

5-17-2006

Understanding Eating Boundaries: A Study of Vegetarian Identities

Susan Kremmel
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Kremmel, Susan, "Understanding Eating Boundaries: A Study of Vegetarian Identities" (2006). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3801>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Understanding Eating Boundaries: A Study of Vegetarian Identities

by

Susan Kremmel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Donileen Loseke, Ph.D.
Spencer Cahill, Ph.D.
Chris Ponticelli, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
May 17, 2006

Keywords: diet, food, identity construction, symbolic interaction, boundary work

© Copyright 2006, Susan Kremmel

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF EATING BEHAVIORS AND IDENTITIES	6
METHODS	12
DEFINING MEANINGS	16
Defining Eating Boundaries	16
Defining Ideals	20
Defining Moral Hierarchies	23
DEFINING IDENTITY BOUNDARIES	26
Identity Importance	26
Identity Support	31
Boundary Work	34
CONCLUSIONS	40
REFERENCES	45

UNDERSTANDING EATING BOUNDARIES:
A STUDY OF VEGETARIAN IDENTITIES

Susan Kremmel

ABSTRACT

My research uses participants' understandings to look at how people define and use the identities and categories of "vegetarian" and "meat-eater." My research examines what it means to be vegetarian, how ideals and moral hierarchies are understood, and how issues of identity importance, social support, and boundary work are components of vegetarian identity construction processes. My research highlights the unmarked character of the meat-eating identity and investigates the variations and complexities of eating behaviors and identities. Learning more about how both vegetarians and meat-eaters construct vegetarian identities contributes to our understanding of identities and how, despite ambiguities, people experience identities. I further previous work by focusing more on the boundaries and interactions that become meaningful when supporting ones identity. Through one-on-one in-depth interviews, I draw out perspectives and understandings of vegetarian and meat-eating meaning-making processes.

This research demonstrates how, despite numerous variations within and between groups, people develop more or less socially shared ideas of what it means to be vegetarian, what vegetarian ideals are, and what moral meanings are produced by various

eating behaviors. These ideas run through issues of vegetarian identity, including: identity importance, social support, and boundary work. Vegetarians and meat-eaters' interactions involve cognitive processing, self-presentations, and negotiations that are not as oppositional as stereotypical social ideas suggest. Meat-eaters play an active role throughout many of these vegetarian identity construction processes and provide a more balanced picture of them. Meat-eaters at times engage with vegetarians in the issues of vegetarian ideals, moral hierarchies, identity importance, social support, and boundary work.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is about how people classify and evaluate themselves as a result of ongoing socialization and interactional experiences. Identity includes the meanings attached to behaviors, experience, appearances, beliefs, and values. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that seemingly objective and opaque identities are the result of behaviors that are constructed with conscious meaning, which become habitualized, taken for granted, and finally learned by future generations as objective facts. Hence, understandings and negotiations reflect the constructed nature of the social world.

The construction of an identity reflects an ongoing dialogue that changes in relation to political, religious, ethical, and ultimately social, ideas in specific contexts. My particular interest is in eating identities, which are voluntary identities, as opposed to relatively ascribed identities such as race and gender. In our current era, the inclination to identify oneself as vegetarian is gaining popularity, in some populations doubling in ten years (Beardsworth 1992; Willetts 1997). Stiles (1998) claims that in 1995 there were between 8.5 and 12.4 million vegetarians in the United States and that the number is reported to be increasing by 500,000 annually, making this identity increasingly relevant for study. But how do vegetarians experience and construct identities revolving around dietary choices? How do they attach meanings to behavior and develop and defend boundaries?

To explore the constructions, meanings, and complexity of vegetarian identities, I will draw from the work of Judith Howard (2000), who blends ideas from symbolic

interactionism and social cognition theory to provide a framework for examining identity. This blend creates a perspective depicting identities as cognitive structures and resources for interactional negotiations that are simultaneously stable and sensitive to social context.

Howard (2000) writes that social cognition theory views human cognitive capacities as limited and examines the way humans store and process information, leading to the categorization of information in the social world in order to make life more manageable. These categorizations, organized into cognitive schemas, allow social actors to summarize information and function more easily in the social world, but at the expense of complexity. Howard argues that the categorizations are used to explain and justify social relationships, creating identities that are rooted in their social contexts. Social cognition theory includes understandings of in-groups (groups with which an individual identifies) and out-groups (groups with which an individual does not identify) as tools used to locate and support the value of particular social identities. According to Howard, these cognitive processes are an important part of creating, maintaining, and changing identities. My research will illustrate these cognitive processes at work in the construction of dietary identities.

Howard (2000) further argues that symbolic interaction is a part of this process of social cognition. Identities are defined as “strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences” (Howard 2000: 371). Through interaction, people attach symbolic meanings to objects, behaviors, selves, and others, developing and spreading these meanings through interaction. In the case of dietary

choice, attitudes and behavior surrounding food reflect the meanings attached to them, which develop through the sum total of a person's interactions in social life.

The identities resulting from interactions position people in social space based on the relationships those identities entail (Howard 2000). Because of the interactional nature of meanings, language is critical in constructing, negotiating, and communicating identity. Negotiations involve self-presentation or impression management through "identity talk" (and more generally "identity work"), used to construct agreed upon meanings and understandings of identities. Identity remains flexible as "people construct and cross borders of various categories in defining themselves" (Howard 2000: 372).

Consistent with Howard, Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) argues that experiencing identity involves engaging in behaviors that express and reinforce mental contrasts between one person and others with whom that person comes into contact. He states that "it is a pronouncedly mental scalpel that helps us carve discrete mental slices out of reality [...] segmenting it into discrete islands of meaning" (61-2). Certain beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors are permitted or forbidden during identity construction, and the very act of naming an identity involves the perception of boundaries and normative outlines, creating "chunks of identity" (13). Zerubavel argues that through the social process of "lumping" and "splitting," constructed identities ignore similarities such as those between diets and focus instead on the carved out differences. In lumping, items are assigned similar meanings and grouped in a single mental cluster, while in splitting, mental voids are introduced between items, which then are divided into different mental clusters (21). This process in vegetarian identities highlights the differences *between* meat-eaters and vegetarians and highlights the similarities *within* a group of vegetarians

or a group of meat-eaters. Other differences and similarities are ignored. These processes of lumping and splitting reinforce a binary model for understanding these eating identities, where vegetarianism becomes oppositional to meat-eating.

People's interactions and meaning negotiations lead to perceived differences between identity categories and similarities among those who "fit into" a given category, the in-group. These categories may be used by individuals to make sense of their own identity and experiences; a construction that highlights certain differences and similarities while relegating others to the sidelines. People within the group of vegetarians actively engage in boundary work to construct or maintain the definition of who does and does not belong to that group. Food consumption choices are highlighted as one relevant marker for engaging in boundary maintenance, while other characteristics are set aside, especially in countries like the U.S., where meat is a central aspect of meals (Stiles 1998).

Identity salience is an important aspect of identity work. According to Stryker and Serpe (1994), selves contain multiple aspects organized into a singular whole. These multiple parts become subject to a hierarchy of salience whose location depends on the prominence of the identity, its need for support, gratifications gained through performing the identity, and perceived utility of the identity in a given situation. Stryker and Serpe define identity salience as readiness to act out an identity as a result of the identity's cognitive schema, or stored meanings that serve as frameworks for interpreting experience. They argue the relative salience of identities is "a function of commitment to the roles to which the identities are attached" (19). Commitment is indicated by the costs of no longer fulfilling an identity role, and costs are "a function of the strength of ties to others in social networks, to which one relates by virtue of playing a role and having an

identity” (19). In my research, identity work depends on the relative salience of the vegetarian identity in comparison to other identities, such as familial identities, that become important in specific situations.

