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Plant-based diets, planet power, and the patriarchy

A study on food and identity

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Abstract

Much research has been done on the sustainability of food consumption in the science sphere, but the research on social sustainability and plant-based diets are lacking in anthropology. This thesis aims to investigate how cultural perceptions affect what we choose to eat and if these perceptions can be challenged for the sake of sustainability. The analysis of the paper is based on a literature review of the previous research in combination with empirical research on the topic. The findings show that societal structures guide food choices on a macro-level as well as individual notions of identity on a micro-level. The structures on the macro levels are permeating society, and to achieve a sustainable solution, there is a need for an ideological change. Since the two levels are integrated, there is much potential for sustainable trends on the micro-level to inspire change on the macro level.

Keywords: Sustainability, plant-based, identity, naturalness, ethical values, gender stereotypes, communication, consumption, globalization.

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1. Introduction

Food trends around the world are continually changing, not least due to globalization and the expanding reach of the internet. When moving to Lund, we discovered a different food climate compared to our previous surroundings, where meat had been the most important component in every meal. Among the students at the university, the majority of people preferred plant based food due to care for the environment, animal care, or their health. With an increasing interest in sustainability, we decided to investigate the connection between plant-based diets and identity to better understand if this bond could have positive implications for sustainable food consumption in the future.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The current food production and consumption system are far from sustainable. A switch to a full or in part plant-based diet would go a long way to battle some of the more pressing issues that humanity faces. However, there seem to be current societal structures in place that prevent this change from happening. Our aim with this study is to investigate both on the macro and the micro-level why there is such friction in the food sphere regarding the necessary switch to a plant-based food system. To achieve this on a macro-level, we will discuss three main cultural perceptions which we consider to have a significant influence on what we as humans choose to eat. On a micro-level, we hope to gain a better understanding of food choices by analyzing the connection between food and identity. More specifically, how this feeling of identity manifests itself for people with plant-based diets. More extensive knowledge of their way of thinking could result in a better comprehension of sustainable food choices. This knowledge could in turn ameliorate an understanding of the different aspects of sustainable food production.

To achieve this goal, we will answer the following questions:

- How do cultural perceptions affect what we choose to eat?
- What is the connection between plant-based diets and identity?

1.2. Previous research

Anthropologists have written about food and eating habits for as long as they have studied human behavior. They started by writing about food and eating in relation to feast and sacrifice, taboos, cannibalism and how people were ranked socially (Mintz 1996:3). The connection

between food and social institutions implies that food is essential not only for nourishment but for sensations that go beyond the physical. Food is a source of energy and memory, identity and encounter, relation with the earth and nature, and a symbol of social status (Corvo 2019:2). Food is a constant topic of discussion, but it is still connected to much ambivalence. Not all societies eat the same things or have the same perception about food or what it means to eat properly (Mintz 1996:5). Eating for us then is never a purely biological action, but is something which has cultural, historical, and symbolical associations. This goes for what we eat, who eats what, techniques used when preparing, consuming, and serving the food and what meanings lie behind all this (Mintz 1996:7).

Anthropological reports show that no human culture eats every single foodstuff that is available in their nearest surroundings. In fact, humans stay away from the majority of things that we could actually eat. There are many factors involved in choosing not to eat something. However, some of the most common reasons for food preferences in Sweden include physical and mental health, ethical reasons, or care for the environment (Rydén 2017:8). Positioning oneself in relation to these factors creates a feeling of identity, and food is a common way to express one's identity to oneself and others. Common food habits enforce a feeling of affinity, and food taboos is an effective way to show who belongs to the group and who is left on the outside (Rydén 2017:17). The connection between identity and consumption gives the food a central role in the creation of society, and we all use our diet to mediate an image of ourselves to our surroundings (Rydén 2017:37).

Beyond the popular theme of food as communication, the focus of food studies have differed in many ways, with a primary focus on almost everything from food preparation rituals in international diasporas to food-related diseases such as obesity or anorexia as well as globalized consumption patterns (Counihan 2013:xii). There has also been an increasing focus on sustainability within food production and consumption. According to Wendin & Olshov, meat consumption in Sweden has almost doubled since 1990 (2018:7). This development has been in motion for a long time and is the result of higher incomes, rapid technological development, and influences from social media. Today, we buy more processed foods rather than raw food commodities, and the demand for meat among the growing middle class is still increasing (Wendin & Olshov 2018:9). The increasing meat consumption in Sweden and other emerging countries are causing deforestation, a loss in biodiversity, and increasing air and water pollution. A longer life expectancy in combination with expected population growth from 7,6

billion to 10 billion people by 2050 increases the pressure on earth's natural resources. A continued meat consumption for everyone is not sustainable since it would put unnecessary pressure on agricultural systems, increase greenhouse gasses, and require an unsustainable use of water and land resources (Wendin & Olshov 2018:7).

Due to the unsustainable nature of our current food habits, one might think that there would be substantial research connected to alternative diets such as plant-based foods. From what we have found in our research, there are quite a lot of scientific reports on the most suitable food systems for the planet, but the research on the social sustainability of plant-based diets is lacking. Perhaps this is because plant-based diets only recently have become more popular. Vegetarianism has been mentioned in historical documents since 700 B.C. However, it did not have its proper breakthrough in the West until the 1970s, when the environmental effects of meat production and consumption became widely known (Rydén 2017:60). The number of vegetarians and vegans have increased in Sweden since 1990 due to a growing awareness of the effects that meat production has on the climate. With issues of overpopulation gaining more attention, many criticized the fact that the same area of land that fed one meat-eater could feed ten vegetarians (Rydén 2017:119). The ones leading the change in favor of the environment are mostly young people since the threat of climate change is very much present in their daily lives and their future lives (Rydén 2017:136).

Even though more and more people gain access to information about the environmental dangers of meat production and consumption, relatively few tend to make the dietary shift to veganism. This implies that something is hindering this development, possibly both on a micro and on a macro scale. Our primary interest in this study is to explore what this friction might be by investigating societal structures and individual identities concerning plant-based diets. However, not much research has been done on veganism in the anthropological food sphere. Therefore, we have had to rely mostly on studies of food trends and vegetarianism to build our theoretical framework, and after that, use the results from our empirical material to draw parallels and make connections between plant-based diets and identity. However, we realize that our study is limited, and there is still much room for further research on the topic of social sustainability and plant-based diets.

1.3 Theoretical framework

To better understand the complex theme, we have chosen to focus our attention on five main theoretical concepts. These will be frequently used throughout the whole study and act as the theoretical base to approach our topic, but the concepts are, to a large extent, divided between the first and the second research question. The first research question will discuss cultural perceptions of ethical values, naturalness, and gender stereotypes in relation to food. In contrast, the second research question will revolve more around the fundamental concepts of identity and plant-based diets. To better grasp the relevance of these particular concepts, we will apply them within the broader frameworks of anthropocentrism, feminist theory, and capital theory.

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is a belief system that is privileging human values and knowledge, and everything in society and culture is held to the standard of the human. One part of this is the human-animal dualism called speciesism, where humans and animals are positioned in two opposing categories, proclaiming humans as superior in every way (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:3). This speciesist approach means that those who are not classified as belonging to the privileged species are considered and treated unjustly. Further, there is a sub-ideology to speciesism called carnism. Carnism means categorizing nonhuman animals into edible or inedible, and this categorization legitimizes the exploitation and consumption of these particular animals. This means that even though someone eats meat, that does not mean that they eat all kinds of meat but rather the kinds of meat that, through a carnistic viewpoint, are considered edible to them (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:29). Critics of anthropocentrism claim that this creates a feeling of justification and means that carnism is causing humans to support the anthropocentric system without reflecting on moral and ethics concerning the suffering of others. It is this carnistic and speciesist discourse that the vegan praxis is questioning (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:28).

Perceptions of ethics

Anthropocentrism has a powerful influence on our perception of eating meat as natural and ethically viable. As opposed to anthropocentrism, vegans consider this treatment of animals as unethical, which shows a clear division in the cultural perception of ethics. The majority of people that we talked to in our interviews claimed that the vegan lifestyle is resting upon moral

standpoints. In every culture and society, some kinds of foods are perceived as more or less moral. These kinds of foods and the act of eating (or not eating) them is used as a vehicle to score social points (Mintz 1996:67). For vegans, this means refraining from eating meat, while meat-eaters perceive meat-eating as ethical, thanks to the societal structures that are enforcing this norm. Classifying foods and connecting eating to moral overtones is distinctively human and culturally specific. Food habits, emotions, and sentiment are closely linked (Mintz 1996:69).

Perceptions of naturalness

Claiming that it is natural to eat meat is one of the oldest justifications for animal exploitation there is, as expressed by the supporters of anthropocentrism. Many cultural perceptions affect what we choose to eat, but one of the strongest influences is the preference to eat things that are natural and good for you. The Oxford English Dictionary defines naturalness as: "the condition of being in accordance with nature." (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d). In the food sphere, there is currently an emerging trend of "going back to nature," primarily through a renewed interest in the rural world, for example, the cravings for locally grown produce. In a society characterized by industrial consumption, the search for a good quality of life is expressed mainly by renewed attention to everything natural (Corvo 2019:123). This trend could imply an increase in plant-based diets, but Swedes eat more meat today than ever (Wendin & Olshov 2018:7). What feels natural for some might seem repulsive for others, as exemplified in our study by the disagreement between meat-eaters and vegans.

