



## “If I became a vegan, my family and friends would hate me:” Anticipating vegan stigma as a barrier to plant-based diets



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### ABSTRACT

A significant body of literature has developed which examines why meat consumption continues to be so important to Americans. Our paper contributes to this literature by examining how fear of stigmatization may be a barrier to avoiding meat consumption. This is an important subject because there is evidence that suggests that individuals who avoid meat, especially vegans, are stigmatized for disrupting social conventions related to food. In this paper, we present data from a series of focus groups in which vegan, vegetarian, and omnivorous college students discussed perceptions of vegans and veganism. Our analysis shows that non-vegans anticipate stigma associated with eating like vegans. We identify two strategies by which non-vegans attempt to avoid this stigma: social and behavioral distancing. These results suggest that vegan stigma is a barrier that inhibits dietary shifts toward a plant-based diet. Our results are important because they can be used to improve the efficacy of public health initiatives focused on encouraging plant-based diet adoption and meat consumption reduction.

### 1. Introduction

Within the past few decades, meat consumption has significantly increased worldwide (Henchion, McCarthy, Resconi, & Troy, 2014), a pattern that has been attributed to rising income and the growth of an aspiring middle-class in the Global South eager to emulate a Western diet (Delgado, 2003; Vranken, Avermaete, Petalios, & Mathijs, 2016). Among the nations of the Global North, meat consumption remains high. Within the US, the majority of the population is omnivorous with only one-third of Americans reporting in 2016 that they “sometimes” did not eat meat during meals (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016). An even smaller minority of Americans—about 4%—indicated in 2016 that they *never* eat meat (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016). This figure includes individuals who identify as vegetarian as well as vegan. Vegetarians are individuals who do not consume animal flesh, though they may consume animal products like eggs or dairy (Vegetarian Society, 2016). Vegans, on the other hand, are individuals who do not consume any animal flesh or animal products (The Vegan Society, 2018).

Literature has considered the question of why meat continues to be a significant part of the Western diet, and much work explores how omnivores rationalize their meat consumption. For instance, justifications identified by scholars include difficulty breaking dietary habits (Lea, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006; Phjolainen, Vinnari, & Jokinen,

2015), enjoyment of the taste of meat (Graca, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2015), identification with masculine characteristics (Rothgerber, 2013), and the denial of animal minds (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Rothgerber, 2014a). We add to this research by exploring the social context of eating because food is a deeply social activity (Delormier, Frohlich, & Potvin, 2009). In the process of sharing food, people bond in the sharing of common meanings and experiences (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). For this reason, it is important to also examine social factors surrounding food such as group and interpersonal dynamics regarding how people negotiate their dietary needs as well as regard the dietary choices of others (Delormier et al., 2009).

In this paper, we start with the finding that people generally view vegetarians and vegans negatively because they severely disrupt social conventions related to food (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Potts & Parry, 2010; Wright, 2015). Because of this dietary deviance (Boyle, 2011), we argue that vegans are prone to stigma (Bresnahan, Zhuang, & Zhu, 2016). Stigma refers to the negative perceptions and biased treatment of those with undesirable statuses or characteristics (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Since this biased treatment often includes distancing one's self socially and behaviorally from those who are deviant (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Hertel & Kerr, 2001; Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, & Pescosolido, 1999; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008; Pool, Wood, & Leck, 1998), we further argue that vegan stigma may deter

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individuals from reducing their meat and animal product consumption toward plant-based diets characteristic of vegans. This is because individuals anticipate the stigma that would follow from deviant behavior, and thus, they desire to avoid being labeled and treated like those in the stigmatized group (Johnston, 2002; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Some work has suggested that stigma may deter individuals from a plant-based diet (Lea & Worsley, 2001, 2003; Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017). However, using qualitative data from separate focus groups of vegan, vegetarian, and omnivorous college students who discussed their perceptions (or experiences) of vegans and veganism, we were uniquely positioned to examine if and how stigma impacts food-related behaviors. In short, we corroborate preliminary work on this topic, but we also illustrate two strategies (i.e., social and behavioral distancing) by which vegan stigma anticipation translates into maintenance of current food consumption habits. In so doing, we introduce a fundamentally social understanding of factors impacting food choices to a literature that has not yet explored in depth how interactional and social processes predict meat and animal product consumption choices. Below, we begin by discussing the centrality of meat in the construction of American meals before exploring how plant-based diets, especially veganism, disrupt conventional meals.

### 1.1. Personal reasons for eating meat

In light of increasing levels of meat consumption worldwide (Delgado, 2003; Henschion et al., 2014; Vranken et al., 2016), recent research has made it a priority to explore why omnivores continue to eat meat. This literature has examined how omnivores rationalize their meat consumption by focusing mainly on personal factors like individuals' characteristics, attitudes, or beliefs. For instance, Piazza et al. (2015) identified what they call the 4N classification, including the beliefs that eating meat is natural, normal, necessary, and nice. Graca et al. (2015) found evidence for affective attachment to meat, including enjoyment and pleasure in taste, as predictive of meat consumption. Other factors identified by researchers include the denial of animal pain, suffering, or animal minds (Bastian et al., 2012; Rothgerber, 2014a), and identification with masculinity (Rothgerber, 2013). Finally, scholars have also identified pragmatic issues associated with learning new behaviors as reasons to continue eating meat (Lea et al., 2006; Phjolainen et al., 2015). Each of the above justifications likely plays a part in the general hesitation of the vast majority of Americans to reduce, and especially eliminate, their meat consumption (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016). However, there are likely other important factors that enhance our understanding of the general reluctance to avoid meat.