Yet vegetarian identities cannot be fully understood without also reflecting on the “oppositional” meat-eating identities. While vegetarian identities are experienced as salient and “marked” (Brekhus 1998), the meat-eating identities of the vast majority of the U.S. population remain unnoticed. Brekhus labels identities like Anglo, heterosexual, and meat-eating as “unmarked,” categories commonly considered “epistemologically unproblematic.” Vegetarian identities are the “figure,” meat-eating identities are the “ground,” the socially neutral category. People may experience meat-eating behavior as natural rather than socially constructed due to the unmarked character of meat-eating identities.

Additionally, Brekhus (1998: 36-37) critiques the way “distinctions *within* the marked tend to be ignored, making it appear more homogeneous than the unmarked,” while the marked are overly distinguished from the unmarked by representing the category in its “most colorful, stereotypical images.” In line with Brekhus’ critique, my research will focus on illustrating the high diversity experienced within the marked vegetarian category as well as highlighting similarities between vegetarians and meat-eaters that often are ignored.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF EATING BEHAVIORS AND IDENTITIES

What have researchers learned about eating behaviors and identities? Some researchers argue there are relationships between eating behaviors and assemblages of values, attitudes, and beliefs. For example, Dietz and his colleagues (1995) examine factors influencing the choice of a vegetarian diet, with 14 people (7.2%) out of a 194 person sample claiming vegetarianism. While recognizing that this was a very small number of vegetarians, these researchers argue that individuals with traditional values (defined as honoring parents and elders, honesty, family security, self-discipline, obedience, cleanliness, politeness, social order, loyalty) are less likely to be vegetarian. Conversely, individuals holding altruistic values (defined as valuing unity with nature, protecting the environment, preventing pollution, respecting the earth, a world at peace, equality, social justice, helpful, a world of beauty, sense of belonging) are more likely to be vegetarian. These researchers conclude that beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values are predictors of dietary choice and that dietary choice is related to a sense of personal identity. Kalof and her colleagues (1999) use the same “traditional” versus “altruistic” value categories (and the same operationalizations) and have similar findings. Similarly, Allen and his colleagues (2000: 410) found that a more salient meat-eating identity was associated with “stronger social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism,” comprised of submission to recognized authority, aggression towards persons of lower status, and conformity. Vegetarian identities were marked by a weaker association to these orientations.

These studies link values, attitudes, and beliefs to food consumption choices, creating vegetarian versus meat-eating “types of people” and in essence, creating moral binaries with dichotomous understandings of the world. They indicate that vegetarianism is an identity and that this identity matters. Yet they do not approach identity construction as a process to be explored. Rather, the existing research merely assumes that the practice of eating or not eating meat is a salient and politically charged identity.

Previous research also has examined the motivations behind adopting a vegetarian identity and how those motivations can change over time. Beardsworth and Keil’s (1992) research in the United Kingdom argue that motivations to become and remain vegetarian are mostly moral, with health-related, gustatory, and ecological motivations decreasing in importance. This research also shows motivations for dietary preference change over time. Beverly Stiles (1998) also studied vegetarians around the globe and reports similar findings with the exception that health-related concerns ranked higher in her study. Additionally, she argues that incorporating other vegetarian motives over time is associated with a strengthening identity and often the strictness of maintaining a vegetarian diet. New motives may become relevant to the person’s identity, increase self-esteem, serve as a logical continuation of the identity, or represent increased commitment and salience. It is noteworthy that while these questions have been asked about vegetarians, researchers do not investigate why people eat meat, evidencing the unmarked character of meat-eating behavior.

Researchers also have shown that there are variations in eating behaviors between and within eating identity categories. Beardsworth and Keil (1992) find that people who identify as vegetarian engage in eating practices that spread along a continuum of

strictness. From least strict to most strict these include red or white meat, fish, eggs, dairy, rennet-free cheese, only vegetable derived products, and finally the prohibition of the use of *any* animal derived products. Additionally, Willetts (1997) finds that vegetarians define and enact their identity to fit their individual lives, using justifications to make sense of the ways that their behavior does not comply with socially understood boundaries of the vegetarian identity. She reports that there are meat-eaters who eat less meat than their vegetarian counterparts, illustrating how vegetarianism is a fluid and permeable category. Indeed only 8 out of the 23 participants in her study who claim a vegetarian identity do not eat meat “regularly” or “on occasion.” Others who claim a vegetarian identity also say they prepare fish at home or buy chicken sometimes. This is further evidence that vegetarian identity is not fully dependent on eating behaviors. Likewise, Jabs and her colleagues (1999) report similar findings. Individuals who followed “vegetarian diets” modified the term to suit their own diet, and the researchers conclude through measures of salience and pervasiveness that the diet does become an identity. Beardsworth and Keil, Willetts, and Jabs et. al.’s findings illustrate how difficult it is to pinpoint specific requirements for claiming a vegetarian identity and provide a mandate to further investigate the variations and complexities of eating behaviors and identities.

Finally, prior research has examined whether these variations in eating behaviors matter to other people in general. Using experiments to gauge vegetarians’ and meat-eaters’ responses to representations in profile stories, Hornsey and Jetten (2003) study imposters as a source of group threat. Study respondents were given profile stories of “imposters” (vegetarians who occasionally ate meat) and “authentic vegetarians” (who

did not eat meat at all). These researchers found that those who identify more strongly as vegetarian are more likely to decrease their affinity for the imposter profile than the authentic profile. Moderate vegetarian identifiers are more accepting, yet still show more affinity for the authentic profile, and meat-eaters are more accepting of the imposter profile than the authentic profile. Additionally, profiles depicting vegetarians occasionally eating meat and trying to hide their non-normative behavior produce even lower levels of affinity from strong vegetarian identifiers and more accepting levels from moderate vegetarian identifiers or meat-eaters.

Hornsey and Jetten (2003) argue that imposters are judged negatively because they pose a threat to a valued vegetarian identity by breaking the norms of that identity, thereby delegitimizing it. They suggest that decreased affinity results partly from the fear that imposters will decrease the group's distinctiveness or undermine the integrity of the group's moral position. If so, it seems that vegetarians engage in a process of lumping and splitting in order to maintain socially understood vegetarian boundaries and moral hierarchies (Zerubavel 1991). This raises a question that cannot be examined in laboratory settings: Do vegetarians and meat-eaters work to maintain eating boundaries?

Willettts (1997) finds more complexity in how much these variations might actually matter. She reports that vegetarians who eat meat justify their behaviors as unpremeditated occasions in order to prevent social awkwardness and keep from spoiling their vegetarian identity suggesting recognition and reproduction of the norms surrounding a vegetarian identity (see also Stiles 1998; Jabs et. al. 1999). Justifications indicate that variations in eating behaviors matter to both the people engaging in the behavior and others and must be accounted for. Despite these justifications, vegetarians

in Willetts' study, unlike those in Hornsey and Jetten (2003) and Beardsworth and Keil (1992), tend to accept other vegetarians' definitions and consumption choices without morally evaluating them. Non-vegetarian participants, however, draw attention to what they perceive to be vegetarian hypocrisies, inconsistent with Hornsey and Jetten. The importance meat-eaters place on perceived identity hypocrisies suggests that meat-eaters may view some vegetarians to be claiming a moral superiority they do not deserve. Differences in the extent to which variations in eating behavior matters to people reflects social stratification and moral hierarchies within the vegetarian spectrum, those consuming fewer animal products being closer to an "authentic" vegetarian. They also suggest, however, that there are other complexities involved in these evaluations.