Gender stereotypes and feminist theory

As mentioned above, choosing to eat or not to eat something is a culturally conditioned practice, and one of the most widely accepted cultural constructions is the notion of gender. Every culture has a sex and gender system which explains these aspects as not only of biological relevance but of social relevance as well. Just as every society has a system through which they organize production, they also organize sexuality and reproduction. Through this system, human characteristics, and what is considered feminine and masculine are organized, revealing power conditions that may not be evident at first sight (Rubin 1975: 90). Gender is a product of the social relations of sexuality, which tends to make men and women seem more different from each other than they actually are (Rubin 1975:94).

This gender identity suppresses the natural similarities that exist between the genders, which has resulted in a lack of recognition of each other's culturally specific, typically feminine and masculine traits (Rubin 1975: 95). The feminist vegetarian critical theory looks at the relationship between feminism and vegetarianism. When it comes to food, there is a connection between what is generally considered masculine food, which is built on deeply rooted male stereotypes. The feminist vegetarian critical theory, therefore, proposes that food such as meat is considered stereotypically masculine and is connected to the patriarchal society. If a man were to eliminate meat and become vegan, they would abandon a part of the male control (Adams 2010:56). Feminist theory is, therefore, applicable when investigating the relationship between gender stereotypes, food choices, and feelings of identity.

Plant-based identities

The notion of identity is difficult to define. However, one of the suggested definitions on the Oxford English Dictionary website defines identity as: "a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others." (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) Identities are created, maintained, and strengthened through the contrast to others but also with some kind of internal solidarity rooting from a cultural commonality or institutional support (Hylland Eriksen 1995:435). Both social identity and group identities are always relational to other identities, and these other ones are often seen as inferior or as a potential enemy, in order to create this solidarity (Hylland Eriksen 1995:429).

In our second research question, we have chosen to focus on how people with a plant-based diet view the relationship between food and identity. Eating plant-based foods means avoiding all animal foods such as meat (including fish, shellfish, and insects), dairy, eggs, and [honey](#). People who eat an entirely plant-based diet are called vegans. Veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose (The Vegan society n.d.). Veganism is not the same as vegetarianism, where the diet entails no meat but other animalistic products such as dairy, honey, and eggs. We believe that any choice of diet is closely connected to and defined by cultural context, the same cultural context that shapes and influences one's identity. Bourdieu's theory of capital is, therefore, applicable to make sense of identity-making for people with a plant-based diet.

Capital theory

According to Bourdieu, people choose products for consumption according to their economic, social, and cultural capital (Corvo 2019:44). Economic capital is an essential part of what determines one's position in society. It includes capital such as properties, investments, and money in the bank, making it pretty straightforward and easy to measure and compare. Cultural (and social) capital is harder to define and measure compared to economic capital. Cultural capital is determined by cultural competence which is partly displayed through how one carries themselves in certain kind of situations. Every social class includes a type of cultural competence, and these competencies are valued differently, which means that a higher social class has a type of cultural competence that is valued higher (Dillon 2010:407).

Social capital refers to one's social network and connections, which can help individuals to enhance their capital in other aspects as well. Having a significant social capital can give more opportunities to develop one's cultural competence or to get a job, consequently increasing their economic capital. This means that there are many links between the three different types of capital (Dillon 2010:408). Capital is not only something that people have, but it is also something that is being used in different ways to establish someone's position in society and can, through this position themselves in specific ways in hierarchical situations (Dillon 2010:410). People choose products according to their economic, social, and cultural capital, which is confined to the notion of class. Different combinations of these three characteristics determine the social identity of the individual (Corvo 2019:71).

1.4 Disposition

The following chapters will further explore our research questions in depth. In chapter two, “Method”, we describe the methods used to gather our material for the literature analysis and the empirical research, before reflecting on the methodological challenges. In the chapter “How do cultural perceptions affect what we choose to eat?”, we investigate how the notions ethical values, naturalness and gender stereotypes influence people’s food choices on a macro scale. In “What is the connection between food and identity for people with a plant-based diet?”, we focus on the micro level by examining the connection between plant based diets and identity through communication, consumption and globalization. Finally, the thesis ends with a summary and a conclusion on the topic of plant based diets and identity.

2. Method

An extensive amount of research has been conducted on the topic of food and identity, but not as much on plant-based diets and identity. To learn more, we decided to focus the thesis on this topic, including the cultural aspects of naturalness, gender stereotypes, and ethics in the making of identity. The lack of previous research on plant-based diets was partly an obstacle since it gave us limited academic support of our claims, but conducting interviews was a helpful complement in this area. Despite the lack of previous research in this particular area, we chose to continue with our line, since we perceive plant-based diets as a current topic worth investigating further. To answer our research questions, we intended to apply different forms of qualitative methods. One of the most central aspects we wanted to focus on was individual and group interviews with a range of people with connections to the vegan food scene, such as wholesalers, scientists, and consumers. When relevant, we also wanted to implement participant observation. Due to the unforeseen effects of COVID-19, however, we had to reconsider our methodology.

2.1 Literature analysis

Throughout the process of writing the thesis, but mainly in the first two weeks of the project, we spent a considerable amount of time trying to find relevant previous research on our topic to build a theoretical framework and a background. We applied different search methods, specifically through the Lund University database. Soon we found an anthropological anthology about food and culture, which gave us a good direction to continue with. From there, it was relatively easy to "follow the sources" by merely looking into the references of each chapter, which in turn gave us new references to look into. The sources that we have decided to include in our reference list are texts from academic journals, established websites, and printed books. Initially, we did not limit our selection in any strict way since we were not sure which areas we could find research. Gradually, we were able to narrow our search to texts discussing the recurrent concepts plant-based diets, identity, naturalness, gender stereotypes, and ethics, all concerning food.

2.2 Interviews

To learn more about plant-based diets, we decided to reach out to vegans (and people who used to be vegan) for qualitative interviews. Since social distancing due to COVID-19 does not go hand in hand with spending much time with strangers, we decided to focus on interviewing

people via semi-structured interviews over the internet instead of meeting in real life. We chose semi-structured interviews because they are a rewarding and important part of social science research, as suggested by Davies (2008:106). We tried to find a wide range of informants by approaching them through two different groups for vegans on social media. It was a successful way to reach out to informants; however, we mostly found people with similar backgrounds - young, educated, white females. Eventually, we found a sample of 12 women, five men, and one non-binary from the ages of 19-57 with an average age of 26 years old. They had varying levels of education and came from different backgrounds. We wanted to have a diverse sample since the purpose of ethnographic interviewing is to obtain a variety of interpretations rather than to seek consistencies in responses in order to develop statistical generalizations (Davies 2008:109). We feel that the semi-structured approach and the demographics of the informants were two successful tools in achieving this goal. In the U.K., there are twice as many female vegans as male vegans (63%), and almost half of all vegans are between 15 to 34 years old (The Vegan Society 2016). This statistic renders our sample quite representative of the societal division, although it's hard to find any statistics on veganism in Sweden. The difficulties with finding male informants and the statistics on the gender division of vegans inspired us to research the gender aspects of veganism further.

In total, we talked to 18 people in the period between March 5th 2020 to April 17th 2020. The interviews ranged from 34 minutes to 70 minutes. For most of the interviews, both of us were present, although we did conduct some of them separately due to issues of scheduling a joint meeting within the given time frame. The interviews were conducted at our apartments via Facebook messenger video, Skype, or regular phone calls, depending on what was most convenient for the informant in question. For one of the informants who felt uncomfortable with making video calls or regular calls, we sent the questions that we had prepared for the oral interviews and asked them to answer to the best of their abilities. For the oral interviews, we had prepared eight questions that we wanted to discuss with the interviewee to get a sense of their views on topics that were relevant for our thesis: food choices, identity, naturalness, and ethics, for example. However, we intentionally let the informants steer the conversation in the direction they wanted since we sought after their personal opinions, and we were completely transparent about our intentions with the interviews, in accordance with Davies suggestions on contextualizing the research (Davies 2008:121). Additional information on the demographics of the informants or the proceedings of the interviews can be found in the appendix.

2.3. Observation at the Disgusting Food Museum

In addition to our literature analysis and interviews, we conducted observations at the Disgusting Food Museum in Malmö on March 7th from 14:00-16:00 and March 8th from 13:30-15:30. The museum is interactive and allows its visitors to touch, taste, and smell some of the 80 food objects on display. The food objects are considered delicacies in different parts of the world, but for people who are not culturally accustomed to them, they appear disgusting. The museum was an ideal place to observe people's reactions to feelings of disgust since the interactivity with the food inspired much discussion on the topics of naturalness, cultural perception, and taste. These observations have also helped analyze our empirical material and make connections to previous research.

2.4 Methodological reflections

The semi-structured arrangement of the interviews was beneficial for us in the way that it made more freedom possible, and letting the informants lead the conversation opened up for important aspects of veganism that we had not even considered. However, the freely flowing interviews also left us with quite diverse empirical material that eventually would be difficult to compile. After conducting 18 interviews, we felt that we had enough material to work through and when analysing the interviews we were able to draw certain parallels. Knowing very well that our sample of informants - despite being of different ages, sexes, and backgrounds - still all resided in Skåne, leaving them exposed to the same kind of cultural conditioning. If we had had more time, we would have diversified our results by conducting more interviews with vegans from other parts of the country, and perhaps also by interviewing meat-eaters to get a more holistic view of dietary preferences. The study could also have focused on other cultural perceptions of food choices, something that undoubtedly would have given other results. The limited geographical and topical aspect, in combination with the short timeframe for the project, means that the results of our empirical research in no way can be presented as a representation of veganism since it is an incredibly diverse praxis.

