



## Research report

Compassion and contamination. Cultural differences in vegetarianism<sup>☆</sup>Matthew B. Ruby<sup>a,\*</sup>, Steven J. Heine<sup>b</sup>, Shanmukh Kamble<sup>c</sup>, Tessa K. Cheng<sup>d</sup>, Mahadevi Waddar<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA<sup>b</sup> University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada<sup>c</sup> Karnatak University, Dharwad, India<sup>d</sup> Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has shown that Western vegetarians report more concern for animal welfare and environmental sustainability, and endorse more liberal values than do Western omnivores. However, despite the prevalence of Indian vegetarianism, its psychological associations and underpinnings remain largely unexamined. In Study 1, we find that Euro-American vegetarians are more concerned than omnivores with the impact of their daily food choices on the environment and animal welfare, show more concern for general animal welfare, and endorse universalistic values more, yet among Indian participants, these differences are not significant. In Study 2, we show that Indian vegetarians more strongly endorse the belief that eating meat is polluting, and show a heightened concern for the conservative ethics of Purity, Authority, and Ingroup relative to their omnivorous peers, whereas these differences are largely absent among Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans.

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## Introduction

Humans have historically spent a vast amount of time acquiring, preparing, and consuming food, often following only work and sleeping in percentage of daily time expenditure (Szalai, 1972). Although the consumption of fast food has dramatically increased since the 1970s (e.g., Goyal & Singh, 2007; Paeratakul, Ferdinand, Champagne, Ryan, & Bray, 2003) reducing time spent in food preparation, a substantial proportion of people's earnings is still spent on food and drink, with recent estimates of total household expenditures on food and drink ranging from 7% in the USA and 10% in Canada, to 28% in India (Meade, 2011). Despite the centrality of food in daily life, the psychology of food and eating (apart from research on obesity and regulation of food intake) is greatly understudied (Rozin, 2007): many of the reasons on which people base their food choices remain unclear. Most humans follow an omnivorous diet, and take advantage of dramatic nutritional flexibility not available to other omnivorous species. However, such flexibility carries risks, such as failing to consume essential nutrients, or ingesting toxins or harmful microbes, a problem that Rozin (1976) has termed "the omnivore's dilemma". Unlike most animals, who instinctively know which foods to eat,

and which to avoid, humans must learn these distinctions, relying heavily on culturally transmitted information (Rozin, 1990). Thus far, the kinds of cultural information that guide food choices are not well understood.

One kind of food that is particularly appropriate for investigating the ways that culture guides food choices is meat. A concentrated source of fat and protein, meat also has a higher risk of containing harmful substances than vegetable foods, and so, across a broad array of cultures, meat is one of the most highly valued foods, and most commonly tabooed foods (Fessler & Navarrete, 2003; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Although most people avoid eating particular types of animals, a number of individuals avoid eating animals altogether. Recent polls indicate that approximately 8% of Canadians (Ipsos-Reid, 2004), 3% of Americans (Cunningham, 2009), and estimates for India vary between 20% (Goldammer, 2001) and 42% (Delgado, Narrod, & Tiongco, 2003). Although vegetarians are a minority in most cultures, they are not always small minorities, and the popularity of vegetarian diets is on the rise in many countries (Cultivate Research, 2008; Datamonitor, 2009; Mintel International Group, 2007). As such, a growing number of scholars have begun formally studying the psychology of vegetarianism, exploring who vegetarians are, what motivates their dietary choices, and how they differ from omnivores in their politics, attitudes, and worldviews (for a review, see Ruby, 2012). However, as with much of the psychological database (Arnett, 2008), the research on vegetarianism has largely drawn from Western cultures, leaving the cross-cultural generalizability of

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the literature open to question (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Despite the fact that there are likely more vegetarians in India than in the rest of the world combined, studies on the psychological underpinnings of vegetarianism have all but ignored Indian cultural contexts. Are the same psychological processes that lead Western vegetarians to abstain from meat also implicated in the food choices of Indian vegetarians?

In Western cultural contexts, vegetarians and omnivores have been shown to view meat in very different terms. Although omnivores usually have positive explicit attitudes toward meat, associating it with luxury, good taste, and social status, vegetarians in the UK, Canada, and Germany tend to associate meat with cruelty, killing, disgust, and poor health (Barr & Chapman, 2002; Kenyon & Barker, 1998; Stockburger, Renner, Weike, Hamm, & Schupp, 2009), and research with Irish and Dutch populations reveals that for many vegetarians, these negative associations are also present on the implicit level (Barnes-Holmes, Murtagh, & Barnes-Holmes, 2010; De Houwer & De Bruycker, 2007). Although research involving vegetarian children is extremely rare, a study of children living in the USA found that child vegetarians framed their own dietary choices in moral terms (Hussar & Harris, 2009).

