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Abstract

Typically, research on vegetarianism has sought to identify the psychological characteristics that distinguish vegetarians from meat-eaters. Health concerns have been identified as a motivation for meat abstention. In this article, rhetorical analysis of Internet discussions about health and vegetarianism highlights the argumentative orientation of explanations for meat consumption, with the various constructions of health serving a rhetorical function. We show the dilemmatic nature of arguments about the relationship between food and health: food can promote health and cause ill-health, and suggest that meat-eating as a dominant practice is supported by the rhetorical use of notions of 'balance', implying moderation, inclusion and rationality. This rhetorical approach represents a radical critique of past work that assumes opinions given in response to questions about vegetarian practices represent 'causes' of dietary practice.

Keywords

food, health, rhetoric, vegetarianism

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ONE NEED only look to Britain during the mid-1990s (during the 'Mad Cow' scare), and early 2000s ('Foot and Mouth') to see the dramatic reaction to health-related fears arising from food. In these examples, the health concerns deriving from potentially contaminated food have been suggested as an explanation for the alleged decrease in red meat consumption, and increase in vegetarian lifestyles (Leech, 1996). The desire to follow a healthy diet and concerns about the safety of foods appear to be potent motivators for dietary change. For example, Goode, Beardsworth, Haslam, Keil and Sherratt (1995) reported that the majority of a British sample indicated that they had altered their diet due to an increased awareness of healthy diets, while one-third reported dietary change as the result of a food scare.

Reduction in meat consumption is recommended by some sources for a healthy diet. For example the World Health Organization (1990) endorses an increase in consumption of vegetables and fruit and a decrease in meat as part of a healthy diet. However, complete abstinence from meat and animal products may be problematic for health. Recently, a New Zealand couple have been convicted of failing to provide the necessities of life following the death of their infant child from a vitamin B deficiency attributed to their vegan lifestyle (*Dominion Post*, 5 June 2002).

The example cited above indicates that the adoption of meat-free diets may be presented as a healthy option, but may also have serious negative health consequences. Indeed, diets characterized by the decision to abstain from meat (and sometimes from all animal products) have inspired prolonged debate over their particular health-related merits. Descriptive polls suggest that in western countries somewhere between 3 and 11 per cent of the population follow a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle, or report avoidance of red meat (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Social Surveys [Gallup] Ltd, 1990; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998b). This indicates that, despite food scares, the consumption of meat is very much a dominant practice in contemporary western society, making meat-abstainers a societal minority.

Researchers typically understand adherence to a meat-free diet as a matter of rational and conscious choice. It is also treated as one for which meat-abstainers are required to provide justification, both in food-related contexts and as subjects of research. Explanations and justifications of dietary practices are viewed as reflecting internal dispositions and causes. The questions asked to investigate the basis of this 'choice' reflect this assumption (and we would argue constrain the nature of responses obtained). For example, the first analytic chapter of a detailed qualitative investigation into meat-avoidance by Amato and Partridge (1989) is entitled 'Why do people become vegetarians?'—a question that is encountered both in the research literature and everyday discourse surrounding food preference. The fact that this question is worth asking at all indicates that (as in other situations in which people are expected to express attitudes) the topic is one of potential controversy. As Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton and Radley (1988) point out—controversy arises from the presence of alternatives. Billig et al. argue that these dilemmas,

> are experienced by people in situations in which they must see things from opposing standpoints, so that there is an awareness of the consequences of one line of action for the other, and of their incompatibility for the person concerned. (1988, p. 91)

In the case of meat-eating versus vegetarianism the normative position is that of meat-eating to the point that, like being 'healthy', meat-eating is the 'unmarked pole' while vegetarianism or meat-abstention (like ill-health) is the 'marked pole' (Greenberg, 1966).

The reasons for becoming vegetarian have been investigated in social scientific literature with quantitative and qualitative surveys (e.g. Allen, Wilson, Dunne, & Ng, 2000; Amato & Partridge, 1989; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Kalof, Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1999; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998a). Typically the aim of research has been to understand the attitudes, beliefs and motivations that lead individuals to reduce or eliminate meat from their diets. Concerns with health and morality are commonly presented as the two most influential factors in assuming a vegetarian food position (Amato & Partridge, 1989). These factors have then been used to differentiate between groups of vegetarians and non-vegetarians. For

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example, Jabs, Devine and Sobal (1998) divided a vegetarian sample in two based on their reported reasons for their adoption of vegetarianism—those whose original motivation was the perception of threat of disease or potential health benefits, and those concerned with the ethical issues surrounding use of animals for food.

The idea that different reasons for becoming vegetarian reflect distinctive identities is a persistent assumption in the literature. For example, Rozin, Markwith and Stoess (1997) specifically contrast health with moral vegetarians and argue (on the basis of attitude survey results) that moral vegetarianism is a choice motivated by disgust towards animal-based foods. This disgust derives out of a process in which food preferences come to symbolize social values (for other discussions of values and vegetarianism see also Allen et al., 2000; Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995). Rozin et al.'s work, and others like it is based on the assumption that a greater reported concern with morality and health reflects internal stable dispositions towards morality or health consciousness. That is, vegetarians are 'more' moral and health-conscious than non-vegetarians.