Regarding the notion of writing together, we have tried our best to make cooperation as equitable as possible. We have during the process of writing this essay tried to split the work as evenly as possible by having shared documents where we included all our research and findings. We did most of the interviews together, and while conducting them, we split up the responsibility so that Louise took notes while Ellen did more of the talking. Through

discussions, both in person and via Skype, we have reached decisions together and made sure that we were on the same page. We also decided to make any essential decisions for the paper when we were together while readings and smaller assignments could be completed separately. Finally, we emphasized being open to each other's ideas as well as being respectful to one another at all times.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Education is essential to guide people in what foodstuffs should and should not be eaten to lead a healthy lifestyle. The poorest people might not have the economical choice. They may, therefore, have to turn to cheap fast food, causing diseases such as obesity or diabetes in developed and emerging countries (Corvo 2019:90). Food is a sensitive topic for many people, and societal norms of body image and looks can cause eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia (Corvo 2019:92). To apply caution in our empirical research, we made sure that the informants knew that they were not obliged to talk to us about sensitive topics and that they would be anonymized in the final product (Davies 2008:54). While conducting the interviews, we did face some friction regarding our own diets. Both of us are flexitarians, meaning that we mainly eat vegetarian food but occasionally eat meat. We did not reveal this for the informants who did not ask, but for the ones who wondered about our own dietary choices, we naturally told the truth. In some cases, it did not seem to affect the informants considerably, while others seemed to change their wording of particular opinions as not to offend us. This could mean that they might not express their frustration with non-vegans in a general sense but instead talk about it based on their own experiences.

Another important aspect of our methodology has been to examine our own reflexivity, which is an essential part of anthropological research (Davies 2008:26). Most importantly, we had to take into consideration our positioning with our informants. Us being two people interviewing one person might have had an impact on the informant's level of comfort, possibly in both directions. In some cases, it made it feel more like a group discussion than an interview, but in others, it was mostly the informant talking with two people staring back at them. Another aspect we have taken into consideration is that we did not know the people we interviewed. The fact that they agreed to take part in the interview might say something about their social skills and levels of outspokenness. The informants could have felt more comfortable to interview because it was conducted digitally, meaning that they could stay at home. The fact that these interviews

took place during a time when many people were quite isolated due to COVID-19 might also have contributed to the fact that so many people had the time and motivation to participate.

3. How do cultural perceptions affect what we choose to eat?

Every person is culturally conditioned to think and act in a certain way. To define every cultural aspect that affects one's food choices would be nearly impossible, considering that every culture is continuously changing, making ideals and ideas open and flowing. However, we believe that three distinguishable factors play an essential role in our attitude towards food: our perceptions of ethical standpoints, naturalness, and gender stereotypes. What we choose to eat is determined in part by an interplay between these three factors.

3.1 Perceptions of ethical values

In the current age of information, knowledge about the effects of the food system on the environment is easily accessible for everyone. Nevertheless, relatively few people have chosen to change their diet to a more sustainable one. This is partly due to a pervasive ideology that permeates society, legitimizing humans eating and killing animals (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:1). This belief system, acknowledged by critical animal theorists, including feminists and posthumanists, is called anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is privileging human values and knowledge as well as the knowledge and values of those animals most similar to humans. Everything in society and culture is held to the standard of the human. A human-animal dualism positions humans and animals in two homogenous and very opposing kinds, positioning humans as superior in every way. This dualism is called speciesism (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:3). The anthropocentric humanism is possible because of the conviction of our exceptionalism, meaning that we have capacities exclusive to our beings, such as our consciousness and speech. Humans interpret everything that is considered human capacities as defined by what all other animals lack, positioning humanity as the exclusive, superior class (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:7).

What is defined as human capacities and the humanistic superiority is not universal. It is culturally specific and, therefore, constantly changing (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:9). Therefore, there are cultural differences in how humans treat the animals around them. In the West, exploiting animals is a common practice in many countries. However, the anthropocentric worldview is facing critique, for instance, from vegans. Veganism has developed as a counter-narrative and counter practice to speciesism, questioning the justifying of exploitation and oppression of animals as a definition of the human/animal relationship. The vegan praxis is, according to some, the most effective way to deconstruct and re-evaluate the speciesistic norm

(Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:28). Many of the vegans that we interviewed for this study found it immoral or unethical to eat meat (Empirical research 2020). However, perceiving meat-eating as immoral is far from the general societal opinion, even though many people are aware of the animal treatment and the environmental consequences.

Enjoying eating meat but disliking the thought of harming animals is a dilemma known as the meat paradox, which is creating a cognitive dissonance amongst meat-eaters (Benningstad & Kunst 2020:1). There are several strategies to handle the dilemma to reach some kind of consistency between these very conflictual attitudes and behaviors, for example, to become a vegan or vegetarian. The three Ns of justification (eating meat is normal, natural, and necessary) is another mechanism to handle this disconnection (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:32). It is quite easy to justify eating meat in today's industrialized society since meat is already dissociated from its animal origins. In the stores, all of the animals' characteristics have generally been removed from the meat, making it easy to forget its origins, especially if the meat production process is something that you have never been exposed to before (Benningstad & Kunst 2020:2). Dissociation is also happening on a linguistic level where pig meat is referred to as pork and cow meat is renamed beef. One could claim that the reason why so many people do not reflect on the moral aspect of eating meat is that these societal mechanisms are keeping the cognitive dissonance in place (Rydén 2017:58).

Generally, people do not feel the need to use coping strategies such as becoming vegans or vegetarians because these societal structures of meat consumption become a coping strategy in itself (Benningstad & Kunst 2020:2). Another of the societal structures that are guiding our view of animals is the notion of carnism. Carnism is a sub-ideology of speciesism and aims to categorize nonhuman animals into edible or inedible. It is this categorization that legitimizes the exploitation and consumption of the edible animals (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:28). Carnism is maintained through different defenses, which makes us perceive the "inedible" animals as disgusting. Because of this perception, we support the system without reflecting on moral and ethics concerning the suffering of others (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:29). The carnistic discourse plays a significant role in our perception of eating meat as natural and ethically correct, both subjective notions that are culturally conditioned. Food habits, emotions, and sentiment are closely linked. We learn our culturally specific eating habits early in life and they are, therefore, usually strongly affected by a sentimental power (Mintz 1996:69).

In recent times, there has been a shift in cultural attitudes towards eating meat, and veganism has increased, especially in the West. Yet, with this, another development has arisen. This could be seen as a sort of backlash against the vegan counter-narrative with trends of consuming "humane," "sustainable/local," and or "nutritional" meat and dairy. The neocarnist narrative is invading the fundamental pillars of veganism, which are human rights, environment, and health (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:32). This emerging trend could be dangerous since justifying meat production and consumption at this point would only further complicate our societal change. However, people might not be aware that they are supporting the system. Veganism could be considered an ideological minority, and vegans could, therefore, be seen as victims of carnism as the vegan movement is still often stereotyped and silenced. Although, it is also possible seeing it from another perspective where the non-vegans are the victims of carnism. These are the ones who are supporting the system, which is likely to go against their authentic narratives and core values, putting them in a position of psycho-emotional disconnection (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:31).

To achieve a long term sustainable food system, there is a need for an ideological shift that steers us away from anthropocentric and speciesist values. Humanity has become very self-obsessed, focusing on our society and economy, ignoring and disrespecting everything else (Washington 2015:141). An alternative to the unsustainable anthropocentric approach is another ideology called ecocentrism. Ecocentrism means valuing nature and perceiving the natural world as something sacred and something we are one part of rather than being superior. Through an ecocentric approach, we would instead act and consume in a way that reflects that we share our planet with others, for example, through a vegan diet (Washington 2015:139). Today, people are starting to change their worldviews, more so because of climate change reasons than ethical values (Washington 2015:140).

However, just because we see the environment through a human perspective does not mean that we cannot value nature and animals, just like a white man does not have to be racist and sexist just because he lives in patriarchy. If we are going to be sustainable, we have to realize that just because we are human, that does not mean that we have to focus on ourselves in every aspect of life (Washington 2015:142). This ideological change is possible. Some vegetarians come to dislike meat or even to be disgusted by it, which makes it easy for them to avoid it. Other vegetarians remain tempted by meat all the time and have to struggle not to reintroduce it into their diets. This is very much in line with our empirical data, where the ethical vegans

spoke of feelings of disgust for meat and dairy. In contrast, some of the ones who were driven by sustainability or health admitted missing the taste of it. This means that they can put their personal taste preferences aside for the sake of a more long-term goal (Empirical research 2020).

