovascular functioning, and low levels in vegans should be countered by consuming DHA fortified foods (Craig, 2009, p. 1628). B-12 is an important vitamin for neurological and nervous system functioning. It can be found in animal products and in supplements, though the actual synthesis process of the enzyme happens only in bacteria. Thus, it's extremely important for vegans to eat B-12 fortified foods or take a supplement. But, like B-12, Craig emphasizes that any mineral deficiencies in a vegan diet can be made up through consuming fortified foods, like cereals, soy and rice beverages, nutritional yeast, leafy greens, orange juice, flaxseeds, and walnuts (Craig, 2009, p. 1630). Because of this, Craig notes, "typically, vegans can avoid nutritional problems if appropriate food choices are made [and] their health status appears to be at least as good as other vegetarians, such as lacto-ovo-vegetarians" (Craig, 2009, p. 1630). However, further research needs to be done over a longer time period to more accurately gauge health advantages and outcomes to vegan diets.

Lani Muelrath and Neal Barnard, a plant-based-diet activist and American doctor, respectively, are the authors of *The Plant-Based Journey: A Step-by-Step Guide for Transitioning to a Healthy Lifestyle and Achieving Your Ideal Weight*. This was a very informative piece of literature regarding vegan nutrition and its relationship to the American food industry, diet, and obesity epidemic. The authors, like others previously mentioned, target the irony and flaws in the Western food system: "A report by the Union of Concerned Scientists says we could save 100,000 lives and \$17 billion annually in health care costs from heart disease if Americans *simply ate more fruits and vegetables*" (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 22). However, these ambitions are severely undermined by the U.S. government itself, which "keeps pumping funds into research on heart disease and cancer while government subsidies push more

meat, dairy, and refined foods onto our plates” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 30). Because of this -- the way the Western food system *benefits* from the subsidies, policies, and advertising mechanisms for less-healthy food choices -- Muelrath and Barnard challenge many of the telltale arguments for the consumption of animal products in their writing. They address a myth behind the value of animal protein, which became established in the first place because “animal protein promotes more weight gain gram for gram than plant-based protein,” making it seem more beneficial than the latter (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 23). Nonetheless, plant-based foods are “whole and complete nutritionally, rather than providing a single benefit,” such as being solely a source of protein (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 24). Like previously discussed, plants are the source of the micronutrients and phytochemicals necessary for other bodily functions. Thus, by eating plant-based, whole foods, one is “obtaining nutrients from where animals gathered them in the first place – the plants themselves” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 39). This is a method to “bypass” the middleman, so to absorb the nutrients one needs in their fullest form, rather than consume them secondarily through a refined animal product.

Muelrath and Barnard address the myth of the nutritional benefits of dairy. After decades-long efforts on behalf of the milk industry to advertise their product as a great source of calcium, they uncover that “a look at the epidemiology around the world reveals that the very countries that consume the most dairy, calcium, and animal protein have the highest rates of osteoporotic bone fracture” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 26). Moreover, the Western dairy industry has triumphed out of physical addiction – thanks to phosphoprotein casein. Casein is the largest source of protein in cow’s milk, which “breaks down into casomorphins, similar to compounds in morphine” (Askew, 2008, p. 51). Casein is intended to lure calves back to the mother’s udders, to facilitate their rapid growth; and in humans, the “consumption triggers a highly

pleasurable biochemical response,” like a drug (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 35). Because of this, Muelrath and Barnard describe dairy products as “insidious,” creating an unknown dependency on the product itself. This information sheds light on why people find cheese one of the most difficult animal products to get rid of.

Amongst many other important dietary misconceptions that the authors address (such as the healthfulness of fish, many of which are farm-raised on fish meal), they discuss the significance of refined foods. The misconception that carbohydrates cause weight gain is another marketing ploy on behalf of the US food system. Unrefined carbohydrates are not the issue. In fact, “when carbohydrates are delivered in the complete package as nature intended, whole starchy carbohydrate foods, such as potatoes, whole grains, yams, and squashes, they come with fiber, antioxidants, protein, and fats. They are a perfect match for our bodies. It’s only when we mess with carbohydrates by hacking them to bits – through refining them, separating out key nutritional elements, and pulling out their parts – that we can get into trouble with carbs” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 46). It is an unfortunate truth that the Western food system capitalizes on making people, namely women, feel self-conscious about their weight and body image. By promoting refined carbohydrates (think “fat-free breads”) the industry is able to both attract customer interest *and* further the issue: the fat in these foods is usually replaced by sugar to keep them palatable. But more hidden sugar equals more hidden weight gain, which equals more desire to eat foods advertised as diet-friendly, which equals more consumption of refined carbohydrates. Dietary choices are therefore muddled by the way in which they are related to industry, advertisement, and health myths. Thus, for vegans and non-vegans alike, reading scientific literature about the benefits and detriments on a micro and macro nutrient level is the most effective way to make a decision that works with one’s personal health.

On a separate note: Not much literature from a reliable source exists to provide insight on how to transition to veganism. I believe Lani Muelrath and Neal Barnard's work is a very valuable resource for those interested in moving towards a more plant-based diet. They offer comprehensible advice on how to transition in a healthful manner, something that "begins with an awareness of where one is *now* – the point from which one can pragmatically move forward" (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 74). Muelrath and Barnard stress the importance of becoming aware of one's own position in regards to dietary choice before setting intentions. From there, one is better able to identify micro changes they can make to their diet, and practice those micro changes through things like ingredient swapping (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 75). In other words, because of the increased availability of plant-based options, "to further close the gap between your current dietary practices and your aspirations, you need an action plan" (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 36). This ultimately requires deciding at what pace one wants to make the transition. Where eliminating all animal-products all at once reaps "more immediate benefits and rapid results, the downside is having to deal with any fallout from unexpected circumstances and unpreparedness" (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 68). The authors emphasize that this transition choice is usually out of urgency of illness. Phasing out animal products one at a time ensures preparedness and a greater understanding of one's actions, and is a method that can be done in essentially any way one chooses. For example, the authors suggest making the transition on a meal-by-meal basis, by making plant-based breakfasts until one feels comfortable moving on to other meals (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 69). They also emphasize how many of the ingredients and foods one knows and likes are already vegan (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 74). Thus, preparedness makes the transition process much easier, so incorporating methods like meal-planning, meal-journaling, building grocery lists, taking meals to work and school, and

scouting out menus at restaurants beforehand will make the process more manageable (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 120-121).

Muelrath and Barnard discuss how many people make simple, but natural and subconscious, mistakes when beginning to eat plant-based, like calorie counting. The authors state counting calories on a plant-based diet is obsolete, because not only is it often imprecise, but it is also an unsatisfying way of thinking about food and eating. In that way, it is liberating to stop monitoring and micromanaging calories when eating vegan (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 57). Furthermore, they suggest “as you get started eating plant-based, rather than worry about getting X number of servings from any particular plant food group each day, it’s more important that you delight in your meals, that your food tastes really good, and that you feel satisfied” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 38). The importance of satisfaction when eating meals is paramount: “Some [vegans] try to eat mostly vegetables, yet remain hungry and calorie deprived because they aren’t eating sufficiently or making more robust choices, such as the starches and beans. Or they’re trying to eat all raw salads and can’t find enough hours in the day to chew, keeping satisfaction elusive” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 39). In this way, preparing meals, thinking extensively about one’s ingredient choices, and balancing the types of whole foods one consumes is essential for a gratifying transition to veganism.

Thus, the literature regarding vegan nutrition suggests that its relationship to health has been affected by historical tendencies in Western diets and operations by the US government – making it something often misconstrued or misunderstood by both consumers and experts. This stems out of a general unfamiliarity with its nutritional advantages. Nevertheless, the benefits of veganism in mitigating chronic diseases and other health issues are known, and have been reaped

by many consumers and experts for years. The recognition of these benefits in literature is an important step for the success of the lifestyle.

*c. Why This Research Is Important and the Practicality of Veganism*

This thesis strives to comprehensively understand veganism on a cultural level, part of which includes the fact that veganism has a practical significance and can perhaps respond to complex world issues. I reviewed literature related to this in order to reflect the applicability of this thesis to addressing serious global problems like climate change. Furthermore, the literature reviewed in this section is meant to substantiate the idea that veganism is a supra-individual choice: something that can and does benefit others, including the environment and all its living parts. Thus, there is a scientific and mathematic backing to the sustainability of veganism. Publications from major governmental and environmental organizations about the impact of animal agriculture on environmental sustainability have become more frequent in the media in the past decade; like the nearly 400 page document published by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization in 2006 on exactly this subject. There are much statistical data and statistical comparisons between vegan and non-vegan diets, all of which relate to variables associated with climate change: greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use, pollution, waste, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.

A 2009 report from the WorldWatch Institute estimated that 51% of all greenhouse gas emissions worldwide are linked to animal agriculture (Pendergrast, 2004, p. 108). This is more than the exhaust from all vehicles in the world combined. More importantly, cattle emit methane during their digestive processes, as does their manure: livestock accounts for 71% of all methane emissions in the United States alone (FAO, 2006, p. 96). The combination of dairy cattle, other cattle, buffaloes, sheep, goats, and pigs accounted for 85% of global methane emissions in 2004

(FAO, 97). This is especially problematic, as methane remains in the atmosphere for nine to fifteen years, and traps heat 21% more effectively than carbon dioxide (FAO, 2006, p. 82). It is a potent greenhouse gas, and one that has yet to command as much attention as carbon dioxide. Also significant is that “it takes thirty to forty times the fossil fuel energy to produce one pound of animal product than it does to produce just one pound of grain” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 27). There is a strong difference in the amount of energy that goes into producing meat compared to producing grain. As is the amount of land: “4 million kilometers squared of land worldwide is devoted to feed crops, primarily grains and oilseeds... This can be converted to roughly 29 million tons of meat protein. To produce the same 29 million tons of plant protein, this would require .25 million kilometers squared of land worldwide (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1261). This means that the production of plant protein takes 6.25% of the land that the production of animal protein does. To put this further into perspective: feeding a meat-eater uses eighteen times more land than to feed a vegan in one year, and feeding a vegetarian uses three times more land than a vegan (Robbins, 2012, p. 352).

Furthermore, the amount of water used to produce meat and dairy compares unfavorably to grain: where “producing 1 kilogram of animal protein requires about 100 times more water than 1 kilogram of grain protein” (DeBoer, 2011, p. 1261), and nearly 1,000 gallons of water are required to produce one gallon of milk (Hoekstra, 54). Factoring in what is used to irrigate feed crops, irrigate pastures, and drinking water for livestock, half of all water use in the United States is given to the animals we eat (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 27). And 70% of freshwater worldwide is consumed via animal agriculture (Pimentel, 2004, p. 1). These statistics bring into serious question *how* we are using our resources. Many vegans argue that the land, water, and grain used to feed livestock can and should be used to feed the many starving human populations

around the world. To put this into perspective: we could feed 800 million with the grain used to feed livestock in the United States alone (Pimentel, 1997, p. 1).

Other reports address the unsustainability of animal agriculture in relation to pollution, waste management, and biodiversity loss. Agriculture can be responsible for the “dead zones,” a marine ecosystem without commercial fish or shrimp life. Waste from livestock production, surface runoff from manure and wastewater, and excess fertilizers discharge into marine systems, “resulting in high biological oxygen demand, which leads to a reduction of oxygen levels in water and suppression of many aquatic species” (FAO, 2006, p. 149). Combined with severe overfishing of the world’s fisheries, marine biodiversity is threatened by animal agriculture. In fact, a 2006 study predicted “the global collapse of all taxa currently fished by the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century” (Worm, 2006, p. 790). This means by 2048, scientists have predicted the collapse of all fish species that we consume. This, unsurprisingly, has other consequences for marine life because of trophic cascading – when the food chain collapses without sources of prey. Comparatively, the slaughtering of livestock for human consumption is also happening at a stark, unsustainable rate. The United States has killed more than 10 billion animals per year since 2003 – which averages out to more than a million an hour (Askew, 2008, p. 16). 70 billion animals are killed worldwide per year for human consumption, with “two out of every three of those animals being factory farmed” (Compassion in World Farming, 2017, p. 5). What these numbers demonstrate is just how responsible we are for an immense, and nearly hard to believe, amount of animal cruelty.

Wild ecosystems are further prone to biodiversity loss because of change in land use. Animal agriculture is responsible for deforestation to create pasture and grow feed crops, which, in turn, results in habitat destruction and fragmentation. This decreases biodiversity by creating “new



opportunities for invasive alien species to intrude and compete with native ones, [by decreasing the] size of wild populations easing inbreeding and eroding intra specific biodiversity, [and by disrupting the] natural equilibrium between species and in particular between prey and predators” (FAO, 2006, p. 189). The dynamic between plants, animals, and the biotic environment are disrupted, creating instable and futile natural environments. The most distinct example of this is in Brazil, where an abundance of natural greenery has been converted for animal agriculture related land use (FAO, 2006, p. 188). Brazil happens to be home to important biodiversity hotspots, where unique and often-endangered plant and animal species can thrive in very specific environmental conditions. However, the Cerrado region of Brazil, an expanse of savanna-woodlands, “is now among the world’s top regions for the production of beef and soy. At the current rate of loss, the ecosystem could be gone by 2030, according to estimates by Conservation International” (FAO, 2006, p. 192). Animal agriculture is threatening the survivability of species *and* their ecosystems, at rates where we will see their full impact within two decades.

There is much scientific evidence about the environmental degradation from animal agriculture and the environmental benefits of veganism, a snapshot of which I have included here. Simply put: animal agriculture cannot be maintained. Our environment – wild ecosystems and their species – is impaired by it, at an ever-increasing, unsustainable rate. Because of this, “veganism emerges as one strategy that individuals can take to assist in combatting this alarming situation” (Pendergrast, 2015, p. 106). It is a choice with practical consequences, like reducing emissions rates, and supra-individual outcomes, like improving biodiversity. And while the data can be upsetting, the “growing awareness around the environmental consequences of consuming animal products, in addition to mainstream recognition of animal rights and health benefits, has

played a significant role in the rising interest in veganism” (Pendergrast, 2015, p. 107). By mainstreaming the data between environmentalism and veganism, we are able to establish an important step towards mitigating climate change (and, perhaps unintentionally, saving the lives livestock, dairy, and marine animals).

#### *d. Ethnographies*

There is much published literature about the role of ethnography in social research. Because I wanted to employ ethnographic tools to this thesis – through the interviews and through the interpretation of the interviews as narratives – I used this literature as the foundation to my methods and analysis. Charles Frake describes ethnography as a manner to study through individual systems (not a study *of* individual systems) by “tapping into the cognitive world of the participant” (Frake, 1962, p. 54). Ethnography, therefore, is an intense examination to understand the conscious and subconscious thoughts of individuals who fall into a system the researcher is attempting to understand. Frake emphasizes the value of ethnography when addressing questions of cultural ecology, something he describes as “the study of the role of culture as a dynamic component of any ecosystem which man is a part” (Frake, 1962, p. 53). Ethnography can be used to interpret and comprehend the ways in which social systems interact with ecological systems, i.e, the “constituents of his physical environment,” which are inherently connected through cultural “threads” (Frake, 1962, p. 55). I found this point especially relevant to what I try to target in this thesis: how the relationship between man and other organisms (other humans, non-human animals, the biotic environment) is shaped by cultural variables, which, ultimately, lead to a change in behavior regarding that relationship.

Deborah Rose provides important insight on the effectiveness of ethnography. She claims, “An ethnography, as an outcome, offers an account of a way of life. The most inspiring

ethnographies bring readers into the experience of life within a world of meaning, generating empathy as well as answering them” (Rose, 2016, p.110). I took this advice to heart – when interpreting and presenting the narratives of my interviewees, the most important goal is to reflect just how sincere, expressive, and realistic their understanding of veganism (veganism as their “experience of life”) is. Presenting their narratives as a result of ethnography makes their stories all the more impactful on anyone who may parse through the thesis. Humans are capable of sympathy, especially to other humans – prompting empathy and a clear understanding of the values expressed by my interviewees will do this. Rose continues by pronouncing, “At its best, ethnography is provocative; it unsettles self-satisfied certainties, expands the range and substance of the questions we ask ourselves and others, and opens space for challenging encounters across multiple human and nonhuman cultures” (Rose, 2016, p. 110). This addressed another goal of mine. While the interpretation of the narratives should be relatable, it should also be thought inducing for those that may have not considered all the aspects (the values, the justifications) for veganism. (Including other vegans!) The ethnography must, “at its best,” challenge and confront what any one person might consider the norm. In regards to the value of ethnography in environmental studies, Rose concludes, “This is a time for working toward ethnographies that will have the power to awaken and change people, to call humans into heteronymous proximity with ‘Earth others.’ As ethnographies become more inclusive, questions of justice become more complicated and contentious. The provocation of ethnography will continue as its practitioners take up questions that cut through boundaries in modes that relational, ethical, inclusive, open, and responsive to the vulnerability of the entangled loops of earthly life” (Rose, 2016, p. 112). Studying veganism through ethnography addresses these points exactly – how the notions of inclusivity and interconnectedness to living beings tackle ethical and judicial boundaries in our

society. In many ways Rose's point is applicable to any undertaking of an ethnography that focuses on a minority group. How minority groups experience life every day is inherently determined by the sets of values and reasons behind their minority "status." An effective ethnography attempts to elucidate on these values, reasons, and experiences so that they are understandable in relation to the greater entanglement of life on Earth.

David Snow further expounded on the value of ethnographic research methods, some of which I utilized. For example, he states, "a mixture of methods may be involved [in ethnography], such as participant observation, non participant observation, and various forms of interviewing that typically are less formal and more conversational than in the case of survey resource" (Snow, 1999, p. 98). Conversational interviewing was an incredibly effective method for me; I believe it gave me better insight into the real feelings of my interviewees by allowing them to process their thoughts and articulate themselves in however they were most comfortable. It allowed the interviewees to lead the interview in whatever direction was most authentic and powerful for their own narrative (as opposed to following a rigid set of circumscribed questions). Furthermore, certain themes come to light when using ethnographic research methods, like "social processes such as socialization and identity construction and reconstruction, individual agency and the structural and cultural factors that facilitate or constrain its expression, and the not infrequent tensions between individual cognitions, feelings, and behavior and the social contexts in which these cognitions, feelings, and behaviors are embedded... because qualitative, ethnographic research almost invariably embeds the researcher in the flow of the contextually relevant processes that his/her informants must negotiate in some fashion or another" (Snow, 1999, p. 100). By doing so, the results of the ethnography demonstrate dynamic aspects of social life that are not possible to reach via other methods. Ethnography is potent in that it is

determined by assessing that which is not normally assessed. Lastly, Snow offered a justification for using ethnography which I found powerful: “the typical justificatory account [of using ethnography] emphasizes either how the research illuminates empirically social categories, settings, worlds, or processes about which little is known or about which there may be a good deal of misunderstanding” (Snow, 1999, p. 98). As quoted in the very beginning of the literature review, very little research has been done about veganism – *especially* regarding its values, principles, and codes of behavior. And, in many ways, veganism is misunderstood by its overshadowing stereotypes, a barrier that was heavily discussed in every interview. Thus, an influential ethnography should attempt to broaden the field of research while making the reality of the field better understood. These are two goals of mine.

## CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVES

The interviewees recounted the personal experiences and values, life histories, and self-reflections that led them to veganism. Their journeys illustrated the societal, moral, and physical contexts that influenced their adaptation and transition to the lifestyle choice, from which six main narratives became clear to me: the narrative of the social circle, the narrative of geography, the narrative of education, the narrative of health, the narrative of morals, and the narrative of the environment. These narratives depict the shared behaviors, ideologies, and influences behind veganism – they are what provide veganism with meaning, significance, and justification to its participants. The repetition and commonality of these themes reflect the collectivity and interdisciplinary nature of veganism. Each narrative is meant to weave the stories of the interviewees to reflect the contribution of the narrative to veganism; they are the symbolic vehicles of meaning. Therefore, a detailed discussion of the interviewee's involvements with and perceptions of the components and nuances of each narrative represent *why* the interviewees were able to come to the lifestyle. The narratives provide the context for the interviewees' decisions to become vegan – which resulted in a *process* defined by *action*, changes in behavior, as described in the following two chapters (5 & 6).

### a. *The Social Narrative*

The *social narrative* describes the way in which the social environment of the interviewees -- namely attitude of people they are surrounded by and their place in a given social setting – influences the adaptation to veganism. This was the narrative most heavily described during the course of the interviews. It reflected the outstanding impression that family, friends, and other social groupings, in addition to certain social conditions like levels of support, influences from peers, and family histories, have in promoting veganism. For some, their social

environments were the primary cause of transitioning to veganism, where for others, their social environments more aided and shaped their decisions around veganism. A unique discussion about the impact of social groupings came from one interviewee, who identified her adaptation and transition to veganism as being inherently caused by her socio-political status as a black female. She stated:

*“I guess the short of it is that, I’m vegan for socio-political reasons, more in the context of generational health as a black woman. The types of foods that black folks have had access to in this country started off as very poor, and so for long periods of time, that’s all black populations ate. As a scientist, I understand that has impacts on [our] physiology: it has some level of epigenetic and real biological consequences for black people moving forward. So for me... I was thinking about long-term effects of my diet: how it impacted my family and how eating a plant-based diet would help address those issues that have now become part of the black medical experience... Being vegan I thought would help that. Or at least help reduce the chances of those things coming up in my family” [13].*

This interviewee presented veganism as a mode to respond to certain issues her racial community was more prone to, so as to improve the quality of life for herself and her own family. This required an understanding of the food histories of black communities to address the relationship between veganism and socio-political status. Thus, the historical dietary trends for black communities impacted their susceptibility towards certain diseases – especially chronic ones like heart disease, obesity, and diabetes – paving the way for one interviewee to elect against these predispositions through her diet. Some of these dietary trends are expounded on in Tracye McQuirter’s book *By Any Greens Necessary*. For example, chicken is an important cultural food for black women because it signified economic freedom, independence, and an ingredient to express cooking skills (McQuirter, 2010, p. 29). Moreover, sending chicken in lunchboxes to events and occasions where black women were once not allowed – schools, for example – was a mechanism to metaphorically travel to these places themselves (McQuirter, 2010, p. 30). Chicken, therefore, is an important cultural staple to the dietary experience of black

women. Same with meals typically identified as “soul food,” such as macaroni and cheese, potato salad, collard greens, string beans and ham, cornbread, barbequed ribs, pork chops, grits, and sweet potato pie (McQuirter, 2010, p. 2). The association of soul food with black communities dates back to the 1960s, when “it became a popular signifier of blackness, like hairstyles, fashion, and music, elevated by blacks and romanticized by whites” (McQuirter, 2010, p. 3). Food associates an individual with their culture in the same way art and aesthetics can.

However, typical soul foods are unhealthy. They are packed with refined sugars, salts, and saturated fats, whose overconsumption has long been tied to disease development (McQuirter, 2010, p. 30). By electing to follow a vegan diet – especially one that limits refined foods – is a mechanism to deter the likelihood of these conditions. While the health benefits of veganism are noteworthy, this does not make the decision particularly easy for black women: “I went out of my way to learn about black sociopolitical histories. When I was initially transitioning to vegetarianism, [it was made more difficult because] there are not a lot of black folks or people of color who eat that way. I had some Latino/a friends transitioning to vegetarianism, but my whole family is omnivorous. So it was mostly through forums online, blogs from other black people who had decided to become vegetarian or vegan where I learned [about this]. I was looking for a shared community because the experience as a black person is different” [13]. The significance and value of veganism for black women, therefore, is characterized by the historical complexities between black communities and their diets. The adaptation and transition to veganism is more unconventional in this way, making the “vegan community itself... a really interesting place. There is mainstream veganism, but then there are like people of color who are vegan. There isn’t a lot of overlap in why or how you go about



veganism between mainstream veganism and veganism for people of color. The things that you think are important to say about [veganism] are different between the two” [13]. This further reflects the idea that social environments play specific roles in the ability and justification for someone to become vegan. It also supports the reality that the majority of those who I interviewed were white – and that their experiences with veganism were not necessarily dictated by race in the same way it can be for black individuals. The end goal is the same – being vegan – but the motivations and mechanisms to reach that goal are distinguished on complex, societal levels. This is an interesting niche to veganism that I, as a white woman, feel unqualified to remark further on, and something that would need to be elaborated by other interviews with vegans of color. The fact that I encountered many white vegans, nevertheless, demonstrates how common the diet is with white individuals and how this has created a sense of “mainstream” veganism associated with race.

Outside of historical and societal spheres of influence on veganism, the role of family was described in almost every interview. Family is significant because it is an intimate, personal, and trustworthy social setting. Family can impact an individual in a unique way by being familiar – following the norm of what one grew up with – and by exposing an individual to new ideals in a comfortable environment. For the interviewees, there was a connection between family and the adaptation and transition to veganism on two main levels: the influence of their own parents and the lifestyle of their families, and the influence of being a parent and raising children. Each of these levels has their own intricacies that express the elaborate relationship between the social environment of the family and veganism.

Several interviewees had supportive parents and beneficial familial lifestyles that aided their journey to veganism. For one, her “mom has been vegetarian since she was in college, and

about five years ago she went vegan. I never grew up in the kind of family where you eat meat at every meal – which I think would make the transition much more difficult. And it was only ever ‘clean’ meat that my mom would prepare, like chicken and turkey. I rarely ate red meat growing up. Like I would have an occasional burger at a barbeque” [2]. Having mostly vegetarian meals growing up – and a mother who went vegan before the interviewee – played a role in this interviewee’s decision-making, because plant-based foods were habitual, normalized in her home life. For others, spousal support was imperative to becoming vegan in a family setting, like having a husband who cooks vegan dinners every night [9]. Multiple interviewees expressed the importance of example setting from a vegan spouse, which acts as a checking system (‘if they’re eating this way, I should eat this way,’) and as a source of inspiration: “My husband never specifically made a verbal commitment [to veganism], but I’m watching him slowly change. He used to buy yogurt, but recently he came back with coconut yogurt instead. And I didn’t tell him to” [11]. But, overall, the most beneficial aspect of the familial social setting is simply having one of encouragement – regardless if any other member of their family is vegan or not. Support from the family recognizes and affirms the individual’s decision to become vegan, a mechanism to lift confidence and continue practicing veganism. It also fosters conversation: “My immediate family, so my mom, step-dad, and siblings, were for the most part accepting. They would make jokes every once and a while, but it was never mean-spirited. We would have conversations about it. They feel like they need to eat meat for x, y, and z. And I reassure them that I can get my iron from x, y, and z. So we have those conversations, and it’s not antagonistic, but as the years go on, they’re more interested, or they’ve incorporated things I’ve made when I’m home” [13]. In this sense, a home environment that encourages open dialogue and personal choice is advantageous to veganism.

Two interviewees mentioned the role of religion – Quakerism and Buddhism -- in their home lives and how that pertained to their veganism. For one, “being raised Quaker influenced me. I couldn’t draw a straight line between violence and non-violence. Quakerism has pieces in it that say you should follow your conscience, with a deep thread of requiring considerations of equity. Your life needs to exist in relation to other lives, and we must have respect for all living things” [4]. This interviewee became cognizant of the disconnect between practicing non-violence, perhaps the greatest line of belief in Quakerism, while supporting the violence of the animal agriculture industry. The values of justness, equality, and peace are not exclusive to Quakerism. For another interviewee, a practicing Buddhist, the religion “is very much in congruence with veganism. All sentient beings are enduring suffering in an interrelated network. To cause no harm is one of the principles [of Buddhism]” [7]. While the interviewee did not grow up in a Buddhist family, but rather practices Buddhism as a parent in their own family, veganism is a way to reinforce and cement their own beliefs.

Thus, the influence of becoming a parent – raising children and expanding a familial network outside of what one grew up with – is a fascinating nuance in the vegan experience. Multiple interviewees, as vegan parents, questioned whether or not to raise their children vegan. Most came to the conclusion that the decision to become vegan should be their child’s own, although presenting their children with vegan rhetoric and ingredients to make vegan meals is a natural response [7]. Allowing the child to make the decision to become vegan themselves is beneficial in part because it is more committing -- “If we’re talking about what will stick, you need to be the one making the choice, with children even more so than adults” [7] – and in part because many parents feel the dietary wants and needs for young children waver. For one vegan family, this meant compromising by giving their children eggs and salmon when they craved or

were lacking protein [6]. They reiterated this notion by mentioning, “Based on my experience, parents view veganism as more difficult. Because when you raise very young children, you’re exhausted. You’re trying to maximize energy. And you don’t want to deprive your kids. So parents are facing choices – are we going to feed them dairy and meat or not? And at that point, some people might transition back from veganism...We’ve spoken to other families: if you’re a parent and your children don’t want to be plant-based, many of the parents do let that slide. A lot of parents do” [6]. There is a level of flexibility required when considering the diets of children in order to foster an environment where they are able to make their own informed choices. This is easier for some parents rather than others: “I have one son and I’m raising him vegan for the moment. He’s five. He is vegan, and we talk about diet and why we make the choices we do. I think at this age, it’s easy to see the reasons in black and white. And so I am trying to raise him with the idea that it’s a moral choice we make – and others might not -- so he can still have lunch with friends at school and get along. I expect that the types of conversations we have will evolve as he gets older” [16]. For relatively young children, the complexities of choosing a vegan diet are not as prevalent, like when it comes to interacting with non-vegans or being able to cook their own meals. For other families with teenagers, veganism can be typified as an imposition: “I’m trying to move my family more toward a vegan diet and it’s hard. It got to the point where I realized even using that word was a mistake. Don’t classify meal. Talk about what’s delicious in it, and leave it at the meal as is” [10]. Thus, balancing the desires as parent about what to cook serve to their family with the realities of raising children is not an effortless process. The choice to become vegan is strengthened by personal conviction – something that is aided by the food and information parents can provide, but solidified by individual choice.

Nevertheless, all interviewees expressed the importance of putting the health of their children first, something that required deeper understanding of healthfulness of a vegan diet. This makes facing the medical community sometimes difficult for vegan parents, especially parents of young children. “There’s a lot of controversy over whether people can be raised from birth as a vegan. I know several people who have done so successfully. Those who argue against it are a little ignorant. All the matter [i.e. nutrition] that is in animal products came from plant products. You do need to take supplements – like B12 synthesized from yeast. But it’s just a myth, even in orthodox medical community, that you need animal products to be healthy” [8]. This interviewee sees veganism as a way to bypass the middleman and attain the nutrients directly from the plants themselves, but the association between animal products and nutrition, namely protein, is entirely common. Similarly, another interviewee commented, “many children prefer veggie diets when they’re young, and parents make them eat otherwise because it’s perceived as unhealthy” [7]. For another interviewee, the transition of her child off of breast milk and onto another supplement was a particular challenge as a vegan parent: “When you’re talking to parents about parenting choices, that’s one time I felt I really needed a community. Like when I was to figure out what to do when you’re done nursing a baby. When they’re weaned, what milks do you supplement with? What’s a healthy diet for a child? That’s an area where I met resistance among the local medical community, but it really helped me to find vegans that were parents. I had to try and find an online community – and I’m grateful for that. I read a number of blogs, but I just reached out and emailed friends who put me in touch with other parents. I created a personal network. I supplemented with hemp milk, by the way, which is the fattiest milk out there” [16]. She was able to overcome the complexities of nursing and veganism by developing her own online community of vegan parents. Finding a support system was crucial

when it came to making parenting decisions very early on in their child's life – i.e., the time before their children are capable and willing to make their own dietary choices.

Moreover, many vegan parents expressed the ways in which their own children have impacted their understanding of veganism, rather than the other way around. One family set the foundation for this subject by explaining how children are inherently non-violent, a source of inspiration for their own dealings with veganism: “We have read literature where authors talk about how children have difficulty to kill animals for food. It is the adults who teach them how to do this... I do think that this is an ethos in American culture: ‘Come kid, let me show you how it's done, don't be a wimp.’ Kids innately do have compassion and reluctance to harm, and it's the grownups that show them the other way” [7]. Adults can learn from children by mimicking their moral codes against violence; and for vegan parents, it can be very rewarding and educating to see their own children confronting veganism and its values in their own lives. For one interviewee, “it occurred to me that something that preconditioned me to [becoming vegan myself] was my son: he decided to be vegetarian and went to a Quaker summer camp,” where he learned the value of selflessness [4]. He continued by reflecting, “I learned a lot from him. He taught me the strength of will, just to do it” [4]. The choices their children make are equally meaningful in informing a transition to veganism, because it reflects how their child has gained knowledge and made decisions outside the influences of their parent(s). Similarly, another interviewee disclosed, “Our son changed [to veganism] after just watching a video. He is very interested in animals and animal preservation, even from a very young age. He realized that there is some contradiction between wanting help animals and eating them. It took a while for him to square that contradiction, but he did” [6]. Their son absorbed the information about the harms of

the animal agriculture industry, and used that information as a reference to make a tangible change. This is a valuable learning technique.

Another interviewee expressed a parallel idea; that children, more often than adults, recognize the distinction between eating animals and also loving them: “I have seen this with my nephews, who aren’t even vegetarian. They’ve each gone through moments where they learned where meat came from and they stop eating it. That there is a disconnect between meat and how it gets to our plate. I watched American boys make those connections, and they had to stop for a while” [16]. Thus, what these conversations reflect is that the role of family in making decisions about food choice is powerful and complex. Parents, children, and spouses all have the ability to influence and learn from one another – but the familial setting is one that requires cooperation and adaptability. It is imperative that vegan parents understand the health needs of their own children to make the right decisions for them when they are unable to, all the while it being imperative that children are able to make their own food choices as they age. In whatever situation, *support* is key: by creating an environment in which acceptance is the foundation, the more approachable veganism can be.

The interviews conveyed equal importance to friendships in influencing the adaptation to veganism. This is a setting distinct from the familial one in that it requires social bonding and a choice to identify with certain individuals. In this way, friendships are important to veganism because they offer a source of support and example setting outside of the one an individual grew up with. For vegans that find themselves in an unsupportive familial environment, friendships are crucial to feeling like their decision is valid and worthwhile. Furthermore, developing friendships with other vegans, or at least those who are supportive of veganism, is a mechanism to learn and share experiences outside of one’s own. “When I wasn’t really experienced with the

concept of vegetarianism, or veganism, I wasn't sure what to eat. Just by going out with friends that were vegetarian, I definitely entertained the ideas... I had various friend circles and when we got together, I would make sure I brought something veggie-friendly so it was fitting for everyone. To share dishes that are good for both of us. But also after I started eating like that with them, I felt healthier, so you know it was sort of a feedback system" [1]. Shared meals are a way to gain comfort and appreciation for veganism, all the while reinforcing the fact that there are other people who are *able* to be vegan in the same setting. By correlating vegan food with social bonding, some of the discomforts of veganism (feeling like one is in a food minority) are abated. Similarly, another interviewee noted, "I had a support system at [college] knowing that other people were vegan. It made me more comfortable; knowing other people were doing this at the same school" [2]. Feeling a part of a network in a certain environment, like a campus, is helpful for maintaining veganism.

Four interviewees noted that having at least one vegan friend spurred their decision to try veganism for themselves – these friendships set the example for how and why to become vegan, and were helpful because "having [a vegan] friend around was motivating" [17]. For example, "I think for me, ultimately, it was seeing the example of some of my friends – seeing how they had adopted to it so well, and talking to them about what they got out of it, and challenging myself to get out of the rut of my diet at the moment. I have a good friend who runs a vegan blog and I had been cooking the food that she had advertised. And we would go to the vegan restaurants together at conferences. I basically lost the excuse for not being more plant-based" [10]. Having someone to converse with, or simply to try new foods with, is encouraging. Comparably, one interviewee went vegetarian a year or so before becoming vegan, thanks to her friend: "My best friend from home went vegan when I went vegetarian. She encouraged me to sort of do it, so it



was something we kind of did together. The two of us were trying to figure it out together... Like yo, I just watched this documentary, you should, too” [2]. This reflects the value in having a close friend to work through the nuances of plant-based diets and how to guide a transition. Again, having someone to consult with is crucial. For others, seeing the health benefits of their friends was inspiring: “[My friend] is my role model on all of this: he had high cholesterol, which was the proximal cause of him becoming vegan, and it of course veganism solved that. I saw his capacity to take control of his diet as something I could do... and I watched him and his fitness change. He lost 30 pounds, and that was reassuring” [4]. What these interviews highlight are the importance of seeing those that one feels related to on a social, collective level make certain choices and actions that one can replicate. The changes become more attainable when someone one admires or identifies with is able to make them, too.

Thus, the social narrative during the course of the interviews illuminated several important subthemes to becoming vegan: the way in which race, and identification with certain racial or religious communities, can dictate perceptions of veganism and justifications for the diet, the way in which parents guide their children towards veganism and navigate the difficulties in making food choices for or with them, the way in which children can impact their parents through moral inquiry, and the way in which friendships can inform and support individuals attempting veganism. Each of these emphasizes the value of connecting with others with whom one feels comfortable and comparable to, in order to aid the adaptation and transition to veganism.