### 1.2. Social reasons for eating meat

Food is a deeply social enterprise (Delormier et al., 2009). Eating is a central activity around which humans not only organize time but also spend time with others (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). In a recent representative sample of U.S. adults living with at least one other family member, Sobal and Hanson (2014) found that 89% of respondents ate meals with family members five or more days every week. Sharing meals serves a variety of social functions, including defining the boundaries around a group, strengthening and maintaining relationships with those in the group, and teaching as well as reinforcing cultural beliefs and values (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). These functions point to the idea that sharing meals is not necessarily always about food; however, eating *the same food* establishes commonality among members of a group, facilitating social bonding (Kemmer, Anderson, & Marshall, 1998; Miller, Rozin, & Fiske, 1998; Morrison, 1996).

The food that is most central to creating bonds among meal participants, then, will be the one that is most commonly shared. Research indicates that this food is meat, as for many Americans, a meal is not considered a 'proper meal' unless there is some form of animal protein

on the plate (Charles & Kerr, 1988). Marshall and Bell (2003) found that this is most true with respect to dinner, though their results show that people also expect other meals to prominently feature meat and animal products. Scholars have suggested that this is the case due to meat's symbolic association with strength as a primary source of protein (Sadalla & Burroughs, 1981). The consumption of meat is also associated with traditional values including superiority of men over women and humans over animals (Adams, 1990; DeVault, 1990; Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995; Fiddes, 1991). Thus, eating and sharing food, especially meat, has long been a core component of Western culture and the Western diet (Leroy & Praet, 2015; Wilk, 2010). This is reflected in the fact that most Americans are omnivores who eat meat with nearly every meal (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016).

### 1.3. Negative reception and treatment of vegans

Sharply contrasting with omnivores, about 4% of the United States population indicated in 2016 that they never eat meat (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016). This number includes those who identify as vegetarians and vegan. In general, literature documents that people view vegetarians, and especially vegans, in negative terms. For instance, in a content analysis of articles published in social science journals, Cole (2008) examined the specific terminology used in reference to vegans. He concludes that scholars describe veganism as an 'ascetic' practice that is extremely difficult to maintain. Potts and Parry (2010) examined discourse published in online articles, personal blogs, and chatroom comments, and they found that vegans are viewed as oversensitive as well as physically and mentally weak. Additionally, Cole and Morgan (2011) as well as Wright (2015) examined other popular media, like films and newspapers, for mention of vegans or veganism. Both examinations found the dominant perceptions to be negative, which led Cole and Morgan (2011) to term these views as "vegophobia." Two exceptions to this trend exist: both Rothgerber (2014b) in his survey view of general attitudes and Yeh (2014) in her content analysis of vegetarian magazines found that vegetarians tend to view vegans favorably. Despite the positive view from those who do not eat meat, the literature cited above indicates this is not the typical view shared by the omnivorous public.

What are the interactional processes that contribute to the pervasive negativity surrounding vegan diets? A key factor is that meat-free and plant-based diets are deviant (Boyle, 2011), meaning that those following such diets reject a core component of American culture that otherwise binds individuals together: eating meat. Since it is customary for social occasions where food is present to feature meat and animal-product-centered dishes (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Marshall & Bell, 2003; Sobal, 2005), those who refuse to partake are openly disrupting convention and often tradition. This prevents one of the central functions of sharing food—bonding—the prevention of which fosters negative emotions among omnivores, like anger and discomfort (Bresnahan et al., 2016).

Another key factor driving these negative views stems from the finding that some plant-based groups not only personally disrupt but also actively attempt to subvert social convention. For instance, though vegetarians and vegans alike cite a variety of motives for their diets, like health or environmental concerns (Fox & Ward, 2008; Greenebaum, 2012b; Radnitz, Beezhold, & DiMatteo, 2015), moral and ethical reasons are most common (Ruby, 2012). These considerations are primarily fueled by concern over animal suffering and exploitation, which leads some to join social movement groups and to participate in social activism (Cherry, 2006, 2014; Wrenn, 2017). Since animal rights activists share similar concerns as moral/ethical vegans (Cherry, 2010), vegans in particular are commonly equated with animal rights movement protesters (Cherry, 2006). This close equation means that veganism may often be equated with stereotypes of animal rights activists (Wrenn, 2017), which may lead individuals to derogate vegans as

outspoken activists who are bigoted and hypocritical for favoring animal rights over human rights (Greenebaum, 2012b; Potts & Parry, 2010).

Scholars also document the behavioral treatment of those who eat plant-based diets. This research largely comes from qualitative interviews with vegans. For example, McDonald (2000) noted that those who have recently become vegan often report interrogation from omnivores, including family and friends. Twine (2014) noted that such antagonistic questioning is often accompanied by open ridicule and discrediting of vegan identities as illegitimate or merely a temporary phase (Greenebaum, 2012a; Hirschler, 2011). This negative attitude commonly leads vegans to experience strained social relationships with non-vegans, characterized by the refusal of non-vegans to provide or try vegan dishes (Twine, 2014). This tension may result in lost friendships, reduced contact, and/or exclusion from social activities, suggesting that the social costs of veganism can be quite high (Greenebaum, 2012a; Hirschler, 2011; Twine, 2014).