These studies provide a foundation for examining the socially constructed understandings of vegetarian boundaries and identities. They demonstrate how values, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations can be attached to eating behaviors. They show there are variations in eating behaviors both within and between categories as well as variations in responses to these behaviors. To better appreciate how both vegetarians and meat-eaters define and maintain meanings and identity boundaries through cognitive processes of lumping and splitting, my research will move the prior work forward by approaching identity construction as a process to be explored. My research examines what it means to be vegetarian, how ideals and moral hierarchies are understood, and how issues of identity importance, social support, and boundary work are components of vegetarian identity construction processes. My research will highlight the unmarked character of the meat-eating identity and further investigate the variations and complexities of eating behaviors and identities. Learning more about how both

vegetarians and meat-eaters construct vegetarian identities contributes to our understanding of identities and how, despite ambiguities, people experience identities.

METHODS

Because my questions are about sense making processes, I conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews. This approach allowed me to explore complex perspectives and understandings of vegetarian and meat-eater meaning-making processes. My participants included 8 self-identified vegetarians and 10 self-identified meat-eaters. While I use the general terms “meat-eater” and “vegetarian” in my analysis for economy of expression, the data indicate that the terms “vegetarian” and “meat-eater” do not fully illustrate the range of dietary self-identifications and were not accepted without some kind of modification by the majority of participants.

Meat-eaters included one person identifying himself as a meat-eater (eats mostly meat and starches and very few vegetables), one ex-vegetarian (has been a fish-eating vegetarian but is now consuming poultry and mammals again), and eight omnivores (eat a “balanced” mix of meats, starches, and vegetables). Vegetarians included one strict vegetarian/freegan (eats no fish, poultry, mammals; only eats dairy or eggs if they constitute 5% or less of the ingredients, especially if the food is free or going to be otherwise thrown away), one vegan/vegetarian (believes that vegan and vegetarian denote the same behavior, eats no poultry, fish, mammals, dairy, or eggs), two vegans (eats no poultry, fish, mammals, dairy, or eggs; no purchasing of other goods with animal products in them), and four vegetarians (eats no poultry, fish, or mammals).

Because there is no exhaustive list of the vegetarian population, participants were recruited using a snowball technique. I started by interviewing two vegetarians and two

meat-eaters and then tapped into their network of acquaintances. I asked each initial participant to contact two vegetarians and two meat-eaters, and after gaining their friends' permission, to provide me with those acquaintances' contact information. I continued this process and interviewed participants until their stories ceased to introduce new understandings or insights.

All of the participants were 18-25 year old students in a large Southeast U.S. university. Because college students are one group increasingly adopting vegetarian identities (Beardsworth and Keil 1992), this is an appropriate sample. Among the vegetarians, eight are Anglo (all from the U.S. except one who is from Russia); six are female and two are male. Among the meat-eaters, eight are Anglo, one is Indian, and one is Asian; seven are male and three are female. These demographics are consistent with research showing women are more likely to be vegetarian than men (Worsley and Skrzypiec 1998). The relatively racially/ethnically homogenous makeup of the sample likely is a result of participation selection biases.

This sample does not draw from older populations of vegetarians and meat-eaters or from populations with limited formal education. Given the sample by referral, these people might be more likely than others to experience vegetarianism as an important identity and to have a network of social relationships around their identity. While limiting the possibilities of generalizing study findings, these likely characteristics are good for my purpose of examining how vegetarians negotiate boundaries. People without important vegetarian identities or communities arguably do not spend much time negotiating the boundaries of that identity. Additionally, the nature of this sampling technique creates bias because the participants selected the other vegetarians and meat-

eaters in the sample. This means that they chose friends *they* perceived to be vegetarian, perhaps overrepresenting the vegetarian types who are more noticeable in interactions or marking what the referring participant perceived to be a representative or “good” vegetarian. Yet again, while limiting the possibilities of generalizing study findings, these biases mean only that study participants were likely to have socially important vegetarian identities.

I started the interviews by asking general questions about the participants’ beliefs and feelings about food, what they chose to eat or not eat. I allowed them to supply their own dietary labels. I asked questions about how the participants described themselves to others, whether their diet was an important part of how they thought of themselves, and whether they engaged in activities (aside from eating or not eating certain things) that related to their dietary identities.

Later in the interviews I asked vegetarians questions about what it was like to become vegetarian, if they think there are different types of vegetarians, if they have experienced situations where it was difficult to maintain their diet, and if they have encountered situations where they compromised their dietary beliefs and preferences. To elicit stories about interactions, I asked them to talk about some of their vegetarian and meat-eating friends, family, and partners. Finally I asked questions about what they thought about other people’s dietary beliefs, whether they have ever challenged or wanted to challenge other people’s ideas or behavior, and whether they worried about how others evaluated their dietary choices.

I attempted to ask meat-eaters similar questions, but many of these questions did not make sense to them. This was especially true for questions about the importance of

their diet and the problems they experience in maintaining their diet. The very process of interviewing vegetarians and meat-eaters demonstrated the consequences of marked versus unmarked identities. While meat-eaters are not the focus of this study, their interview contributions are used to enrich analysis of the social ideals of vegetarianism, understandings of moral hierarchies, identity importance, and boundary work. They supplement vegetarian understandings and illustrate the widespread character of certain understandings.

DEFINING MEANINGS

This research examines how vegetarians and meat-eaters define and maintain meanings and identity boundaries, how ideals and moral hierarchies are understood, and how issues of identity importance, social support, and boundary work influence vegetarian identity construction processes. The specific content of various eating identities must first be examined in order to explore what people mean when they categorize themselves into one or another identity.

Defining Eating Boundaries

Though I cannot define what it means to be a vegetarian, vegan, omnivore, or meat-eater, both participants and I use these labels throughout the study. In general, a vegetarian is one who does not eat meat, a vegan is one who does not eat any animal products and often does not use manufactured goods containing animal products, and an omnivore/meat-eater (all but one respondent distance themselves from the term “meat-eater”) is one who eats both meat and vegetables. Though in common conversation people tend to stick to the terms vegetarian or not (they do not usually call someone a meat-eater or omnivore), people do differentiate nominally, behaviorally, and attitudinally between people’s dietary practices.

People use a variety of labels and have a variety of understandings about the meanings and contents of eating identity labels. Some vegetarians, for example, claim that how people choose to enact vegetarianism is all personal, but other vegetarians have

very strict understandings, saying, “I guess if you only eat meat very, very, rarely—no, that’s still not vegetarian.”

For other vegetarians, the use of “basic” vegetarian labels is not important. One vegetarian claims that “there isn’t a difference between vegetarian and vegan. [...] I mean the labels are fine but I don’t think we should rely so heavily on what they are.” Yet I accidentally asked a person in one interview who self-identified as vegan what the hardest part of being vegetarian was, and he was quick to reply, “I’m not vegetarian, I’m vegan.” Such statements indicate the salience and distinctions many self-identified vegans experience between the vegan label they claim and the vegetarian label from which they distance themselves. Perhaps the strict behaviors they engage in to maintain their diet makes such distinctions very important.

Cultural typologies employ terms such as “ovo-vegetarian” and “lacto-vegetarian” to describe vegetarians who may consume eggs or dairy. Vegetarians, while recognizing these typologies, often do not endorse them. One woman who calls herself a vegetarian states:

Pesco-vegetarian- that can be different because that is fish, so a lot of people don’t consider that vegetarian. So pesco-vegetarians are fine, but the ovo and lacto, it’s just sort of repetitive because you know, I assume vegetarian, you’re going to eat at least some form of dairy or egg, or else you would call yourself vegan.