The research discussed so far represents a traditional approach in the social sciences (Smith, Harré, & van Langenhove, 1995), where attitudes are elicited through interviews or questionnaires. These attitudes are quantified, analysed and weighted in terms of their utility in predicting or explaining other quantified constructs (for example, vegetarian or non-vegetarian group membership, or attitudes to meat). An alternative framework for considering these issues focuses on discourses surrounding an issue or issues. In contrast to a traditional approach, we would take the position that language and thought not be considered ontologically distinct (Bakhtin, 1981; Billig, 1991; Wittgenstein, 1953). Billig (1991) argues for a rhetorical social psychology, where opinion-giving is considered in the context of argumentation (only issues that do not require opinions are ones that are not worthy of debate), one function of opinion-giving is to argue and persuade. Therefore, an opinion or attitude does not exist in isolation from other, potentially opposite, attitudes and opinions. Rather, any response to questions such as 'why be vegetarian?' can be understood as a position designed around potential counter arguments to the adopted position. This notion of adopting a dialogic (assumption of possible contradictory positions) as opposed to monologic position can be taken further and applied to the research paradigm itself (e.g. Shotter, 1992).

From a rhetorical perspective, articulation of health as an explanation for adoption of a particular diet does not necessarily reflect something about that person or their dietary choice, but that health is an important and desirable concept, and one that can be used to justify observable behaviour (and not just diet). Further, we can anticipate the counter positions that may be important in such a debate because previous research has identified various possible responses to the question of dietary preference. However, such research has interpreted explanations such as morality, animal welfare, environmentalism, religion, as reflecting beliefs and motivations about one's dietary preferences. Persuasive arguments are those that draw upon the shared understandings of their audience, particularly notions of common sense and morality—invested as they are with obvious values of right and wrong (Billig, 1991). Therefore, convincing arguments about diet are going to be those that draw upon common-sense notions, such as health and morality, and these notions are used because they are accepted as legitimate and rational.

Health (and ethical concerns) are represented in psychological research as significant predictors of dietary variation (e.g. Amato & Partridge, 1989; Rozin et al., 1997; Sims, 1978), at the same time there is considerable variation in the frequency and importance attributed to health concerns as a motivation for meat-abstention. Not all studies have supported the finding of health concerns as a primary reason for meat abstention. For example, Worsley and Skrzypiec (1998a) report a factor analytic study of attitudes to meat indicating that (in terms of variance accounted for) health was the seventh factor accounting for less than 4 per cent of variation. Kalof et al. (1999) report that neither health nor animal welfare were significant predictors of vegetarian attitudes (though concern for the environment was).

One possible reason for the contradictory

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findings in this traditional literature may be that this reflects the rhetorical needs of the individual, in terms of their interpretation of the specific context in which the question is asked. Given the non-normative meat-abstention position, there are pressures on the respondent to account for their position in ways that mark their decision as rational and legitimate. Depending on the context, vegetarianism as a health concern may be a more desirable position than others (ethical concerns, environment, etc). In turn, the discursive resources available to the respondent will differ depending on their position. For example, there may be a concern that adopting an ethical position on meat-consumption leaves one open to accusations of moralizing or proselytizing (e.g. 'Vegetarian oppressors?', *TIME Magazine*, 15 August 2002, p. 2) making health a more desirable expressed response.

Surveys on dietary motivation are equivocal as to the relative importance of health reasons (as opposed to animal welfare or other motivations) as causes of vegetarianism. Further, it is often assumed that vegetarian concern for health means they are healthier. However, the reverse has also been suggested—that vegetarians are less healthy than meat-eaters. An illustration of how the issue of concern with health issues might work both ways can be found in the research that suggests that far from representing a healthy alternative, vegetarian eating styles might actually be an eating disorder by proxy. For example, Rao, Gowers and Crisp (1986) examined the case histories of a group of anorectics, approximately half of whom were identified as vegetarian and who presented with a markedly greater fear of 'fatness' than non-vegetarian anorectics. Sullivan and Damani (2000) also argue that vegetarianism is disproportionately prevalent in eating-disordered individuals. Furthermore, despite the assertion of health as a pre-eminent reason for vegetarianism, studies of health symptomatology show little difference between vegetarians and non-vegetarians, though vegetarians have been shown to display higher levels of hypochondriasis (Cooper, Wise, & Mann, 1985; see also Martins, Pliner, & O'Connor, 1999; Mooney & Walbourn, 2001).

From a rhetorical perspective, then, discussion of the merits (or otherwise) of a vegetarian or low-meat diet can be understood not as reflections of attitudes and beliefs about vegetarianism but rather as positions located in a broader discursive context. Statements or responses to the question 'why are you vegetarian?' function to present a position against various counter positions in a broader argumentative context. The present study takes a rhetorical approach to analysing responses to some form of the question 'why be vegetarian?' It was anticipated that the categories of reasons for becoming vegetarian identified in the traditional literature on meat consumption would be used in ways that demonstrated their rhetorical orientation.

Furthermore, it was expected that accounts would be organized around the ideological dilemma of 'vegetarianism as healthy' as opposed to 'vegetarianism as unhealthy'.

Corpus

The corpus for this investigation comprises of a number of public domain, Internet-based discussion forums, the topic of which is the response to some form of the question, 'why be vegetarian?' Contributors to these fora do so with the expectation that their postings become publicly available, and for this reason consent for inclusion in the corpus was not sought.

Between late 2001 and early 2002, the GOOGLE (http://www.google.com) Internet search engine was used to locate Internet sites, web lists and discussion forums that included reference to 'vegetarianism', and were narrowed down further by searching for question-type statements like the target question. The analysis presented here is based only on discussion sites (vegetarian organizations, pro-meat groups, etc.) for the simple reason that the remaining sites included a wide range of contributors whose contributions were organized chronologically (though not attended to in this article, such a criterion allows us to look at the development of argumentation over a sequence of turns). The final corpus comprised of sites as diverse as a Morrissey fan-site (vegetarian ex-lead singer of the Smiths—http://www.morrisey-solo.com/), a recipe exchange site (http://ths.gardenweb.com/forums/load/vegex/), an anti-McDonald's website (http://www.mcspotlight.com/) and

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others (a complete list of URLs is included in the Appendix).

