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Vegetarianism, dietary restraint and feminist identity[™]

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Abstract

Objective: Research examining the relationship between dietary restraint and vegetarianism has yielded inconsistent results due to differing definitions of vegetarianism and the possible modifying role of feminist identity. The current study sought to further clarify these relationships by examining three levels of vegetarianism, motivation for vegetarianism, and feminist identity (using an updated measure).

Method: Participants were 90 female undergraduate students and community members (mean age=24.34 years). Dietary restraint was measured using the TFEQ; feminism was assessed using the LFAIS.

Results: Weight-motivated semi-vegetarians reported higher levels of dietary restraint than those not motivated by weight. This effect did not appear among full-vegetarians. Lowest levels of dietary restraint were found among full-vegetarians with no difference between non- and semi-vegetarians. Contrary to previous research, feminist identity did not moderate the relationship between dietary restraint and vegetarianism.

Discussion: Limitations resulting from a scale with a narrow definition of feminism and the use of multiple sources of recruitment are discussed. Directions for future research are highlighted.

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1. Vegetarianism, dietary restraint and feminist identity

In recent years, an increase in the prevalence of dieting behaviors and disordered eating has been the impetus behind a large body of psychological research. Among the constructs of interest is dietary restraint, a conscious monitoring of food intake for weight control purposes. Research focused on the predictors and consequences of dietary restraint has identified vegetarianism as one correlate, but the exact relationship between these two behaviors remains unclear (Barr, Janelle, and Prior, 1994; Gilbody, Kirk, & Hill, 1999; Martins, Pliner, & O'Connor, 1999; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1997). The current study aims to further define the relationship between vegetarianism and dietary restraint by examining potentially moderating constructs.

1.1. Vegetarianism and dietary restraint

Vegetarianism has been positively associated with both dietary restraint (Barr et al., 1994; Gilbody et al., 1999; Martins et al., 1999; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1997) and extreme dieting behaviors (e.g., purging), especially among adolescents (Perry, McGuire, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2001). A link also exists between vegetarianism and eating disorder symptomotology, including disordered attitudes about eating and interpersonal distrust (Lindeman, Stark, & Latvala, 2000). The adoption of a vegetarian diet for some people may be a means of either legitimizing or facilitating dieting behaviors (Gilbody et al., 1999; Martins et al., 1999; Perry et al., 2001), although results of the few studies that examine this relationship are inconsistent. It is likely that the nature of this relationship varies according to the definition of vegetarianism and other relevant sample characteristics.

Studies that combine semi-vegetarians (those who do not eat red meat but may consume chicken and/or fish) and full vegetarians (those who do not consume any animal flesh) under the unified category of "vegetarian" find a positive correlation between vegetarianism and dietary restraint (Gilbody et al., 1999; Martins et al., 1999; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1997). Gilbody et al. (1999) examined vegetarianism in college females with the expectation that vegetarianism was used as a means of weight control among that population. Higher levels of dietary restraint were found among the females who self-identified as vegetarian than among those who were non-vegetarians. Worsley and Skrzypiec (1997) studied dieting habits and vegetarianism among adolescents and also found higher dietary restraint levels among self-reported vegetarian females. In addition, vegetarians in that study reported higher rates of extreme dieting behaviors. Lastly, Martins et al. (1999) found a positive correlation between dietary restraint and self-reported vegetarianism among adolescent and adult males, as well as among adolescent and adult females who were also feminists. Thus, vegetarianism, when broadly defined, appears to be positively associated with dietary restraint.

In contrast to studies utilizing a broad definition of vegetarianism, Barr et al. (1994) defined vegetarianism as the *complete* avoidance of meat and found *lower* levels of dietary restraint in these strict vegetarians relative to non-vegetarians. This study did not include a semi-vegetarian category. This finding, which is seemingly inconsistent with other literature in this area, may be a function of the definition of vegetarianism used in this study. Strict vegetarianism (complete avoidance of meat, chicken, and fish) requires a much more substantial life commitment than semi-vegetarianism. Strict vegetarians are also more likely to identify political and/or ethical reasons as motivations behind their vegetarian lifestyle, whereas semi-vegetarians may be more likely to include weight loss as a motivating factor for their food choices (Perry et al., 2001). Given the differing levels of

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