### *b. The Geographical Narrative*

The *geographical narrative* can be described as the way in which physical location, where one has lived and currently lives, influences the adaptation to veganism. This was a narrative of

particular importance many interviewees, who addressed the role of geography through the lens of accessibility, ease, and influences of local food options (e.g., the presence of grocery stores, CSAs, and other food sources, the availability of restaurants that support and have plant-based options on their menus), the change in recognition of veganism in small, rural towns over time, a community of the like-minded in their region, the way vegan-supporting businesses function in a certain region, and the influence of dietary preferences and cuisines in specific cities and countries in which they have lived.

Having relatively easy access to grocery stores, farmers' markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organizations is key in order for vegans to feel like their lifestyle choice is possible. As many interviewees expressed, this is in part because fresh produce is a cornerstone ingredient in their diet. CSAs, in particular, are an eco-friendly option to support local farmers by buying a share of a season's harvest. Belonging to a CSA, as stated one interviewee, helped him and his family practice veganism: "The good thing about it is there's no choice. Once a week you have a ton of fresh produce and you have to do something with it. It's a challenge; you need to try new things" [10]. CSAs can function, then, as a method to incorporate fresh foods into one's diet. On the other hand, many interviewees were cognizant of the "privilege in terms of access to options, especially in the context of the United States" [7]. Geography can work for or against one's ability to be vegan because not everyone has the same ability to find or afford fresh ingredients. Food deserts, or areas in which access to nutritious food is not available, are common across the United States where distance and socio-economic status hinder accessibility. Living in a food deserts is a sort of vicious circle, acknowledged by another interviewee, who stated, "if you live in a place with few grocery stores, and not enough produce, that's hard. So where you are geographically localized, that's a barrier. And then

underneath it would be cost. So if you're in a place where it's harder to get these things [i.e., fresh foods], then they will cost more" [13]. Is it telling that none of my interviewees lived in a food desert? Probably yes. Are food deserts solvable problems, whose resolution would help facilitate veganism? As one interviewee claims, also yes: "No one is saying [being vegan in a food desert] is easy, but it shouldn't be a matter of individual initiative. It should be a communitarian effort to find ways to keep food deserts from being food deserts. It's more of an excuse than anything else. If 40, 50 years ago we could design a spacecraft to leave our solar system, we have got to be able to solve food deserts. No one is *not* taking no for an answer. And that's sloppy thinking" [8]. This interviewee is reflecting on the inherent, institutionalized difficulty in making healthful food choices in the United States – because one's ability to make those decisions is dictated by the industry and where the industry finds economic benefit.

Nonetheless, while there was an appreciation for the difficulty of being vegan in a food desert, all interviewees expressed how much more accessible being vegan in the United States has become in the past several decades. Perhaps this is because the vegan stereotype is evolving: "it's changed so much because people identify as vegan; and you're not a freak. It is not seen negatively, and I think more and more restaurants recognize what it means," [4] said one interviewee, similar to another interviewee's response that "my sense about this is that people were not as open to it as they are now – there are a lot of non-vegans who go to vegan restaurants, and those restaurants for the most part didn't exist in the 90s. I do believe that today, while the reception of vegans is largely negative in the non-vegan population, it's less negative now. It's not normalized, but it's seen as less weird. It's seen as a little less bizarre and off the map" [8]. Other expressed veganism is becoming easier because of shifts in economic trends, by claiming that "if I don't seek it out and less people are actively seeking it out, the economics will

start to impact production” [9], and “where your dollar goes, is where the production will be” [5]. And, on a similar note, restaurants across the United States have become conscious of the rise in veganism and are attempting to corner the market. One interviewee claimed, “I’ve seen an interesting trend in restaurants in the last year. A lot of places are billing themselves as vegan, though they’re not using the word. Which is probably a good move – calling themselves vegetarian, or plant-based. They’re using it to lure people in, and then they don’t notice there’s no cheese in it. And they don’t care, if they like the taste of the food, its presentation, texture, and variety. So that’s encouraging. And you can see in Newspapers, articles about Philadelphia, for example. All the time it’s being noted as a vegan culinary mecca. And this is really high-end food stuff going on” [14]. People want to eat good food, even if that food is vegan. And if the restaurant industry can predict that trend – and market it without using the *word* vegan – they can be successful. For example, in Washington D.C., a Chinatown restaurant popped up where “they don’t use the word “vegan” on their menu. They only stay “plant-based” to make it more appealing for other people and so that others can walk in and try it. A lot of people don’t realize that there’s no meat on the menu. And the founder of the restaurant wanted it to be that way. The food is very tasty, and the restaurant has very long lines” [10]. Thus, multiple interviewees had insight into why they believed veganism was becoming more accessible. But many others were simply alert to the changes in their geographic region over time. This provided an interesting comparison between the vegan-friendliness of cities in the United States over time.

Lewisburg is a rural town in central Pennsylvania where many of the interviewees were located as students, professors, and other employed professionals. Long-term vegan residents of Lewisburg noted similar changes: “20 years ago you couldn’t go out to eat in Lewisburg [as a vegan]. It was not even remotely possible. But things are changing rapidly” said one interviewee

[14], echoing the other's timeframe, that "over the last 20 years, the options have become greater and greater. The online commerce, things available in the area, the types of products that these places sell. I never would have predicted the wide variety of things you could get here" [8]. This interviewee became vegan when he lived in Lewisburg, something he described as "difficult at first, just finding foodstuffs and clothing." He had to "get very creative about it in a place like this, where the shopping and restaurant choice is limited. So I did research, developed a routine, and found the things I was able to get around here. Things like raw nuts, seed, beans, fruits, veggies, and grains. I sort of adapted". Other interviewees reiterated this notion – that creativity is key to being vegan in central Pennsylvania, by claiming "If you're going to be vegan here, you have to be able to cook" [11]. But it *is* possible, even in a highly rural area. Interviewees stated that it helped to have a local farmer's market, "especially in the summer when you have organic produce," and by having a local "natural foods store, and local spice business, because we're into flavor. With those resources it hasn't really been much of a struggle" [15].

Restaurants in the area are becoming more aware, too: One interviewee mentioned, "Here, locally, it has definitely changed [in the twelve years I've been in Lewisburg] in terms of the grocery options and restaurant awareness" [16]. She continued, "More people seem to have some sense of what it means to be vegan. If you're [at a restaurant,] and ask if something's vegan, it's easier to find" [16]. While many Lewisburg interviewees recognized the importance of having a Bucknell student population to influence restaurant and grocery options in the area, others addressed that "plant-based friendly options are slowly becoming incorporated [around here]. In Williamsport they have a sort of veggie friendly area, and in Danville there is a vegetarian friendly menu section. So in a way, I think we are seeing a similar pattern across our neighboring cities even without a university" [1].

These tangible changes towards the ease of veganism in Lewisburg are not without some drawbacks, especially for vegans who moved into Lewisburg from another city in the United States. One claimed that moving to small-town Lewisburg from a major city in California “was such an adjustment. I think with that there was total loss of a vegan community... I had gotten used to potluck communities, those sorts of events. The loss of those took a year or two before I figured out how to make my own way. Though there’s a small vegan community here” [16]. The importance of community development will be discussed in further detail in upcoming sections. Others brought their challenges of veganism in Lewisburg back to the discussion of access, with one interviewee in particular mentioning, “I see why it’s hard for other people. It can be super locationally dependent and if you have the means to do it. It’s not cheap, especially living out here” [11]. Thus, because Lewisburg is situated in a rural area, some of the eases of veganism are interfered with, the way they aren’t in other cities.

Portland, Iowa City, Los Angeles, Austin, and San Francisco were the other cities mentioned during interviews that had particular importance and benefits for those adapting and transitioning to veganism. Iowa City, Austin, and San Francisco were highlighted for their sense of vegan communities: their large “alternative” population demographic meant vegan restaurants, vegan potlucks, and vegan cooking classes that helped inform one interviewee’s transition to veganism. Portland was described as a “region friendlier to veganism. You’re still going to be in a minority and have explaining to do, but in Portland, there’s always a vegan option and no one will ask about it. It’s always there; it’s part of it. It’s not anything remarkable” [10]. Cities like Portland are vegan meccas. The single largest barrier to veganism to every interviewee, as will be discussed, is handling and confronting situations with non-vegans. Simply by having a vegan option on a menu, no questions asked, is one major way Portland is

combatting this barrier. Furthermore, Los Angeles is an example of a city that supports veganism. An interviewee who lived for some time in this region noted, “In Southern California you’re more pressed to find people who eat meat. Access to produce was much easier and cheaper there. And plant-based things are more common. So I think it was easier in some ways there [than in Washington D.C.]” [13]. This is an important comparison point to Lewisburg, where produce and fresh food tend to be more expensive, simply because the growing and importing cost is more than that in California. This interviewee explained further, “I do know a lot of low-income folks who are vegan, all located in California, like the Bay Area and LA. So we can talk about the cost of vegan food, but they have also been given the caveat that where they are located, they are able to buy cheaper produce [and other vegan food.] So I think the financial thing is kind of a nuance” [13]. Thus, the cost of vegan foods – and any food at all – depends largely on geographic location. Comparing the ease of veganism on a cost-based level needs to take into consideration the discrepancies between geography and economic-class. What could be considered unaffordable, or at the very least more difficult, for low-income citizens in Lewisburg is not the same as for low-income citizens in California.

From here I want to delve into two case studies from the central Susquehanna region of Pennsylvania, which consider the value and ease of plant-based diets in this region from the viewpoint of local business owners. This is important because the central Susquehanna region represents an area that has undergone change in the past several decades in terms of receiving veganism, and because, as many interviewees expressed, the relationship between cost, consumer demand, and veganism is complex and intertwined. One food-focused business in the central Susquehanna region opened in 1980, the owners of which were heavily influenced in opening it because of Walnut Acres – an enormous natural foods store once located fifteen miles

from Lewisburg. “People would come from around the country for their natural foods, people from a ‘back to the earth generation.’ And it always smelled good, out the fresh air. As the business grew, they had an enormous mailing list... It employed hundreds of people and was a source of pride for the area” [19]. The current business at hand encompasses this same sense of pride in a lot of ways, and uses honest discourse about the value of plant-based diets to establish a committed customer base. The interviewee mentioned, “we still sell some cheese, and we used to sell milk. But I just can’t do it anymore, because, look, I just don’t believe in this. And I can’t lie if customers ask my opinion. Adult, cross-species nursing is perverse. And when people say, ‘but this is raised without hormones,’ I say, you’re still getting the hormones from a half-ton cow, which is not normal for a human. In that way we’re always trying to be honest and accurate about which things our customers should try. If not, it’s a waste of time and money for the customers, and those kinds of things people appreciate” [19]. The owners take pride in the relationship between natural food and personal health at the same time that they use the relationships they develop with customers to inform their business decisions.

The interviewee significantly mentioned that their “products have changed a lot, and really the last ten years. Sometimes we lead our customers, and sometimes they lead us. They come in and want GMO-free, vegan, organic things. It’s a balancing thing. We want to show them new things, and the other half is people being willing to try them, and maybe pay a little more for something with an organic label on it” [19]. The business has thus thrived by being able to combine customer preference with health-conscious, business-supporting product ventures. However, most important of all, is the sense of community that the store has created through their customer relationships. The interviewee noted that “the customer community in Lewisburg includes Amish and Mennonite folk, and they’re so nice. And of course Bucknell students and



hospital community is huge; it's the way our store survives. Which is why you don't find stores like these in other small towns. So we try to be nice to people, and people tell their friends. This momentum has built over the years as people tell each other. And it doesn't hurt that if you're interested in [plant-based] foods and you move to a small town, you're going to find them on your own" [19]. Thus, this store plays an important role for the vegan community in Lewisburg: in part by providing access to both staple and unique ingredients, but also by establishing a home-base for customers to try new things, learn about plant-based foods, and feel comfortable and appreciated for their values.

Similarly, there is a vegan-friendly restaurant in the central Susquehanna region: one of, if not the only, restaurants in the region to provide healthful vegan, vegetarian, and meat-based, foods on their menu. It opened in 2007, with an interviewee involved in its management stating, "no question the pattern [in the customer base] has changed over time. People are seeking out vegetarian options. When [the restaurant] first opened people walked to the other side of the street. They thought it was the weird, hippie spot. Now it's more mainstream, it's more popular. I think that's thanks to people like Michael Pollen, and more videos about food and its production that have come out. People are thinking more about where their food comes from" [18]. Thus, the restaurant is founded on sourcing food locally, organically, and healthfully, so that it can support local sustainability. While the restaurant is not entirely vegetarian, the goal is to embrace food awareness and conscious-decision making, two values many vegan interviewees promoted. In this way, the restaurant was described by an interviewee as a "good niche market," where it's important to take into account how they "feel better eating mostly vegetables and eating a tiny bit of meat here and there, and [how they] know a lot of people feel the same way. They want to come out and eat something and not feel like crap. They want to have those choices" [18]. As a

business strategy, balance is important; it appeals to a wider customer base, but also provides vegans who find eating out difficult with options. From an economic standpoint, the interviewee noted, “for the most part, I think veganism and sourcing vegan ingredients is less expensive, things like beans and rice. But, alternatively, things like cashew cream to replace cheese are extremely expensive” [18]. Where the real investment comes in, however, is in training chefs in the kitchen: it takes a lot of time and effort for the management team at the restaurant to teach chefs how to cook things from scratch. And while it may be time consuming, it is rewarding and a testament to the values of the restaurant: understanding the full meaning of food, where it comes from, and how it gets to the plate. Lastly, similar to the way in which the food-focused business prompts their customers to try new things, so does the restaurant: “our menu changes with season and consumer preferences, about four times a year. We had resistance at first, but like I said, people are becoming more and more open-minded to trying to new things” [18].

Thus, these two local businesses reflect the importance of providing options for people adapting and transitioning to veganism; there has been a customer base, because people are actively seeking out the options or because people are willing to try new things and learn about them, even in rural Pennsylvania. Balancing customer preference with personal values – the ingredients the business owners are interested in or want to work with – is a successful model. By doing so, they are able to develop a dedicated and honest customer base, something that is continually improving and expanding over time.

Geography lastly comes into play when interviewees discussed the role and influence of regional cuisines on their ability and desire to pursue veganism. There are trends in dietary choices that depend on where one lives. One interviewee spent many years living in Hawaii, where the influence of Asian culture permeated into eating styles and restaurant options: “the

focus on the dish isn't just on the meat as being the standalone ingredient. You don't go to an Asian restaurant and say oh, 'I want steak.' You order something that has a mix of vegetables and some sort of carb, rice or noodles, and there are pieces of meat in it." Because of this, the interviewee mentioned that he felt much healthier by eating a better balance of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. Another interviewee, who grew up eating dishes influenced by Asian culture, said this ideology made transforming dishes into vegan ones when he was older much easier: "Once you know how to cook Asian-meals, it's easy to take meat out of the equation and add tofu. And you get the vegan version" [6]. Furthermore, because of the types of meals more commonly eaten in Asian-based cultures and because dairy is not a main ingredient in Asian-based dishes, the options at restaurants are more functional to the vegan diet. For example, "when I was in Honolulu I knew that I was healthier, because I had more options available to me, especially with the way my lifestyle is associated with eating out more often" [1]. It is easier to make the decisions one wants to make when the environment in which one is living has long been assimilated to those values.

Lewisburg functions in a similar way because it has a variety of ethnic cuisines incorporated into its history, with one interviewee indicating, "Lewisburg has is a variety of ethnic foods to make veganism work. Things like tortillas and burritos, stir-fries, and falafel... these are foods that draw on specific places and their flavors and ingredients. This is what make Lewisburg food culture broad, because it has access to lots of different things" [4]. So while Lewisburg certainly has ingredients that fall into the stereotypical American food culture – fried anything, burgers, sandwiches, ice cream, etc. – it also has ingredients readily available that are inspired by ethnic cuisines that make vegan cooking possible. Lastly, the regional diet of Israel influenced several interviewees, who had "family and an ethnicity coming from Israel. The

Mediterranean diet is convertible to veganism, and vegan and Israeli lifestyles are similar” [6]. They are similar in that they are vegetable based, and fresh produce is an important staple ingredient in meals – “things like roasted veggies, Israeli salad, and olive oils” [7]. And while “there are very few Israelis who are vegan,” these interviewees made clear that veganism is doable in Israel and if you live off of an Israeli diet. “It’s a small percentage of people who are vegan in Israel. People do like their meat, namely chicken. But if you chose to eliminate that, veganism would still be possible” because of the focus on fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains [7]. Consequently, where people live or have once lived plays into their appreciation for certain ingredients and their understanding of what makes up a “meal.” In many ways this was influential and useful for the interviewees when becoming vegan.

### *c. The Educational Narrative*

The *educational narrative* is the way in which one’s access to resources, effort to actively seek out information, and participation in an academic environment influences the adaptation to veganism. For many interviewees, the college setting was crucial to informing their decisions. Given that all the interviewees have completed or are in process of completing (at least) a bachelor’s degree, this narrative is especially pertinent by further reflecting the significance that higher education has on veganism. College was depicted as influential for the interviewees for a number of reasons: by moving out of the home, the role of classes and professors, community development, the time period of their education, and what they chose to study.

For the interviewees who described the importance of their living situation, this transition meant moving out of a home with a parent or parents and into an on-campus housing option. For some, particularly the interviewees currently enrolled in college, this was important because it meant loosening the grip on their families eating habits: “As soon as I got to college and my dad

wasn't cooking for me, I really stopped having meat at all" [17]. This sentiment was reiterated by another interviewee: "By the time I was able to make these decisions, to work out, eat better, and research nutrition and the benefits of veganism, I wasn't at home. So I didn't have to include my parents in on them, who are both super unhealthy" [3]. Thus, for those of whom feel unable or restricted by the dietary practices ingrained in their home life, the transition period of college can open the doors for being able to make independent choices. Furthermore, the advantage of living in a campus option with kitchen appliances benefitted veganism – "being able to cook for myself in an apartment as an undergrad was very helpful" [16]. Where navigating campus eateries may pose difficulties, the ability to cook for oneself, or at least gain a comfort in cooking for oneself, aids the transition to veganism.