The complete discussions were downloaded and converted into text-based documents, before being imported into the qualitative data management software program QSR N*Vivo (Qualitative Solutions and Research: see Fraser, 1999; Richards, 1999). The final corpus consisted of 807 contributions, for a total of 360 pages. The whole corpus was coded into a number of families of arguments, one of which was determined by allusion to the topic of health. This sub-sample was used for the following analysis and comprised of 154 extracts (approximately 12,500 words). Note that we present extracts as they appear, without corrections of spelling or grammar.

Analysis

The extracts presented here illustrate how concepts of health get worked up and used to rationalize and legitimate vegetarianism and meat-eating. Despite considerable points of disagreement between the pro and anti meat-eating positions there was one assumption or bottom line position that both camps shared—that health is important.

A second widespread assumption was that diet was a key health issue. However, on a single occasion that assumption was challenged:

> As for the health issues, I can guarantee you that changing your diet is not *nearly* as effective as changing your exercise habits. 2 hours of *sweat-inducing* exercise is more healthy for you than abstinating from meat and sitting at a desk all day. (Extract 1)

The suggestion offered in Extract 1 is that exercise is more important than abstaining from meat for your health. In the following analysis understandings about the relationships between food and health are highlighted. Extract 1 serves as a reminder, however, that debates about diet and health form part of a wider discursive context where other factors are understood as influencing health.

Our analysis takes the posted messages not as reflections of the internal states of the messagers but as stances in matters of controversy. We begin by examining messages that justify being vegetarian on the basis of generic health. These messages are not taken as referring to the 'real' motivations for being vegetarian. Rather, we understand them as a position taken in order to undermine possible counter positions.

For health not ethics

The following extracts illustrate that people use the notion of health discursively to counter or undermine being positioned as being concerned with ethical issues. Consider Extract 2:

> I am a vegetarian but not because of animal cruelty. I am a vegetarian simply because my body feels better when I don't eat meat or dairy products. I don't tell others what to eat. 'To each his own' is right on. I am offended that people assume that because I'm a vegetarian I'm going to lecture them about their personal dietary choices. (Extract 2)

The first sentence in Extract 2 has the form of a disclaimer (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). Disclaimers simultaneously acknowledge and attempt to prevent people interpreting what they are doing or saying in a particular way. Potter and Wetherell (1987) describe disclaimers as a kind of account that tries to undermine an anticipated negative attribution. Thus, it is possible to infer that what is being disclaimed is normatively undesirable. Here, the messager recognizes the statement 'I am a vegetarian' can negatively position him as being concerned about animal welfare because there is an immediate disclaimer 'but not because of animal cruelty'.

The rhetorical force of the disclaimer is worked up in the message by being 'offended' at what 'people assume'. A liberal discourse 'to each his own' further helps to counter an interpretation that he might be trying to judge others' dietary choices. The use of quotations functions rhetorically to establish what is being said, not as idiosyncratic but, as belonging to a group of others (Potter, 1996):

> I rarely eat meat, not because I think it's wrong to eat meat, but because it isn't healthy. (Extract 3)

In Extract 3 the potential of a general ethical stance being attributed to decisions to restrict meat-eating is also illustrated by the use of a disclaimer. Extract 3 is a disclaiming statement because it acknowledges morality as a possible

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reason for rarely eating meat and simultaneously dismisses it as the messager's explanation, which is instead 'because it isn't healthy'.

From Extracts 2 and 3 we can infer that there is something problematic about claiming ethical reasons for vegetarianism—it is an attribution that was warded off rhetorically, through the use of disclaimers. What possible cultural norm/s are threatened by an ethical explanation of vegetarianism? The following two extracts suggest an answer that question:

> I'm vegan because I care about the well-being of animals, about my own health, and about the environment . . . and I do not care one bit about putting it in people's faces. (Extract 4)

Unlike Extracts 2 and 3, in Extract 4 caring about animals and the environment are not disclaimed as reasons for avoiding meat consumption. In contrast with the other extracts in this section, the messager acknowledges, indeed is positively unapologetic about, the possibility that presenting their views may be seen as proselytizing. Thus the imposition of beliefs or 'putting it in people's faces' is constituted as undesirable:

> In my research I have decided, for health reasons, to limit my consumption of meat and totally remove pork from my diet. But I must say that it disturbs me when someone wants to place a weight on my shoulders for eating meat. (Extract 5)

In Extract 5 the messager admits to some meat consumption. The second sentence of the message illustrates that a moral responsibility, implied by the metaphor 'weight on my shoulders', can be placed on those who eat meat. The message in Extract 5 construes the notional imposition as disturbing.

The rhetorical rather than causal function of reported health reasons for meat restricted diets, being emphasized in our analysis, was not entirely lost to the messagers. Consider Extract 6:

> Well, when some vegans are out in public, they first size up the person they are speaking to, and if they determine the person to be one that isn't very compassionate, they will use the 'health' justification for becoming vegan, so the person will listen. If your co-worker told you he was concerned for the environment and or animal welfare, you probably wouldn't listen to him anymore. (Extract 6)

Extract 6 illustrates that the discursive function of various justifications for dietary preferences is not always understood, as reflections of 'true' reasons, but are used flexibly to meet the rhetorical demands of a particular interaction.