This woman believes that certain behaviors are distinct enough to warrant different labels. Pesco-vegetarian is different enough from vegetarian to be given a label, likewise, vegetarian is different enough from vegan. Her understanding of the validity of

categorization comes from what “a lot” of people agree on and an assumption that the labels are known and properly used. Yet despite such general understandings, other study participants do not classify consuming dairy and eggs as vegetarian. One self-labeled vegetarian for example, says, “I don’t consider consuming dairy and eggs vegetarian [but] I wouldn’t go against it, since that is what the norm is.”

Even meat-eaters seem to orient to such understandings of eating boundaries. One meat-eater believes:

There are vegetarians who will absolutely forego anything that comes from an animal, whether it be vegan or something different. There are people who will eat dairy, milk, eggs, whatever. Then there are people who will occasionally eat flesh, will eat animals. They’ll have fish or chicken now and then. [...] it’s not well labeled, as far as I’m concerned.

Most participants are aware of the vast array of eating behaviors that vegetarians engage in and many also express confusion in the precise labels for these boundaries.

While there are many variations in boundaries and terminology, “meat” is an important aspect of all of them. By definition, a vegetarian is a person who does not eat “meat.” But what *is* “meat?” Both vegetarians and meat-eaters can disagree about what constitutes meat, and those who eat meat make further distinctions about what constitutes “edible” meat. Study respondents speak of what they term “normal” or “average” understandings of meat but have or adhere to alternate understandings, including the conception of mammalian flesh as the only “real” meat. One meat-eater states:

Meat is from mammals, therefore from birds, it’s poultry, and from fish, it’s fish, and such. [...] meat has two meanings. I mean if you’re

classifying it in terms of where it came from, I guess it has a general meaning, the muscle/fat/skin on any kind of animal.

Other vegetarians and meat-eaters reject such differentiations, saying things like, “If you don’t want to eat meat, but then you say, ‘well this isn’t really *meat*, it’s fish.’ [...] it just sounds sort of screwy.” Similarly, other participants tell stories about religious texts and food pyramid placements being used as justifications for alternative conceptions of meat and talk about the disagreements that can arise.

People also differentiate between a general definition of meat and a definition of meat based on evocative cultural understandings. One meat-eater states:

I think meat in a *general* sense, would have to be all encompassing of the animal kingdom. When *I* think of meat, I think of red meat, steak, burger. When someone says meat, I think of beef, I don’t necessary think salmon or snails, I wouldn’t consider that meat. Meat carries such a heavy undertone, like meat just sounds thick, juicy, red. To me at least. It’s not like chicken fingers or something, which *is* meat and an animal... I think when you’re actually describing meat, people think of beef...

His construction of meat as heavy, juicy, and red is very sensual and reflects a widespread cultural understanding that may affect people’s food choices, leading people to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle only involving an exclusion of red meat, which is a common teenage definition of vegetarianism in Australia (Worsley and Skrzypiec 1998).

Meat-eaters make further distinctions about what constitutes “edible” meat. While a couple of meat-eaters express no problem with eating any kind of animal flesh, most do make distinctions. One meat-eater states:

I think the beef I eat, I'm not sure where on the cow it comes from, but when they start naming specific things, like, you're kind of weird about it. [...] maybe it really has to do with I just couldn't pretend I wasn't eating an animal.

Meat-eaters may avoid eating meats that remind them of the animal. Other meat-eaters make further distinctions, claiming, "I'm not such a fan of looking at uncooked meat [...] I think uncooked meat reminds me that it was once a living creature." Still other meat-eaters make distinctions between pets and edible meat, saying, "I've had five dogs my entire life, so I'd feel really weird about eating a dog." The distinctions go on. Though they admit other animals and other parts of animals constitute meat, they make distinctions between that and the meat they are willing to consume.

Such inconsistencies and distinctions run throughout interview data and provide illustrations of the range existing within the seemingly simple categories of "vegetarian" and "meat-eating." The question therefore becomes: how can vegetarianism be an identity given all these variations? Eating boundaries are very fuzzy, yet somehow, despite the acknowledged ambiguity, participants still claim vegetarian labels and experience vegetarian identities. Those identities are real to those who experience them.

Defining Ideals

Despite variations, there is an ideal of "vegetarianism," and people orient their understandings and evaluations toward this ideal. Social ideals of "the vegetarian" exist in lay discourse and they make sense since identity involves the perception of boundaries and normative outlines. A woman who calls herself a vegetarian says:

I don't think I am a poster child. Somebody who would never slip, never revert to eating meat. Somebody who knows a lot about it, who's done their research, who is able to sustain a really healthy diet [...] who's going out and doing something about it.

According to her, the social ideal for a vegetarian identity involves never crossing dietary boundaries, being well-informed, healthy, and socially/politically active. This ideal is noted by both vegetarians and meat-eaters. Meat-eaters for example, say things such as, "There's a certain mantle to go with vegetarianism [...] very activist, very political, very motivated." Both vegetarians and meat-eaters show an understanding of these vegetarian ideals. Though many of the vegetarian participants do not consider themselves socially or politically active, they nonetheless believe such an ideal exists. Moreover, the ideal of never crossing dietary boundaries is mentioned by all participants.

For some vegetarians, the ideal is very strict. They state, "A *true* vegetarian would not eat animal products at all. Just because you didn't have to kill the animal and cut it up doesn't mean it's any less cruel." In this sense, the ideal vegetarian does no harm to animals. To some extent this representation may be reinforced by stereotypical images in media and other venues, images that are treated as representative when they connect to marked categories (Brekhus 1998: 37).

Though the social ideal of the vegetarian exists, vegetarianism in practice is not so clear. Real-life interactions often do not seem to fit vegetarian ideals. Some vegetarians recognize these symbolic moments and highlight practicality as an important concept for understanding them:

Rubber is made from animals a lot of times and oil and make-up and almost everything. And the plants and things that we're eating, they kill thousands of insects and rodents and things like that in trying to keep their crops growing [...] you can't live a 100% vegan life.

This woman believes rigid and ideal understandings of vegetarian identity boundaries are impractical ways of living. She notes that vegetarians live in larger cultures that often do not operate in line with vegan/vegetarian beliefs. Yet despite these difficulties, vegetarians often orient themselves toward the ideal vegetarian. Though just over half of the vegetarian participants identified the importance of social or political activism to vegetarianism, they all orient themselves toward maintaining boundary consistent eating behavior.

Though consuming dairy and eggs is widely accepted as normal behavior for vegetarians, many vegetarians orient toward the ideal of consuming as little of these as possible. One vegetarian states, "I'm feeling kind of uneasy about milk products because it supports the veal industry so I don't know if I will make the jump to vegan eventually." She perceives that she is not the ideal and aspires to move closer to it.

Other participants show an understanding of the ideal vegetarian by distancing their own behavior from the ideal. One vegetarian states, "For a while I called myself vegetarian and ate fish, dairy, and eggs. I think someone might have asked about it and I said, 'I'm vegetarian, but I eat fish, too.'" This vegetarian's use of the term "but" indicates that, while fish-eating vegetarians can be counted, eating fish is not considered a characteristic behavior and does not fit the ideal. While he may not have had a problem with eating fish at the time, he still believes the social ideal that vegetarians do not eat

fish. Likewise, many other participants either are or know people who eat fish and claim a vegetarian label, and likewise indicate an orientation toward, yet a distance from, the ideal.