Many of the interviewees who fell in older age groups (31+) discussed the relevancy of their timing of their undergraduate education and how it aligned with early rights movements and periods of intense activism in their generation. "I got to college [in 1970] thinking I can't kill animals. So I definitely shouldn't eat them if I can't kill them. So this was strictly on ethical grounds. A lot of those considerations were going on. The '70s seemed like a time of new thoughts, and people were considering new things, new values. Those values are still coming to the forefront today – especially veganism, because even 5, 10 years ago wasn't understood what it is at all" [19]. While the '60s are credited with the beginnings of activism movements, for the students of this generation, similar issues spilled over into the next decade: "Students then really believed they could change the world and did. What were peripheral issues during the 1970s? Civil rights, the environment, and feminism would become core values in the United States" (Winbush, 2001, p. 85). Values of equality underscored the most influential activist movements at this time, perhaps reason why animal ethics and veganism were able to take hold across the

United States, too. One interviewee, whose undergraduate education took her to Iowa City, remarked, “There was a great vegan community there. And at the time, this was also sort of an activist community in a lot of ways. There were people really fighting for an equal rights amendment to pass – women’s rights, reproductive rights, and part and parcel of animal rights community at the time. At any of these activist meetings, there were potluck dinners that were vegan. So there was a larger vegan community there” [16]. The campaigning for equity, therefore, permeated college communities via their surrounding municipalities. But these values also facilitated the creation of on-campus organizations, fostering a sense of community among college students who felt similarly. “I was interested in animal rights issues when I got to college, and there was an animal rights student group on campus. Through that, I started to read about how cheese was produced and other animal byproducts. It was from this animal rights perspective that I was able to get into veganism” [16]. Colleges can support and host student groups, meaning they are able to unite individuals of the same age with the same interests. This is a powerful resource.

Two interviewees expressed the value of studying science in an upper-level setting to inform a transition to veganism. “I’ve gotten my education about veganism through university classes and my work, and because I’m in a science field it felt like I was more exposed to that than just the average citizen” [1]. This idea was echoed by another interviewee, who claimed, “I think being in a science field has exposed me to more correct information, especially with food and nutrition. There’s a lot of misinformation out there and people are misguided. Having a science background has helped me make responsible decisions” [11]. The pursuit of a science degree is valuable because it can introduce individuals to reliable, research-based data. Nonetheless, this should not trivialize the significance of pursuing other degrees and becoming

acquainted with vegan ideals through other manners. “I was doing a lot of reading for my work in philosophy on animal rights, and coming to realize that the consumption of dairy and eggs involves every bit as much violence as the consumption of meat. That was one piece of it” [8]. The values, rationales, and objectives of veganism are interdisciplinary, making one’s exposure to them possible through diverse approaches. For others, the degree itself was less influential: “For me it was the library, because there weren’t really courses that emphasized diet when I was an undergrad. It just wasn’t in the curriculum at the time in the way that it is now” [16]. Simply having access to a college library, i.e. its extensive collection of reliable books, magazines, and documentaries, makes a difference.

Moreover, a significant number of the interviewees pursued education as a profession by becoming professors. Because of this, each of these interviews included a discussion about the “platform” of being a professor – what it means to be in an educational position as a vegan, and how, if at all, they combine their scholarship and life choices. Every single professorial interviewee reiterated the same intention: that they would never tell a student what to do or how to act, but rather present them with relevant information in class discussion as a way to circulate ideas. This is a way to present veganism and its affiliated messages in an educative setting, hopefully so that veganism can be seen as a feasible option for students. “What I do is have students be mindful of food production practices, how that influences the environment and food access, how we are using our resources to feed people, and the ways we could rethink that. Even if I wasn’t vegan, but in a scientifically and an environmentally related field, I feel like this is information that the students need to be critical about as they move on in their life” [13]. There is a commitment on part of the professor to present a realistic picture of relevant world issues in the classroom. Students, too, though are more and more often the ones to broach questions of

vegetarianism and veganism in classes. “The more I teach biology, the more veganism and vegetarian comes up when we talk about nutrition. I myself never bring it up nor do I say I’m vegan... The more we have those conversations and let the students talk, the better” [13]. This type of dialogue is substantiated by biology textbooks, too: “I’ve noticed that the textbooks, *Campbell Biology for Non-Majors* for example, have included it more in the newer versions. With each change, they talk a little more about what makes up a healthy plate and the nutrients we need from food. There is more discussion of veggie diets as just one of the ways you can be healthier. This was not in the textbooks even four years ago, let alone having a table comparing nutritional values of plant-based versus meat-based meals” [13]. This shift reflects the modification of educational resources to include information about plant-based diets, an important step to making veganism more understandable. Nevertheless, other interviewees noted that, while veganism rarely comes up in their class discussions, they feel their influence is pertinent in other ways: “Influencing my students doesn’t mean that they become vegan, but in one-way or another, it’s by setting an example otherwise. Someone who takes me seriously as a human has to question veganism in some way” [8]. In this way, veganism can become a more transparent lifestyle choice if others are able to, at the least, respect opinions that differ from one’s own.

That being said, the importance of “self-education” when it came to the adaptation to veganism was a significant discussion point for this narrative. Being in a college setting was one manner that interviewees were able to educate themselves on veganism, how to become vegan, and why it is important. Multiple interviewees communicated the way this learning process made them feel. “I was actively seeking out information about animal agriculture and the dairy and egg industries. It made me feel like I was sitting with information that made me uncomfortable, and



like I wasn't doing anything about it [before going vegan]. I felt hypocritical, like I was trying to be healthy and care about the environment but wasn't doing so fully" [3]. This consciousness triggered feelings of frustration, something that could be solved by transitioning to veganism. In this way, the learning process was precipitating for making a behavioral change. Others resonated with these feelings: "There is wealth of information out there. The only thing that's hard is making the choice. And even that's not hard if you wrap your mind around it" [8]. As an interviewer, I became interested in where each of the interviewees sourced their "wealth of information." What resources are the most valuable, and what sort of content do they produce? This information is crucial to understanding how veganism is informed, something that, again, is triggering to making the decision itself. As one interviewee described, "making behavioral change basically starts with ability to take in information that's contradicting to what you've grown up with, what you've previously known. You go to your own base of information to validate your feelings. You first let information come in, and you process it as knowledge, and then it translates into actions. But people won't just change their behaviors if the information is the same" [7]. Social media, books, cookbooks, documentaries, plant-based restaurants, apps, and doctors visits were the primary sources of information from which the interviewees were able to gain insight and enact change.

Social media materializes through a variety of outlets – with blogs, Instagram, YouTube, and specified vegan websites (i.e. ingredient lists, alcoholic beverages) being commonly reported by the interviewees for gaining information and inspiration. For example, "Vegan Instagrams are full of cool pictures, and it's helpful to see people baking beautiful vegan treats that mimic non-vegan treats. I don't make them myself, but to see so many other people are doing it is encouraging. I also like to follow fitness accounts that are paired with vegan eating" [3]. It was

encouraging for some interviewees to see people employing veganism on social media in the same ways that non-vegan lifestyles do, like through cooking and exercise. A YouTube channel that was discussed in one interview was “Fully Raw Kristina,” a channel with over 850,000 subscribers and 79 million video views. Kristina, the namesake of the channel, publishes videos each week on raw veganism, or the consumption only of raw fruits, vegetables, seeds, and nuts. Video topics include raw recipes, tips, tricks, lifestyle motivations, and fitness. Raw veganism is a more restricting dietary choice than traditional veganism, but the popularity of “Fully Raw Kristina” suggests the content can be inspirational without necessitating its viewers convert to raw veganism. This channel was helpful for the interviewee because she was transitioning to veganism out of a health concern that could be further remediated by consuming large amounts of fresh fruits, vegetables, and juices.

Two blogs were noted during interviews: Sistah Vegan and an otherwise-unspecified female Israeli blogger. Sistah Vegan is a blog by Amie Breeze Harper that discusses race and gender in the vegan experience, using her own personal history as a critical race feminist to navigate the complexities between the food system and ethnicity. One interviewee, whose interest with veganism was established via its connection to black food and medical history, mentioned, “I always gravitated towards her posts. It was reading all of these things that helped me put some of the thoughts I was starting to have into words and help flesh them out” [13]. Sistah Vegan, therefore, is a space where questions and concerns for vegans of color can be explored and explained in a relevant way. In a similar way, another interviewee found a blog that elucidated on veganism in a satisfying way: “There’s a female blogger in Israel that says, and this is a rough translation of Hebrew, “vegans have more fun.” I think she’s trying to say: these are the incredible benefits of veganism, and in a way you’re not giving anything up but instead

you're gaining something. That's a more effective way of promoting the diet" [7]. By doing so, this blogger has encouraged veganism by separating it from its stereotype of restriction or loss. Lastly, when it comes to Internet sources, certain websites and simple Google searches are equally valuable. "I remember the first week or so I looked up ingredients in packaged foods that weren't vegan, and learned more about how insane it can be. Insects are ingredients as coats to make candy sticky and waxy. It really blew my mind. It geared me toward eating more simplistically and wholly because the whole slew of ingredients in certain foods is disgusting" [17]. In this sense, adjusting to veganism requires an understanding what makes processed foods vegan and not-vegan. This includes alcohol: many types and brands of which are filtered or refined using animal bones and other ingredients like fish bladder: "There are websites like Barnivore, and I can go in the liquor store with my cell phone and look up and see if wines are vegan or not" [8]. Barnivore (<http://www.barnivore.com>) advises on liquors and beers, too. Thus, there are very specific resources for very specific aspects of veganism, something of tremendous benefit.

Several books were noted as helpful in the adaptation to veganism, in that they offered evidence of the benefits of veganism or in that they approached veganism by combining it with another powerful philosophy. For the former, a vegan couple used *The China Study* by Colin Campbell (Campbell, 2005) and *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease* by Caldwell Esselstyn (Esselstyn, 2007) were paramount: "I would describe our diet as mostly home-made, because there's a lot of prepared vegan foods and you can be a pretty unhealthy vegan in that way. We do this as part of our emphasis on heart health – and we were really influenced by [those] two books to do so... Esselstyn and Campbell work closely together, because they were working on vegan science at the same time from different perspectives. Campbell came from a statistical

standpoint, where Esselstyn was a surgeon. And they, at some point, realized they were coming up with the same results that were published in those two books. So we were influenced by them quite a bit” [15]. *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease* is founded on a 20-year nutritional study conducted by Esselstyn to describe the way a plant-based and oil-free diet prevents, stops the progression of, and reverses heart disease. Multiple interviewees also mentioned *The China Study*, which depicts the relationship between nutrition and risk of disease, specifically heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and cancer. Both of these books are examples of cutting edge nutritional research, providing resounding evidence and useful advice for vegans.

On a different thematic note, some interviewees mentioned books that combined feminist and spiritual theory with veganism. For example, “one of the [*unspecified*] books that I read that was influential as an undergraduate was by Carol Adams. She addressed animal rights from a feminist perspective. Combining those two together was really powerful” [17]. Adams is author of books such as *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990). This thought echoes a sentiment described by another interviewee, who avoids egg and dairy products because they victimize only female animals. This is an important, albeit lesser well known, connection to make, and one that could be powerful for non-vegans who are familiar with feminist rhetoric to consider. Secondly, an interviewee described the influence of “A Plea for The Animals, by a Buddhist biologist [Mattheiu Ricard]. It traces food history it to the fact that we were hunter-gatherers, where there was a sense of equality and even admiration to animals. Hunter-gatherers ascribe qualities to animals spiritually. But when humans started to raise animals for consumption, what happened was, we had to distance ourselves. We had to find a way to no longer attach ourselves to them the way we once had. So now we view things as it says in the Bible: ‘God is giving us the land to

use as we please” [6]. This is an interesting perspective to consider: that through the industrialization of animal husbandry, the sentience of the animal became disregarded.

Two cookbooks were of particular importance for the interviewees. *Thug Kitchen* (Holloway & Davis, 2014), an entirely vegan cookbook to “encourage people to eat more goddamn vegetables,” was brought up in five different interviews. Its wild vocabulary makes it an interesting read, but its innovative and easy recipes are what made it appealing to the interviewees: “I need to make dinner for my whole family. *Thug Kitchen* has faster recipes, and the food fits my family’s palate better. It’s spicy, flavorful food” [11]. Its easy-to-prepare vegan recipes set *Thug Kitchen* apart from other vegan cookbooks with complicated steps and difficult-to-find ingredients. Another cookbook series noted was *The Happy Herbivore* by vegan chef Lindsay Nixon (Nixon, 2011). “We have the whole series. She’s great. The recipes are very easy to prepare, tasty, and low fat. She made the transition easy for us” [16]. *The Happy Herbivore* cookbooks utilize inexpensive, accessible ingredients, whose recipes appeal especially to vegans who prefer to prepare low fat meals.

Documentaries were equally influential to the interviewees. *Forks Over Knives* was mentioned several times, a 2011 documentary that traces disease development to animal-based and processed foods (Corry & Fulkerson, 2011). *Forks Over Knives* bases their plotline off of the research done by Colin Campbell and Caldwell Esselstyn, the two authors mentioned previously. *Cowspiracy*, a 2014 film that investigates the environmental impacts of animal agriculture, was also discussed (Andersen & Kuhn, 2014). “Last summer I was watching more documentaries, and learning more stuff from my summer climate change course. I remember watching *Cowspiracy*, where a guy being interviewed was like ‘You can’t say you’re an environmentalist and not be vegan’” [17]. This interviewee was referring to an interview in the documentary with

Howard Lyman, a fourth generation dairy farmer turned animal rights activist and outspoken vegan. Interviews with individuals like these made *Cowspiracy* especially powerful when married with its scientific, environmental narrative. The final documentary distinguished was *Earthlings*, a 2005 film narrated by Joaquin Phoenix about animal abuse in the food, clothing, entertainment, pet, and research industries (Monson & Monson, 2005). The narration is part of what makes the documentary so meaningful: “*Earthlings* is very even handed, it’s just like telling you a story. The effect, in that way, is even more chilling” [7]. The film does not stray away from explicit visuals, and in that way, can be quite painful for people to watch. Nevertheless, the almost nauseating depiction of the reality of animal exploitation is what makes *Earthlings* an instrumental resource for transitioning to veganism.

Other methods of education, for one vegan couple, included being able to attend an “Ivy League Vegan Conference” held at Cornell three or four years ago. One interviewee described, “It was about the business of food. They had companies, ethicists, law professors, and student presentations. It was really cool. I enjoyed just looking at the list of presenters and the topics,” [14]. The other continued, “One presenter was a vegan cheese maker, and I actually already had her book and was eking my way through how to make a cheese substitute. But then she started to market her products [like at this conference]. You can get the ingredients for it at a natural food store” [15]. What’s important about this conference was that it did not necessitate its attendees to be associated with Cornell or any Ivy League institution. Because the conference was in an accessible location for the couple, they could become exposed to vegan-related seminars in an academic environment.

Interviewees noted educative efforts at plant-based and vegan-friendly restaurants, too. These establishments present their customers with interesting and delicious foods; while they

also often advertise for other vegan-friendly businesses, vegan groups and organizations, and offer information related to vegan diets in their store. “I’ve seen things on like walls of [veggie-friendly] restaurants, particularly in cities. They would put the water [use] that is required for cows and lambs and chickens and turkeys on posters... And those things are really impactful because it’s during the experience of eating that you’re thinking, oh actually, just by making this simple choice to consume a fish product or meat, I’m actually increasing the demand for water just to have this food make it to my plate” [1]. This interviewee was referring to a restaurant in Philadelphia, dubbed the most vegan-friendly city in the United States. Nonetheless, what he highlights here is the implication of education in a restaurant setting: when one is in the act of making decisions about their food choice. Having certain information presented at that time can be persuasive. It at the least prompts customers to think about dietary impact and food at the same time. On a related note, one interviewee commended a certain app to find vegan-friendly restaurants. “Happy Cow is an app like Yelp, and you can filter the restaurants as vegan. I found a Chinese restaurant in west Philadelphia this way. The menu looks like any Chinese-American menu, but it’s 100% vegan. And it’s been there forever” [14]. Happy Cow makes going out to eat as a vegan that much easier by simply making vegan options *discoverable*, especially where one may not know a veggie-friendly restaurant or store exists.

Lastly, for one interviewee, the catalyst for her transition to veganism was an informational visit with a holistic doctor in New York -- a decision she made after years of medical complications and unsuccessful recommendations from traditional doctors. The holistic doctor “knew his stuff. He’s the type of doctor who will spend extra time educating you. Hours long. If he needed to spend the time with you, he would. He would give me a lot of information, websites, books, and what to get in the grocery story. You don’t need to go out of your way to

find the products he recommended, either. He wanted to have information, I really appreciated that” [5]. The doctor served as a reliable source of information regarding how and why to make the transition to veganism from a medical standpoint. This was compelling: “The first day I saw this doctor was the first day I started veganism. After the appointment, it was from then on. I now had a wealth of information and I knew what to do with it” [5]. The interviewee concluded that the suggestions made by the holistic doctor for her diet were especially convincing because he did not recommend veganism for all his patients – the interviewee’s aunt being one of them. His recommendations were suggested from a complete understanding of her personal health, its challenges, and specifically how a vegan diet would address them. In this sense, the medical community can also serve as an influential, educative resource.

Consequently, there was a wide variety of resources used by the interviewees to educate themselves on the topics they find most important – including resources founded on recipe development, health advice, a broad understanding of vegan arguments (ethics, environment, etc.), vegan theory, or vegan community development. The content in these resources was, accordingly, also diverse. Because of this, the interviews provided robust support and enthusiasm for content that depicted both the *why* and the *how* of veganism. When it came to wanting to learn about *why* to transition to veganism, books, documentaries, social media, and blogs served this purpose best. When it came to wanting to learn about *how* to transition to veganism, cookbooks, social media, venturing to plant-based restaurants, and medical visits served this purpose best. This is not to imply these are the *only* valuable resources, but rather they were the ones most commonly reported and endorsed by the interviewees. They engaged the interviewees with both a mechanical foundation – here is what to do and how to do it -- and ethical foundation – here is why this is important -- for veganism. All in all: the educative aspect of veganism took



time and practice. It required active engagement with the lifestyle's resources, of which there are plenty, to find what sort of adaptation to veganism could function best for oneself – something probably most available to the highly-educated and middle-class. Educating oneself, therefore, is an imperative step in the vegan process.

*d. The Health Narrative*

The *health narrative* can be described as the way in which tangible, biophysical responses and a deeper understanding of the relationship between food and health influence the adaptation to veganism. For some interviewees, a question related to their own or to their family's health was the catalyst for attempting veganism. One variation on this theme was how interviewees addressed genetic predispositions – from family or personal histories with diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease, lactose intolerance, and obesity. A college-aged interviewee discussed, “there's a history of diabetes on mom's side of family, and mom herself is in the early stages of being pre-diabetic. I know red meat is a driver of that. Plus, high cholesterol and high blood pressure runs in my family. I do not want to put myself in a situation where any of that would be an issue. Not to mention I don't really like taste of meat” [3]. For another female interviewee, recognizing the correlation between her mother's battle with diabetes and high blood pressure and dietary choice was equally precipitating [5].