The analysis so far has shown that statements in favour of the health benefits of being vegetarian can be construed, not as 'causes' of dietary practices but as functioning to counter being positioned as ethical. A problem with ethical reasons is that you might be positioned as pushing your morals or moral responsibilities onto others.

Health reasons for restricting or avoiding meat were not only used to counter a possible ethical explanation but also to counter the possible ill-health effects of being vegetarian and the possible health benefits from eating meat, which will be examined next.

Vegetarianism, meat-eating and health

The positions and counter positions about the health or otherwise of meat-eating and vegetarianism illustrate a dilemmatic aspect of everyday thinking about food and health. It suggests that people do not necessarily hold simple views about the relationship between food and health, rather their thinking is characterized by the presence of a contradictory theme, or in Billig et al.'s (1988) terms an 'ideological dilemma'. On the one hand diet (vegetarianism or meat-eating) can promote health, while on the other diet (vegetarianism or meat-eating) can cause ill-health:

> There is not health reason to eat meat. If anything the opposite is true. (Extract 7)

> We need meat as part of a healthy diet and if vegetarians are ill its there own fault. (Extract 8)

Extract 7 is a simple statement in support of vegetarianism where the counter position—the possible health reasons for eating meat—is directly and straightforwardly challenged 'there is not [*sic*] health reason to eat meat'. Extract 8 is similarly uncomplicated in support of meat-eating. Both Extract 7 and 8 rest on an everyday

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understanding that food and diet can cause health and illness.

Constructions of health

Few of the statements in support of vegetarianism or meat-eating were as brief and to the point as Extracts 7 and 8. Usually messages were longer and more complex. One aspect of many of the longer messages was the ways 'health', and by implication illness, were constructed. Extracts 9 to 14 are examples of how various constructions of health are used to support vegetarianism:

> I am 30 years old and I just turn veggie about 7 months ago. I feel like I'm 18 again. I went back to my ideal weight and I have lots of energy. (Extract 9)

> I know people that sit eating KFC and ask me why I'm not eating it too? They know I don't eat meat (except fish sometimes). These people are very unhealthy looking. I'm not a doctor, but I can see their skin tone looks bad, they are very fat, they can't breathe very well, etc. They laugh at healthy living or that's my impression. They just don't get it & I just don't understand why they don't at least try to be healthier & enjoy life more. (Extract 10)

The notions of good health inferred in Extract 9 include feeling young, being an ideal weight and having energy. Weight is also mentioned in Extract 10. In contrast to Extract 9, where ideal weight is linked to a vegetarian diet, Extract 10 links being fat to eating meat. Extract 10 also mentions appearance as an aspect of health 'unhealthy looking . . . their skin tone is bad'. Furthermore health is construed as a 'lifestyle' in Extract 10, and is associated with enjoying life:

> I recently had the pleasure of spending a few days with a young man of 12 who was raised as a vegetarian. Although he appeared to be 'skinny', as he calls it, I noticed no lack of stamina or other signs of protein deficiency in his epic climb to the top of a 4000 meter peak accompanied by me and my son who are both meat eaters, uni brows, cannibals, whatever. (Extract 11)

As in Extracts 9 and 10, weight and energy levels are also associated with health in Extract 11. In Extract 11 a vegetarian diet is being supported as healthy, from the perspective of somebody who eats meat. In this case, arguing for a dietary preference that one does not practise is an effective management of the issue of stake or interest in that the discussant may not as easily be accused of bias (Edwards & Potter, 1992):

> Better overall health, less chance of heart disease or cancer, and a clear conscience, when it comes to animals having to die so that you can eat flesh foods which are not needed in you diet. (Extract 12)

In Extract 12 a vegetarian diet is not only associated with better physical health, that is less chance of 'disease or cancer' but also, like the enjoyment mentioned in Extract 10, with psychological well-being or a 'clear conscience':

> I agree that what you eat is only one of the many choices that we make that impact the world around us, but what we eat collectively has an enormous impact on the environment and on our health as a society. (Extract 13)

> I also feel that they would live longer, and that our planet will last longer and be more healthy if we could all live peacefully as Vegetarians. I'm aware that this may only be a 'dream', but i still feel that it can become a reality . . . Any suggestions? (Extract 14)

Extracts 13 and 14 draw upon a broader understanding of health than was mobilized in the more individualistic aspects of Extracts 9–11. In Extract 13 dietary choices are implicated in the state of the environment and the health of society. Extract 14 uses the construction of health as having longer life to refer both to individuals' health but also the environmental health 'our planet will last longer'.

Health, illness and nutrition

Various constructions of health were one aspect that contributed to the complexity of some of the longer messages. Another source was the level of detail about food and its possible relationships to various kinds of health and illness:

> Eating meat is unhealthy! even the ada has publically noted that meat eaters are at a higher risk for such diseases as cancer,

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> hypertension, and diabeties. also, meat eaters are consuming what the animals intake . . . pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, and many other kinds of heavy metal, cancer causing toxins. (Extract 15)

In Extract 15 the exclamation that 'meat is unhealthy' is quickly supported by the expert weight of the American Dietary Association (ADA) and a list of three of the diseases that meat-eaters are at higher risk from. Three-part lists have been found in a variety of discursive contexts and are noted for their various persuasive functions (see Edwards & Potter, 1992). Here, the list functions to provide a representative sample of kinds of diseases that meat-eaters are at risk of. The persuasive force of the three-part list is worked up further by a longer, albeit less rhetorically elegant, list of the nasties that meat-eaters incidentally consume:

> Additionally, there is evidence that red meat can increase your risks of contracting colon cancer. Also, prion diseases (like mad cow disease), are passed between carnivores. There is now evidence pointing to alzhiemers being related to prion diseases. And here is a hot tip—prions can not be killed by cooking meat, or even exposing it to radiation. You can't avoid them if they are present. (Extract 16)

Colon cancer, mad cow disease and Alzheimer's are 'additionally' associated with meat-eating in Extract 16. The explanation of technical terms, 'prion diseases (like mad cow disease)' alongside its factual statements 'prions cannot be killed by cooking meat' gives the message an expert footing (for more on 'footing' see Edwards & Potter, 1992).