In contrast to the positive explicit attitudes expressed toward meat, recent research with Western populations indicates that meat-eating is a conflicted behavior that often results in omnivores modifying their perception of animals' moral status and capacity for emotion to be congruent with their behavior. Bratanova, Loughnan, and Bastian (2011) found that simply classifying an animal as a food source led participants to rate the animal as significantly less capable of suffering, and subsequently less deserving of moral status. Relatedly, Loughnan, Haslam, and Bastian (2010) found that randomly assigning participants to eat beef jerky led participants to report less concern for cows, consider them less capable of suffering, and less worthy of moral status, than those participants randomly assigned to eat nuts. People have been shown to attribute diminished mental capabilities to commonly eaten animals, and reminders of the link between meat eating and animal suffering leads to further demoralization of animals (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012). Furthermore, whereas omnivores have been found to ascribe less capacity for secondary emotions (e.g., hope, love, guilt) to 'edible' animals than to 'inedible' animals, vegetarians did not differentiate between these categories of animals (Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogosz, 2011).

In addition to holding different attitudes toward meat, several studies provide convergent evidence that Western vegetarians and omnivores differ more broadly in terms of other kinds of values, with liberal values more associated with vegetarians and conservative values more associated with omnivores. In a study of British adults, vegetarians were more likely than omnivores to be employed in charitable organizations, local government, or education, and were more likely to favor governmental redistribution of income (Gale, Deary, Schoon, & Batty, 2007), and among American adults, vegetarians were more likely to endorse universalistic values (e.g., peace, equality, and social justice; Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995). Similar results were obtained with New Zealanders, such that those with a more pronounced omnivore identity more strongly endorsed Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Allen, Wilson, Ng, & Dunne, 2000), and research with Dutch samples indicates that vegetarians report more concern than omnivores about the ecological consequences of their food choices (Hoek, Luning, Stafleu, & Graaf, 2004). Compared to omnivores, vegetarians in the UK reported greater opposition to capital punishment, and this anti-violence stance was especially strong among ethically-motivated vegetarians (Hamilton, 2006). Similarly, among Americans, vegetarians report greater human-directed empathy than omnivores (Preylo & Arikawa, 2008), and among Italians, ethically-motivated vegetarians reported more concern

for human suffering, and showed increased recruitment of empathy-related areas of the brain when viewing scenes of human (and animal) suffering (Filippi et al., 2010).

Given the growing body of research that links Western vegetarianism with broadly liberal worldviews, it would be informative to more closely examine the moral intuitions of vegetarians and omnivores, and see whether the same intuitions guide food choices across different cultural contexts. One potential area of inquiry is Moral Foundation Theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007), which holds that people's moral intuitions can be largely contained in five major domains. The ethics of Harm and Fairness, related to the ethic of Autonomy proposed by Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997), are concerned with the extent to which one's actions directly harm or help another, and whether one behaves in a fair manner that respects the rights of others. These two domains were the major focus of the founder of moral psychology, Lawrence Kohlberg (1969), and continued to be the main domains of concern for subsequent leading theories on morality, such as Gilligan's (1982) Moral Development Theory and Turiel's (1983) Social Domain Theory. In stark contrast to these theories of moral psychology, Moral Foundation Theory also considers the ethics of Ingroup, Authority, and Purity to be major domains of moral concern. The ethics of Ingroup and Authority, extensions of the ethic of Community (Shweder et al., 1997), are concerned with the extent to which one's actions show loyalty or disloyalty to one's group, and whether one displays respect for authority, hierarchy and tradition, whereas the ethic of Purity, a corollary of the ethic of Divinity (Shweder et al., 1997), is concerned with the extent to which one's actions follow the perceived 'natural order' and religious laws. Recent research has indicated that American liberals value the ethics of Harm and Fairness more than the ethics of Ingroup, Authority, and Purity, whereas American conservatives value all five ethics to relatively the same extent (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). To what extent might omnivores and vegetarians differ in their endorsement of the moral foundations?

Historically, vegetarianism in the West has been a countercultural dietary practice, traditionally associated with concerns about the killing of animals (Joy, 2009; Rozin, 2004; Stuart, 2006; Twigg, 1979), and in more recent years, concern for personal health and environmental sustainability have become common motivations (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991a; Fox & Ward, 2008; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997; Whorton, 1994). Most vegetarians in the West were not raised as such, but made a decision at some point to convert from the meat-eating diet followed by the majority of people in their culture (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991b). As such, the past research suggests that Western vegetarians would be more concerned than their omnivorous peers with the ethics of Harm and Fairness, and less concerned with the ethic of Authority. Because vegetarians are a minority group in the West, one might expect them to be more concerned with their ingroup. However, given that vegetarianism is an ideological identity than can sometimes lead to marginalization (e.g., Kellman, 2000; Monin, 2007), that motivations for becoming vegetarian are diverse (for a review, see Ruby, 2012), and that vegetarians may not be well connected to one another (e.g., Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998), group cohesiveness is difficult to predict. Furthermore, given that vegetarians are also typically more liberal than their omnivorous peers, and liberals typically endorse the ethic of Ingroup less than do conservatives, we did not have a clear prediction regarding differences between Western vegetarians and omnivores in their endorsement of the ethic of Ingroup. Furthermore, as vegetarianism is rarely motivated by religion in Western cultural contexts, vegetarians and omnivores also should not significantly differ in their endorsement of the ethic of Purity.

Turning to other cultural contexts, the history of vegetarianism is markedly different. In India, there is no general consensus on the

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