For many interviewees who prioritized health in their adaptation and transition to veganism, the physical responses their bodies underwent were important in their recognition of the power of food, and a manner to commit themselves to the lifestyle. As one interviewee suggests, “the reason I changed was because of my health. And I saw things improve. The medication I was taking I no longer had to take. It got worse before it got better because it was a detoxing process. But just by eating differently, your body feels different. I decided I was going

to continue doing this, which has improved my life tremendously instead of having to take medication” [5]. She concluded by mentioning, “I’d rather pay a higher price in food than in medicine.” This particular interviewee opened up about her history with blood clotting; she had two blood clots in her legs in 2008, even though she didn’t drink or smoke, two major risk factors. “So I got genetic testing done, and it revealed I have gene mutation that causes me to clot. I decided to seek doctor’s advice, but after following their recommendations and taking their medication for a year, I didn’t feel like my health was improving. Two weeks after I changed my diet the swelling went down immediately” [5]. This was the first interview I conducted where I learned about immediate health responses; I was surprised. But these physical reactions were reiterated in interview after interview. One older interviewee affirmed, “What really helped me stay with veganism initially was the blood work. I had blood work done before I started and pretty shortly after. My blood chemistry changed so dramatically in three weeks – that was all the incentive I needed to stick with it. There it was, in black and white. Because other things are harder to gauge. This was very demonstrable, something you can measure” [14]. Similarly, a married couple recapitulated, “the most important thing for us is the animal ethics, but also in terms of sustainability, health benefits, and getting unbelievable blood work. Usually at our age, people have blood pressure and cholesterol issues. But our health has improved tremendously since eliminating dairy” [6]. There is a considerable feeling of satisfaction when blood work validates how one is feeling and how one’s body is responding to the types of foods one eats. This feeling can work the opposite way, too, for one interviewee whose “precipitating moment was getting routine blood work done [decades ago] and my cholesterol was much higher than I thought it would be for a vegetarian. And that worried me, as there is heart history in my family, cholesterol problems -- that type of medical profile” [8]. Blood work is an important step

to take for many vegans and aspiring vegans who wished to decipher their health on a deeper level.

Several other important physical responses to becoming vegan were brought up during the course of the interviews. Weight loss is one, like in one instance where a married couple “lost a lot of weight without even trying” [14]. Nonetheless, weight loss was never discussed as the sole motivation for becoming vegan. For example, “I knew I would lose weight and have more energy, which I was excited for. But I don’t think I would have stuck with it if that were my main reason, which makes veganism seem like a ‘diet.’ This is something bigger than just me, and I can’t view it as a dietary thing that only I want to receive benefits from” [3]. Weight loss may be an initial physical reaction to becoming vegan, but its meaning is less significant when compared to other benefits of becoming vegan. Other health responses included increased energy and a newfound ability to exercise [15], a loss of migraine headaches [16], and a normalized menstrual cycle three months after becoming vegan [5]. Several interviewees did not experience any particular health changes – one of whom felt mildly frustrated with the response [4], and one of whom already felt healthy prior to being vegan [13]. In neither of these cases was personal health the main intention for becoming vegan.

An important aspect of the health narrative for older interviewees was aging. Some interviewees had “a desire to age in as healthy in a condition as I could, something that involved the decision that animal products were not good for you” [8]. Others took into account their marriage and friendships along this theme, with one interviewee mentioning she and their closest friends were “interested in preserving [her husband]” [15]. Becoming vegan with her husband, as a source of reinforcement, was one major way she could see doing that. His response was valuable to this conversation, by claiming, “I think typically young people do it for ethical

reasons, when realize that they need to stop participating in this behavior. Whereas people that are my age, we come to it for more selfish reasons like personal health. We start thinking about mortality. We recognize our really bad family history of heart disease. So I guess we all eventually end up having the same values” [14]. He reiterated the value in taking one’s own personal health into account – like questioning one’s own length of life and what that means for one’s immediate social circle. Nonetheless, vegans are able to recognize the multitude of the lifestyle’s benefits. For example, whether one’s intentions are for health, one can recognize its significance for animal ethics. Whether one’s intentions are for animal ethics, one can recognize its significance for health.

Many interviewees appreciated and stressed the importance of health awareness when practicing veganism, because veganism requires careful decision-making and conscious choice. Before becoming vegan, one interviewee proposed, “we think that health just happens rather than us doing it ourselves” [4]. Veganism slows down the entire process of eating by necessitating an understanding of the ingredients in something before consuming it. For some interviewees, this recognition allowed them to reflect on their previous food consumption habits: “You see the food exchange as something completely utilitarian. Food in, food out. You stop thinking about it. Now I think about eating more like food as powering an engine. It’s a much more practical way of looking at food” [9]. The experience of eating becomes more enjoyable and comprehensible by looking at food in this light. Another interviewee addressed, “coming to college I was never healthy. I never gave a thought to what I was putting in my mouth. I didn’t make choices that I knew were good for me because I was never taught portion control. I wreaked havoc on my body freshman year” [3]. For this interviewee, the pleasure of eating differed between a non-vegan

diet and a vegan one: where the previous was about indulgence, the latter transformed eating an experience that required applying knowledge.

This consciousness allowed vegans to understand what foods make them feel best: “I feel so much better physically -- it’s hard to explain. I just feel this lightness. I have a heightened sensitivity to junk, anything fried or heavy – even if it is vegan. I’m more aware of how my body reacts to food now, and it’s much easier for me, even when I randomly crave candy or sweets, it’s easier for me to not eat it because I know plant-based whole foods make my body feel the best” [17]. The recognition of how one’s body reacts physically to the foods one puts into it, therefore, is an important source of motivation for vegans. For some interviewees, this made understanding certain bodily reactions understandable and addressable. For example, “when I craved protein, I made myself eat beans. I reminded myself to put them in almost every meal... And at some point I figured out about B12 when I would find myself lethargic. So I now take B12 pills once or twice a week. And because there aren’t many vegan sweets, my sugar consumption went down considerably” [4]. Food-awareness lead to body-awareness, and by being vegan, many interviewees were able to better assess what their body needed and why. As one interviewee stated, “I am more conscious about how much I am eating. I tend to eat less and enjoy it more now” [15]. Lastly, with awareness of the benefits of vegan foods came the awareness of the detriments of non-vegan foods. For one interviewee, this meant processing his thoughts about dairy: “It’s mostly for health, but it’s also about how disgusting it sounds. We are the only species on the planet that consumes another species milk. Would it be just as socially acceptable if we were drinking rat’s milk, or cat’s milk? Or even other human’s milk?” [1]. It is unlikely. A more robust discussion about interviewees’ responses and feelings towards non-vegan food production can be found in discussion of ethical narratives.

*e. The Ethical Narrative*

The *ethical narrative* is perhaps the narrative most associated with veganism, which I mean as the way in which morality and considerations of animal and worker treatment influence the adaptation to veganism. This is a topic in many ways important because the history of the vegan movement is inherently tied to questions of ethics; the establishment of the Vegan Society, the oldest vegan non-profit, was in 1944, under the message “that it should be realized how closely the meat and dairy produce industries are related. The atrocities of dairy farming are, in some ways, greater than those of the meat industry but they are more obscured by ignorance” (Preece, 298). Ethical concerns are important to many vegans because they emphasize selflessness and awareness in every day behavior. How or why individuals can value selflessness, and how or why individuals can be empathetic towards others, is somewhat unexplainable. As one interviewee felt, “it’s not just the arguments for the ethics of it, it’s something about affect or emotion that is the glue that commits us to those insights. And that’s the deep mystery about ethics” [8]. There is more to the ethical narrative than the simple recognition that mistreating others is wrong. Moral considerations of the animal agriculture industry can precipitate strong and often overwhelming emotions for vegans. These emotions are what commit them to the cause.

A concern for animal welfare was the most notable value during these conversations, something that tended to incite major grief – especially regarding the lack of empathy from non-vegans, and the living conditions, the treatment, and the ultimate demise of the animal. There were personal experiences and a general awareness of the realities of the industry that triggered these emotions for the vegans I interviewed. For one, this was described by a family farm trip decades ago: “It left an impression when I saw a cow who was slaughtered when I was about 8

or 9 years old. My siblings and I were looking for the rabbits on this farm, and we stumbled across the slaughter area. It was right there, out in the open. Anybody could see it. And we were just in total shock” [5]. Having a visual association, as heartbreaking as it may be, was influential. Because, as reiterated by another interviewee, “if you see animals being killed in front of you and then say here’s your dinner, you’re much more likely to give it up. It’s so easy to disconnect what you buy at the supermarket with what’s on your plate” [7].

However, not all interviewees had a direct experience with an animal’s death that engendered feelings of affliction. For one, they claimed, “[my veganism] was sparked by seeing a pig sticking his head out of a tiny opening in a great big pig house. And pigs are like dogs. I began to imagine specific experiences of organisms. How they have the same intelligence, connections to other organisms, and specific personalities. I no longer saw how it was possible to eat them” [4]. A consciousness, an applied effort to understand the reality of factory farming, was instrumental in being able to effect ethical decision making. Another interviewee mentioned, “I’m truly not interested in eating animals, and factory farming is wrong, and I truly can’t understand how we convinced ourselves as a nation that we can sustain ourselves on a system that is horrifically cruel to animals” [10]. It is important to recognize that many people can disassociate the treatment and life of an animal from the food on their plate – something that likely stems from the fact that the mechanics food industry are purposefully obscured. This notion is relevant because it reflects how “we’re not trained for empathy. What we see in our nation, and especially through our national politics, is that empathy is a lot more possible if you’re comfortable” [4]. Questioning one’s food choices, and what these decisions mean for the life and death of another living being, is uncomfortable. It means judging oneself. As reflected above, it means becoming empathetic to beings that one may not normally be empathetic to –

because the United States has organized the food industry in a way that contributes to the disassociation. This is a difficult process, but for some vegans, the longer they maintain the diet, the easier it becomes to empathize on such a level: “it’s been a really interesting process, seeing myself change so dramatically in terms of my ethical beliefs” [14].

Furthermore, a deeper understanding and recognition of animal welfare is what can delimit ethical vegans from vegetarians. The horrors of the dairy industry are, to many, just as real and just as distressing as the horrors of the meat industry. As one interviewee mentioned, “I don’t want any animals to be killed, but the most important thing to me is to not support industrial egg and dairy operations. The chickens being trapped in tiny little cages, the fact that ‘free range’ means the chickens have a three square foot opening at one end of the building, the rape racks for cows... it’s just a horrific life that they lead” [9]. Other interviewees described feeling very upset at the thought of male chicks being slaughtered immediately after birth because of their uselessness in the egg industry [3]. To clarify: only female chickens and female cows are exploited in the egg and dairy industries, because eggs are the result of an ovulation cycle, and milk (and its byproducts) are the result of pregnancy by forced insemination. For vegans that identify as feminists, as one interviewee expressed, this is further rationale for their choices [10]. The lives of female animals in the egg and dairy industry are short: “Dairy cows usually meet their end at beef slaughterhouses, when, at two to five years of age, their milk production slows or they are too crippled or ill to continue in the dairy industry” (Muelrath & Barnard, 2015, p. 28) while egg laying hens are killed after eighteen months. The lives of male animals are similarly short: Chickens for meat are killed after five to seven weeks, and beef cattle are killed after eighteen months.



There are other important ethical considerations that vegans can value: like addressing speciesism, a “hierarchy of being,” and animal intelligence. These are issues that similarly engendered an emotional response and feelings of distress in the interviewees. Regarding animal intelligence, one interviewee poignantly asserted, “people are invested in the idea that animals are dumb, and that they don’t know what is happening to them... Because of this falsehood, we are more ignorant than insightful about what animals want and need. We’ll say, ‘animals don’t know what’s happening to them’ because it makes them feel more comfortable using them” [8]. By demoting the intelligence of animals, people are able to justify their reasons to kill them – as if intelligence or sentience determines the value of a life. This is a dangerous territory to be encroaching on, as another interviewee expressed, because it brings into question what makes any life more valuable than one’s own: “You dehumanize that you want to kill. Same with war. You justify that your enemy is “less than human,” and that gives you permission to kill. It takes the value of other living beings away. And by doing so, you’re taking away the cognition of them” [7]. I found this idea pivotal and moving. The violence, misunderstanding, and worthlessness that we place on animals in the food industry are parallel to the violence, misunderstanding, and worthlessness we place on enemies in times of war. Ultimately, violence was an ethical conundrum much larger than just animals for the interviewees, because it brought into question where one “draws the line.” It seems that interviewees saw a very thin boundary between practicing violence against animals in every day life and practicing violence against other humans. Some people can so easily dehumanize, and so easily act brutally and barbarically against others, when it is a notion ingrained in choices they make every day.

This idea is further confounded by what one interviewee brought up regarding the treatment of workers in the animal agriculture industry: “I feel like it desensitizes the workers,

killing becomes just common nature to them” [5]. The job of the factory farm worker is similarly unethical and upsetting. Eric Schlosser, in his novel *Fast Food Nation*, depicted this reality in quite some detail. Factory farm workers work in an assembly line, starting with the kill (stunning the cow, slicing its neck), and then portioning most of the cattle’s body parts by hand, where a worker can make up to 10,000 cuts in an eight hour shift (Schlosser, 2001, p. 172). The workers are, unsurprisingly, susceptible to injury: amputated body parts, torn muscles, slipped disks, and broken bones (Schlosser, 2001, p. 175). Because most of the workers are illegal immigrants, and therefore do not belong to a labor union, there is rarely compensation or care for these injuries, and there is certainly not incentive to lodge a complaint about them (Schlosser, 2001, p. 174). Additionally, many of the immigrant laborers work the night shift to sanitize the factory. This means hosing blood off operating conveyer belts, fifteen feet off the ground, in a plant exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit (Schlosser, 2001, p. 177). Visibility is low; the fumes from dried blood are nauseating. The reality of the workday for a factory farm laborer is truly dangerous and physically and emotionally taxing.

For reasons like these, vegans who are influenced by ethical motives strongly value principles of non-violence and selflessness in their own lives. One interviewee mentioned, “I try to live a non-violent lifestyle as much as I can. I view my veganism being tied up and into that larger philosophy. So it started with thinking about what it meant to do harm to animals, with just not eating meat first, and then eliminating animal byproducts completely” [16]. In this way, incorporating veganism into one’s every day life is a way to practice values of non-violence. Similarly, another interviewee described, “I’ve argued [that] veganism is a strict moral obligation, not a simple lifestyle choice” [8]. These values permeate every aspect of one’s personality and behavior, something that much more complex and meaningful than just deciding

what to put the dinner plate. Furthermore, this interviewee continued, “it is part of a basic principle that using animals is wrong. Especially when it’s not necessary and easily avoided. The fact that there are alternatives easily available make it clear that it’s completely unnecessary. It’s something we do only out of human habit and preference” [8]. Thus, making the choices necessary to uphold principles of non-violence are certainly made easier by the wide array of alternatives that exist. Utilizing the alternatives requires addressing and adapting one’s everyday choices.

This is not to imply that overhauling one’s own moral considerations is easy. Many interviewees addressed this notion as “moral blindness,” because the treatment of animals is purposefully concealed by the industry. As one interviewee described, “ethics are constructed in a way that will fit the population. We become aware of different kinds of discriminations, like sexism and racism, because of how they are publicized. This means animals are some of the major victims of societal discrimination” [6]. Because of this, recognizing the realities of the animal agriculture industry is difficult. The interviewee continued, “One of my most difficult teaching moments was in my second year [as a professor]. We watched *Food Inc.* It’s great. One of the arguments they make, is that if you are cruel to the animal, it’s a small step to take to be cruel to humans too. This is the way compassion works. If you’re not compassionate to animals, then increasing your circle of victims is relatively easy. So I made this argument to my students. If you care less about the suffering to animals, you’ll transport the argument to humans. And one of my students said: if animals are killed and the workers are abused, but we can feed Americans cheap food, we should do it. It was really hard” [6] (*Food Inc.*, Kenner, 2008). This quote echoed much of what was previously discussed about the role of violence in our society, and the thin line drawn between extending violence to other beings. Yet the response of the student exhibited how

isolated feelings of empathy towards animal welfare can be, a result of a moral blindness that is perpetuated by the Western food system.

For many vegans, the mistreatment of animals, the violence inflicted on them, and the moral blindness of much of society results in feelings of pessimism. To address moral blindness, which essentially requires overhauling societally ingrained values of speciesism, “you’re talking on a much larger scale. A scale so large that the UN Food and Agriculture organization reports we kill 56 billion land animals. That’s as many animals killed in a year and a half to total the number of people who have ever lived on earth. And it doesn’t include sea animals. That’s too large of a number to be optimistic about the future of the food industry” [8]. What is being argued here is that the consumption of animals is such an enormous component of how the world functions and thinks, that its redesign towards one less violent and more sustainable is unlikely. This is further perpetuated by how violence is normalized because of the food system: “some people say ‘if slaughterhouses had glass walls everyone would be vegetarian’ – and my reaction is I beg to differ. Somebody would hit on the idea to build stands and sell hotdogs and popcorn, just like people used to go to public hangings” [8]. Ultimately, this reflected how deeply ingrained making violent choices have become through the food industry. While addressing ethical considerations is a source of motivation for many vegans to continue practicing veganism, it is also a source of anxiety, sadness, and cynicism. The reality of the meat and dairy industry is both horrifying and extensive; and because of this, it promotes brutality in how we treat those that we view as less valuable than ourselves. As one interview concluded, “this is all may be a commentary on the human condition – that the most appealing argument for non-vegans might be first your health, then the environment, and then lastly it’s the animals. Sadly. But that’s probably the most convincing argument” [7]. Ethics are complicated, elaborate, and

deeply personal. How we utilize ethics in our every day lives, then, can reflect much about how we view the world and those in it.

*f. The Environmental Narrative*

Lastly, there was an *environmental narrative*, or the way in which concerns for the environment, the effects of climate change, and resource use influence the adaptation to veganism. While for a majority of the interviewees the environmental benefits of a plant-based diet was considered a “bonus,” for some – namely students – it was particularly influential. Perhaps the reason the environmental narrative took a backburner compared to other values is tied to the fact that “the environmental impact will force people into becoming more plant-based” [6]. The other rationales for going vegan, such as animal ethics, are determined more by principle and altruism. This defense became particularly clear during one interview, where it was pronounced,

*“The environmental consequences of animal husbandry are appalling... When you start thinking about the fact that half the arable land in the United States is grazing land, [and how] beef production is a completely inefficient expenditure of land and water use. It leads to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, methane, shit lagoons around swine farms, and hormones in animals. There are all kinds of environmental havoc being wreaked. And for me, I’m sometimes asked why I don’t focus more on that. I can see three types of problems here [when addressing veganism]: human health and welfare issues, environmental issues, and animal rights issues. The first two, humans will have to address on selfish grounds. But the most selfless responsibility you can take it taking it for animals – for those that are more vulnerable than any human being. They can’t speak, they cannot defend themselves, and they cannot win in a confrontation about human beings. I don’t think people should [only] focus on one of the three, but that’s why I focus on that one” [8].*

Following this line of logic, the environmental impacts of veganism are incentivizing and an important source of justification for the diet. But, at least for some vegans, acting out of compassion and self-sacrifice is more compelling to the vegan transition. It provides reason for practicing what one preaches, when what one preaches is non-violence and equality.