#### 1.4. Stigma avoidance and stigma anticipation among the non-stigmatized

As noted by Bresnahan et al. (2016), the views and treatment described above corresponds to vegan stigma. Stigma involves the negative perceptions and biased treatment of those with devalued statuses or characteristics (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). By definition, stigma is undesirable, and individuals want to avoid it. Due to the fear of experiencing stigmatized treatment, vegans report altering how they behave around non-vegans (e.g., discussing veganism only when prompted, actively trying to distance themselves from the characteristics associated with vegan stereotypes) (Greenebaum, 2012b; Hirschler, 2011; MacInnis & Hodson, 2015; Wrenn, 2017). Regarding the non-stigmatized, however, Link and Phelan (2001) note that one way to avoid stigma is to actively stigmatize others. Individuals can accomplish this through building social distance—or refusing to interact with those that are stigmatized (Link et al., 1999). If this were not done, the non-stigmatized risk taking on a courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963). A courtesy stigma is a “stigma by association” granted to someone because they possess stigmatized acquaintances (Pryor, Reeder, & Monroe, 2012). Thus, adding social distance between oneself and stigmatized others keeps one safe from “catching” a courtesy stigma.

Social distancing not only helps individuals avoid a courtesy stigma, but it also enforces norms (Phelan et al., 2008). That is, by derogating and distancing socially from those who behaviorally deviate from norms, the norms themselves are reinforced as acceptable and legitimate; as a result, this induces conformity to normative behaviors and strengthens identification with non-stigmatized groups (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Hertel & Kerr, 2001; Pool et al., 1998). In this way, behavioral distance between oneself and stigmatized others also keeps one safe from being stigmatized. As noted by Johnston (2002) as well as Quinn and Chaudoir (2009), this is at least in part due to fact that the non-stigmatized can anticipate the stigma that would follow from deviant behavior and thus behaviorally distance themselves from the ways in which the stigmatized act.

#### 1.5. Stigma as a social reason to avoid plant-based diets

Guided by the above discussion of stigma anticipation and avoidance, we suspect that vegan stigma is a deterrent to reduce meat and animal product consumption. In other words, individuals anticipate that if they were to reduce and/or eliminate meat and animal products from their diet—thus approximating the ways in which deviant, meat-free and plant-based individuals, such as vegans, eat—they would be subject to similar stigmatizing treatment for their food choices. Some work suggests that this process is at play, even among semi-vegetarians—or those who reduce but do not completely eliminate meat and/or fish (Lea & Worsley, 2001, 2003; Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017). Here,

we explore if and how such a process unfolds among those with a wider array of food identifications in a way that might make them reluctant to adopt meat-free and plant-based diets. We explore this by examining vegan stigma in particular.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Data

The data for this study come from five separate focus groups conducted in the fall of 2015. Research has shown that focus groups are a useful strategy to yield in-depth, qualitative data regarding food choices and preferences (Deliens, Calrys, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Deforche, 2014). The advantage of using focus groups is that we were able to obtain information and insights that uniquely result from spontaneous group interaction as opposed to structured, solitary interviews or quantitative data collection methods (Moore, 1987). This method was useful for our purposes because it allowed us to explore general themes, culturally shared ideas, and common-sense explanations that emerged and were refined in the course of the group discussions (Morgan, 1988; Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

### 2.2. Participants and recruitment

All participants were undergraduate university students at a large Midwestern institution in the United States. Students were recruited from a variety of introductory-level courses in sociology and philosophy. Students were told that volunteers were being solicited to talk in groups about their views on vegans and veganism. They were also told that they would be compensated for their time. Following the presentation, the professors emailed students with a link to a questionnaire to solicit interest. A total of 150 students responded and indicated interest in participating.

The questionnaire was intended to capture basic information about participants for screening purposes, such as whether the individual self-identified as vegan or vegetarian as well as which foods the participant consumed from the following list: red meat, white meat, fish, shellfish, honey, milk, cheese, and other dairy products. Participants also had the option to indicate “I do not eat any of the foods specified above.” If participants indicated that they were vegetarians or vegan, they were subsequently asked to indicate their main reason for being vegetarian or vegan. The list was fairly exhaustive and included the following options: moral/ethical reasons, animal rights, environmental reasons, world hunger, political reasons, health reasons, weight loss, religious reasons or spiritual beliefs, family/friends, to save money, taste preferences, I was born and raised this way, or other. Length of time being vegan or vegetarian was also assessed, including if vegans considered themselves vegetarian prior to becoming vegan.

We held two focus groups for omnivores, two focus groups for vegetarians and one focus group for vegans. The vegan focus group consisted of 4 participants; the vegetarian groups consisted of 8 and 6 participants; and the omnivore groups consisted of 9 and 7 participants. The only criteria for meat-free participants was that the individual self-identified as a vegetarian or a vegan. Due to the small number of vegetarians and vegans who indicated interest in participating, we did not stratify groups by motivation or specific behavior. This produced a fairly heterogeneous group of vegetarians and vegans who varied in their primary motivations for their meat-free statuses as well as the extent to which they met the customary definitions of vegetarian and vegan (see e.g., Vegetarian Society, 2016; The Vegan Society, 2018). Among the vegans, two reported moral/ethical reasons, one reported health reasons, and the other reported environmental reasons as their primary reason for being vegan. Similarly, the majority of vegetarians in both groups cited moral/ethical reasons or animal rights, with the remaining individuals fairly evenly split between health reasons and environmental reasons. The vegetarians varied in their seafood and

**Table 1**  
Demographic composition of focus groups.

Demographic	Vegan Group 1	Vegetarian Group 1	Vegetarian Group 2	Omnivore Group 1	Omnivore Group 2
White women	4	7	6	4	4
White men	0	1	0	3	3
Black women	0	0	0	1	0
Black men	0	0	0	1	0
Totals	4	8	6	9	7

animal product consumption (e.g., fish, eggs, milk products, etc.), and the vegans varied in their consumption of honey as well as eggs (exclusively from home-kept, rescue chickens). All vegans reported being vegetarian prior to becoming vegan. Last, the length of time being vegan ranged from less than one year to five years, while the length of time being vegetarian ranged from one to eight years.