In Extracts 15 and 16 the messages focused on the dangers of meat-eating. The following two extracts extol both the benefits of a vegetarian diet as well as warning of the dangers of eating meat:

> A vegetarian diet provides all the nutrients a person needs, is a good source of carbohydrate and a wholly adequate source of protein, while meat has been linked to some types of cancer as well as heart desease, and the excess protein it often provides linked to osteoperosis and kidney failure . . . Have you ever heard of a cause of death being recorded as 'vegetarianism'? (Extract 17)

In Extract 17 the nutritional adequacy of a vegetarian diet is detailed and contrasted with the illness associated with meat-eating. The counter position that a vegetarian diet could be dangerous is undermined by the rhetorical question 'Have you ever heard of a cause of death being recorded as "vegetarianism"?' Although rhetorically effective, the recent case described in the introduction, where a child died of vitamin B deficiency caused by diet, illustrates that a non-meat (in this case vegan) diet can indeed be fatal:

> There are many reasons to be a vegetarian. In particular, a typical vegetarian diet—low in fat, cholesterol, and calories—can reduce your blood cholesterol level, thus helping to lower your risk of heart disease. The vegetarian approach can also help you shed extra pounds—and keep them off. Vegetarians are less likely to develop diabetes and high blood pressure. And many of the compounds that scientists are isolating from vegetables may even protect against certain forms of cancer. Additionally, there aren't any additional problems with vegetables, such as salmonilla and the like . . . (Extract 18)

Similar to Extract 17, a list of the nutritional and health benefits of vegetarianism is given in Extract 18. Although not mentioned explicitly, one can infer that it is meat-eating that is associated with diabetes, high blood pressure as well as food poisoning.

Extracts 15 to18 are only a few of the many messages that used details about health, illness and nutrition to support vegetarianism.

Evolution

Tangentially related to health were arguments that invoked evolution to support dietary practices:

> Humans evolved to be omnivorous. We have teeth for tearing and teeth for grinding. We are allowed to eat meat and grain and vegetables. We can digest both. (Extract 19)

The evolutionary argument for eating meat, briefly alluded to in Extract 19 has considerable currency. For example, *TIME Magazine* (Corliss, 2002) suggested evolutionary evidence supporting meat-eating was one of the most

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difficult arguments for vegetarians to counter. However, consider the following:

> And for everyone who's citing the food chain and Darwin's 'Survival of the Fittest,' please familiarize yourself with the work of Cornell's T. Colin Campbell, Ph.D. (China Study—dubbed the 'Grand Prix of epidemiological studies' by the NYT—Campbell and his associates from Oxford and Beijing found that villages in China that ate the least animal products were also the villages with the least heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, obesity, etc.); UCSF's Dr. Dean Ornish (reversing heart disease—Ornish uses a vegetarian diet, instead of surgery, to melt the atherosclerotic plague from the walls of heart patients); George Washington University's Dr. Neal Barnard ('The Power of your Plate'—studies on the connections between obesity, diabetes and heart disease and animal product consumption). Survival of the fittest, indeed. (Extract 20)

In Extract 20 the Darwinian notion of survival of the fittest, that underlies common-sense ideas about the evolutionary advantage of certain traits and behaviours, is rhetorically undermined by citing a raft of authorities that show meat-eaters are less likely to be fit and survive than those following a low meat or vegetarian diet. The existence of a viable counter position to a simple evolutionary argument emphasizes the dialogical over the referential function of statements about meat-eating and vegetarianism. The dilemmatic and dialogic nature of our data is further highlighted in the next section that focuses on the counter arguments to the health and nutritional benefits of a vegetarian diet.

Vegetarian counter arguments

The pro-vegetarian extracts presented in the health, illness and nutrition section of the analysis highlighted the rhetorical detail and discursive complexity of arguments about the effects of food on health. In pro-vegetarian messages the dilemmatic counter arguments—that meat-eating is healthy and vegetarianism is unhealthy—are implicit. The vegetarian counter arguments are made explicit where meat-eating is supported. In this section of the analysis messages supporting meat-eating are emphasized. A point we wish to stress is that despite the difference in stances both vegetarianism and meat-eating can be supported by the *same* rhetorical resources and common-sense ideas. Eating meat and vegetarianism can *both* be construed as healthy *and* unhealthy.