3.2 Perceptions of naturalness

In some ways, many people are susceptible to what they put in their mouths. This could be because the item is being incorporated from the outside into the self in an undeniable way, making the eater exposed to its effects (Rozin 1997:28). The perception of contamination enhances this feeling. If an item we consider disgusting touches a piece of food, it renders that food inedible. It is an evolutionary explanation to avoid the risk of getting sick. However, even in controlled studies where the risk was equal to zero, the negative psychological response was still incredibly strong (Rozin 1997:43). This psychological response often makes people overrate the dangers of eating. More emphasis is placed on so-called natural foods that are good for you, free from toxins or other additives (Rozin 1997:26). In a world where health and eating are always in focus, we tend to choose foods that feel natural for us to eat. The naturalness of a food item may appear to be universal, but our perception of naturalness is affected by our speciesist values and, therefore, without a doubt, culturally conditioned.

Across time and cultures, nature has been seen as the source of life, and as the birthplace of many cultural institutions, nature still holds great importance to us today. As civilization and its products threaten much of the natural world, many movements have arisen in recent years to protect it, on both practical and moral grounds. This is connected to the ambition of maintaining the environment in its natural state (Rozin et al. 2012:448). Recently in western developed countries, the term 'natural' has whenever possible been associated with food products. Rozin et al. have conducted a large-scale study comparing food attitudes in six countries: France, Germany, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Italy, and the USA (Rozin et al. 2012:450). Their findings show that there is a general positivity towards the term natural. When the participants were asked to define the term, many did so by emphasizing the absence of certain processes or products. These could be grouped into two headings: No processed foods, i.e., no alteration or industrial intervention, and no additives, i.e., no chemicals or pesticides. Other dominating categories included things that come from nature, homemade, healthy, and pure (Rozin et al. 2012:451).

When asked to associate the term natural with other words intuitively, five main categories seemed to invoke a strong sense of natural: biological, positive affect, environment, food (specifically plant products), and health (Rozin et al. 2012:452). Out of the 60 most common free associations, 20 words related to plants while only four related to animals or animal products. Also, almost 80% reported green, the color of plants, to be the most natural. This shows that plants come to mind more often than animals when people think about naturalness (Rozin et al. 2012:453). What is interesting and quite contradictory with this insight is that it goes against the previously mentioned anthropocentric and speciesist viewpoint in the sense that a belief system should be related to a feeling of naturalness towards that belief. Many people have an underlying understanding that humans are superior to other animals and that we have a right to decide which animals we can eat or not. The fact that we at the same time feel that what is earnestly natural to us is unprocessed, plant-based food might mean that what we see as natural might not in every sense be what is good for us but rather what we are used to or feel that we need. For example, we have always eaten meat; therefore, it feels natural. Although, as one of our informants pointed out: "Naturlighet och nödvändighet är inte samma sak"/"Naturalness and necessity is not the same thing." (Empirical research 2020, interview 16). We do not need to eat meat simply because it appears natural, and naturalness should not be used as a justification for unsustainable (and according to some people unethical) practices.

There are predominant similarities in the meaning of natural across the Western-developed countries. This unity might have its explanation in the success of the industrial revolution in these countries, and that they are quite similar on a cultural scale. Nature refers to the "original" status of things and may have particular appeal for people who come to resent the intrusion of technology into basic traditions. For example, there is an idealization of an agricultural past as well as present-day spaces that recall this past, such as farms or cultivations. There is an essential component of 'authenticity' in modern western views of natural (Rozin et al. 2012:454). This is something that Corvo also has noticed. He identifies an emerging trend of "going back to nature" in the food sphere, primarily through a renewed interest in the rural world, for example, the cravings for locally grown produce. In a society characterized by consumption, the search for a good quality of life is expressed mainly by renewed attention to everything natural (Corvo 2019:123). This trend is strong in the Western-developed countries at the moment, but the societal consumption patterns are constantly changing and spreading through globalization. One of the main driving forces behind changing what we want to eat is

the notion of disgust. The most common way our biology affects our food habits is the interaction between our ability to learn about foods and the biological effects those foods have on our bodies. Why we choose not to eat certain things could be due to distaste, fear that it will harm us, or that our culture tells us that it is inedible, often a combination of the three (Rozin 1997:31). The food items that disgust people vary in different cultures, but they are almost always animal products, which are simultaneously the most craved and the most taboo food in the world (Rydén 2017:57). Criticism towards animal products has become more prevalent in recent years, something that is made clear at the Disgusting Food Museum in Malmö. The museum has 80 food objects from around the world that are, in some way, perceived as disgusting, and the majority of them are animal products. The museum is interactive, meaning that the visitors are allowed to smell, taste, and touch some of the food objects. After conducting observations at the museum, we noticed several interesting things.

Firstly, the food objects that are familiar to us in Sweden, such as surströmming, blood pudding, or gelatin candy, spurred the most discussion about disgust and naturalness. Those who dared try the unusual delicacies such as insects were often pleasantly surprised. The ones who reacted strongly did so because the taste was unfamiliar, rather than distasteful. Second, the food items on display were mainly different kinds of animal products that are viewed as delicacies around the world, for example, foie gras, haggis, tartare, or bull penis. Many of the food items at the museum were coded in different categories, such as aphrodisiacs, animal cruelty, historical significance, and poisonous. Almost all objects with this type of indication were animal products, and the mark for animal cruelty was the most common. The museum displayed graphic information videos on how the delicacies are made, implying grave criticism towards the industrial meat production of today. The museum challenges people to question their perceptions of what is edible and not. This type of practice - spreading information about food that invokes feelings of disgust - is a powerful tool in changing people's food habits (Observation DFM 2020). Our empirical material implies that this goal is particularly achievable when showing how animal products such as meat and dairy are produced since many of our informants converted to veganism after seeing documentaries or reading books on this topic (Empirical research 2020).

'Natural' is an unambiguously positive quality for most people. At the same time, animals and their products have been singled out as particular foci of intense and often ambivalent feelings in people (Rozin et al. 2012:454). Feelings of ambivalence towards animals and animal

products were a common occurrence among our informants. Many of them discussed how they had struggled with the meat paradox for a time before making the switch. Today, however, none of them could imagine going back to eating meat, because it would feel unnatural for them to do so (Empirical research 2020). The perception of naturalness must then be very diverse, influenced by many different cultural currents. Another critical aspect that influences our perception of food is the gender system of society and its associated stereotypes, creating and maintaining ideas on masculinity and femininity within food systems.

3.3 Perceptions of gender stereotypes

One might not consider the fact that food habits have a gendered aspect, but they do, especially regarding who is expected to eat what. Anthropologists have shown that associations between food and gender are present in every human culture, although with some variations. Some of these categories of differentiation are the type of food, meal size, and nutritional features (Cavazza 2015:266). The choice of food and eating habits are closely connected to social, cultural, and economic capital. The taste for certain foodstuffs is associated with a whole conception of the domestic economy and the division of labor between the sexes. Dishes that demands an investment of time and interest are linked to the traditional conception of a woman's role in food preparation (Bourdieu 2013: 33). Women are also limited by food taboos to a greater extent than men, especially when it comes to meat. In many cultures, certain kinds of meat are forbidden for women in order to reinforce the prestige of men (Adams 2010:49). Here, the gender systems have organized human characteristics in determining that meat is for men and therefore seen as masculine. Instead, non-meat food such as vegetables and dairy are seen as "women's food" and, therefore, not desirable to men. For example, in Western societies, studies have shown that cookbooks are reinforcing the belief that men cook and eat meat by addressing these kinds of books to men and not women (Adams 2010:50).

The patriarchal culture has created a traditional conviction that a working man needs to eat the muscles of animals for strength and that these attributes of masculinity will be achieved through eating the "masculine foods" (Adams 2010:56). The practical philosophy of the male body as powerful, big, and strong is a principle of division of the foods between the sexes. Men will eat and drink more as well as eat and drink stronger things. They are expected to consume much meat and alcohol, strong-making, and robust food items (Bourdieu 2013:35). One of the reasons why meat is considered masculine is because it is connected to strength and the

patriarchal tradition (Cavazza 2015:266). The well-trodden stereotype that meat is for men has strong historical connotations. Meat has always been associated with the danger of the hunt and with high status since it was a prized food, for example, in various hunter-gatherer societies. The men were the ones who hunted the meat, and they consequently became associated with eating it (Gorvett 2020).

Since meat was and is a valuable economic commodity, the ones in control of this commodity are the ones with power (Adams 2010:58). This could, therefore, be seen as one of the ways that the gender systems are relieving the organized power conditions in society. Women are expected to eat more vegetables, and they are also expected to eat smaller portions. Additionally, they are expected to be more compassionate when it comes to animal use in general and experimentation on animals in particular (Gorvett 2020). We could not find any statistics on gender division amongst vegans in Sweden, only in the U.K., where there were twice as many female vegans (The Vegan Society 2016). Despite this, in our empirical research, the informants expressed it as a fact and common knowledge that there are more female vegans (Empirical research 2020). This could be due to people expecting women eating more vegetables and being more compassionate, or because women are more comfortable talking about veganism because it is in accordance with gender stereotypes. Finally, it can mean that there are, in fact, more female than male vegans in Sweden, even though there has not been any research on the gendered division which provide the necessary statistics.