Diversity in dietary behaviors as well as primary reason within groups did not pose a significant problem for our analysis because we were interested in culturally-shared themes and common-sense understandings that transcend these motivations and slight behavioral distinctions. All participating vegans were white women, as were nearly all in the vegetarian groups (only one group had one white male participant). Both omnivore groups consisted of roughly equal numbers of men and women, and the racial composition was largely white with two racial/ethnic minority participants in one group. See Table 1 for demographic compositions of each focus group.

### 2.3. Procedure

Participants met in a conference room on the university campus, where they read and signed an informed consent form as well as a form providing consent for the researchers to audio-record the group discussion. Since individuals' names (and if applicable, primary motivation) were in no way connected to their audio-recorded responses, participants remained anonymous in the recording and in the transcript of the discussion used for analyses. As the goal of the focus group was to generate discussion among the group participants, both researchers kept their participation in the discussion to a minimum. Neither the primary nor secondary researcher disclosed their eating preferences to any group.

The second author conducted the focus groups using the Nominal Group Technique (Moore, 1987), where participants were asked a question (e.g., "What comes to mind when thinking about veganism as a diet or lifestyle?") in response to which they were asked to write down any words or phrases that came to mind (e.g., "outspoken," "dedicated"). Participants had two minutes to complete the task, after which they took turns sharing one response at a time until no new responses were offered. This ensured that each participant had time and space to contribute to the conversation. Each response was written on a large whiteboard such that it was visible to all participants. Then, participants had up to 15 min to collectively discuss items on the list at their leisure. Discussion involved participants explaining as a group what various terms or phrases meant as well as why they came to mind. Throughout, participants offered personal experiences as well as personal opinions and beliefs. To ensure that no single individual dominated conversation, the second author intervened as necessary to prompt a variety of individuals in the group to participate. She also prompted the group as a whole to consider items on the list that were overlooked or least discussed. Once all items on the list were discussed to the satisfaction of the group, the facilitator repeated the process with the next question.

To ensure that group dynamics did not prevent participants from presenting dissenting opinions, all scratch paper was collected at the end of each focus group, and written responses were cross-referenced

with the list generated by each group. The data presented here come from responses to four questions asked of the group. Participants were asked what comes to mind when thinking about vegans as people as well as what comes to mind when thinking about veganism as a diet or a lifestyle. They were also asked what difficulties non-vegans would face if they were to transition toward a vegan diet or lifestyle as well as what would help facilitate such a transition. Each focus group lasted between 70 and 85 min. Participants were each compensated \$20 at the end of each session. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

### 2.4. Analysis

All focus group discussions were transcribed from the audio recording. Transcriptions were checked against the audio recording for accuracy, and both authors used personal notes taken during the course of each group to facilitate this process and ensure data quality (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). ATLAS.ti was used to facilitate open coding of the data. Our presentation of the results proceeds in three steps. First, we describe the content of vegan stigma across the groups, starting with how vegans think others view them. Second, we examine how non-vegans responded to this stigma by social distancing and anticipating vegan stigma, including how such anticipations correspond with experiences reported by vegans. Third, we conclude by connecting these instances of anticipating stigma as well as social distancing to a final and important response to vegans: non-vegans' behavioral distance from eating like vegans. As a final note, since there were few differences between groups of the same type, we aggregate results in the presentation below.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Vegan stigma

All groups converged on their answers when asked the questions: "What comes to mind when thinking about vegans as people?" and "What comes to mind when thinking about veganism as a diet or lifestyle?" Though each group listed some positive descriptors, such as "healthy," "compassionate," "dedicated," and "self-controlled," the majority of descriptors from vegetarians and omnivores were negative.

**Vegans.** The vegans were the only group that uniformly responded with positive descriptors when explaining how they view vegans and veganism. Key words and phrases here included "aware," "open-minded," "peaceful," "kind," and "loving." When the vegans listed negative descriptors, it was exclusively in the context of how vegans thought non-vegans viewed them and their ideas. For instance, the vegans all agreed that non-vegans viewed their actions as "crazy" and "stupid." To this point, one vegan remarked, "You don't even know the amount of times that people have said to me, 'You're crazy' or 'I could never do it.'" This was followed by a second vegan who commented, "Everywhere you go, everyone is trying to prove you wrong." These feelings of being devalued were perhaps best encapsulated by another vegan who said the following:

*Vegan 3:* It's also challenging with people. Like she [Vegan 2] said, it's really hard with people who are looking down on you [for] doing the 'wrong thing'—not doing what is normal.

A key aspect of the sentiments expressed above is that vegans perceive that they are viewed negatively for *how* they eat—patterns of which are implied as abnormal and irrational. Along similar lines, other vegans in the group indicated that negative views derived not only from their personal actions but also the ideas and beliefs which they express in social interactions—in other words, *why* they eat the way they do. For example, one vegan noted how non-vegans negatively construe the characteristic of being passionate, even though the same term holds a positive connotation for her:

**Vegan 1:** Passionate is definitely something that would describe most vegans and often gets us in trouble because people feel like we're yelling at them to change them because we care so much about this cause and want other people to understand ... They don't understand.