Defining Moral Hierarchies

Despite the understanding that strict diets are hard to maintain in practice, the existence of ideals and orientations toward them lead to constructions of moral hierarchies. Where boundaries lie and how much people care about them vary, but participants do believe that some boundaries are more socially desirable than others. While a couple of vegetarians claim, “I don’t think it’s right to say one thing is better [...] it’s all a personal choice,” others, like the one below, state:

I guess [being vegan] would be considered better [...] what one person is happy with, you know, this is as high as they’re going to go with this issue, so you know, they’re only going to be vegetarian and another one can push on to a higher level of vegetarianism and say, “Yeah, veganism. That’s where it is for me.”

This account indicates the ideal in terms of height. The higher you are, the closer you are to the ideal, which is morally better. Additionally, some vegetarians claimed they feel morally superior to meat-eaters and that “vegetarian kids and vegan kids are a lot more compassionate and understanding in general than other people.” Moreover, this moral hierarchy exists even within vegetarian identities. One of the two self-identified vegans I interviewed claims vegetarianism is good, “just not as good as vegan.”

Even meat-eaters subscribe to moral hierarchies. Many meat-eaters talk of moral discomfort when comparing their position to that of vegetarians. One meat-eater confesses, “It just makes me feel a little bit inferior that I’m not taking a holier ground sometimes. I think I feel that vegetarianism is morally superior.”

When people call themselves vegetarian while they occasionally eat meat, their position in the moral hierarchy falls. This belief is shared by vegetarians and meat-eaters alike. Some vegetarians feel the moral implications of their vegetarian identity in interactions with what they perceive to be “better” vegetarians. For example, one woman says:

When I relapsed, I didn’t tell [my friends who are vegetarian]. They’re very invested in it, so there I never say. There, when you come over, everybody cooks vegetarian and assumes everyone is vegetarian. [...] when I first met them I was just starting being a veggie, and I was very proud of that fact. So it would be like admitting some sort of relapse of addiction.

This woman says she is very proud of becoming vegetarian, indicating an experienced morality. Then, when she “relapsed,” she experienced the decreased morality of a potentially spoiled identity and was aware of her less than ideal position. Comparing her feelings to “admitting some sort of relapse” suggests not only a personal negative evaluation, but the fear of others’ perceptions of her identity as less moral. Similarly, one meat-eater states:

If they’re going to have the audacity to call themselves one thing and do something else to make ourselves feel better as meat-eaters and

omnivores, we have to call them out on it. That would be like someone who completely foregoes alcohol and has a drink now and then. We as people who drink often have to call them out on that to make ourselves feel better. [...] Just to bring them down from a loftier stance, I guess.

This meat-eater, like many others I interviewed, believes it is unacceptable to call yourself a vegetarian yet occasionally eat meat. Such people need to be brought “down” from their lofty position in the moral hierarchy. Interestingly enough, these findings are inconsistent with Hornsey and Jetten (2003), whose data indicate that meat-eaters are more accepting of vegetarian “imposters” who eat meat occasionally. They are, however, consistent with Willetts’ (1997) findings, which show that meat-eaters are critical of inconsistent behavior among vegetarians due to a perception that they are claiming a false moral position.

These data illustrate that while vegetarian identities are typically treated as marked categories, closer inspection reveals the variety existing within unmarked categories. Nevertheless data show that vegetarians and meat-eaters alike can develop coherent ideals and moral hierarchies and interact in regards to them. These ideals and hierarchies are used to create vegetarian identities and boundaries.

DEFINING IDENTITY BOUNDARIES

How do people use these variations, ideals, and moral hierarchies to maintain identities? This section examines how vegetarians' experiences in the social world encourage them to experience their eating behavior as a salient and important identity. Their non-normative behavior gives them a minority status in society that they are constantly reminded of, creating an identity of both their own and others' making that is maintained through boundary work.

Identity Importance

Holding vegetarian beliefs and behaviors constitutes an identity for most vegetarian participants in this study. While a few people claim this identity is not very important, even they provide evidence that vegetarianism entails the salience and commitment that is characteristic of identities in general:

Yeah, I don't think I could ever eat meat again. It's important part of how I think about myself. [...] I almost never think about it [...] other people bring it up a lot. If I'm in a group of people and they're like, "Oh, let's go to Burger King," they'll be like, "No, Virginia's a vegetarian," you know, like it's a big deal.

This vegetarian tells a conflicting story where her identity simultaneously is something *she* "almost never" thinks about, while it's a "big deal" to her friends. In her case the identity is very salient in social contexts, and one aspect of her identity involves being

constantly reminded of it by others. Vegetarianism may be a part of one's identity that is more salient to the non-vegetarian other. One meat-eater, for instance, when asked what proportion of her friends were vegetarian, initially reported 50%. After telling some stories, she amends, "I change that 50% honestly, it's more like 10%. It just seems like a larger percentage." The fact that being vegetarian is not the social norm may make interactions with vegetarians more salient and memorable.

Other vegetarians say that being vegetarian is "not a big deal" but provide evidence that non-vegetarians would see as a good indicator of identity, including: posting to vegetarian forums, attending vegetarian conferences, being involved with animal rights groups, trading recipes, and so on. There is a distinct vegetarian subculture in which many vegetarian participants are involved, indicating the salience of their vegetarian diet. It seems that identity for vegetarians simultaneously involves experiencing socially non-normative behavior as normal for them, and also being made aware of the ways they are different from others in social settings.

In contrast, meat-eaters typically do not experience their dietary practices as a salient identity, saying things like, "It almost never comes up between two omnivores talking to each other" and "it's a mainstream line of thinking and generally the mainstream line of thinking hardly ever has to be defended." When I interviewed people who ate meat, my questions about times when this eating identity mattered did not make sense. They typically did not understand why they might experience a lack of social support for their identity, why eating meat might come up as an issue during social events, or what being a meat-eater even meant to them. Meat-eating was just "normal." This is the practical meaning of an unmarked identity (Brekhus 1998).

However, in interactions with vegetarians, the unmarked character of meat-eating becomes marked and important for making distinctions between two or more social actors. One meat-eater reports, “One time I went to the cafeteria with a bunch of my friends [...] and I was the only meat-eater [...] whenever I’m around vegetarians I felt self-conscious about eating meat.” When the tables are turned, when the situation involves a meat-eater surrounded by vegetarians rather than a vegetarian surrounded by meat-eaters, meat-eating identities become salient. They are the marked identity. Vegetarians may feel self-conscious if they are a minority in dining situations, but this is a common experience for them. Arguably, because meat-eaters so rarely experience their dietary practices as a marked category, it is very salient when they do. This experience can be very uncomfortable when there is a perceived moral evaluation attached to it, producing heightened feelings of self-consciousness. Intriguingly, this account shows how even meat-eaters may experience their position as an orientation toward the vegetarian ideal, though not very close.

In addition to experiencing salience, vegetarians believe that maintaining vegetarian behaviors are extremely important. One vegetarian declares, “If I was starving in the desert and all I could eat was meat, I’d probably eat the meat,” and that was his only concession. He and a couple of others would choose to go hungry for a few meals rather than compromise their beliefs. To them, the strength of their belief is more important than hunger and, arguably, social politeness in dining situations.

Other vegetarians, however, perceive good, or at least acceptable, reasons to eat meat. They eat meat when they are drunk, celebrating, very hungry, or exhausted. One vegetarian admits that in an earlier stage of her life, “I was vegetarian/vegan except on

Thanksgiving. We would have turkey on Thanksgiving,” and others share similar experiences. In the numerous cases where vegetarians recognized boundaries of their identities, the physical act of consuming animal flesh or products is given different meanings based on their definition of the situation.