Research has shown that one of the reasons why food and identity are related is that what one eats and how much one eats can strengthen one's gender identity. In this way, both men and women can use food choices as a tool of impression management, manipulating their behaviors according to both their company and what type of gender identity they want to strengthen (Cavazza 2015:267). In Cavazza's study, the results showed that a single feminine connotation, such as type of food, a small portion, or a more beautiful presentation, was enough to make a dish seem more feminine and therefore be more appealing to women. However, this was not the case for men, implying that the feminine connotation is more prominent than the masculine (Cavazza 2015:270). Food taboos are more potent for women, deciding what they can and cannot eat, but the rules for what is considered masculine food is stricter for men. This implication resonates well with our empirical research and especially with our interviews with the male informants. Many of them expressed having a hard time asserting themselves, especially towards other men. As previously mentioned, the gender system is making men and

women seem more different than they are, resulting in the difference in experiences of being vegan for men and women. The stereotypes connected to these systems are deeply rooted, and while times are changing, they are still affecting us in many ways. Due to consumption stereotypes regarding food intake, many people are using food to convey a favorable impression. People are motivated to portray an impression that will maximize rewards and minimize costs, but the images that will serve this end are not always positive. For example, for a woman, it is not always positive to eat less and therefore appear feminine because femininity is also to subordination and lower social status. Therefore, our impression management is contextualized (Vartanian 2007:272). Motivation and awareness of audience values are important when doing this. Awareness of the different values held by one's surroundings or culture in many cases leads people to adapt their food consumption to accommodate those values (Vartanian 2007:273).

The system organizing versions of femininity and masculinity consists of variations intersexually. However, the organization of femininity and masculinity on a higher structural level is based on the fact that men are globally dominant in relation to women. This fact provides the foundation for the relationship between men in society and creates a hegemonic form of masculinity, which is called hegemonic masculinity. This hegemonic masculinity is always relational to both women and other subordinated masculinities, and this is an integral part of how the patriarchy works. This hegemony does not exist as clearly among women. Forms of femininity are instead mainly perceived through the basis of women's subordination to men (Connell 1987:183). Hegemonic masculinity is not the same thing as gender roles. The hegemonic ideals do not have to represent any general masculine traits (Connell 1987:184). These characteristics do not have to represent the man with the most social power. Through strategy, hegemonic masculinity maintains the practices which institutionalize the men's dominance over women (Connell 1987:185).

Even though we are aware of men living up to the patriarchal standards of masculinity while being vegetarian or vegan, the connection between masculinity and meat remains. Today, men who choose a vegan or vegetarian diet are seen as less masculine by their meat-eating peers (Gorvett 2020). This is a notion that our male informants recognized and identified themselves with. Some of them have been met with skepticism or hostility from other men when talking about their diets and life choices, something that creates a toxic environment for the ones who wish to question the norms of the gender system (Empirical research 2020). The hegemonic

centrism of speciesism can arguably be compared to the man/woman dichotomy, where the position of a woman is considered subordinated, and she is seen as the Other. For a man to question the speciesist belief is to take the side of the Other and could be seen as giving up part of one's masculinity. However, at the same time, to not give equal moral consideration to all animals is a prejudice that, according to some people, is similar to sexism and racism (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:13).

Feminism and animal rights activists have long been intimately connected, which might be one of the reasons why there is cemented perception in many places that more women are vegans (Gorvett 2020). Feminist and posthumanist anti-speciesists are critical towards the humanists. They believe that to reach new and better ways to conceptualize humans, animals, and the morality between them, there have to be radical changes in our current dominating practices (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:12). These transformations started in the 1960s with movements relating to civil rights, feminism, and the environment, challenging the anthropocentric ideology (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:13). In previous research and our interviews, a connection between feminism and the human/animal morality has recurred. One reason for this could be that feminist theory is very focused on the materiality of the body and the commitment to those bodies that are most vulnerable to abuse, which in our modern society is women, but also animals (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:17). In our empirical research, we received a diverse outcome when discussing the connection between feminism and veganism. Some people could not see the connection at all, while others perceived them as interrelated since they are based on the same core values (Empirical research 2020). In this way, one could claim that veganism is very related to values, but what these values include and what they mean for them varies amongst different people.

For millennia, many cultures have prioritized males and, in this way, excluding women and other human Others from full and equal citizenship. Characteristics such as vulnerability and passivity are associated with the subordinated, giving the impression that the powerful men have escaped these qualities. To care equally for those supposedly "less capable," such as animals, is considered both sentimental and irrational, both not surprisingly commonly associated with women. By this logic, caring for animals is seen as feminine (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:21). The feminist ethics of care is, therefore, also relevant to the connection between feminism and veganism and the probability for one to change to a plant-based diet. While caring is considered a fundamental aspect of being a human, especially of being a woman, it is

also something that requires a particular discipline, effort, and courage (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:22). These characteristics were also commonly mentioned by our informants when they were to describe themselves (Empirical research, 2020). Challenging current gender stereotypes in food habits and other areas of society might, therefore, be a productive way to inspire another more socially and environmentally sustainable way of life.

3.4 Conclusion

Cultural perceptions affect what we choose to eat in many different ways and it is to a high degree affected by social structures, specific to a culture. The anthropocentric belief system is the prevailing norm, guiding us to take advantage of our privilege without questioning it and giving the impression that it is normal, natural, and necessary for us to eat meat. These societal structures make it relatively easy for us to ignore the impact animal exploitation has on the environment but also on our psyche. As long as the current hierarchical power system remains between humans, animals, and the environment, those at the top will continue to exploit those who are superior. In an anthropocentric and patriarchal society, this means the exploitation of animals and women. Besides anthropocentrism, gender systems play a big part in the structural influence of food choices. By deciding what we perceive as feminine and masculine, gender systems influence the level of ability and simplicity in making individual dietary choices. The hierarchical scheme makes it more difficult to challenge the norms and stereotypes surrounding food, making us stick to the understanding that women are more compassionate and eat a salad while men do not care and eat meat. This is not beneficial for either the environment, animals, or humans in the long term, but it is still deeply rooted. Therefore, to reach the goal of a more sustainable future in terms of food choices, our research leads us to a solution which includes is a real change in ideological approach, where the focus is on equality.

Even though naturalness has an impact on what we decide to eat, one could claim that it is more complicated than that. The fact that many people see it as natural to eat meat contradicts the fact that animal products are rarely perceived as natural in themselves. People who want to seek out natural food generally choose unprocessed food without additives, which to a high degree, consists of vegetables. This implies that what one thinks is natural is not always what one chooses to eat. The cognitive dissonance that logically should present itself in the contradictions of the diet is, in some cases, removed through social structures that are legitimizing our behavior and habits. Finally, what we choose to eat can also be very individual.

A combination of structures and individuality has an impact on who chooses a plant-based diet and who does not. Many of us live under the same or similar structures, all affected by anthropocentric systems and gender stereotypes, but only a few of us decide to become vegans.

4. What is the connection between food and identity for people with a plant-based diet?

After analyzing some of the underlying structures that affect dietary choices on a macro level, it is necessary to investigate how these notions affect individual food choices, and how the choices can become so varying within the same societal structure. To become a vegan is to go against the anthropocentric norm. Information about positive aspects of veganism is available for everyone through the internet and social media. However, only some people perceive this as important enough to decide to change their diet and lifestyle. Possibly because this would mean breaking structural norms and maybe going against gender stereotypes, this must mean that we somehow choose our input based on what we value as valuable information. We believe this is strongly connected to economic, social, and cultural capital in terms of regulating our privilege, contexts, and possibilities. To inspire people to make the dietary shift to veganism or at least vegetarianism, it would be helpful to understand how vegans perceive the world. A grand part of this is to understand the connection between plant-based diets and identity.

4.1 Identity and communication

People define themselves based on what they eat, or rather what they do not eat. You are what you eat is an applicable thesis in many ways when it comes to food and identity. The food does become part of our bodies in a biological sense, but it is also a fundamental part of human communities. Sharing a meal is a way to form new bonds of business, friendship, or love (Rydén 2017:189). Therefore, it is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical and nutritional studies, but it is also a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. All foods serve as 'a sign' among the members of a given society. It is, anthropologically speaking, the first need, but ever since man has ceased living off wild berries, this need has been highly structured. Substances, techniques of preparation, and habits all become a part of a system of differences in signification. When this happens, we have communication by way of food (Barthes 2013:25).

In our empirical analysis, we put much emphasis on identity-making through food by interviewing people with a plant-based diet on this topic. All of them spoke about veganism as a statement of identity, although they had differing attitudes about this statement. Some felt very comfortable with being labeled as vegans, while others did not feel the same connection to the vegan community. They also had varying opinions on how much their veganism defined

their identity. This had a lot to do with the process of adopting a new kind of lifestyle. When they were in the beginning process of becoming vegan, identity seemed to play a more significant role in their life as opposed to when they had been eating plant-based food for a long time (Empirical research 2020). This makes sense since the set of characteristics developed when becoming vegan distinguishes them from others in a new way, making it seem like a more significant and more critical part of their identity. However, when getting used to this part of their identity, this is mostly relevant for themselves when others acknowledge it. Labeling our informants as vegans is usually part of other people's identity making when distinguishing themselves as non-vegans (Empirical research 2020).