According to this vegan, passion indicates a deep level of care because she wants non-vegans to understand her reasons for being a vegan. However, non-vegans perceive this passion in a different way—as overbearing. Similarly, another vegan remarked:

**Vegan 4:** They're scared of it, [veganism] ...

**Facilitator:** When you say they're scared—why's that?

**Vegan 4:** That you're going to take away what they have. Like I'm going to take away your ability to eat meat ... They're scared that I'm going to impose my beliefs on them.

Implied by this quote is that non-vegans view vegans as intolerant, which is imagined as contributing to non-vegans' fear that vegans want to control and change their behavior. As we discuss below, this perception mirrored the vegetarians' and omnivores' feelings.

**Vegetarians.** Vegetarians in the groups viewed vegans negatively. For instance, one vegetarian in the first group used the term “attention-seeking” to describe vegans before another joined to describe why this quality leads to negative social regard:

**Vegetarian 1:** Someone will say, ‘I can't eat that—I'm vegan.’ And it's like, ‘Oh, you're vegan.’ Like, you have to say it—you can't just say you can't eat it.

...

**Vegetarian 2:** There's usually a pause after somebody says I'm a vegan. [Group laughter] Maybe it's a little angst part of me that's like, ‘What is the reaction they're seeking?’ or something. Like it's kind of a moral war ... I feel like some people that I have encountered, people who are vegan, have kind of, just like, this air about them.

This suggests that for the vegetarians in our focus groups, they understand vegans as regarding themselves as morally superior compared to non-vegans, especially when accompanying the refusal of food with an acknowledgement of the reason why (i.e., that they are vegan). The key idea here is that it *might* be okay to refuse food—presumably as vegetarians do at times—but to acknowledge a deviant identity status as the reason behind the refusal is socially inappropriate because it conveys seeking attention for one's identity. Other vegetarians in this group agreed that explaining that you are a vegan is “pretentious.” For instance, a third vegetarian more specifically described the ‘air’ about vegans when she stated, “I would agree with what you [Vegetarian 2] said ... Some can be pretentious—that they think they're better people.”

The second focus group of vegetarians held similar views. For example, one participant noted:

**Vegetarian 4:** With the pretentious and condescending thing, I find that some vegans look down on other people ... You're not going to change anyone's opinion by telling them that they're wrong. They're going to be like, ‘Yeah, I'm wrong, but it's delicious.’

In this example, this vegetarian related the perceptions of being pretentious and condescending with vegans “looking down on others” by telling them they are “wrong” for how they eat. Another vegetarian from this group captured these ideas in the term “outspoken.” She explained: “I had a friend in high school who was a vegan, and she would bring that up all the time. She's like, ‘I can't believe you're eating that, like, think about it. Think about the animals.’” These quotes indicate that, despite the sentiments among vegans that *non-vegans* look down on them for violating food norms (i.e., by not eating meat or animal products), vegetarians likewise feel shamed by vegans who are

perceived as passing moral judgment against *them* (i.e., for eating animal products). Interestingly, another vegetarian from the first group suggested this feeling of reciprocal stigma is not unique among vegetarians when she said: “I know when I say that I'm a vegetarian, a lot of people—their response to me is, ‘But you're not vegan, right?’” Evident in these sentiments is that it is okay to be vegetarian, but being vegan crosses the line from partially following food norms to completely eschewing them—from moderately acceptable to totally unacceptable.

**Omnivores.** The omnivores echoed the sentiments of the vegetarians. For example, after one male omnivore in the first group described vegans as “opinionated,” a female omnivore in the same group stated:

**Omnivore 1:** I'd agree with opinionated too because I know some vegans, and everyone that I know, they really like to talk about how they're vegan, and they like to tell you, ‘Oh it's so good ‘cause of this and that, and this and that.’

This focus group participant equates being opinionated to being vocal about the beliefs associated with veganism. Similar to the perceptions reported by vegetarians, the omnivores in general construed this propensity as undesirable by using terms like “annoying” and “rude.” However, in contrast to the vegetarian groups, the omnivores tended to employ harsher terminology when further describing why they view vegans in this way. For instance, in response to the word “overbearing,” another male omnivore explained:

**Omnivore 2:** It sort of goes along with all those militant, self-righteous, overzealous, kind of—go down that continuation—that in order to continue their lifestyle, they kind of have to force people out of the way ... They have to be kind of aggressive to keep it going.

The perception that vegans are aggressive also arose in the second group, as noted by one female omnivore who said:

**Omnivore 3:** Every time I've ever met a vegan, they've like tried to convince me to become a vegan. They talk about how great it is, and if you meet somebody that is a vegan, the first thing they tell you, they're like, ‘Oh yeah, I'm a vegan.’ It's the first thing they say about themselves.

This sentiment was echoed later by two other female omnivores:

**Omnivore 4:** They're really vocal with their veganism and try to kind of like, force it down people's throats sometimes.

...

**Omnivore 5:** The same as what she [Omnivore 3] said: They're very like, ‘Everybody should be vegan. Vegan, vegan, vegan.’