Nonetheless, for those of whom helping the environment was a significant source of inspiration and pride, greenhouse gas emissions, land use, food distribution, and overfishing were the most relevant topics discussed during their interviews. For one interviewee, her profession in a scientific field exposed her to some of the lesser-known data about the dairy industry: “at some point I was dealing with the data surrounding methane emissions from cows, and during that research I came across figures about emissions and environmental consequences of cheese production – the runoff, pollution, and how these numbers work out specifically to make cheese. So, once I figured that out, it became really easy to cut out cheese” [11]. It is less clear whether or not a general public is exposed to this type of information, making it significant that the interviewee had a background and career in science and understood veganism in its context. She continued, “a lot of people don’t know about the connection between climate change and meat,” [11] an issue that is further confounded by the rhetoric around whether climate change is real or not, namely in the United States. This discussion allowed me to think about the connection between politics and food choice in another way – i.e. not necessarily in regards to food policy, subsidies, food deserts, and advertising, as I had been considering previously. Is there a correlation between vegans and political affiliation? Are more liberal thinkers more likely to be vegan, and how does recognizing climate change play into this? These are questions out of the scope and timeframe of this thesis, but are nonetheless thought provoking. Can veganism become normalized through the lens of environmental impact if a portion of the United States, and a portion of our governing body, do not recognize the environment being impacted in the first place?

Other concerns were brought up regarding resource use, namely how grain is distributed across the world. An interviewee admitted, “I didn’t learn this until after I went vegan, but it will

never fail to surprise me just how much food that could be fed to humans that's given to cattle. And how much water, and how much land it takes for that... all just for the consumption of animals that only serve a minute percentage of the world. We could solve world hunger, or get pretty close, to it, by just practicing veganism" [3]. It is concepts like these that prompt a sort of stress and despondency in vegans about the state of the world. It is easy to be disheartened by realizing an issue that people can rally around – child hunger – could be alleviated by a shift in dietary trends. In this regard, environmental considerations for veganism are compelling.

One interviewee was particularly passionate about overfishing and marine health, given that the impact and ethics of consuming seafood is not considered nearly as much as the impact and ethics of consuming terrestrial animals. This interviewee said, "my degree is in marine studies, so I know a fair amount about this kind of stuff – overfishing and its policies, but most people don't think much about marine life. It's because you can't see it every day. If species of wild land animals were disappearing at the rates of marine animals, we would notice, and we would care, whereas what's under the water it doesn't affect us in the same way" [11]. To reiterate an earlier statistic, by 2048, scientists have predicted the collapse of all fished taxa (Worm, 2006, p. 790). This is a devastating fact, perhaps especially devastating to scientists who recognize its major ramifications. But because figures like this alone have not stopped nor slowed down rates of marine fishing, the psychological disconnect between choosing to eat seafood and its ecological impacts is apparent. This interviewee went on to discuss the dissonance between ethics for terrestrial and marine animals by using octopi as an example: "The other thing I really can't handle is octopus, because they are really smart, too [like pigs]" [11]. The species is known for tool use to aid in foraging, among other mental capabilities (Mann,

2013, p. 3). Thus, care and understanding for species intelligence across all habitats is especially incentivizing when paired with an awareness of broad environmental impacts, like overfishing.

Nonetheless, while a few interviewees noted the significance of veganism as it relates to environmental issues, its relevancy to the adaptation to veganism was not as prevalent as the other narratives. This is not to imply the environmental narrative is less significant – in fact, as the literature review suggests, veganism is an especially useful mechanism to combat climate change – but one that, perhaps, will grow in significance over time. As climate change scenarios become more common and severe, veganism can continue to emerge as a strategy to confront it.



## CHAPTER 5: THE TRANSITION

The narratives are the vehicle by which the meanings of veganism can be portrayed: the purposes veganism serves and why. Nevertheless, to repeat, “it is not enough to have the right thought; to be a vegan one might have the right action” (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 20). The process the interviewees underwent to become vegan – the literal action taken, the cognizant making of changes in behavior – is a step just as important as the narratives in recognizing veganism as a cultural phenomenon. The transition is the *how* of veganism, the ways in which the actions behind veganism were organized and carried out by the interviewees. This parallels the understanding of culture as “an identifiable process,” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 103), something more tangible than just its symbolic meanings. Furthermore, culture has been described as a “repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of actions. Both individuals and groups know how to do different kinds of things in different circumstances” (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). Thus, cultural phenomena result in lines of action – decisions and behavioral changes – that are characterized by certain contexts. This concept made the actual transition process to a vegan diet an important topic of discussion during the interviews. Every interviewee addressed how he or she made the transition in a way that best worked for themselves. These conversations included how the transition formally happened, the aid of being vegetarian beforehand, routine development, medical visits, and their own scales of strictness. This chapter pulls away from the influences surrounding the interviewees’ decisions to practice veganism, and instead describes the way in which they made tangible behavioral changes.

Almost every interviewee became vegan cold turkey; a choice that, I admit, I was surprised by. I initially believed that making the transition gradually, by cutting out certain food products one at a time or making certain meals of the day vegan, would alleviate some of the

difficulties and starkness in a change in diet. Nevertheless, for one mostly vegan family, “it didn’t feel ‘cold turkey,’ it was very natural. We didn’t miss it. We didn’t have to find some way to adopt. Sure, we tried different things. But it was pretty natural” [6]. Assessing the situation as a new norm, rather than a complete transformation, was helpful. However, a member of this same family did mention, “once you are vegetarian it’s easy. And we went from an Asian-based diet, with not a lot of dairy, so transition was particularly easy” [7]. For others, while the transition to veganism initially happened all at once, this was not necessarily indicative of its easiness: “I went vegan all at once, with a couple incidents of back sliding. When I went completely vegan, I was living in an apartment and cooking for myself [in college]. I remember two occasions where I was like ‘I want cheese’ and made a pizza. And then I felt completely awful. I remember very well those couple of incidents. And back then there weren’t good vegan alternatives – there wasn’t anything like [what we have now] at the time” [16]. This sheds light on an important theme that will be discussed in more detail – how vegans confront a situation where they eat something, on purpose or not, that is not vegan. Even so, what this reflected was that once the interviewee became vegan, incidents where they were not vegan did not shatter their experience in the long run.

Secondarily, a vegan couple addressed their transition to veganism as more of a ritualistic period: “The conversion was pretty quick. [My wife] was a life-long vegetarian, and I was an omnivore. And I went cold turkey, except for using up food in freezer. So over the course of about three weeks we used that up. The way that I make a change that stays is to have a ceremony. Some sort of ritual, a public event. And so we had last suppers, and food giveaways, and a lot of ceremonial meals. To say goodbye to eggs and things like that” [14]. This kind of transition, I believe, is powerful; something that could be emulated by others perhaps struggling

to change their diets by addressing it in a creative way. By having last meals and food giveaways, one is confirming to others their commitment to the process. One can show others the meaningfulness behind veganism by taking the transition seriously. On a personal level, ceremonial meals present an opportunity to formally address one's dietary progression. In this same couple, the wife had art receptions, "where I made the food and the art. And to me it was a big deal, that all of this could be satisfying to people and I wasn't going to have to take any food home. It was a hit" [15]. This was a way to combine her profession with her dietary choices, to precipitate a supportive community, and introduce her friends to another part of her life. Thus, the interviews presented two different strategies here: a shift that was normalized and viewed as a natural progression for oneself and/or one's family's dietary preferences, or a shift that was memorialized and concreted by bringing the change to light among one's close community. But both represent the importance in making a transition that feels comfortable and meaningful.

Roughly half the interviewees were vegetarian for some period of time before becoming vegan, something that they all identified as an aid in the transition. For one interviewee, being vegetarian was an equally purposeful choice: "I knew I wanted to be vegan eventually so I became vegetarian around a year beforehand to ease the transition" [2]. This was the only instance in which vegetarianism was used as a stepping-stone for veganism. For many others, vegetarianism aided in that it introduced them to the questions about animal ethics: for example, "I became vegetarian as a high schooler – even though I grew up in the Midwest in meat and potatoes family. I had a couple friends who were vegetarian and grew up in vegetarian households. So some of it was because of this interaction with friends who were aware of moral implications of eating meat. Then I started to read animal rights literature, educate myself. So I was already starting to think about the moral choices I was making with my diet, starting with

vegetarianism. It was a natural evolution [to veganism]” [16]. Vegetarianism is similar to veganism in that animal ethics are a crucial aspect of its message. Exposure to these values, as an introduction of sorts, is beneficial to vegans. Vegetarianism further aided in the transition in that it exposed interviewees to the discomfort of making out-of-the-norms dietary choices: “It’s a short step from vegetarianism to veganism, because you’re already making different food choices and being inconvenient” [4]. This awareness was reiterated by other interviewees, one of whom disclosed, “being vegetarian first made becoming vegan easier, because I had already made a ridiculous decision [in my family’s eyes], since no one in my family was vegetarian. So I kind of went through the hard stuff then” [11]. In this way, addressing the confusion and uncertainty of social situations through vegetarianism helped vegans feel more confident about their decisions later on.

Furthermore, finding vegan foods that one knows and likes was another critical factor in making the transition to veganism more successful. To do so, interviewees noted that reading ingredient labels became a necessary skill: “I don’t have to keep looking at labels as much anymore. But it’s a habit that I acquired, because at first it was so easy to reach for something and have to put it back because I found there was something in it. It’s a mindset you have to get into when you are grocery shopping or in the cafeteria” [17]. Nonetheless, reading ingredient labels can be frustrating, which perhaps explains why the “staple foods” indicated in the interviews were all fairly simple – almond and cashew milks, peanut butter, fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, potatoes, beans, rice, hummus, lentils, and veggie burgers are the big ten. Developing sets of staple foods that one knows and likes facilitates their every day use, which has added benefits: “I feel much more committed the longer I eat vegan – the more vegan foods I eat, the less chance there is for me to every go back. It increases the likelihood of me never wanting to

eat those things again” [17]. Vegan substitutions for non-vegan ingredients, things like nut milks, faux-meats, and faux-cheeses, tended to be viewed as junky and heavily processed by the majority of the interviewees; however, they did appreciate that their incorporation into grocery stores makes veganism more appealing to omnivores considering the diet. Many vegan substitutes are soy based, and one interviewee affirmed, “I won’t say the alternatives are equal, but it was something I became okay with over time” [13]. Lastly, three interviewees discussed having milk in their coffee – an important part of their daily routine that needed to be addressed. One interviewee kept milk in their coffee for three months after becoming vegan: “the hardest single change for me was coffee, because I used to drink six to eight cups a day with milk. So that was a really hard choice. But now like coffee without milk better” [4]. For others who craved the creaminess of a latte, the discovery of hemp milk was key: “it has all the same nutritional value as almond milk. But it’s the best for coffee because it foams up. I learned that from my son living in Oregon, where there are all these vegan hacks that he picked up on” [10]. So, like in any lifestyle change, learning the substitutions that are satisfying and work with one’s habits is essential.

On this line of thought, a topic of conversation that is particularly relevant to the transition to veganism was how strictly the interviewees followed and follow vegan restrictions. Almost every interviewee viewed veganism as a “work in progress,” where situational considerations are necessary. By this, I am suggesting that vegans do not consider their veganism a failure if they make a mistake, or if they feel uncomfortable in a social situation and eat something non-vegan. “If it’s all in or all out, I would not be drawn to it. There’s enough fundamentalism in American life and we don’t need more. If veganism is something you try hard to do, and you slip up, it’s not like you’re a ruined vegan forever” [10]. This idea is replicated in

other cultural phenomena: like in the way missing church one Sunday does not invalidate one's Christianity. Trying one's best and accepting one's mistakes is more conducive to maintaining veganism long term. For other vegans, their measure of strictness came out of a desire to "try not to be a pain. I want to make decisions that affect me and not everyone else around me" [11]. This is a hard balance to strike, principally when one finds oneself in a situation where the food choices are out of their control. Another interviewee mentioned, however, how to handle food situations one might *think* is out of their control, like at the movies: "I bring my own snacks. I pop my own popcorn; I'll bring a banana or some blueberries. It's easy enough to bring your own food options" [5]. These decisions come with one's own comfort level with veganism and the situation one will find oneself in. There is no right or wrong choice.

Moreover, the majority of the interviewees noted that their flexibility with veganism was in regards to lifestyle products (clothing, toiletries, etc.) more often than food products: "I allow for some flexibility, I recognize that sometimes perfection is not going to be possible. Like these boots I'm wearing. I've never lived in the cold, so I bought these boots. I wasn't quite sure if the pleather ones would be what I need. My preference would be not, but in that scenario, I have to let it go" [13]. Because the transition to veganism primarily comes with a change in dietary choices, the use of animal byproducts can become a secondary realization, i.e. the longer one is vegan, the more one learns about the textile and footwear industries, and can eliminate those products from one's other daily routine. "That's been a slower process," one interviewee mentioned, "We find ourselves thinking and talking about clothing a lot and having to replace things. It's more that I won't be buying the same thing the next time around" [14]. Furthermore, for an interviewee who's primary motivation for becoming vegan was its environmental impacts, non-vegan lifestyle products are more of a challenge: "I really do care a fair amount of animal

testing. So I do try to use products that are not tested on animals, but I don't read the ingredients on my makeup as closely as I read my food labels, because it doesn't have the same environmental pull for me" [11].

In the same way, most interviewees, while they enjoyed and are committed to their own veganism, are very appreciative of non-vegans who attempt to cut back. There is immense value in reducing intake of meat and dairy products, environmentally, ethically, and in terms of influencing market trends. As one interviewee put simply: "you don't have to become vegan to eat differently and make a big impact" [11]. In this way, addressing the connection between diet and its consequences can serve as an important foundation to understanding veganism. Furthermore, awareness is inspirational: "If you don't want to go vegan, fine, don't go vegan. Because if people are informed, and they get it, at least they'll reduce. And I think it's encouraging to see someone who's not as 'radical' about veganism to still do it. Because I keep it on the down low, I think it seems more accessible. I'm reducing my intake of animal products, so hopefully other people can see that that's possible for them too" [2]. Being appreciative of non-vegan efforts to minimize harm is, therefore, an important way to make veganism more approachable.

None of the interviewees were vegan from birth. This means, somewhere along the way, the lifestyle struck a cord with them and became a viable option. This makes them astutely aware of how veganism can be perceived from another perspective. For example, "as vegans, we know we're doing the right thing from our standpoint. But we need to understand that other people, for certain reasons, would find it nearly impossible" [6]. The barriers that non-vegans face are all barriers that the vegan interviewees once faced and overcame in their transition, and are

discussed in the following chapter. These are obstacles that vegans are conscious and mindful of, though that does not make them any less of a challenge.



## CHAPTER 6: THE BARRIERS

There are barriers that made, or continue to make, veganism a challenge for the interviewees: factors that influenced the ability for action to be taken, and factors that had to be overcome as part of the process to become vegan and maintain the lifestyle. Addressing the barriers to veganism is important because they can determine the type of action taken by the interviewees. Within a cultural context, “attention to strategies of action also suggest a number of specific research questions, answers to which would give us a more precise understanding of how culture works,” for example, how “belief systems lose their plausibility” and “what capacities particular cultural patterns give those who hold them” (Swidler, 1986, p. 283). A discussion of barriers is meant to provide insight into the nuances and details of the action of veganism -- similar to how understanding action in culture, as noted above, examines the feasibility of the actions and what actions the participants of a culture feel capable undertaking. Furthermore, given that “the fate of cultural meanings depends on the strategies of action they support” (Swidler, 1986, p. 284), the success of becoming vegan for the interviewees is related to the actions they took, the specificities of which required confronting and curbing the barriers to veganism. These included: going out to eat, cooking at home, traveling, nutritional completeness, polarization from the vegan community, and, the most outstanding quandary of them all, polarization from the non-vegan community. While these barriers did not necessarily inhibit the vegan interviewees from maintaining the lifestyle, they are important to recognize as sources of resistance and areas of concern for non-vegans. Furthermore, these are the areas that the vegan movement can utilize moving forward: where is there opposition, why is it there, and what are ways to approach the opposition in a way that makes veganism more accessible?

*a. The Barriers*

Most interviewees highlighted the significance of knowing how to cook in order to feel more successful and accomplished as a vegan. For those who did not know how to cook, this was a learning curve. Vegan cooking requires creativity for food to taste good and be presentable, and it requires knowledge for meals to be nutritionally complete. Because of this, “being a vegan is an enormous amount of work. I’m a lazy person, and I wasn’t doing it right. There was something missing [nutritionally] which I probably could have figured out,” [9] and because of that, the food this interviewee was cooking and consuming was not nourishing. Not everyone can take the time to understand their nutrition deficiencies and learn how to prepare meals that satisfy those deficiencies. For other interviewees, cooking was a challenge confounded by having non-vegan family members: “What do I buy and how do I prepare it so everyone in family enjoys it?” [14]. For parents, introducing the world of vegan food to non-vegan children is difficult because it appears out of the norm. Furthermore, family members can have different palates and preferences, and appealing everyone at mealtime is a challenge for non-vegans alike. This interviewee continued, “We need to have more infrastructure where we don’t just talk about *why* it’s important, but we show people *how* to do it. To go to grocery store first with people and prepare it with them.” Confidence and knowledge about vegan cooking is key.

Nevertheless, cooking is time-consuming, both for vegan individuals and vegan families. This presented a barrier to some interviewees because “we live in a culture where you think ‘fast, fast, fast.’ But you gotta cook. You gotta spend time in the kitchen. And you need to have a refrigerator with food that will go badly if you don’t cook it” [8]. The Western food system serves the impulse for “fast food,” the idea that Americans do not want, or do not have the luxury, to spend hours in the kitchen. (It’s important to note that for many people who work

incredibly long hours, usually at or below minimum wage, cooking is an especially pertinent barrier. The system is working against their ability to make healthful decisions in a number of ways, and this represents the complexity of dietary choice. Barriers need to be addressed on a systematic level, not just an individual one). However, because the notion of fast food is ingrained in Western food culture, it presents veganism as needlessly laborious. If we compare these desires to the dietary tendencies of other cultures, the result is “ironic, given that food is about social fabric and community. People in other cultures kind of joke about the fact that people in the United States want to eat fast and simple. A meal is not just about filling your stomach in other cultures. A meal can take hours. What better way to draw out the social meaning in food than by sharing it? There is no cultural practice that is more elemental to people’s identity than food” [8]. This was an interesting comparison to draw: for many other nations, the food they eat and how they eat it is essential to creating feelings of community. The cooking of the meal – and the time spent to do so – is not viewed negatively, and in fact, is viewed the opposite. Thus, this demonstrates how barrier of cooking is something perhaps unique to Americans. It would be interesting to compare how vegans from other nations view and address vegan cooking.