This sweet old lady who speaks English but not that great and has no idea what veganism is, she tried. And you know, she didn't cook meat, she cooked a variety of things so I could eat, but the sauce, which of course is mixed in with everything, has the tiniest bits of little meat mixed in all over with everything. I was just like, “I cannot be this rude to this woman.”

This vegetarian eats the sauce because she believes that politeness is more important than maintaining eating behaviors consistent with her vegetarian identity. These data are consistent with Willetts' (1997) findings that many vegetarians believe avoiding social awkwardness is a justification for eating meat that does not spoil their vegetarian identity. Vegetarians who tell stories like this will cross boundaries to avoid offending someone who has worked hard and attempted to accommodate them, even when these others get it wrong. These vegetarians engage in emotion management, prioritizing the emotional comfort of others at the expense of dietary beliefs (Hochschild 1983). I suggest this interaction simultaneously serves to manage the vegetarian's own emotions by creating a situation where the vegetarian does not have to experience the embarrassment or guilt that often accompanies being rude to a “sweet old lady.”

Other vegetarians see their dietary beliefs as less important, partially due to the lack of social importance attached to the identity. One vegetarian talks about times when

she wonders whether the soup she orders has chicken broth in it, saying, “I sometimes think about telling people I’m allergic if I’m going to do something like that. I don’t feel like I have enough of an excuse to cause a scene.” This vegetarian is very conscious of her potential to irritate restaurant workers. Preventing awkwardness again is described as more important than dietary beliefs, and she defines her vegetarian beliefs as not a good enough “excuse.” She contrasts her “illegitimate” situation with the “legitimate” situation of allergies. Her perception of vegetarianism as a less valid excuse indicates perceptions of it as a socially less important position. The relative social importance of an identity may affect experiences of the personal importance of the identity. This woman’s comment suggests that she is aware that restaurant workers would be more responsive and accepting of a person they perceived as unable to consume certain products, as opposed to a person they may perceive as irritating and picky, reflecting a perceived lack of social legitimacy attached to vegetarian identities.

The importance of dietary behavior for some vegetarians who have very strict beliefs goes further than simply not consuming meat or dairy. These vegetarians must often make decisions about issues they commonly call “contamination.” These are instances where meat or dairy may have been in contact with the food they wish to eat, or where foods contain hidden animal product ingredients. According to one vegetarian:

If I get a sandwich somewhere and people are wearing gloves that have been handling meat, I don’t say anything, but I always am aware of that.

It’s something that I’m thinking about, and I still don’t really like it...

This vegetarian’s strength of belief proscribes casual contact because to her any physical contact is considered contamination and has implications for her self-concept. I asked

another vegetarian if she would kiss her boyfriend if he didn't brush his teeth after eating meat. She replied, "If it's been a couple hours, yeah. (laughs) But, if it's only been a half hour and they still taste like meat—nope!" This constant awareness of the presence of meat even outside eating situations indicates the importance of the vegetarian identity.

Identity Support

Experiences of social support, or lack thereof, may serve to reinforce the experience of vegetarianism as an identity. Arguably, both social support and a lack of social support can make the identity more salient. Vegetarians experience varying levels of social support from family, friends, and society at large for their respective identities, and this can affect their strength of belief and behavior. Support from family can be strong, as seen in a couple of vegetarians' stories. One mentions a vegetarian friend whose "relatives turned full vegan very late in their lives because their daughter became an animal rights activist." Experiences within an in-group may reinforce the identity by allowing the vegetarian to connect with others.

Many more times, however, vegetarians report receiving too little support from their family. Instead, they report experiencing ridicule, if not outright sabotage.

My mom was constantly asking, (*in a sarcastic voice*) "Oh, are you going to become vegetarian now like everyone around you?" that kind of stuff [...] After I broke vegetarianism at Thanksgiving, I kept not telling my mom about it, because I think she'd gloat. Like, "Oh, crawling back aren't you?" She wouldn't do that [gloat], I just know she'd be happy, and it would almost be like a losing battle.

This vegetarian experiences her mother's sarcasm as a strong lack of social support and a devaluation of her motives. This lack of social support leads to expectations of future negative interactions, leading to this vegetarian's decision to hide her inconsistent behavior in order to avoid confrontation and protect herself from the "battle." Additionally, the term "battle" reflects the way this vegetarian sees herself as different from and oppositional to her mother. Her identity is clarified by contrast to her mother.

In some situations vegetarians may decide to eat meat when they lack support for vegetarian eating behavior. Moreover, a vegetarian identity is but one of many that a person possesses, and some identities are more salient than others at given times (Stryker and Serpe 1994). For some vegetarians, familial identities are prioritized over "dietary" identities. While vegetarians often defend the boundaries of their identity in public, they must choose to defend this identity or give it up to some extent in order to preserve their family connection:

I try to work out a compromise with mom, that if she's going to cook something where she puts lots of time and effort [...] mom would feel upset and rejected, because part of how she expresses her love is through her cooking.

This vegetarian tells a story about a perceived family reaction to maintaining vegetarian boundaries. From my data, parents and other relatives (in almost every case I have coded, the mother or aunt) tend to be among the most supportive and least supportive people a vegetarian may interact with. Some mothers rally around it while others refuse to accommodate a vegetarian diet, "forcing" the child to make a choice between family identity and vegetarian identity. The woman telling this story demonstrates a family

identity that is just as important as her vegetarian identity, if not more so. The social and personal costs of choosing the vegetarian identity over the familial identity are reflected in the perceived effect of this woman's decision on her ties to significant others (Stryker and Serpe 1994). This interpretation of costs makes her familial identity more situationally salient than her vegetarian identity. Meat-eaters also profess an awareness of these competing identities, telling stories about friends who go home to see their parents and choose to eat meat at home because "she doesn't want to offend them. [...] she doesn't want to lose her family connection."

Experiencing a lack of social support is also common in more public spheres. One vegetarian recalls:

I go to a restaurant, and there might not be anything on the menu that is vegetarian at all [...] Sometimes I'm concerned about, if I tell them I'm vegetarian and don't want meat, if they're really conscious of that or not and be like "oh, ok, well, we'll make sure we make this separately" or if they're just like, "oh, ok," and they'll scrape it from one plate to another.

This vegetarian, as all others, experiences a lack of identity support in restaurants and is reminded that she is different by the restaurant menu. She connects the lack of menu items to a lack of consciousness about vegetarian dietary options to a lack of care on the part of the server in providing her with food that meets her vegetarian requirements. This situation can lead to feelings of concern and distrust. Other vegetarians talk of how these unsupportive situations remind them of their minority status, where "like any other minority, you're subject to abuses, flack."

Not all meat-eaters, however, are socially unsupportive. In the course of experiences with vegetarian friends, some meat-eaters increase their levels of social support for vegetarians. One meat-eater talks about a friend who:

didn't want any kind of exposure to meat whatsoever, and I completely understand that. To someone like me that might not seem like a big deal. It might be like "hey buddy, you're getting your sandwich, why do you care if it's the same knife that cut up a big slab of roast beef." [...] So it was just interesting to hear that, and from then on I was always careful to separate any vegetarian things at work, very important not to contaminate it with meat.

This meat-eater illuminates the perspectives of meat-eaters in a system that does not provide much social support for vegetarians. He shows how meat-eaters often do not attach the meanings to meat and contact that vegetarians do, experiencing contact as "not a big deal." Only by learning the meanings vegetarians attach to those situations are meat-eaters able to interpret food preparation techniques as a "big deal." This account also shows how interactions between meat-eaters and vegetarians affect and spread these understandings of what it means to be vegetarian. This is but one example of the ways that meat-eaters play important roles in vegetarian identities; roles that help construct the very experiences that vegetarians use to define themselves and their social position.