These quotes confirm that non-vegans view vegans exactly in the way that the vegans anticipated—as wanting to control and change how people behave. Just like how the vegetarians thought vegans were intolerant of non-vegans, an omnivore from the first group expressed similar ideas:

**Omnivore 2:** Being a hunter—last year, a deer I'd shot was in the back of my truck. I was like, ‘Yeah, I still got to get gas’ ... a vegan came up to me and tried to talk some sense into me and was like, ‘Stop hunting, stop hunting.’ Whatever ... I told him that's one less deer that you're not [*sic*] going to hit with your car with your family in it. That's exactly what I told him. He's still dead on, ‘Stop hunting. This is God's gift to us. We shouldn't harm them.’ Go to Hell.

Here, this omnivore's experience lives up to the perception that vegans are vocally intolerant and desiring of others' behavioral change. Clearly, his experience reflects the negative perceptions of vegans shared across omnivores and vegetarians in the groups.

### 3.2. Responses to vegan stigma

In response to these stigmatized views of vegans, our analysis

identified three ways in which non-vegans responded to this stigma: social distancing, anticipating what vegan stigma would be like if they experienced it themselves, and behavioral distancing strategies. We detail each in turn below.

**Social Distancing.** The first common response to vegan stigma by non-vegans involved vegetarians' and omnivores' reports of socially distancing themselves from vegans. This proceeded in two ways: physical and verbal. Regarding physical distance, for instance, one of the male omnivores recounted the following:

Omnivore 2: There's this girl in high school—I'm not friends [with her] by any means, [or] probably actually to any vegans at all—but I met this one girl in high school and she was a vegan ... Everything she wanted to write about was veganism. She would always throw it in your face and ruin your lunchtime because she was vegan. For that, it really annoyed me the way she would talk about it. For that, I avoid vegans, and when I hear about stuff being vegan, I am not happy about it.

Here, it is clear that the participant actively avoids propinquity with vegans. In reiterating that he avoids, and thus does not associate with nor consider any vegans as friends, he is able to preserve his social membership in the non-stigmatized group. The result is that this social distance by physical distance prevents any associational stigma that may come with previously having had (and recounting) an interaction with a vegan.

Though in the above quote the omnivore makes it a point that he maintains social distance in a physical sense, this was not always the case among the participants. For instance, two females used verbal distancing when they stated the following while reflecting on past interactions they have had with vegans:

Vegetarian 5: I'm like, 'That's really cool that you chose to do that, but I don't care, personally.'

Vegetarian 6: That's definitely stereotypical of vegans ... I don't care [if] ... you choose to do that, I choose to do this. Like, I'm not going to try to preach to you about what I think you should and shouldn't do.

Though the extent to which these vegetarians maintain interaction with vegans is unclear from the quotes, it is clear that the vegetarians are less concerned with physical distance. Instead, they are concerned with conceptually separating themselves from vegans (they are *not* vegans) as well as separating what they do from what vegans do (they are also not *like* vegans because they do not “care” if others do not eat like them and subsequently will not shame or “preach” their beliefs to others). This verbal distancing strategy translates into social distance by reinforcing the idea that vegans embody undesirable personal and social attributes, all of which the vegetarians assert they do not possess because they are not part of the non-stigmatized vegan group.

**Anticipating Vegan Stigma.** In our third question for each group, we asked the following: “What difficulties would non-vegans face if they were to transition toward a vegan diet or lifestyle?” While vegetarians and omnivores in our focus groups agreed that barriers included pragmatic issues, such as resisting temptation for foods they used to eat, knowing what to eat instead, and how to prepare and cook foods they could eat, social challenges also came up as the second common response to vegan stigma in each group. In particular, one female vegetarian noted that “social stigma” would be a barrier. When prompted a bit further, this vegetarian said:

Facilitator: What is it that people are assuming about vegans as people that would lead it to be stigmatized?

Vegetarian 6: I think it's that people just assume that vegans look down on others. So, you don't have to be in someone's face about it, but just knowing they're vegan, I think people think, 'If I eat a cheeseburger in front of them, they are definitely judging me.'

A similar sentiment came up among the omnivores in the first group, too, illustrated by one participant who noted the following as a barrier:

Omnivore 2: Learning to just ignore people and their negative opinion of me because, if I'm a vegan, I feel that comes with a certain stigma. Like, 'Oh, okay.' And they'd kind of think differently of me and treat me differently than they did before.

It is apparent in these quotes that the two individuals expect that those around them would view them differently if they were to eat like a vegan. Eating like a vegan would lead others to assume that the individual thinks and regards others in the particular way associated with vegans (e.g., judgmental). As the non-vegans explained above, this is ultimately an undesirable way to be perceived by others.

In addition to anticipating negative regard from others, non-vegans also anticipated how others would treat them. For instance, the following exchange occurred in response to the omnivore's quote above:

Omnivore 6: Kind of going along with learning to ignore someone's opinion. Kind of like with your friends, if you become a vegan, they're like, 'Hey you wanna get a beer and a burger?' You're like, 'No, I'll get a water and some leaves or something.' [Group laughter]

Omnivore 7: 'Excuse me bartender, do you have any leaves?'

Omnivore 6: Do you know what I'm saying?

Here, though one omnivore presents an anticipated pragmatic barrier (not being able to order vegan food at a restaurant), humor is employed to exaggerate the anticipated negative social repercussions following a non-standard way of eating. In this case, the omnivores anticipate being mocked for being vegan since they would appear as outlandish in refuting the norms that govern food in social situations with friends.