Being vegan is according to our empirical research habitual; however, the notion is very contextual. In some social contexts, being vegan is accepted as very natural and, therefore, not considered a big part of identity-making. In other contexts, the informants feel the need to "come out" as vegans a lot more often (Empirical research 2020). As we have already established, food is an integral part of our social life since many of our gatherings include the consumption of food in some way. Therefore, informing about dietary restrictions is necessary for many situations, and when it comes to veganism, and it is often perceived as a clear statement of values rather than just information about what the person wants to eat. Many of our informants expressed feeling awkward about having to inform others about being vegan. They would instead bring their own food or, as some informants expressed, preferred surrounding themselves with other vegans or vegetarians. In these situations, the awkwardness of coming out as a vegan is not a factor since they have put themselves in social contexts where they are a part of the norm (Empirical research 2020). For the situations where they are not part of the norm, it is sometimes more complicated. All of our informants have dealt with prejudice from other people. Some of the more common preconceptions are that vegan food is boring, tasteless, that it contains no energy, or that it even tastes bad. Our informants have also met accusations of being militant, uptight, or rude, even though many of them have tried to be as humble and approachable as possible (Empirical research 2020).

Despite the prejudice, there seems to be a widespread opinion that vegan food is healthy since its base consists of plants. There are different traits attributed to people as a function of what kind of food they eat and whether that food is healthy or not. An essential factor in this is the social appeal. Studies relating food to social appeal have given the result that people who eat "good foods" are perceived as being more attractive, intelligent, monogamous, moral, and less

fun to be around. People who eat "bad foods," on the other hand, are perceived as less attractive and intelligent, but more humorous (Vartanian 2007:268). The social and cultural capital, therefore, has strong implications for what we choose to eat. The most powerful influence on which food we like is social influence. We tend to like food that people we admire like. Eating the same things as one's family and friends also make one accustomed to those tastes, which creates an acquired liking for certain foods (Rozin 1997:33).

As mentioned earlier in the section about gender stereotypes, there are specific characteristics commonly connected with women but also with vegans. They are stereotypically perceived as caring, and this requires a certain discipline, effort, and courage (Weitzenfeld & Joy 2014:21). The most common characteristics that our informants described themselves as were empathetic, disciplined, and critical of norms. These qualities are very individual, and in combination with a particular mixture of capital, this might be a reason why some people choose a specific diet and why some people do not. The characteristics might develop during time as a consequence of capital, or people might acquire specific capital because of already existing characteristics. For example, the informants who became vegetarian or vegan when they were very young often described themselves as very disciplined and stubborn. However, those who made the switch later in life more often described it as having developed more empathetic characteristics after receiving more information about plant-based diets (Empirical research 2020).

Humans are swayed by the need to be accepted for our food choices, and it is not uncommon for people to eat or drink something they find unpleasant or distasteful just to be part of the crowd (Almerico 2014:4). This means that it is challenging to do the opposite of what everyone else is doing, especially when it comes to one's family. However, many of our informants did not grow up in a family where veganism or even vegetarianism was the norm. They were instead brought up on typical Swedish food with meat as an essential part of the meal, and the majority of our informants became vegans through friends, social media, or documentaries (Empirical research 2020). Vegetarianism and veganism becoming a bigger trend in Sweden could have had an impact on who received information about environmental issues and unethical food production. This trend could result in people with other kinds of social and cultural capital, making dietary changes that were not available or relevant to them before.

4.2 Identity and consumption

Due to the fact that food is such a palpable part of everyday life for many people, making a dietary statement of eating plant-based food can be a bold choice. However, it can also strengthen feelings of individual and group identity. Cultural and social capital could, therefore, be gained through this type of membership. Consumption as a form of self-identification and communication is becoming more common and can provide a sense of choice and self, which gives a feeling of temporary freedom. (Mintz 1996:13). Individualism and consumerism together characterize a lot of modern society, according to Mintz. The utilization of choices in consumption to create an effect of changing form fits with the romantic conception of the self. The rejection of certain foodstuffs - such as animal products for example - enables one to march to the beat of a different drummer. This individuality can allow access to social groups where members eat or do not eat the same things. These urgings to "moral performance," leads to individuals learning how to consume with more discipline (Mintz 1996: 82-83). According to our informants, discipline, open-mindedness and perseverance are some of the most important characteristics to strive for when eating a plant-based diet, and succeeding often leads to feelings of content (Empirical research 2020).

In any class, one can distinguish three structures of the consumption distributed under three items: food, culture, and presentation. These structures take strictly different forms, much like the structure of their related capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Bourdieu 2013:31). Different combinations of the three capitals determine the social identity of the individual and the behavior in the domain of consumption practice, especially when it comes to food (Corvo 2019:71). Many of our informants spoke about the class aspect of being vegan. Firstly, economic capital can limit one's diet and food choices in an obvious way, making it difficult or impossible to purchase certain products. Our empirical data shows a great diversity regarding whether people felt that veganism is an expensive practice or not. When added together, the data points to the fact that it is affordable as long as one applies economic thinking. This can be done through buying fresh produce according to season and not spending too much on processed vegan foods since meat substitutes and other additives usually cost more (Empirical research 2020). Nevertheless, the same goes for anyone wishing to diversify their meat-based diet.

One's economic capital is not the only factor determining what one feels comfortable eating. Food choices are also influenced by the social context of whom one is dining with, where you are and what time of day it is. Certain foodstuffs or dishes might feel "out of reach" for you, implying that social and cultural capital might be more crucial for the capital aspect of veganism. One of our informants mentioned the fact that it is a privilege to be able to worry about one's diet, implying that it is more common among the middle and upper classes. "Det är privilegierat att kunna välja att vara ängslig över kost." / "It is a privilege to be able to choose to be anxious about your diet." (Empirical research 2020, interview 7). When asked about their perception of a stereotypical vegan, the majority of our informants pictured a white, young, and educated person from a middle-class background. This perception could indicate that veganism is not culturally attainable for everyone (Empirical research, 2020).

4.3 Identity and globalization

Globalization has led to changes in consumers' food choices (Corvo 2019:25). This is in large part due to the influence of media, something that our empirical research supports. People today have a reduced budget for food, where most people do not spend as much money on food compared to what they used to. Fewer people cook their food and go out to eat instead (Corvo 2019:29). However, many people are generally more aware of and interested in organic food, seasonality-based products, and km 0 recipes, something that consequently leads to more focus on plant-based foods. Food products that are defined by adjectives such as local, organic, fair, eco-friendly, and raw, continue to gain popularity, not least at restaurant menus. A short supply chain is also something that is starting to become more important to consumers (Corvo 2019:35). These patterns reveal an emerging trend of "going back to nature" in the food sphere, especially through a renewed interest in the rural world. In a society characterized by consumption, the search for a good quality of life is expressed mainly by a renewed attention to everything natural (Corvo 2019:123).

Studies have shown that food could be seen as a symbol for both personal and group identity, forming foundations in both individuality and membership of a larger group. What studies do not show to the same extent is how such a stable pillar of identity could also be so changeable and fluid (Wilk 2013:376). There is now, in most larger cities, a possibility to satisfy every gastronomic need. On the streets, one can find traditional, local, regional, international, ethnic, vegetarian, vegan, and organic food almost everywhere one goes (Corvo 2019:36). This

availability allows one to change and adapt one's relationship to food. According to Corvo, a person's capital influences their food habits, but people's choices are also influenced by advertising, friends, and diets recommended in magazines (2019:44). This is much because cultural belonging today is such a diverse specter compared to a hundred years ago. People are no longer confined to their geographical position but can subscribe to any ideology of their choice, thanks to globalization. This enables new forms of identity-making, but it could also cause feelings of confusion (Rydén 2017:193).

The anxiety regarding food always becomes stronger in times of social unrest. We are currently experiencing several changes in society, and the food is changing along with society. We have access to a vast range of exciting foodstuffs from different parts of the world, and this diversity is creating anxiety since it makes it challenging to navigate. Decisions on what to eat are rarely made with people in our physical proximity, and uncertainty in what to eat leads to uncertainty of who you are (Rydén 2017:194). As mentioned before, many informants are ambivalent about how vital their veganism is for their feeling of personal identity. However, many of them felt reassured in their group identity by their newfound access to the vegan community, where they could ask for help and support, a community that was mostly anchored on different social media platforms (Empirical research 2020). Social capital and networks on social media was therefore a helpful tool in both developing interest and knowledge in veganism but also to maintain solidarity in the group-identity. The informants expressed different experiences with the vegan community. Some people were positive towards the growing diversity and greater acceptance. In contrast, others explained it as more of a cult-like group where the inner circle consisted of people enforcing an expanded set of rules where "the others" were seen as ignorant or less intelligent (Empirical research 2020).

Srinivas writes that the warping of time and space through media, travel, and other modes of access, perforce leads to pluralism. This, in turn, leads to a consequent and necessary questioning of identity. Identity is no longer a "taken for granted" but becomes an all-absorbing project that is often enacted through consumption (Srinivas 2013:356). Many of our informants discussed social media's role in the development of veganism, claiming it to be an important factor for them to feel connected to a group identity. Today they can communicate their identity and share their values with others on the internet where information is easily accessible. The amount of information and influence has resulted in a more heterogeneous vegan community where it is more difficult to describe the stereotypical vegan. Today, people become vegans for

many different reasons, the definitions of veganism vary, and opinions about how to act as a vegan are widespread. None of our informants seemed to be completely similar to another, and the informants themselves explained the constant change in their behaviors. Some of them had become vegans for environmental reasons. However, they had received information about ethical aspects of veganism through social media and now claimed that to be their primary motivator (Empirical research 2020).