Boundary Work

Accounts show that people experience variations in labels, meanings, and contents of eating boundaries. They show variations in the importance of vegetarian

identities and engage in boundary crossing, providing reasons for these transgressions. Despite all of these findings, many vegetarians believe the vegetarian identity is important and do a lot of work to symbolically defend its boundaries.

Some vegetarians say that being vegetarian is not important to them. Moreover, some vegetarians and meat-eaters state that different definitions or behaviors are “no big deal.” Despite these statements, many of the same people also tell stories that illustrate boundary work. Though vegetarians and meat-eaters are often unaware that they are engaging in boundary work, they use vegetarian ideals and moral hierarchies to inform their interactions with others, resulting in moments of boundary defense.

Many vegetarians feel there are important reasons to reject the claims of others who call themselves vegetarian. One reason vegetarians engage in boundary work may be because they define the behavior as avoidable. One vegetarian tells:

[He] said he was vegetarian but, there was this Chinese place that would make things vegetarian [...] he would order *chicken fried rice* and he wouldn't eat the chicken, but he'd eat the fried rice and I'm like, “do you realize it's all cooked together and you're vegetarian?” He's like, “but I don't eat the chicken.” I'm like, “but there's chicken juice *all over everything*.” And then it got to the point where he would eat the chicken too, and he was like, “well, it's only a little bit of chicken, I'm still vegetarian,” and he was absolutely full of shit, like, I-want-to-punch-him-in-the-face full of shit.

This woman notes that the restaurant sells a vegetarian version of the food, suggesting that her companion's behavior was avoidable and therefore unacceptable. Vegetarian

beliefs can lead to strong emotional responses to the perceived lack of boundary strength among others. In this case, the vegetarian felt violent emotions toward her companion and negatively evaluated his attitudes and behavior, which she defined as inconsistent with that of the ideal vegetarian. Willfully ordering “contaminated food,” and later eating the chicken itself, does not fit the vegetarian ideal of not consuming animal flesh.

Other vegetarians reason that the behavior of people who eat meat and call themselves vegetarian harms the vegetarian collective. Making the assumption that the boundaries are agreed upon and known, one vegetarian maintains that people should not claim certain vegetarian labels if they do not stay within those boundaries:

Vegans who cheat know that they shouldn't be eating non-vegan food.

[...] If it's really that important to them that they have to eat meat or dairy or whatever, they shouldn't be calling themselves vegan because it just makes the vegans who don't cheat look silly or weak. And since we're such a minority, weakness is unacceptable because it undermines the goals and beliefs of the group.

Rejecting the claims of vegans who eat “meat or dairy or whatever,” this vegetarian believes individuals' behaviors reflect on and have a negative effect on the group (consistent with Hornsey and Jetten 2003). He believes that vegans who cross boundaries undermine the meanings that have been attached to those boundaries, as well as the moral distinction those boundaries represent. He reinforces mental contrasts between cheaters and the others by the use of the terms “they” and “we” to distance that person from the collective identity. He mentions that the vegan collective is a minority group, suggesting that this status creates an increased need for strong boundaries to counteract their

minority position. This type of rejection is common in social movement groups that perform boundary work in order to preserve the strength and respectability of their organization (Gamson 1997). This process may help reinforce the prescribed ideal of the vegetarian category that says “vegetarians consume no meat, not even sometimes” and may help keep people who eat chicken from becoming representative of the vegetarian identity.

Boundary work, however, can reach an extreme that excludes most vegetarians.

According to one vegetarian:

I've also had vegetarians, er, vegans before that are like so into their beliefs [...] and they get very mad and defensive about it [...] it was like, “Well if you're going to eat egg or dairy, which comes from an animal, why don't you just eat the whole animal, because it's the same thing. You're causing the same amount of problems.”

In this story, some vegans may do boundary work by reasoning that eating dairy or eggs cause the same amount of problems as eating meat. Therefore non-vegans are rejected. The vegetarian telling the story depicts a vegan who links vegetarianism to animal rights, a social problem relationship that provides the cognitive rationale to lump dairy, eggs, and meat together. Zerubavel (1991) notes that while the fuzzy mind allows for shades of gray and blurring between boundaries, the rigid mind attempts to maintain purity of categories, and many vegetarians experience social interactions with other vegetarians that take on this rigid character. Additionally, the distinction between vegetarian and vegan labels is presented as important here, as this participant corrects herself about the category of people to whom she is referring. Her word choice suggests that vegans are

more likely than vegetarians to adopt intense beliefs and emotional attitudes toward dietary boundaries, reflecting the heightened importance it holds for them.

Vegetarians are not the only ones who try to regulate eating boundaries. Though this experience seems counterintuitive at first, meat-eaters' demonstrations of boundary work provide an intriguing look into the understandings of meat-eaters who interact with vegetarians. One meat-eater states:

I think if they're going to be so proud of being a vegetarian, I think it totally goes against it, just to even occasionally go against it. [...] it really rubs me the wrong way when you claim to be something and do another regardless of the circumstances.

This meat-eater believes people who occasionally eat meat should not claim a vegetarian identity; they do not deserve the pride that goes with their identity. Ironically, though some other meat-eaters do not feel the need to reject vegetarian claims, meat-eaters like the one above can effectually guard the "purity" of the beliefs and values of the vegetarian collective, protecting its moral stance. These meat-eaters do boundary work for identities of which they are not a member, identities that place meat-eaters in a lower position within the moral hierarchy. Though they may intend to prevent people from claiming a morally superior position to them, they subtly protect the moral position that places them below it.

Other meat-eaters similarly claim that if they saw a vegetarian eating fish or some other animal, they would directly tell the person, "No, you are not a vegetarian." One meat-eater states:

Technically, fish have meat on them, right? The way I define meat is sort of like if it's an animal, and it has muscles and tissues and stuff, that's meat. So I'd probably call someone out on not being a vegetarian [for eating fish] [...] I'd ask like, "What's the difference between a cow and a fish then? Is a fish less important and less of an animal?"

This meat-eater does boundary work to protect certain social definitions of what constitutes meat. Like the other meat-eater's account, even though this man is a meat-eater, he believes it is important to make vegetarian boundaries clear by defending the boundaries of definitions of "meat." Varying conceptions of meat play into the stories vegetarians tell about being frequently offered chicken, fish, or lamb as an "alternative" to meat, and this meat-eater protects boundaries in a way that may actually make vegetarians' interactions in the social world less problematic.

Despite the fuzziness of vegetarian identity boundaries, both vegetarians and meat-eaters engage in boundary work. They use socially constructed ideals, definitions, and moral hierarchies to provide rationales for rejecting certain individuals' claims to vegetarianism, working to help clarify boundaries and protect the identities of vegetarian collectives.

CONCLUSIONS

The demographics reported in previous research (Worsley and Skrzypiec 1998) suggest that women are more likely to be vegetarian than men. Yet participants in this present study usually report that there is no gender difference in who becomes vegetarian. It may be fruitful to investigate whether this perception is common, and if so, why there is such a strong difference between demographics and perception. Additionally, due to the fact that most of the vegetarians I interviewed are female, do these findings reflect a more feminine understanding and interaction regarding identity construction and boundary maintenance? A comparison of the ways men and women variously engage in these processes may reveal differences.

