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Vegetarian Utopias: Visions of dietary patterns in future societies and support for social change



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ABSTRACT

The current study draws on the collective futures framework to examine how visions of future societies where most people consume plant-based, vegetarian or vegan diets are related to current support for social change towards plant-based diets. Participants were 506 university students in Aotearoa New Zealand invited to imagine a society in 2050 where most individuals consume a plant-based, vegetarian, or vegan diet. A thematic analysis was conducted on responses to an open-ended item asking how these future societies would be different to today. Participants reported a variety of potential positive and negative outcomes for individuals and wider society. Subsequent analyses of attitudes scales investigated the relationships between the collective dimensions of plant-based future societies and support for policies to promote plant-based diets. For a vegetarian future, the strongest predictor of current support for social change was the expectation that widespread vegetarianism would reduce societal dysfunction. For a vegan future, the strongest predictor of support for social change was an expectation of increased warmth in a vegan society. Implications for theory and advocacy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There is growing concern about the environmental impact and sustainability of diets based on high levels of animal products (Hertwich et al., 2010; Odegard & van der Voet, 2014; Stehfest et al., 2009; Steinfeld, Gerber, Wassenaar, Castel, & deHaan, 2006). An estimated 70% of the world's agricultural land is now dedicated to livestock production, which has contributed to biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and air and water pollution (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Additionally, research suggests that animal agriculture is responsible for an estimated 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions, an amount greater than the entire transport sector (Steinfeld et al., 2006). One strategy to reduce the environmental impacts of livestock production is to encourage the adoption of diets low in animal products, such as vegetarian and vegan diets (Marlow et al., 2009; Schösler, De Boer, & Boersema, 2012; Stehfest et al., 2009). Surprisingly, while environmental advocacy groups have heavily promoted pro-environmental behaviours such as recycling or using public transport; until recently there has been

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¹ A 'vegetarian' diet describes a diet that excludes meat but includes dairy and eggs, while a 'vegan' diet excludes all animal products. A 'plant-based' diet refers more generally to any diet where plants form the majority of the intake (although a small amount of animal protein may or may not still be consumed; Lea et al., 2006). Therefore, the term 'plant based diets' has also sometimes been used as an umbrella term for vegetarian, vegan and low meat diets.

relatively little promotion of plant-based, vegetarian, or vegan diets¹ (Freeman, 2010). It is important to investigate ways of framing these alternative dietary patterns that could function to increase support for social change in this area.

Visions of a better future society are argued to play an important role in motivating people to engage in social change in the present (Bain, Hornsey, Bongiorno, & Jeffries, 2012; Bain, Hornsey, Bongiorno, Kashima, & Crimston, 2013). Although there are potentially endless ways to depict the future, Bain et al. (2013) suggest that most visions of the future involve references to the following basic dimensions: societal development, societal dysfunction, and individual traits and values. Additionally, Bain et al. (2013) argue that some of these collective future dimensions might form the “active ingredients” (p. 523) promoting support for social change in the present. Bain et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of eight studies assessing individuals’ perceptions of different future scenarios. Although there was some variation across scenarios, in general, the strongest predictor of current intentions to engage in social change was the expectation that a future society would have more warm and caring people.

The relationship between future dimensions and current support for social change has implications for message framing and advocacy strategies. Bain et al. (2012) investigated whether framing climate change policies in terms of increasing benevolence in the future could stimulate support for these policies in individuals sceptical about climate change. Participants read a paragraph describing the future in one of three ways: the potential negative outcomes of climate change, the effect of climate change policies on improving warmth in society, or the effect of these policies on increasing societal development. Participants then rated their willingness to support climate change policies. The warmth and development future frames resulted in more pro-environmental intentions than the real/danger frame, and this effect was particularly strong for climate change sceptics (Bain et al., 2012). The authors concluded that for this audience, it may be more useful to focus on the potential positive societal outcomes of pro-environmental policies (such as increased warmth and development in society) rather than attempting to convince them of the threat of climate change.

In addition to positive visions of future society, beliefs about the way that society is most *likely* to develop also appear to play a role in motivating support for social change (Kashima et al., 2009). Individuals in Western societies generally understand social change as the linear development from traditional society to modern society; a belief that has been labelled the “folk theory of social change” (Kashima et al., 2009, p. 227). More specifically, there is a perception that traditional societies tend to display more interpersonal warmth, but less competence, whereas modern societies are perceived as more competent, but less warm. Kashima et al. (2009) identified that, for individuals who believed that policies can influence society, the perception that a future modern society would be less communal was associated with greater support for policies that promoted communality. Increasing theoretical developments such as the work by Kashima et al. (2009) and Bain et al. (2013) have contributed to our understanding of when and why visions of the future can motivate current support for social change across different contexts. An area that is yet to be explored is visions of the future involving large-scale shifts in dietary behaviours.

We would suggest that utopian visions of future society may play a role in shaping attitudes towards plant-based, vegetarian and vegan diets in Western cultures. In Western utopian literature, vegetarianism (or the condemnation of animal slaughter) has appeared several times as an underlying theme; for example, in Thomas More’s *Utopia* (More & Baker-Smith, [1869] 2012; More & Baker-Smith, [1869] 2012), H.G. Wells’ *Modern Utopia* (Wells & Sullivan, 1905), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (Gilman, [1915] 1979; Gilman, [1915] 1979). Vegetarian utopias are often attributed characteristics such as better relationships with animals, lower rates of violence, increased support for feminism, and individuals with greater control over animalistic instincts and higher levels of purity (Belasco, 2006). However, vegetarianism can also be imagined as the outcome of a dystopian future. For example, Parry (2009) discusses Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake*, in which the future population consists of a new engineered type of human who is effectively vegetarian. Parry (2009) suggests that the author constructs the few remaining ‘real’ humans (in contrast to the ‘new’ humans) as *naturally* desiring meat. Therefore, a vegetarian future society can be constructed as a positive natural development of humanity, or alternatively, as an undesirable, unnatural development.

How do individuals in meat-centred Western cultures envision the future of meat consumption?² Vinnari and Tapio (2009) surveyed beliefs about the future of meat consumption among 177 consumers and 39 experts in Finland. Although most participants reported an expectation of business as usual (in which no major changes to levels of meat consumption were expected), a small number of participants anticipated that there could be widespread vegetarianism in the future. Potts and White (2008) interviewed vegetarians and ‘cruelty-free’ consumers in Aotearoa New Zealand about their perceptions of the future of animal agriculture in the nation. Participants reported pessimistic, pragmatic and utopian visions of the future, including predictions of better animal welfare, a shift to crop-based farming, or even the outlawing of meat consumption (Potts & White, 2008).

Aotearoa New Zealand is an interesting context in which to examine visions of plant-based future societies.³ There is a strong historical and contemporary emphasis on animal agriculture and meat consumption, primarily linked to European colonisation and the current productivist emphasis on pastoral farming (Potts & White, 2008; Rosin, 2013). Sinclair (1986) suggests that for early European colonists, “‘breaking in’ the land [to cultivate pastures for agriculture] was seen as central to

² It should be acknowledged that most individuals in these societies probably have not considered this much at all.

³ The term ‘plant-based future societies’ will be used throughout the current article as an umbrella term to refer to plant-based, vegetarian or vegan future dietary patterns.

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