Anecdotal examples and personal experience were used as evidence in support of the health of a vegetarian diet (for example Extracts 9, 10 and 11). Similar evidence was used to illustrate that eating meat can be healthy and vegetarianism can cause ill-health:

> And there are plenty of people who do eat meat and are in top physical health and condition. (Extract 21)

In Extract 21 the relationship between meat-eating and health is supported by an anecdote. The example is formulated through extreme cases (Pomerantz, 1986) 'plenty of people' and 'top physical health', which illustrate the rhetorical orientation of the message:

> I have tried vegetarianism several times, and have always been left feeling weak and tired. Yes, I did go about it the right way, I did not live on salads. (Extract 22)

The claim a vegetarian diet is unhealthy is made in Extract 22. Here personal experience is drawn upon to show the ill-effects of vegetarianism on feelings of strength and alertness. The dialogic nature of Internet discussion threads is nicely illustrated when the messager answers an imagined objection about the adequacy of their vegetarian diet, 'Yes, I did go about it the right way'.

Extracts 21 and 22 called upon general notions of health to support meat-eating and argue against vegetarianism. The following extracts were selected to show that the kind of detail about health, illness and nutrition that were used in pro-vegetarian posts were also evident in messages advocating meat-eating:

> If you want to argue about what chemicles are in meat, your vegetables are sprayed with harmful pesticides and are chemically altered for more efficient production. (Extract 23)

Look back to Extract 15 where a long list of the toxins consumed via meat was provided. Extract 23 highlights that vegetarians may also consume harmful substances:

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> One Glucosomine a lubricant that lubricates your muscles and joints which is a by-product of Chrodroitin and is supplied in meat. Secondly a protien with an amino acid balance that is digestible and utilezed by humans. You can say you are getting enough protien all day long but you are not getting the correct amino acid balance.
>
> Third Creatine Monohydrate comes from meat especially red meat and is a crucial part in the ATP cycle and also aids in bringing water into your muscles. (Extract 24)

Extract 24 is a pro-meat parallel to the messages in support of vegetarianism that used technical detail to work up their position. Just as pro-vegetarian positions utilize the scientific language of nutrition, the use of technical terms for the chemical substances ('glucosomine', 'creatine monohydrate') and processes ('ATP cycle') gives the pro-meat message scientific footing and authenticity. The three-part list in this message provides a sense of completeness and closure to the argument.

Extracts 22, 23 and 24 illustrate the dilemmatic nature of the relationship between diet and health. On the one hand vegetarianism can be healthy, on the other it can be unhealthy. Meat-eating can also be healthy or unhealthy.

Reasserting the sense of meat-eating

The common-sense dilemma that food can cause health and illness produces a problem, how can food be consumed safely? The discursive resolution to the problem of healthy dietary practices uses the notion of 'balance'. The notion of balance suggests that eating anything, in moderation, is unlikely to cause harm. The notion of 'balance' gains some of its rhetorical effectiveness because it connotes reasonableness and rationality:

> The Humans Beings NEEDS to eat meat and vegetables there're are many essential nutrients that we need from meat and vegetables, the recomendation of the physician is to eat a balanced diet. (Extract 25)

The claim made in Extract 25 is eating meat and vegetables is necessary to meet the nutritional needs of humans. The messager inoculates themselves against their personal stake (Edwards & Potter, 1992) in the matter by attributing the recommendation of a 'balanced diet' to the physician:

> You need a proper balance of nutrients for your body to function right, and meat is a good thing to eat. . . . I admit, all meats aren't good for you. (you DON'T want to eat a steak for dinner every night if you don't get much exercise) But you need balance. (Extract 26)

As in Extract 25, in Extract 26 the notion of balance is invoked to support the idea eating meat is a good thing. The messager does reasonableness by conceding the validity of the counter position—that some meats aren't good and eating meat too frequently can be undesirable. 'Balance' is restated at the end of the post as the bottom line of the argument, 'But you need balance:'

> There is a health case for eating less saturated fat. No reasonable person thinks otherwise. However a good balanced diet (certainly including moderate quantities of meat, fish, and fowl) is perfectly normal for humankind. (Extract 27)

Doing reasonableness was a feature of Extract 26 that is also evident in Extract 27. Being reasonable involves conceding some of the points of the counter position—here the health case for eating less saturated fat, presumably through eating less meat is acknowledged. The reasonableness of eating some meat is then worked by through the related notions of balance, moderation and normality:

> I would also have to say that my opinion is mixed about living a vegan lifestyle. I know it has its advantages but it also has its disadvantages. I know that there are certain vitamins and nutrients that are easier to get from animal products then from any other sources. I also know doctors warn and caution against put growing kids on vegan diet. It could be dangerous to their health and deprive them of nutrients needed in abundance that are easily supplied by animal products. I do agree that people over do it. I think moderation in everything is good. (Extract 28)

In Extract 28 the messager's neutral position on veganism is established in their statement 'my opinion is mixed'. Their acknowledgement of

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the advantages and disadvantages of veganism confirms their lack of personal stake in the matter. The reasonableness of eating meat is worked up further by hedging claims about its necessity—there are '*certain* vitamins and nutrients' that are '*easier* to get from animal products'. Thus a vegan or vegetarian diet is not being dismissed but is being construed as more difficult. The specific instance of the health of children being dependent on a diet with meat re-establishes the sense of eating meat in a particular instance. People overdoing it, which presumably refers to veganism or vegetarianism, is contrasted with 'moderation', which has been worked up as the more legitimate or rational position:

> The nutrients in meat must either be found elsewhere or eaten in meat to continue to have a balanced diet. I have a number of friends who are either vegetarian or vegan, for various reasons. Health is one large one. YES it can be healthier for some people, especially those with hi cholesteral, to remove red meat and poultry from their diet (most continue to eat fish, to get important protien. Iron can be gained through other sources). (Extract 29)

In Extract 29, meat is recognized as the primary and most accessible source of nutrients for a 'balanced' diet. Thus the sense of meat-eating is established. The acknowledgement of health as a valid reason for 'some people' to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet functions to disclaim the first statement being interpreted as arguing that vegetarianism is unhealthy. The recognition of the possibility, albeit with difficulty, of a nutritionally balanced vegetarian diet and that the messager has vegetarian and vegan friends functions to establish the messager's reasonableness and objectivity.