The demographics of this study's sample also exclude those racial and ethnic groups other than Anglo. While these patterns may be the result of the snowballing technique or the small sample size, more research is needed to better understand the demographic patterns within vegetarianism. Future research could also investigate how ethnic or racial differences might affect the ideals, moral hierarchies, importance, and processes in regards to both vegetarian and meat-eating identities.

This sample also may not pull from the population of those not experiencing vegetarianism as an important identity, and people without important vegetarian identities arguably do not spend much time negotiating the boundaries of that identity. But is this true? Vegetarians in my study were often unaware of their identity negotiations (indeed awareness of the identity is not a necessary criterion for salience), so perhaps other

vegetarians do not fail to negotiate boundaries, but rather do so in nuanced ways of which we are unaware.

Despite these limitations, this work can inform understandings of how vegetarians negotiate boundaries and experience identity. Throughout this study vegetarians and meat-eaters are shown engaging in identity work. Vegetarians and meat-eaters' interactions involve cognitive processing, self-presentations, and negotiations that are not as oppositional as stereotypical social ideas suggest. Meat-eaters play an active role throughout many of these vegetarian identity construction processes and provide a more balanced picture of them. Meat-eaters at times engage with vegetarians in the issues of vegetarian ideals, moral hierarchies, identity importance, social support, and boundary work. Previous vegetarian literature has ignored many of the similarities in vegetarian and meat-eating experiences in favor of highlighting the oppositional "nature" of these identities. Social researchers have often focused on pinning down the differences in values and attitudes between the two groups, in effect, reifying stereotypical cognitive conceptions of vegetarians and meat-eaters.

While the nature and size of the sample prohibit claims of representativeness, these accounts show that meat-eaters and vegetarians can experience similar feelings and attitudes toward animals and meat consumption. What is more important about vegetarians and meat-eaters: that they possess some socially marked differences or that they can often share similar experiences and feelings regarding identity claims, interactions, and boundary maintenance? Perhaps these shared meanings, ideals, and moral understandings are reflected in the increasing numbers of vegetarians each year (Stiles 1998).

The data also highlight the marked and unmarked characters of many social identities. In line with Brekhus (1998), normative positions in society are often treated as unmarked categories; indeed, they are not even experienced as identities. Conversely, minority group members of all kinds experience marked identities. In this study, vegetarians' non-normative positions in society mean that they will constantly be reminded of their difference. Their interactions will encourage them to experience their behavior as a salient and important identity even if outside of social situations they do not perceive the identity as a "big deal."

The unmarked character of meat-eating becomes obvious through the very process of interviewing, when I found that sensible questions to vegetarians do not make sense to meat-eaters. It often took a great deal of time for meat-eaters to label themselves in interviews. The meat-eaters tended to say things like, "I'm just a normal eater." Part way through the interview they would adopt the term "omnivore" or "meat-eater" in order to compare themselves to vegetarians. The unmarked character of the meat-eating identity was also displayed through their stories of how being a meat-eater never came up in their lives except when interacting with vegetarians. If these meat-eaters have vegetarian friends within their social circle and still experience their dietary category as unmarked, how much *more* unmarked do meat-eaters without vegetarian friends experience their dietary category? It is important to note, however, that when a member of an unmarked category suddenly becomes marked, that marking can be much more salient for the unmarked person who is not used to being in that situation.

The data show that vegetarians and meat-eaters engaged in processes of lumping and splitting in ways that clustered many variations into a small number of bounded

categories (Zerubavel 1991). Despite the variation in the very processes *themselves* (and despite the fact that there is likely even more variation outside this sample), people orient toward specific vegetarian ideals that are used to guide the construction of a socially meaningful identity. While my research focused on vegetarian identities, these findings may be used to better understand other identities whose classifications resist universal acceptance such as transgender identities and Christian identities. The data show that people are able to develop and maintain coherent social ideals within ambiguous and contested categories. These ideals become resources that social actors can use to inform expectations, moral meanings, and boundary maintenance processes, clarifying the identity in question.

When studying the meanings and boundaries of identities, an inclusion of labeled “out-group” discourse may reveal surprising interactions and engagement with “in-group” identities. Boundary construction and maintenance is shown to be an interactive process involving individuals outside the studied group. Just as vegetarians defend the boundaries of their identity, meat-eaters reject certain people’s claims to vegetarianism. Though meat-eaters may engage in boundary work for different reasons than vegetarians, meat-eaters protect the purity of the vegetarian identity even though that identity positions meat-eaters as “morally inferior.” These findings may parallel other identities that claim positive moral dimensions and provide a mandate to examine other morally-imbued identities, such as religious groups and groups of social activists. Is it a common activity for outsiders to monitor identity construction when the moral identities of other groups implicitly construct the outsider’s own moral identity? Additionally, how may

outsiders reconcile their boundary work behavior with its potential effect of reinforcing the position of the outsider as morally inferior?

Vegetarianism is a voluntary (as opposed to ascribed) identity where boundary work is a continual concern. Because of this character, voluntary identities may often coincide with identities whose classifications resist universal acceptance. Studies of how members of voluntary identities such as social movement identities (Gamson 1997) and members of other organizational identities engage in this ongoing boundary negotiation can provide a useful insight into ways these identities locate and use social ideals as resources to inform identity boundaries.

REFERENCES

- Allen, Michael W., Marc Wilson, Sik Hung Ng, and Michael Dunne. 2000. "Values and Beliefs of Vegetarians and Omnivores." *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 140(4): 405-422.
- Beardsworth, Alan, and Teresa Keil. 1992. "The vegetarian option: varieties, conversions, motives, and careers." *The Sociological Review*, 40(2): 253-293.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Brekhus, Wayne. 1998. "A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus." *Sociological Theory*. 16(1): 34-51.
- Dietz, Thomas, Ann Stirling Frisch, Linda Kalof, Paul C. Stern, and Gregory A Guagnano. 1995. "Values and Vegetarianism: An Exploratory Analysis." *Rural Sociology*, 60(3): 533-542.
- Gamson, Joshua. 1997. "Messages of Exclusion: Gender, Movements, and Symbolic Boundaries." *Gender and Society*, 11(2): 178-199.
- Hornsey, Matthew J., and Jolanda Jetten. 2003. "Not Being What You Claim to Be: Imposters as Sources of Group Threat." *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33: 639-657.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. 1983. The Managed Heart. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Howard, Judith. 2000. "Social Psychology of Identities." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26: 367-93.
- Jabs, Jennifer, Jeffery Sobal, Carol M. Devine. 2000. "Managing Vegetarianism: Identities, Norms and Interactions." *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 39: 375-394.
- Kalof, Linda, Thomas Dietz, Paul C. Stern, and Gregory A Guagnano. 1999. "Social Psychological and Structural Influences on Vegetarian Beliefs." *Rural Sociology*, 64(3): 500-511.
- Stiles, Beverly L. 1998. "Vegetarianism: Identity and Experiences as Factors in Food Selection." *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, 26(2): 213-225.

- Stryker, Sheldon, and Richard T. Serpe. 1994. "Identity Saliency and Psychological Centrality: Equivalent, Overlapping, or Complementary Concepts?" *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1): 16-35.
- Willets, Anna. 1997. "Bacon Sandwiches Got the Better of Me': Meat-eating and Vegetarianism in South-East London." Food, Health and Identity. Ed. Pat Caplan. New York: NY, Routledge.
- Worsley, Anthony, and Grace Skrzypiec. 1998. "Teenage Vegetarianism: Prevalence, Social and Cognitive Contexts." *Appetite*, 30: 151-170.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1991. The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life. New York, NY: The Free Press.