Similar ideas were also discussed in the context of the family. For example, the following exchange started from one vegetarian's experience and transitioned to another imagining being vegan:

Vegetarian 7: I'm the only one that doesn't eat meat in my family. And it's kind of like, they're all eating meat around me, and they're like, 'Oh, yeah. You want this? You want this?' It's like, 'No, I really don't, but thanks.' So, you always get the pressure from friends, family, whatever. Or they always ask you like, 'Why do you do this?' And you always have to say the same exact thing ... it's kind of annoying how they always try to pressure you into it and they never see your point of view.

Vegetarian 8: Right. There's a lot of jokes. [Collective agreement—many saying “yeah” and “uh-huh”] ...

Vegetarian 9: I still get, 'Hey, you want a steak?' from my dad all the time.

Vegetarian 7: Yeah, holidays are the worst. [Group laughter] ...

Vegetarian 10: I feel like to put it into perspective, like for us talking about being vegetarians and people offering us meat, like, I can't imagine being a full vegan ... Because it's like, times two hundred magnitude for them.

Here, it was anticipated that, if they ate like a vegan, the vegetarians would endure to an even greater extent the undesirable situations they already experience. Similar sentiments were expressed in the first group as well, as noted by another female vegetarian:

Vegetarian 11: I'm a really picky eater already, so like, holidays are already difficult for my family, so I feel like if I were to, you know [become vegan], my family would hate me. [Group laughter]

Other omnivore anticipations followed suit, as two females from in the second group stated:

**Omnivore 8:** I know for a fact that my dad would totally not be okay if I wanted to be a vegan. He would think it was the craziest thing ever and not understand and try to make me eat the things that I didn't want to. So, I know that would be so hard if I had to go home and be like, 'Oh I'm a vegan now.' They'd be like, 'No. You're not.'

**Omnivore 9:** They wouldn't take you seriously, and they'd make it for you anyway. And you're like, 'But I said I was a vegan.' They'd still be like, 'No.'

In these quotes, the omnivores anticipate social distancing processes that would follow from them wanting to eat like vegans—in particular, how their family members would attempt to decrease the distance by denying the factor creating the distance in the first place. Interestingly, the vegans themselves reported experiences nearly identical to these anticipations. As one vegan stated:

**Vegan 4:** We are met with a lot of ... 'What? Why? Come on, eat this steak!' I've been bribed by my dad's friends to eat a steak with them for two hundred dollars. They're like, 'Let's do it!' I've been doing this since I was eleven. I'm pretty good [without the steak]. Please don't [bribe me].

And another shortly thereafter stated:

**Vegan 3:** My whole family eats their steak bleeding. We're super Italian. There's cheese in everything ... [But] when you go home, you want to be with your family ... because you see them maybe once a month because you're at school. They make this amazing meal for you ... but it's covered in cheese. It still counts [as non-vegan].

Here, the vegan desires emotional and social closeness with her family. However, the refusal to create space for her eating preferences reinforces social distance by asserting through food that the family does not eat in ways amenable to vegans. These are precisely the kinds of experiences that non-vegans anticipate they would face if they were to eat like a vegan.

**Behavioral Distancing.** Explicit in each of the quotes presented above is that eating like a vegan will lead to negative social repercussions. For instance, one omnivore from the first group perhaps summed up best the general response to imagining enduring consequences from being vegan: "Who wants to do that?" This response as well as the responses detailed above imply that, due to anticipated stigma as a social barrier to eating like a vegan, *it is simply easier to continue to eat and be the way these individuals are now: non-vegan*. As a result, the third common response to vegan stigma by non-vegans involved behaviorally distancing one's self from vegans. For vegetarians in general, this means not eating meat but continuing to eat dairy products and/or eggs; for omnivores in general, this means continuing to eat meat as well as animal products and by-products.

Our results show evidence for stigma as a barrier against eating like a vegan. This suggests that non-vegan individuals have a social incentive, then, to *not* reduce their animal-product as well as meat consumption. This was further corroborated by responses to our fourth question for each group, where we asked the following: "What would facilitate a transition toward a vegan diet or lifestyle?" For instance, two omnivores mentioned:

**Omnivore 9:** Having supportive family members and friends.

...

**Omnivore 10:** I think [people] being more open-minded to it. I feel like we're so closed-minded on what should be instead of making it more available.

Similarly, a vegetarian said:

**Vegetarian 6:** Definitely to have, like, the support from your family so that those gatherings and holidays are easier. And friends, as well.

These quotes indicate that social changes would help eliminate the social barrier of stigma. However, without those in place, such changes remain difficult, with the easiest path being maintaining current non-vegan eating patterns (i.e., behaviorally distancing from vegan eating patterns) as well as anticipating stigma and socially distancing one's self from vegans.

#### 4. Discussion

In this paper, we present data from focus group discussions regarding vegans and veganism that took place among self-identified vegan, vegetarian, and omnivorous college students. Our results suggest three conclusions. First, vegetarians and omnivores shared similar negative perceptions of vegans and veganism, and vegans accurately anticipated that non-vegans held these views. Second, non-vegans reported socially distancing themselves from vegans both physically and verbally, and they also anticipated that if they were to transition toward eating like vegans, others would similarly stigmatize and thus create social distance from them. These anticipations paralleled the experiences reported by the vegans. Third, the outcome from this process of social distancing and anticipating vegan stigma is behavioral distance. In behaviorally distancing one's self from vegans, current non-vegan eating patterns are maintained. As reported by vegetarians and omnivores alike, such normative eating patterns would be more easily changed if support for vegans, instead of stigma, were present among family and friends.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, our focus groups were largely white, female, and exclusively traditional college-aged students. However, given that previous research has examined perceptions of vegans and veganism among social science researchers (Cole, 2008), heterosexual white men online (Potts & Parry, 2010), and popular media in the U.S. (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Wright, 2015), our work represents an under-explored population with respect to these views. Importantly, we find evidence that, even though young adults are the most likely age cohort to reduce meat consumption in general (The Vegetarian Resource Group, 2016), vegan stigma is still prevalent among this group.