However, in contrast, two interviewees did discuss how they enjoy the challenge of vegan cooking; in this sense, vegan cooking was not a barrier, but a new skill to master. “My feeling is that cooking with meat is too easy: you always have that strong meat flavor to carry a dish. There’s always the rich, fatty taste. Nobody knows how to cook and get flavors without meat. These are the holes to fill in vegan cooking” [4]. Being able to cook vegan, for these interviewees, meant becoming flavor proficient. “The whole taste experience was a change [from a non-vegan to a vegan diet]. An omnivorous diet is a lot easier to find something to put into

your mouth with a lot of flavor but no effort” [14]. Hence, it’s important to note that where cooking may be seen as a barrier for some, it is a source of gratification for others.

Going out to eat is a large barrier for many of the younger, sometimes single vegan interviewees, for whom going out to dinner, on dates, and trying new restaurants is an important part of their social scene. Some interviewees described going out to eat “as something not enjoyable,” especially for those who are “are concerned about dietary strictness. I get stressed going to a random restaurant or place I’ve never been to, because it’s embarrassing to go to restaurants and change ingredients on the menu in front of people” [2]. Vegans who are newer to the lifestyle tend to feel this way – discomfort in changing menu items, fear of the way their friends or meal counterparts will view them. Trying new restaurants can be frustrating if they didn’t have time to scope out the menu, or the restaurant is unwilling to make changes. Because of this, many of the interviewees recognized that the only time they were not vegan before formally making the transition was when they were out to eat at restaurants. Nonetheless, other interviewees stressed that the longer one maintains veganism, the more comfort one feels in going out to eat: “I’m used to being the one that asks all the questions, and in such a way that I’m not being the demanding customer. I usually call ahead first, and ask if they can accommodate us” [16]. However, this doesn’t alleviate a frustration that most interviewees expressed: that even if there is a vegan option on the menu, there is usually only one and its palate is limited. Food diversity is not a strong suit in veganism when it comes to eating out. A vegan family articulated, “we had an easy conversion [to veganism], but restaurants and grocery stores do make it difficult. You go to a diner – and what do you have? French fries? We went camping in New Hampshire once, and we had to find a quick spot. We couldn’t find a single thing on the diner menu” [6]. Multiple interviewees who live in Lewisburg reiterated this discontent: at the few

food spots there are vegan items, the options are usually the same (a veggie burger), and rarely are healthy. In situations such as these, interviewees acknowledged eating beforehand was more ideal, or at least suggesting to friends to eat out at places where they can design their own meal (i.e. Chipotle-style.)

Furthermore, traveling was a barrier for interviewees who conducted research in the field and whose professions lead them outside the United States. For example, one interviewee conducted research in India, which required a yearly trip to the field. Though India is largely vegetarian, “they cook in clarified butter, so it’s really hard to avoid ghee and yogurt” [16]. Another interviewee, who worked in Greece for a number of years, reiterated this difficulty because “seafood is their culture” [4]. It was cases like these where rejecting the local customs and offerings was awkward, a difficult scene to navigate. To confront these feelings in an effective way, another interviewee mentioned she prefers to “emulate the idea that in Islam you fast during Ramadan, except if you’re a traveller or sick” [9], and loosen her strictures. Situations such as these require a flexible mindset and an appreciation of a food dynamic that is out of one’s control. If one is unaware of likelihood or breadth of vegan options, one needs to assess their own comfort levels and priorities, and apply them accordingly to their travel plans. For example, for one interviewee, veganism took a backburner while she was in the army – where “you eat what you can eat” no questions asked [7]. Lastly, another interviewee validated the difficulty in navigating travel by mentioning, “it helps that we work at home. We don’t have to travel for work, and we don’t go out for lunch for work colleagues because we don’t have any” [14]. In professions where travel is a necessary component, veganism can be inconvenient.

Other interviews revealed a barrier in regards to nutritional completeness and how certain vegan food made the interviewees feel. These are barriers that principally occurred in the early

stages of veganism. For example, “there was a challenge with, not the food per se, but with the nourishment I knew I needed from what I was eating. Because initially I felt like, where am I going to get my protein? Where am I going to get my vitamin this or vitamin that? How am I going to know? But it’s about becoming informed about what you need to eat. When you become more familiar with that, and how to prepare your food, it becomes second nature” [5]. This echoes what other interviewees noted about reading ingredient labels: what is seen as a frustration at first becomes normalized with more and more practice. But it does suggest that without proper time put into educating oneself, a barrier such as nutritional completeness seem especially limiting. Furthermore, food alternatives are a concern, especially because the substitutions tend to be soy-based – soymilk, soy cheeses, soy yogurts, soy burgers, etc. While many interviewees noted that the alternatives are less appealing – because whole foods are preferable and there is, generally, a disinterest in faux-meats for ethical reasons – they are more tempting for non-vegans trying to make a transition. However, as one interviewee recounted, the soy-heaviness of these ingredients was a deterrent: “When I first went totally dairy-free, I initially consumed a lot of soy. Soymilk, tofu, edamame, you name it. So basically a soy overload. And so I tried to cut it out a little, and at that point realized it was giving me horrible mood swings. [Because of that] as a challenge I try not to eat processed soy products, or at least limit it to a few times a week” [1]. Because this interviewee was male, he believed the mood swings were correlated to phytoestrogen levels in soy, saying, “It supposedly increases estrogen in men more than women. And this could be totally anecdotal, but I do listen to my body. And when I cut it out, I felt better” [1]. Thus, some of the barriers that relate to food dissatisfaction can be resolved via “trial and error,” figuring out which foods work for oneself and why.

When it came to food cravings – having to turn down things one once enjoyed – interviewees described the difficulty in giving up cheese and certain family traditions. In regards to cheese, as detailed in the literature review, its addictiveness is certainly part of it: “Letting go of cheese is the biggest challenge for lots of vegetarians to convert to veganism. It’s addictive, from casein. So it can be very difficult for vegetarians to imagine a day without it” [7]. The longer one eats something every day, the harder it is to come to terms with its “loss.” More significantly, perhaps, is the relationship certain meals have with family traditions. As one interviewee described, “some things I missed, not just for taste but for cultural and family reasons – which is something I’m still working through, the nostalgia of it. A lot of it’s like black American ‘macaroni and cheese,’ and I’ve had vegan versions and it just is not the same. Or mostly things around Thanksgiving, holiday type meals. But in the day to day, there are no terrible differences between food choices” [13]. Grappling with the elimination of certain ingredients, then, is about more than the pleasure of the food itself. It is also eliminating the ability to share food, and share the moments around food, that make up one’s family or ethnicity’s history. As another interviewee described, “Food is culture. So when family meals consist of meat – things like turkey and ham at Thanksgiving and at Christmas – the change must be even more difficult. The eating of those foods is a deeply engrained cultural element of people’s identity” [7]. This can be a serious barrier to becoming vegan; to single oneself out of eating practices that have meaning tied to them, like identity development, community participation, sharing, and genealogy. It is such a prevalent barrier that it can cause many vegans to question their own beliefs: “I’ve had a lot of trouble with my boyfriend’s family. I would maybe even eat meat with them, because I don’t want to say, ‘I can’t eat what you just made for me.’ I would feel so rude. There’s that barrier between us that is hard to navigate. There’s a

stigma and confusion why people are vegan. And I feel like people who have been long-time meat eaters, like his family, would scoff at it really easily” [17].

Consequently, multiple interviewees described their relationship with their parents and members of their extended family that hindered their adaptation and transition to veganism. This was in part because “like a lot of American households, we grew up eating meat at dinner” [3]. Meat is viewed as an essential part of the meal, and when a parent is preparing the meal, there is little a child can do to decline it. “It was really hard to fight my upbringing, the discipline of it. My father is the one who influenced me about my eating. He was from a large Catholic family, and it was all meat and potatoes. I definitely grew up thinking a meal had to have meat at the center of a meal. And now, that’s my biggest frustration. A kind of a lack of discipline. I think if you grow up into [veganism] when you’re young, it’s easier. You grow up with a taste for it. What you learned as a child is difficult to change” [9]. Only by transitioning out of the “house” are some vegans able to discern the difference between how they grew up eating and how they may prefer eating. But one’s childhood is formative, and the influence of one’s parents on decision-making is persuasive and difficult to challenge. The same goes for interactions with extended family – situations in which interviewees felt their parents accepted and understood their decision, but others did not. “My grandparents are resistant in a way that they just think it’s a weird thing” one interviewee proclaimed, “They will say things like, ‘that’s just that thing for skinny people,’ or ‘you don’t eat anything.’ I have to tell them I eat well-rounded, full meals, and that I do have my days where all I eat is vegan pizza” [13]. This type of response, then, was not as much demeaning as it was a misconception around veganism. But it can be disheartening when vegans are considering having a conversation with extended family. Other interviewees agreed, “Even in our family, we have a spectrum of reactions. Some despise the decision, and



make a point to tell us how ridiculous it is. They call vegans certain phonetics, as if it is a new colloquial religion, and humans were always meant to have meat” [7]. Whether or not these interactions merit a response depends on one’s comfort in facing confrontations. However, the interviewee continued, “there are also other people in our family who didn’t understand [veganism] at first, but are now almost entirely vegetarian. I don’t know if they buy the ethics side of it, but they certainly recognize the other values for health and the environment” [7]. Thus, there can be a range of reactions that come with addressing veganism in a family setting. The negative ones, however, are important to accentuate because they shed light on more than just what one chooses to eat. Transitioning to veganism impacts one’s ability to participate in certain family traditions, something that can spawn conflict and misunderstandings between family members.

Accordingly, the most significant barrier, discussed in every single interview, is the polarization they feel from the non-vegan community. Discussing veganism with non-vegans is a delicate situation; one that has a tendency to escalate and leave both parties feeling frustrated and misunderstood. Why? The interviewees had a number of theories. Partially, “food and body image are sensitive subjects. There’s so much weight added to what you eat and how you look, and for some reason it’s everybody’s business” [3]. In this way, vegans tend to feel “health shamed,” even if they *don’t* believe they eat and live in a particularly healthful manner. “People will say ‘oh my god she’s so healthy! That’s awesome.’ And I just want to be like, dude, I eat pizza and candy just like everybody else. It’s just made with different things” [3]. Nevertheless, because plant-based diets are generally identified with whole, largely unprocessed foods, veganism gets categorized similarly to healthy eating: “I think veganism is sort of pushed off in the way that healthy eating is. I get the same kind of ‘shut up’ reaction. People don’t want to be

preached to about these kinds of things. And I can see people's reactions, and people almost health shame. Like if you're going to the gym, people are like 'Woah you're going to the gym.' It's the same thing" [2]. It is unfortunate that prioritizing health, in a vegan or non-vegan way, can appear threatening – as if one is trying to compare or compete with others to be healthier. This misconception undermines some of the core values of veganism, like equating all living beings.

Furthermore, because veganism goes against the norm for eating practices, it can become portrayed as a “holier than thou” practice – something snobbish and even threatening. “I think, the general stigma behind veganism is kind of like this snooty, west-coast girl that wants to lose weight image, and I don't think it's actually ever the case. But when you ask the average person what they think of when they hear vegan, it would be associated with a health fad. There are all these jokes and memes made up about veganism, and it's not like you actually ever hear the arguments against them. I think it's just based on the fact that it's something easy to dislike, and it's easy to judge, and it's easy to put on a demographic that the average American can't identify with” [17]. Vegans can feel polarized by non-vegans, because it is something non-vegans do not necessarily empathize with, and that makes it an uncomfortable topic of discussion. Perhaps this stereotype is especially pertinent and hurtful for younger, female vegans. Another interviewee noted that, “sometimes you can just be seen as a snob. Like I was out for someone's birthday and they wanted cheesecake from Cheesecake Factory. So we went, and I didn't eat it. I wondered if people thought I wasn't eating it for my weight or because it was unhealthy or something else false” [3]. This idea further reflected our societal sensitivity around body image.

Other interviewees continued to address how veganism can be viewed as a threat by going against the norm. “When you think about how this country was established – the rural

communities that are its backbone – what did they grow? Meat. There is the image of cowboys herding cows. And what is it for? It's for the meat industry. So veganism goes against something very deeply engrained. And people perceive it as a threat" [7]. Meat has long been part of American food culture, and because of this, those who do not eat meat can appear antipathetic. No one wants to be told their choices or their behavior is wrong. These notions are threatening also in that they confront one's morals: "If you show up and you're the only vegan at a table where other people are consuming animal products, you have a difficult time finding something to eat. So there will be misunderstanding. They react in a mildly hostile manner to it; all you have to do is mention you're a vegan and people will give you a look. What this says to me that this strikes a chord in the moral soul of people – deep down they know that eating animal products is wrong. But it's so deeply ingrained in people, and people want to feel like they're on the ethical high ground without having to change much of what they do" [8]. Thus, this interviewee argues that everyone is conscious of the pain and suffering inflicted on animals in our food industry. Conversing about it engenders certain emotions, one of which is defensiveness, and perhaps the defensiveness stems from feeling truly wrong about it. Consequently, "when it does come up, because it has to as some point, the response from others is interesting. So often it's defensive, without any kind of reason to be defensive. Because I am not accusing you of being a bad person" [14]. The reason to prompt conversation between vegans and non-vegans is not to reject the other's ideology, but rather to have thoughtful discussion.

This doesn't make the disassociation between vegans and non-vegans any less stressful. For some it can feel isolating on multiple levels: "when the overwhelming majority of your social group neither endorses nor understands at a very basic level to be vegan, it's easy to feel

like an outcast. Even when people try to accommodate you, it's easy to feel merely humored. And even when I feel like I have established, after two decades, a way of life I will never abandon, there is still something very lonely about it. The vast majority of people I know are relatively indifferent to injustices done to animals" [8]. For others it can feel like a commentary on their character: "After a while I realized people think you're trying to get attention. They think that you're weak in a way, if you won't participate in the standard American diet. So you must be afraid" [15]. And, for the most part, navigating the barrier between vegans and non-vegans is awkward; it is something that many interviewees never want to bring up in the first place. "Basically, the status quo of food culture is stacked against you. It's huge. That is just an ongoing challenge for being vegan, and at the same time you don't want to be special. And we work really hard to make it normal – which is why I don't even mention it unless I'm forced to" [14]. By and large, vegans try really hard *not* to bring up veganism. They know how uncomfortable it can make people feel, and it isn't their intention to do so. Even just talking about veganism "is a delicate thing. So most of the time I don't touch the conversation unless folks ask me personally" [13]. Similarly, many interviewees discussed how carefully they word their conversations. Donald Watson coined the term vegan when he grew tired of trying to describe vegetarians who do not use dairy products, after which it was entered in the Oxford Dictionary in 1962 (Stepaniak, 1998, p. 2). But, in a sentiment reiterated by multiple interviewees, "the best thing for veganism would be for the word vegan to go away" [2]. Having a word for the practice inherently disengages it from others. So vegans describe themselves deliberately – "I don't say I'm vegan. I say I don't eat animal products" [3], while others mentioned they say, "I have dietary-constraints or am plant based" [4]. These responses reflect the barrier to even *mentioning* that one is vegan, which is a reflection on its tolerance in our

society. For one interviewee, nonetheless, verbalizing his veganism is not such a daunting task: “I’ve been a vegan for 20 years and I’m unapologetic. I’m not combative, but I am unafraid to say it. Because I’ve heard every objection out there. I’ve refined my ways of responding – sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. Some people will think about your response and sometimes they will be steadfast [in rejecting it]. In the case of the latter, I just think we’re living in two different moral universes. Communication can’t proceed beyond a certain point. And that’s that” [8]. Perhaps this comfort stems from the length of time that they have practiced veganism, and in that time have been able to anticipate the reactions of others. Thus, the way in which vegans feel polarized by non-vegans is complex and confounded by many variables – making it something especially difficult to navigate and particularly daunting when considering the transition to veganism.

Even so, interviewees addressed the stereotype of a “radical vegan,” and how these members of the vegan movement are polarizing not only to non-vegans, but also to other vegans who are not as forthrightly open about their beliefs. No one wants to feel criticized, especially when, as vegans, they are fighting the same fight. “For many vegans, it becomes a form of religion and it’s all in or all out. It’s a matter of faith. It’s about convincing other people. It can become that ardent – and it can become isolating” [10]. Most vegans appreciate when non-vegans reduce the amount of meat or dairy that they consume; just in the way they recognize their own inability to be perfectly vegan all the time. Particularly vocal vegans can “portray veganism as combative, as a sort of cultish sect. And I don’t think that contributes to the overall view of veganism at all” [6]. As a movement that, in many ways, is founded on principles of compassion and equality, dissecting other vegans for their strictness and effort to the cause is counterintuitive. Nonetheless, as one interviewee importantly noted, “I’ve met some pushy

vegans – and it has everything to do with their personalities and it has nothing to do with their veganism” [11]. And perhaps this is the crux of the barrier of dealing with radical veganism – there will always be members of a movement who are more aggressive about pushing their beliefs out of an inherent, domineering personality trait. Electing not to deal with those types of members, all the while diffusing the stereotype to those who may not understand veganism, are two important ways to combat this.

**b. *Overcoming the Barriers***

The ways in which to overcome the barriers mentioned above is largely what constitutes the bulk of this thesis: finding the values and deeper significance in veganism that helps commit oneself to the cause. However, some particularly tangible ways to addressing the fears and challenges of veganism were brought up. Surrounding oneself with supportive friends is imperative. For example, “I have a women’s group that I meet with every month, and there’s often someone’s birthday or whatever. So sometimes I bring the cake, or I bring something for myself. Because everybody’s going to be celebrating. Within this group, there are people who will make me a coconut sorbet. Who will go out of their way to get a treat for me. They will remember something I said and source it for me” [15]. These interactions reinforce inclusion and a sense of community that many vegans could feel isolated from in settings such as these. For older interviewees, friendships developed another sort of meaning, too: “Our friends support us in our veganism not necessarily because they are vegan, but because they wanted to preserve us, in terms of our health and our age” [15]. As one’s priorities change with age, so do priorities within one’s social circles. Marriage is another important source of reinforcement for veganism. For some, it is about mealtime: “my husband influences me continually because he does most of the cooking” [9]. If the food being prepared for a meal is vegan, it’s less likely one will go out of

their way to prepare something else. Others mentioned, “it would be really tough to do it on your own, like in couples or families where not everyone is on the same page. That’s got to be tough, though not impossible. It’s definitely easier when both people are committed to it and the household is committed to it” [14]. Example setting and support, in a close and trustworthy environment like the family circle, is valuable.