4.4 Conclusion

Veganism is a specific way to communicate one's identity. It is a statement that often concerns not only food but other forms of consumption as well. For many non-vegans, the term has a negative connotation, and many vegans have to face prejudice from people who do not know or simply do not care about their choices. This negativity makes it difficult for many vegans to communicate their identity, as they do not want to make a radical or rude impression. Personal characteristics of tenacity, open-mindedness, respect, and perseverance have helped at least our informants, to maintain their moral grounds. The extent to which the statement of veganism affects one's feeling of identity differs in what one reads into the notion of identity, and what the main driving force behind one's veganism is. Someone who is motivated by ethical values might be more active in the vegan community and other forms of activism since they feel strongly for the cause and want others to feel the same.

On the contrary, people who are driven by care for the environment might be satisfied knowing that other people eat plant-based foods one or two times a week, since every little change matters. Consumption, although in many ways limited by one's social, cultural, and economic capital, is an effective way to communicate who one is - both for oneself and for other people. It allows one access to specific communities where people consume or refrain from the same things. Vegan communities are perceived as safe havens for many vegans, where they are allowed to extend their social capital and enforce their feelings of identity together with like-minded people. Trends of globalization in food and social media have made it easier for many people to eat plant-based foods, as the amount of vegan products has increased. It is also more socially acceptable to ask for vegan alternatives at restaurants or while eating with friends. To summarize, plant-based identities are not surprisingly an extremely individual compound of different kinds of capital and influences made possible by globalization. However, the current

food trends point to the possibility that switching to a vegan diet will only become more economically, socially, and culturally attainable for everyone in the future.

5. Summary and conclusions

Even though we have now spent much time researching veganism, we have not changed our diets. The literature and our informants have given us a lot of information, and we have been convinced of the positive aspects. Still, taking the step actually to become vegan has not crossed our minds. Societal structures are handling our cognitive dissonance, making it feel okay to ignore the information we have received. This fact could lay the basis for our argument that there are hierarchical and discriminating structures in society that deeply affects how we view plant-based diets and whom they are meant for. The two structures that we have chosen to focus on in this essay are the anthropocentric belief system and the patriarchy, which dictates perspectives of naturalness, ethical values, and feelings of identity. The structures are invisible, and few people realize to question them, but one group that does is the vegan community. They are a diverse set of people who refuse to accept the conditions on which we have built our current society with regards to how we treat the planet and the species that inhabit it. The current food system is far from sustainable. However, to make a sustainable change, there is a need for an ideological solution since a hierarchical system undoubtedly will result in some form of oppression.

Veganism has already developed as a trend in Sweden and globally. With climate change and people understanding the need for a change as a more urgent matter, people have gradually started to go against the anthropocentric approach towards more sustainable options. Having said that, ecocentrism as a future norm still feels far fetched given the fact that, as opposed to people and their identities, structures are not as quick to adapt. Perhaps this cannot be done on the macro level, but it seems that veganism on the micro-level might be the way to go. Despite the structural pressure, the practice is characterized by a great deal of freedom and individuality, many thanks to patterns of globalized consumption and communication that are spreading. Hopefully, the micro-level veganism will continue to inspire the macro-level to challenge and change current norms. In this way, the notion of identity, on both individual and group levels, can lead the charge in changing the system for the better.

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Appendix

Demographics for the interviews:

- 12 women, 5 men, 1 non-binary.
- Ages from 19 y/o till 57 y/o.
- 1 double interview, 16 individual ones.
- 14 “strict” vegans, 4 who eat mostly plant based. Varying attitudes to veganism in other aspects of life, for example buying animal materials second hand or feeding domestic animals with meat products.
- Length of interviews ranging from 25 min-70 min.
- Both students and workers.
- People residing in Skåne (and 2 in Stockholm).
- All interviews took place during the spring of 2020, between 5/3-17/4.
- Interviews conducted via messenger video, skype, regular phone call, written questionnaire and face to face.

Topics discussed

Introduction: Hello! We’re doing this project as part of our bachelor’s thesis on food and identity. We wish to gain a better understanding for how people with a plant based diet communicates their identity to themselves and others through food. Therefore, we are talking to you: the experts. We have prepared a few topics of discussion, but feel free to talk about anything that matters to you, and let us know if you wish to avoid any sensitive subjects. Is it okay if we record and take notes during this conversation? We will keep the material to ourselves and you will be anonymized in the final product. If you have any questions, let us know.

1. How would you describe your current diet?
2. How come you have chosen your current diet? Have the following aspects influenced your choice, if so, in what way?
 - Gender.
 - Class.
 - Religion.
 - Sustainability.

- Health.
- 3. How do you think other people perceive your food choices?
- 4. In what ways does your food choices impact your identity making?
- 5. Which of your personal characteristics makes you suitable for a plant based diet?
- 6. How do you view the relationship between food and naturalness, if you see any?
- 7. Do you have a vision of a stereotypical vegan? What is that person like?
- 8. How do you think veganism will develop in the future?

Summaries of interviews

Note: All of the interviews as well as the topics of discussion have been translated from Swedish to English by the researchers. In the case of direct quotes used in the thesis, we have included both the Swedish original quote and our English translation.

1. Woman, 23 y/o, 2020-03-05

Became vegan through friends who were vegan, received information about veganism. She believes being vegan says a lot about her identity and she will never go back. She is empathetic, sympathetic and reflective about her life choices and how they affect others. Veganism is strongly connected to animal rights but implies other things as well, such as feminism, human rights, environmental issues and political engagement. This can also result in being perceived as a person who is very angry and not empathetic to people who don't think like them. She does not relate to this kind of person but admits to sometimes being provoked when people expects rights of things that don't belong to them.

The trend of being vegetarian and vegan has made it easier for more people to make the transition. There is a connection between feminism and veganism, both is related to rights, including for those who cannot fight for their own rights, such as animals. Food has always been important for her, it is almost always a big part in her social engagements. You communicate, socialize with food. She feels like there has been a shift since she became vegan. She is proud of it but is at the same time almost a bit ashamed to say it sometimes because she knows what impressions it can give. She feels like it would have been easier if she would have a more historically or religious connection to her diet. Finally, being able to become vegan is a privilege in many ways. This is a whole lifestyle which in many cases means a lot of expensive habits that is not available to everyone, making it a question of class.

2. Woman, 27 y/o, 2020-04-02

Changed to a pescetarian diet when she was very young, didn't want to eat meat. Later changed to a vegan diet when she realized that the vegetarian diet still involves a lot of the injustices that she was against. Her choice to become vegan came from inside, she has a strong discipline when she knows what she wants and does not believe she has a right to exploit others. She became vegan for the ethical reasons and sees the connection between feminism and veganism clearly. It is the female animal bodies that are exploited to a greater extent which might be a reason why it resonated more with women. She wants to live as she learns, get rid of the cognitive dissonance and not be the reason for any kind of suffering. She believes that it is a question of generation as well. Her grandmother still does not believe that she ever eats enough because she is not following the traditional "tallriksmodellerna". However, she thinks that she eats more now than she did before because she is more creative now. The values are most important for her, she didn't even like vegetables when she became vegetarian.

The vegan diet is a part of the vegan identity but it is not all of it, sometimes it is made bigger than it actually is. It is a big part of your identity-making but it seems like it is of highest importance when you are in the process of becoming vegan. This is the same as with other kinds of labels. The more normal it becomes for you and for your environment, the less important it seems. It has often felt like a taboo, she does not want people to feel uncomfortable and this is most obvious when spending time in new or different kinds of context. Then you have to "come out" as vegan. Veganism is like a belief system, she would not change her way of life even if it meant that it was bad for her health. She has redefined her identity in many ways. Veganism can be related to other kinds of norm-breaking as well, such as being a woman, homosexual etc. It is easier to break one norm when you have already broken another.

3. Non-binary, 27 y/o, 2020-04-02

Started for the health, both physical and mental. Environmental is also a reason but this was secondary for them. Veganism has grown a lot and they want to surround themselves with like-minded people. They are now disgusted by meat. What you eat says something fundamental about your values, they want to surround themselves with people with similar values. Context is important for how others perceive them. In Sweden, veganism is quite normalized. However, in Italy where their family lives, there is a big difference. They don't want to kill anything and

don't understand how you can justify that for yourself. When the vegan mindset becomes a habit, you don't think about it anymore.

4. Woman, 44 y/o, 2020-04-06

Became vegan for ethical reasons. Realized that you cannot separate the meat and dairy industry. She doesn't want to exploit animals when there are other options not to do so. In her social environment, there are a few people who eat some vegetarian food but also meat. The decision therefore came from herself and she describes herself as empathetic, driven and not egoistic. The world of veganism is not more limiting in her experience, rather the other way around. She has explored more since she became vegan. She does not relate to the stereotypical vegan; many people are surprised when she tells them. She does not see a connection between feminism and veganism, even though she believes that others do.

5. Woman, 32 y/o, 2020-04-06

She grew up as a vegetarian because her mother is vegetarian. She doesn't know if gender has had an impact on her choice to continue and become vegan as well, but during her school years, all vegetarians she knew were female. She grew up on the countryside, close to animals and nature and through this gained respect for the ethical and environmental reasons for veganism. She has been questioned a lot and this has resulted in her searching for more information and becoming even more convinced. It has always been difficult for her to handle the cognitive dissonance in other ways than what she does now. It is important for her to eat food that makes her feel good.