To conclude, the notion of balance is important for arguments about dietary preferences. It resolves the dilemma between food and health (that food can be both good and bad for your health). Conceptually balance is linked with moderation and reasonableness, which together function to re-establish the importance of eating meat, albeit in appropriately limited quantities. It seems then that the construct of a balanced diet supports and functions to reproduce the sense and dominance of meat-eating in western society.

Discussion

We have illustrated, using the excerpts above, that statements about being vegetarian have a rhetorical orientation. This informs and transforms the investigation of dietary preference in general, and health issues associated with vegetarianism, in particular. In accounting for a particular dietary preference our analysis shows how particular reasons such as health or ethics have a discursive function. At the same time, such an analysis informs research practice by suggesting that variation in importance or frequency of a number of dietary motivations solicited by traditional social scientific methods should be treated with, at best, scepticism.

It is clear from the corpus (and the extracts included in our analysis) that health is a rhetorical 'commonplace' (Billig, 1991)—even the single extract (Extract 1) that argues that dietary health may be ineffective without adequate attention to exercise still indicates that health is important, and that health and diet are linked. Health and ethical concerns are both resources available for accounting for dietary practice. The relative importance of health over ethics was shown to serve as a defence against being positioned as moralizing or proselytizing. That health is presented as an alternative motivation does not mean that health is the cause of dietary preference. Rather, as expected, health is mobilized in accounting for both consumption and abstinence from meat. Furthermore, vegetarianism may be construed as healthy, or as unhealthy.

In the process of illustrating the argumentative nature of opinion-giving in the context of these pro-meat/pro-vegetarian discussions, there is also clear evidence of the dilemmatic nature of the argument and the linguistic resources that are used. Billig and colleagues have argued at length that everyday life is fraught with dilemmas of an ideological nature, or situations in which alternative courses of action or thought come into opposition either explicitly or implicitly (Billig et al., 1988). While the argument seems to be one over which dietary practice is best, it is clear from the extracts presented that this argument reflects

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multiple oppositions—including that highlighted in our analysis of health versus ill-health.

Billig et al. (1988) discuss health as a dilemma, or rather (given that there are few circumstances in which health is undesirable) how health becomes problematic in terms of definition, attainment or maintenance. This is clear in our corpus by the contradictory constructions of dietary practices such as vegetarianism or meat-eating as healthy and unhealthy. What is perhaps more interesting and important is that, as already indicated meat-eating (like 'health') is the 'unmarked pole' or default position from which discussants, and particularly meat-eaters, argue. Billig et al. (1988) describe the ideological nature of good health—increasingly health has become an ideal state that we should all aspire to, where the concept of good health is defined in relation to the characteristics of illness and disease. In this way what is unhealthy is bad, what is healthy is good and the pursuit of good health assumes a moral component that becomes apparent in many of the contexts in which health is at stake. From this standpoint, health is something that meat-eaters assume, and which meat-abstainers try to persuade them is illusory (a false consciousness).

Rhetorical psychology is subsumed under a range of discursive approaches in psychology. One of the key principles of discursive psychology is the notion of construction (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Potter (1996) notes that there are two senses to the principle of construction—one is that descriptions or statements work up particular versions of the world, while the other sense of 'construction' is that the categories and concepts used in descriptions are themselves constructions. Our analysis gives some sense of how the concept of health is a construction (see also Herzlich & Pierret, 1985). For example, health may be conceived of as pertinent not only to the physical body of the individual, but also for meat-animals, and the environment in general. The trinity of individual, animals and nature has the strength of inclusion—a rhetorically effective construction of health.

In spite of claims that vegetarianism is an increasingly popular practice (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991), meat-eating is socially normative. Our analysis allows us to speculate as to why this continues to be the case. We suggest that the rhetorical strength of common sense, and particularly the notion of 'balance', confirms and reasserts the sense of meat-eating. 'Balance' counsels inclusion and moderation—all things in appropriate proportions, placing the onus on vegetarian arguments to demonstrate balance while accounting for absence. At the same time pro-meat arguments can argue balance while doing reasonableness—counselling inclusion, but not excessively so, of meat (e.g. 'you DON'T want to eat a steak for dinner every night' (Extract 26), 'No reasonable person thinks otherwise' (Extract 27)). From this position, there may be situations in which vegetarianism may not be bad (e.g. through supplementation, rigid attention to gaining nutrients from other sources, etc.), but eating meat is better (is more efficient and easier to achieve).

Not only is meat-eating normative but surveys have indicated that women are disproportionately represented among meat-abstainers (e.g. Beardsworth & Keil, 1999). For example, Adams (1990) has argued that the consumption of meat is fundamentally related to the subjugation of women, and that attempts to address this social system must include a shift away from this dominant consumption practice. She has argued that red meat in particular symbolizes male power over women (see also Twigg, 1979), and this has served as the catalyst for empirical attempts to evaluate the gender symbolism of meat in general, and red meat in particular.