One of the most useful ways to overcome many of these barriers, as the interviews displayed, was more education: taking the time to consistently question one’s awareness and reasoning. “And that’s the thing, my personality is so unable to take any kind of unpleasantness. I could sure out my veganism if I truly exposed myself to the horrors of it... I learned something once in a writing seminar about threshold concepts. Once you come to a certain realization about some things, you have to fight your way across that threshold, and you can’t go back because you see what’s happening. And for vegans or vegetarians, you pass this threshold of understanding just how bad meat production and dairy production is, and you just can’t go back to being ignorant of it again” [9]. While it might be painful to re-familiarize oneself with the realities of the industry, for example, it is a manner to assure oneself exactly why one decided to become vegan in the first place. This is applicable to whatever factor or factors convinced one of veganism initially: “If you have a conviction for it, it’s a lot easier than if someone just told you you should. And for some people, even, the conviction ‘I want to do this to prove to myself I can,’ like running a marathon, is enough for them. That could totally work” [11]. Ultimately, it is about having enthusiasm and certainty to overcome what one perceives as the biggest challenge to veganism in one’s own environment. Different social, physical, and ethical environments produce equally different sets of challenges. By addressing the ways in which those

environments have shaped one's adaptation and transition to veganism in the first place, encountering its difficulties becomes much more manageable.



## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

The interviewees, through the narration of personal experiences and self-reflection on the values and rationales behind veganism, illustrated the set of dynamic contexts that influence the adaptation and transition to the lifestyle choice. The interviewees reflected on their own participation in, observation of, and reactions to a series of environments that they found themselves in over the course of their lives that played into their decision to become vegan – their societal environments (like their friend circles, their ethnic communities), their metaphysical environments (such as their support for principles of non-violence), and their physical environments (like their college campuses or the availability of vegan groceries). Their veganism, therefore, was dictated by the interactions between these environments. This allowed me to isolate six main narratives -- various subsets of the societal, metaphysical, and physical environments -- by which the journey to veganism was defined for the respondents: the narrative of the social circle, the narrative of geography, the narrative of morals, the narrative of physical health, the narrative of education, and the narrative of the environment. These narratives have justifications and implications that are much larger than a single individual choice. They are given meaning because of their dynamism and connectivity to other dimensions of culture, and they illustrate how veganism is collective in its nature. Through the narratives, veganism can be seen a result of shared behaviors and ideologies that are founded on an appreciation of the ways in which it impacts and is impacted by many facets of life.

Because of this, the adaptation and ultimate transition to veganism parallels other cultural phenomena. It has a foundation of collective, shared behaviors and contextual interactions by which it can be differentiated from other ways of life. This is the very basis for the definition of culture – i.e., something that “becomes a medium of meaning and action... [Where] culture is,

perhaps, not a thing but rather an identifiable process” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 103). Culture is a way to apply shared values and experiences in a tangible way: to take action as a result of collective ideologies. The interviewees demonstrated this journey, first by depicting what the shared behaviors and ideologies behind the transition to veganism were (the six narratives, the “meaning,”), and continuing by depicting the process itself (the transition and overcoming of barriers, the “action”). What this suggests is that cultural phenomena are characterized both by a sense of significance and a change in behavior, something that the adaptation and transition to veganism encompasses. For example, because “culture can be regarded as the structured, traditional set of patterns for behavior, a code or template for ideas and acts... and [it] survives by transfer *not* through biological means but rather through symbolic means,” the process by which an individual becomes vegan can be established by the patterns of behavior that form its symbolic reasoning (Mitchell, 1995, p. 105). This suggests that for any cultural phenomena, veganism included, a shared ideology (or ideologies) leads to a shared change in behavior. Thus, cultural phenomena inherently require collectivity – because it is through the communal values, experiences, and actions that the phenomena distinguish themselves from others: “Culture, therefore, can be specified as something which both differentiates the world and provides a concept for understanding that differentiation” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 103). Through this analysis, veganism can be seen as a function of culture whose members’ beliefs and actions characterize them differently than non-vegans. This is not meant to definitively segregate vegans from non-vegans, but rather to demonstrate how veganism functions as a unique cultural phenomenon.

Cultural phenomena are the result of combining meaning and action, where “values remain the major link between culture and action” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). This reflects how shared and interactive experiences are crucial to the foundation of a cultural process. I suggest

that veganism, therefore, is a cultural phenomenon by paralleling these steps. The meaning of veganism was depicted through the narratives of the interviewees, and the action of veganism was depicted through the transition and the overcoming of barriers. The narratives were the most significant portions of discussion during the interviews, perhaps in part because there is a diverse array of meanings behind veganism, and perhaps in part because the symbolism of veganism is more meaningful to the interviewees than the tangible actions taken to become vegan.

Consequently, each of the narratives exemplified and explained the “template” by which the interviewees were able to come to action. The ideas expressed by any one individual interviewee were most often relayed and reiterated in an interview with another, making it possible for me to connect ideas between interviewees in the narratives. Thus, the six different narratives became clear during the interview process from the overlap in their discussion in every interview. This reflects the shared, collective nature of the narrative’s meanings.

The social narrative depicted the ways in which interactions with other individuals in their ‘social circles,’ namely family, friends, and members of their racial community, influenced the adaptation and transition to veganism. Social circles are an important part of the meaning behind veganism because they serve as a platform for sharing ideas and experiences with multiple people. This allows close bonds to form between vegans, and also with those who support or are interested in veganism. The most significant source of meaning behind the social narrative was the role of support: where it is necessary for a vegan individual to find encouragement and comfort from others to feel like their journey is, at the very least, endorsed. The value of support was indicated by the discussion of finding online communities and advice forums for vegans of color or vegan parents, meal sharing with plant-based friends, and having constructive conversations with once-skeptical family members. Also important to the meaning

of the social narrative was the learning experience, where many parents expressed the value in echoing the compassionate and non-violent attitudes of their children, as well as mimicking the actions taken by friends with whom the interviewees had much in common. Thus, the social narrative highlighted meaning behind the action of veganism by reflecting the way in which human relationships serve as inspiration and motivation.

The geographic narrative depicted how physical location influenced the adaptation and transition to veganism, something that became of clear importance when the interviewees described the ease of accessing vegan groceries over time and the ease of accessing vegan groceries in certain cities compared to others. There was a shared understanding amongst the interviews that certain cities are more vegan-friendly in terms of food options (groceries, restaurants, etc.) and community development (vegan organizations) – notably larger urban centers, like Los Angeles, Portland, and Philadelphia. Nonetheless, this did not necessarily devalue the meaning or importance of being vegan in a smaller, more rural town, like many interviewees who consider Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, their home. There was recognition of the slight difficulty in food access in Lewisburg – produce is less fresh, more expensive, for example – but that over time, the ease of veganism has transformed in rural regions because of widespread changes in consumer culture and online shopping. This makes the geographic narrative an important part of the meaning behind veganism because it is something that can be perceived as a barrier (i.e. feeling like there are not vegan friendly options in a small town). However, as the interviews expressed, the role of geography in veganism is changing for the better, making the significance of physical location something less of frustration and more something of benefit.

The educational narrative depicted how the access to educational resources, self-education, and academia impacted the adaptation and transition to veganism for the interviewees. This narrative provided meaning to veganism because it is the way in which individuals could discover and substantiate why and how they want to become vegan. The educational narrative is the manner by which interviewees informed their process, so that, ultimately, the action of becoming vegan was more meaningful and committing. This was described in part as a shared appreciation for the college community and academic environment – utilizing the resources, like the library, professors, and classes, and the out-of-home environment to guide themselves in an empirical way. Equally important was the discussion about certain resources: what specific books, blogs, movies, etc., they used to actively engage with the aspects of veganism they needed or wanted instruction about. Whether or not the educative material focused on the mechanics or the logic of veganism, it was clear that some level of education is necessary to the transformation process. This allowed the interviewees to feel knowledgeable about subjects and themes in the vegan movement, but also to further engage themselves with the meaning of veganism and solidify their connection to vegan culture.

The ethical narrative depicted how asking moral questions about speciesism and welfare in the animal agriculture industry impacted the adaptation and transition to veganism. This narrative prompted the shared feeling of grief amongst interviewees: grief for the animals involved in the process, and grief about the disassociation between violence and the food industry. It also connected the interviewees through their values of empathy and non-violence, which allowed them to confront the realities of the industry and counter those feelings with ones of peace and equality. The discussions surrounding ethics, therefore, were ones of intense distress and ones that engendered discourse around the value of life – making it a very

emotional, and particularly motivating, theme surrounding veganism. For multiple interviewees, it was the direct engagement with the ethical narrative that facilitated their transition to veganism.

The health narrative depicted both the physical, biological responses that many interviewees underwent and the appreciation for the connection between nutrition and health for the adaptation and transition to veganism. Many interviewees shared the value of health because it is a personal and hereditary topic – the decisions made regarding their health would impact their longevity (disease mitigation and prevention) and perhaps the longevity of their families (example setting). This impacts their relationships with spouses, children, and other family members about whom they deeply care, making health considerations a communal issue. Furthermore, improvements in health provided several interviewees with inspiration to continue with the lifestyle; giving meaning to the health narrative as one of motivation and incentive. The health narrative, in this way, was particularly effective at triggering action because of its tangible effects.

The environmental narrative depicted how concerns for ecological health and stability impacted the adaptation and transition to veganism – concerns that are inherently collective because they require awareness about the interconnectivity of life. This narrative was founded on reflections about the consequences animal husbandry on the environment: the functioning of terrestrial and marine food chains and the consequences of excessive greenhouse gas emissions from the animal agriculture industry. Similar to the ethical narrative, the environmental narratives engendered emotions of anxiety and fear about the future of the planet, where interviewees were able to see veganism as an alleviating effort. Because of this, the

environmental narrative was meaningful for the interviewees through its functionality and value of ecocentric principles.

Thus, each of these narratives was given meaning and significance by the shared values, experiences, and rationales that the interviewees attributed to them. The social, geographical, educational, ethical, health, and environmental narratives were the meaning behind the action – they are the where, how, why, and when the interviewees were able to make a behavioral choice. This suggested that the narratives were an imperative, if not the most imperative, aspect to consider veganism as a cultural phenomenon, because they were what drove the phenomenon to be generated in the first place. This notion was further supported by considering how the six narratives were connected with one another, something that solidified the collectivity behind the meaning of veganism. As such, I am suggesting that the social, geographical, education, ethical, health, and environmental narratives are equally interactive with each other, and understanding how each of these narratives can affect the other can shed more light on their contribution to veganism as a cultural-scale reaction.

For example, a value noted during the educational narrative was that of the college community, which, in that context, highlighted the access to educational resources for veganism. As a parallel, the educational narrative is tied to the social and ethical narratives because the college community fostered relationships amongst students through animal rights groups on campus [17]. It is tied to the geographic narrative because the location of the college community in a California city means access to cheap produce [13]. It is tied to the health narrative because the college community promotes dorm and apartment style living arrangements with kitchens, letting interviewees experience vegan cooking first-hand [3]. It is tied to the environmental narrative because the college community can engage students with climate research [11].

Similarly, the health narrative highlighted the role of genetic predispositions to certain diseases that sparked multiple interviewees to take charge of their dietary choices. This is inherently linked to the educational narrative (in how the interviewees learned about veganism to combat disease), the geographic narrative (in whether or not the interviewees had access to healthy ingredients to combat disease), the ethical narrative (in recognizing the difference between choices for personal well-being and the well-being of others), the social narrative (in that familial and racial histories biologically impacted their susceptibility to disease), and the environmental narrative (in that personal health motivations can have a wider impact). Thus, the interviewees found meaning and motivation in all six of the narratives, and not just one, reflecting how decision-making and behavioral change are interdisciplinary. The ways in which the narratives interact with one another, then, suggest that they are rooted within each other, where understanding the value of the educational narrative is less meaningful without also considering the value of the social narrative. This makes the significance of the narratives – made up by the experiences, merits, and characteristics attributed to them by the interviewees – strengthened by their dynamism.

Lastly, we can understand culture as a medium of meaning and action. The transition to veganism and the subsequent overcoming of barriers were the methods by which the interviewees took the meaning of veganism and transformed it into something of behavioral choice. This can be seen as the *process* of culture, and how it is just as embedded in function and practice as it is in symbolism. The transition to veganism was a literal process: it required the interviewees to assess how they wanted to start the lifestyle (all at once, gradually, probing vegetarianism beforehand), to assess their flexibility with the lifestyle (situational considerations), to develop ingredient lists and routine dietary choices that they felt comfortable



and satisfied with, to educate themselves on topics they felt necessary, and to create and participate in ritualistic ‘goodbye’ ceremonies. These steps were specific behavioral changes that were founded on and fostered by the substance of the narratives.

Furthermore, a significant part of the active process of veganism required the interviews to evaluate the potential barriers of the lifestyle choice and how to confront them. The barriers described by the interviewees included things like learning how to cook, facing limited menu choices at restaurants, traveling, food sensitivities, and, most significantly, interacting and dealing with confrontation from non-vegans. While these barriers posed a challenge to veganism, the ways in which the interviewees attended to them reflects another level of behavioral change necessary to the transition process. The interviewees took time to experiment in the kitchen and gain comfort with cooking skills; they learned to call restaurants ahead of time, scope out menus, and eat before or bring their own food to events; they recognized and educated themselves about cultural differences when traveling abroad to ascertain their own level of flexibility; they listened to their bodies about which foods made them feel better or worse; and, for most, they learned to rarely talk about veganism to non-vegans to avoid conflict, or came up with substitutions for how to discuss it in conversation in an approachable way (‘I am plant-based, I have dietary restrictions’). The choice to address certain barriers does not negate their reality or difficulty – it does take time and knowledge, as expressed by the interviews, to face and act against them.

Nonetheless, the fact that barriers to veganism exist represented how veganism can be differentiated from other lifestyles. The barriers are what set veganism apart from other identifiable norms (like eating meat), and the choice to act against these norms is a behavior founded in commitment to the significance of veganism. The existence of barriers to veganism, and the fact that overcoming them requires action, can solidify the justification for veganism as a

cultural phenomenon: where “the idea of culture is meant to describe at least five things: the actual, often unexamined, patterns and differentiations of a people, the process by which these patterns developed, the markers of differentiation between one people and another, the way all these processes, patterns, and markers are represented, and the hierarchical ordering of all these activities, processes, and production, and ways of life” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 105). In this way, *why* and *how* a cultural phenomenon comes to exist is what distinguishes and differentiates it from another cultural phenomenon. A cultural phenomenon inherently requires differentiation – otherwise every individual’s experience of life and its significance would be the same. Thus, the idea that veganism is founded on values, objectives, and experiences, as depicted in the narratives, and is acted upon following those values, objectives, and experiences in a way that confronts and compares to standard dietary practices is important. Veganism can perhaps be seen a cultural phenomenon, with its meaning arising in a variety of contexts – social, geographical, educational, ethical, health, and environmental – and all of which can be acted upon.

Ultimately, this thesis also has significance outside of the journey of the interviewees. Expounding on how and why people become vegan is important for the movement of veganism itself. It is an attempt to make the lifestyle choice more understandable and perhaps more feasible to those who have contemplated it. By considering veganism from a cultural standpoint, something with embedded significance drawn from values and experiences, the lifestyle can seem accessible and meaningful to a wide variety of people. There can, conceivably, be an aspect of veganism that makes sense and is motivating to someone. The more people that, at the least, consider veganism, the more successful the movement of the lifestyle will be. Like many interviewees noted, veganism begins with an awareness and curiosity about the relationship between food and society, ethics, health, physical environments, or any context of importance to

an individual. This awareness is powerful in that it stimulates thought. This thought can ultimately stimulate action, which is valuable in any capacity – whether that is simply watching a vegan documentary to educate oneself, trying a vegan food, or, perhaps, committing fully to a vegan lifestyle. Thus, there is value in comprehensively understanding veganism so as to present it to a larger audience as an accessible lifestyle choice. This thesis strives to do just that.

Furthermore, veganism can be seen as a meaningful strategy to take personal values and employ them in action. This thesis attempts to reflect the practical significance of veganism in its ability to respond to complex and challenging societal, moral, and environmental issues, and it attempts to reflect the way in which an individual choice can have supra-individual intentions and outcomes. These are principles that became clear through the interviews – where our discussions demonstrated the applicability of veganism to questions about feminism (targeting female animals in the dairy and egg industries), racial histories (black food culture and its affect on generational health), religious doctrines of non-violence and selflessness (in Quakerism and Buddhism), speciesism and social hierarchies (devaluing the intelligence and sentience of other animals), desensitization to violence (the disconnect between industrialized agriculture and the food on one's plate), the affects and complexities of global warming (the misuse and overuse of resources for meat and dairy and its related emissions), and the development of empathy and compassion (addressing and mitigating the suffering of others). Like noted by Don Mitchell (1995), culture can be seen as something contextual, as a reflection of and product of certain realities. Veganism similarly parallels this understanding of culture -- as result of a reaction to realities of violence, health, racial histories, and more.

Understanding how concepts like the ones noted above – feminism, racial histories, speciesism, etc. – function in relation to veganism is important because it can help us understand

how and why people make other intentional lifestyle choices to address these concepts in similar ways. The way people choose to practice, and journey towards, veganism is similar to the way in which they can move toward other moral choices. For example, opposing capital punishment is a way to apply values of empathy, compassion, and non-violence towards others and confront societal desensitization to violence. Attempting to conserve energy, by turning off lights, driving a hybrid car, recycling, unplugging sockets, etc., are ways to mitigate emissions affecting global warming in every day behavior. Having a reusable coffee cup and water bottle are ways that people address the misuse of resources (like plastic) in society. Stopping hunting is a way to face speciesism and abstain from participating in it. Controlling fertility, through birth control or natural methods, is a way to practice feminism by allowing women to pilot their reproductive health and reproductive decisions. Becoming a member of organizations that support racial minorities, such as the Black Student Union or the Middle Eastern Student Association on college campuses, are a way to acknowledge and educate oneself further on questions and implications of racial histories. We, as people, make deliberate behavioral decisions and lifestyle choices because of the broad, complex values and experiences that permeate societal, moral, and environmental contexts. Veganism is just one of many examples of a choice that responds to bigger, world issues.

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