Second, our sample size was necessarily small due to the qualitative nature of our data collection strategy. Of particular note, our vegan group consisted of only four individuals. Thus, caution should be taken when extending these results to other vegan, vegetarian, or omnivorous college students. Last, due to the data recording strategy, we could only distinguish between different speakers in the group and could not link particular responses to each speaker's specific characteristics. For instance, among the vegan as well as vegetarian groups, we are not able to refine our analysis by motivation or length of time being vegetarian or vegan; likewise, among the omnivore groups, we were not able to stratify our results according to frequency or quantity of meat eaten on average. Future work might find it fruitful to expand research along these dimensions—especially by gender—on individual attitudes. However, despite these limitations, our rich, in-depth data shows that individuals within and across groups converged on many sentiments such that vegan stigma and related experiences (real or anticipated) were universally understood and remarkably similar in both valence and content across group conversations.

Our work adds to the literature regarding vegans in at least three ways. First, our results are consistent with other research that shows that veganism is stigmatized; our results support the literature that reports negative perceptions of vegans by specific segments of the public (Cole, 2008; Cole & Morgan, 2011; Potts & Parry, 2010; Wright, 2015). Second, though Rothgerber (2014b) and Yeh (2014) found that vegetarians—especially those who are vegetarian for moral/ethical reasons—tend to view vegans positively, our findings differ somewhat. Specifically, we find evidence for much more negative perceptions by vegetarians than this previous literature would suggest. Third, we

confirm prior reports that vegan stigma extends to behavioral treatment towards vegans by non-vegans—so much so that vegans are aware of this potential stigma and attempt to minimize it when in the presence of non-vegan others (Greenebaum, 2012a; Hirschler, 2011; MacInnis & Hodson, 2015).

In addition to these contributions, however, we believe our results to be especially telling regarding an aspect of vegan stigma that had not been previously examined: how vegan stigma impacts how non-vegans think and behave. We find that when imagining what it would be like to be and eat like a vegan, non-vegans largely imagined they would be viewed and treated in the same way they view and treat vegans: negatively in a stigmatized fashion. Since we find evidence for stigma functioning as a social deterrent in this context, the outcome of stigma anticipation and social distancing is that non-vegans will behaviorally distance themselves from vegans by continuing to eat how they currently do—in a non-vegan fashion—and this is *at least partially due to the possibility of social stigma*.

This key finding holds practical relevance in building upon the literature that explores why Americans in general are reluctant to reduce their meat consumption. While some research identifies individuals' personal characteristics, attitudes, or beliefs as personal barriers (Graca et al., 2015; Lea et al., 2006; Phjolainen et al., 2015; Piazza et al., 2015; Rothgerber, 2013; 2014a), we find evidence here for a distinctly social barrier. Though our findings apply specifically to the ways in which vegans eat—avoiding all animal flesh, animal products, and animal by-products as opposed to just eliminating meat—we suspect that our findings still hold in the context of meat consumption alone. Specifically, the focus group discussions among the vegetarians revealed that they experience many of the same negative perceptions and treatment for their diets as vegans. As a result, this suggests that similar social barriers are in place even when omnivores might try to merely reduce meat consumption.

## 5. Conclusions: implications for meat consumption reduction efforts

If anticipated social stigma plays a part in inhibiting the transition toward a plant-based diet as our results suggest, these findings also have important implications for public health strategies aimed toward improving the general health and well-being of the United States. For instance, current intervention strategies to reduce meat consumption as recommended by recent research include the following: labeling which products or items are meat-free (Apostolidis & McLeay, 2016), emphasizing health benefits of reducing meat consumption (de Backer & Hudders, 2014), and praising a 'less is more' approach to meat consumption (de Boer, Schler, & Aiking, 2014). Notably, these strategies target practical and personal barriers. Since our results point to the need for such initiatives to alleviate social barriers as well, public health initiatives may find it useful to employ interventions designed to reduce social stigma, such as those that aim to alter widespread beliefs and attitudes about the stigmatized (Heijnders & Van Der Meij, 2007; Mittal, Sullivan, Chekuri, Allee, & Corrigan, 2012). Unless made easier socially as well as personally, our results suggest that meat consumption reduction and plant-based diet adoption may still be met with significant resistance due in part to the shared negative sentiments associated with those who are meat-free and plant-based.

One fruitful way in which these efforts might unfold involves examining veganism and vegetarianism outside of the United States. Though veganism and meat reduction efforts have begun to gain some recent traction in the Global North, meat- and animal product-free diets are richly embedded within other cultures and belief systems. For example, vegetarianism is strongly linked to a variety of religions with origins in ancient India (Stuart, 2006). In light of this, a critical question is what experiences vegetarians and vegans have across the globe. Are they viewed and treated in the same stigmatized manner as in the United States? What other factors enabled meat- and animal product-

free lifestyles to flourish in these places in a way that is socially acceptable and evasive of the stigma present in the United States? The answers to such questions may perhaps provide some clues toward eliminating the social barriers to veganism that affect the majority of Americans and perhaps other nations worldwide.

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