We would like to suggest an alternative to Adams' (1990) contention that stems from the notion of balance. The idea of balance has connotations of reasonableness and rationality. Lloyd (1993) has suggested that the binaries of rationality and emotionality are aligned in parallel with other binary notions that organize western thought including gender and Cartesian mind/body dualism. According to Lloyd's argument the concepts on each side of the binary are aligned so that man is associated with the mind, rationality and so on, while woman is associated with the opposing pole of these binaries: body, emotionality and so on. Our analysis shows that meat-eating is supported by invocations of rationality, and hence theoretically maleness. Thus woman becomes aligned with vegetarianism (as the opposition of meat-eating). This kind of argument would be difficult to verify

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empirically, but nevertheless, it offers an alternative framework for explaining why more women than men practise vegetarianism.

An advantage of the methodology employed in this investigation is that it deals with a concern raised by other scholars in this field (e.g. Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998a) concerning the identification of people in terms of their preference. As already indicated, a considerable part of the existing body of literature accreted on the topic of meat consumption has derived from the use of surveys intended to tap potentially relevant internal values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. On the basis of questions about self-identification or food preference respondents are categorized into different meat-eating orientations, and are attributed a group membership on the basis of this categorization. Group members may then be statistically differentiated by their responses to survey measures, and it is assumed that the decision to eat or abstain from meat is a reflection of these internal states (Mooney & Walbourn, 2001; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998a). The problem with this classification system is apparent in our own data—what defines a vegetarian? The answer seems simple—they do not consume meat, and yet it is clear from our corpus that there is disagreement among discussants as to what constitutes vegetarian practice. Some people argue that the defining characteristic is avoidance of red meat only, while others state that abstention from any meat (and even any animal product) is the appropriate criterion. Just as the different motivations for vegetarianism assume discrete types (Maurer, 1995) so too do consumers, even though they might object to the classification imparted by the researcher.

We would argue that (consistent with the argument made by Weatherall (2002) concerning the study of gender) rather than look to taxonomizing people into research-friendly categories and then seeing what variables differentiate these groups, as researchers we should focus on interactional loci in which participants themselves orient to the topic of interest. In our case, this means focusing on the discourse surrounding accounting for meat consumption and abstention, where the discussants themselves show that there is something to be accounted for. At the very least, to assume that a person ticks a box for ethical concerns rather than a box for health (or any of the other families of issues described previously) should not be taken as an indication that one has a particularly privileged status over the other in explaining dietary practice. Only through consideration of how these argumentative resources are mobilized in accounting for dietary preference can we see how they function in relation to one another—it is not a case of health *or* ethics, but rather what serves the purpose of accounting for preference best in a particular argumentative context.

A second concern our corpus addresses is that it represents view of a wide range of meat-consumers (and abstainers). For example, Beardsworth and Keil (1992) summarize qualitative interviews with a vegetarian-only sample. Amato and Partridge (1989) explicitly solicited meat-abstainers. It is no surprise that the reader might conclude that vegetarians are more moral, or more health conscious—these are cited as some of the most important investigations of vegetarianism and yet they neglect the normative counter position.

Our analysis has demonstrated the rhetorical orientation of statements concerning, or responses to, the question about why people become vegetarian. While we have no reason to expect that the discussion forums that comprise our corpus are atypical of other types of Internet discussions focusing on other topics, there are clear differences between Internet-based discussions and face-to-face conversation. Additionally, though we acknowledge that Internet discussion represents a different context from more mundane conversational interaction, we are confident that this does not invalidate our conclusions. Indeed, the full range of 'reasons' described in the literature was represented in the corpus, though we have chosen to focus on health-specific arguments in this article. We have sought to avoid the dangers of a narrow corpus through adopting a 'saturation' approach to collection, in which we continued to add to the corpus until satisfied that further addition would not broaden the analytic content further, and revisited this once analysis was complete.

We have not presented any analysis of turn-taking in this article, and this is clearly a desirable next-step for this type of research. Another reasonable next-step would be to obtain

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naturalistic face-to-face conversational data (e.g. family mealtimes, restaurants, etc.) in which discussants spontaneously orient themselves to matters of dietary practice, rather than focusing on narrow contexts in which the explicit a priori purpose of the interaction is to address vegetarian 'choice'. For example, meal times (at home or 'eaten out') would appeal as an important and obvious locus for negotiation of the issues raised here (see Wiggins, 2001; Wiggins, Potter, & Wildsmith, 2001, for studies adopting such a procedure).

In summary then, our analyses illustrate the rhetorical function of health-related arguments in persuasive accounts of both vegetarian and pro-meat dietary preferences. Our focus on the dialogic nature of statements about dietary choices transforms current understanding of meat-eating and abstention by undermining the assumptions about the status of opinions as 'real' causes and motivations. Further, we argue that a particular linguistic strategy, which invokes balance, functions as a bottom-line argument that reasserts the sense of meat-eating. Rather than one person's meat being another's poison, the 'meat' and the 'poison' are constructions used in accounting for preference.

Appendix: URLs of Internet sites comprising corpus

http://www.mcspotlight.org/cgi-bin/zv/debate/mcspotlight/messages/482.html
http://www.rinkworks.com/rinkforum/message/35718.shtml
http://www.morrisey-solo.com/news/1999/602.shtml
http://ths.gardenweb.com/forums/load/vegex/msg0915121121695.html
http://pub38.exboard.com/florettaslounge-frm53.showmessage?topicID=50.topic
http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a3087.html
http://www.uvm.edu/~ashawley/veggie.html
http://www.gleeb.com/archives/00000069.html
http://www.amabilis.net/meat/
http://triroc.com/bbs/index.sht
http://www.clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/vegan (selected posts only)
http://pub24.exboard.com/froganboardfrm1
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