How others perceive her has very much to do with context. Older generations tend to be more skeptical while amongst people her own age, veganism is much more normalized. However, she doesn't identify herself as vegan even though she is following a vegan diet. A reason for this could be that she has a hard time relating to vegans who tries to spread their word through posting shocking pictures etc., she doesn't believe that is effective. People don't want to feel attacked, it is better to be encouraging. She feels like she has a responsibility and has through this created her own framework for how she wants to behave as a individual and member of the society.

6. Man, 30 y/o, 2020-04-06

Became vegan for ethical reasons, he realized his own hypocrisy in fighting for animal rights while eating ham. He was influenced by vegans on social media, and became somewhat of a pioneer for vegans in his own social circles. It was difficult for him to “come out” as a vegan, since he knew that he would have to justify it for everyone, as he had questioned vegans himself before the shift. Today, he feels that many people try to justify their meat diets to him, possibly because of their cognitive dissonance. He doesn’t look down on people who eat meat, but he thinks that more people need to question their own moral standpoints if they claim to love animals but still eat animalistic products. He hasn’t reflected over the gendered division in veganism. Veganism is a big part of his life since it has made him more committed to politics, activism and issues of consumerism. “När man tror på något så brukar man vilja kämpa för det/When you believe in something you tend to want to fight for it”. Discipline, open mindedness and adaptiveness to change are important characteristics for vegans. He thinks that veganism will only increase around the world, partly due to the internet and easily accessible information.

7. Woman, 26 y/o, 2020-04-08

She used to be a vegan for five years, but recently quit due to reasons relating to her health and economy. Today she eats about 90% plant based foods. She grew up in a middle class setting in a small village on the countryside with a meat based diet. She never liked the taste of meat, and when she learned more about meat production she became vegan. At first, she was skeptical since she perceived vegans as extreme based on personal experience with them from her workplace, but eventually she gained a different understanding from the media and popular culture. She has always liked opposites and avoided gray areas - she has been rebellious to many things in her surroundings and has often used that passion as a driving force. Veganism attracted her because it seemed radical. She appreciated people who make well informed decisions and live their lives accordingly. Her family reacted strongly to her vegan standpoint since she was the first in her family to make that kind of statement, and they are very concerned with not standing out or breaking any norms.

After being a part of different vegan communities on social media for a long time, she perceives the most dedicated groups of vegans as similar to cults. Today she has a more nuanced attitude towards food which she gained from her education and meeting people with other points of view. She doesn’t feel the need to make any statements, veganism is no longer as important to her identity as it was when she was more politically involved. However, it was ethically

challenging to go back to eating some animalistic products. She does see a clear connection between veganism and feminism, but she foremost regards it as connected to class. Social capital gives you different kinds of opportunities, but veganism can become your ticket to a different kind of social context. Many vegans demonize the working class without considering that it's an extremely privileged practice to eat plant based and that not everyone has that option. This creates a kind of class contempt for people who are uninformed and consequently choose the "wrong" things to eat, but it's argumentation without analysis. "Det är privilegierat att kunna välja att vara ängslig över kost."/ "It is a privilege to choose to be anxious about your diet." She feels that the majority of vegans are white, skinny, middle class females like herself. Although the climate is changing, and the community is more accepting today than it was before. Additionally, other people are more accepting of vegans than they used to be.

8. Man, 31 y/o, 2020-04-14

He follows a whole food plant-based diet, meaning that he eats a vegan diet with only natural raw products and no sugar etc. He became vegan for health reasons and was inspired by research from doctors and health experts who were recommending this diet. His surroundings are mostly positive towards his diet, although some does not know a lot about veganism and can have prejudices. Therefore, he believes that his diet requires some discipline. Besides health reasons, there are also environmental, ethical and religious reasons for being vegan. It is not natural to eat the way that people eat today. Food plays a very big role in how we position ourselves socially. He values his health, used to going his own way, principled and calm. There are many different kinds of vegans but the animal rights activists are the loudest, he does not identify a lot with other types of vegans. There is a perception that you are losing out if you eat a vegan diet and that you have to be very well read to manage it. With social media, this has become a lot easier, information is everywhere. Your diet plays a big part in your identity and culture and everyone wants their own diet to be the best one. This makes it hard to stay objective, people believe what they want to believe and you would rather believe in the thing your habits are already confirming.

9. Woman, 21 y/o, 2020-04-14

Became vegan for environmental reason, during the time when there was a big trend in becoming vegetarian/vegan and when many people acknowledged the environmental issues. For her, it felt like something she could easily contribute with, easier for her than to stop flying, for example. She believes that there are some stereotypically female characteristics connected

to veganism, like caring for the environment and for animals. The male characteristics connected to veganism is rather caring for your own health and body. It is easier to eat vegan food if you're rich but still she is managing on a student budget, so it probably depends. Both veganism and feminism has their basis in equality, just as anti-racism and hbtq rights as well. When accepting one of these values, it is easier to accept another. Feminism (and veganism) is not perceived as masculine. Veganism is very normalized in a student city like Lund, comments concerning lack of nutrition or that it isn't saturating usually comes from older generations.

She believes she fits in well in the vegan identity, being feminist, activist, outspoken etc. She embraced many of these qualities after becoming vegan. Today, there is probably a wider specter in who becomes vegan, therefore it might not need to be such a big part of your identity. Since she considers herself as driven by care for the environment, she considers initiatives such as "meat free Mondays" to be positive. She does not believe she will always be vegan, she has been craving meat for two years but does not want to eat something that has been alive due to ethical reasons. She is also incredibly stubborn, and want to continue for the animals and the environment.

10. Man, 24 y/o, 2020-04-14

Became vegan primarily due to ethical reasons, and can't fathom why not everybody decides to make the switch. He feels that non-vegans constantly apologize for their diets in front of him, but they rarely have any arguments in favor of their choices. He has always liked animals and became vegan when he couldn't deal with the cognitive dissonance anymore. While growing up he ate a lot of meat and no one in his family were vegan before him, but they have reacted positively to his switch. They understand his point of view but they are having a hard time changing their own habits, a behavior he sees as immoral and that they're not trying hard enough. The class aspect of veganism is a global issue - we produce enough food to feed all of humanity, but not everyone has access to the same foodstuffs, which is unfair. In the west however, it is easy to be vegan, you rarely have to sacrifice anything since there are many options and substitutes.

He thinks that everyone should be vegan on ethical grounds. It comes down to the meat paradox - how can you continue to eat meat if you care for animals? It's not globally sustainable for everyone to continue to eat meat, and there is need for a change, but few people reflect on the cognitive dissonance. Humans are meant to eat vegetables and not meat, it's evident in the

shape of our jaw and the workings of our intestines. Humans are not omnivores by nature. He himself went from regular diet to veganism, so he knows that it's possible. Once he had found out which supplements to take it wasn't hard to make the switch. He realises that veganism is a minority ideology and far from the norm, but it is truly an identity marker and a lifestyle, it's about more than just food. There is also room for a larger discussion on ethical values - where do we draw the line of which animals are alright to kill? He thinks that veganism will become more popular, but that we will never stop eating meat completely, the meat-eating structures of society are too well cemented.

11. Woman, 57 y/o, 2020-04-15

She became vegan because of the cognitive dissonance she was experiencing when identifying herself as an animal-lover and at the same time ate meat. She started off as a vegetarian but later made the switch to veganism. She received information of veganism through a friend who was vegan. She believes that the belief that veganism is a question of class is bullshit because she feels that it is easy to make cheap vegan food. She rather believes that there is a lack in information in a society where meat still is the norm. Through meat you are also able to show power. Gender on the other hand might have an impact but more so for men than for women. Men have to go against the male norm and can therefore be met with more suspicion. As a woman, she believes that she might have it easier in that aspect. In certain contexts, the suspiciousness against vegans are bigger, for example in more conservative contexts. To go against the norm, you can't be afraid to be uncomfortable and be seen as different at times. You have to rephrase your identity.

Since she changed her diet she become more aware of what she eats, gained new friends through social media and this has broadened her horizon. Most of the people she has been in contact with has been younger than her and this has given her new insights. She is now more environmentally aware and healthy. She believes that all processed food is unnatural, both vegan and non-vegan. Veganism can therefore be seen as unnatural since you have to take supplements such as b12. She hopes that we in the future stop normalizing the consumption of meat.

12. Man, 19 y/o, 2020-04-15

He became vegan after seeing the documentary "What the health". He previously new about the ethical aspects but didn't think it was good for your health. When realizing that it was, he

changed his diet. He still sometimes gets comments in school about lack of vitamins, probably because veganism is still quite rare there. He is often seen as “the guy who is vegan” and sometimes it feels like it is made bigger than it is, or at least than what it feels for him now. It is very connected to values, becomes a part of him. There are more women who are vegans, maybe because they have an easier time seeing the ethical connection. It is manly to eat meat and therefore more difficult to make the transition to a plant-based diet. There is also a connection between feminism and veganism since they are both movements with a natural connection to justice. There has been a change recently with more vegan products, which might have to do with the fact that more and more people are invested in environmental issues. For him, the ethical aspects are most important, however health and environment is a great bonus. What you eat depends a lot on culture, tradition and context.

13. Woman, 26 y/o, 2020-04-15

She became vegan when she started a new programme in school and a lot of people around were suddenly vegan. It started for environmental reasons but then changed to be for strong ethical reasons. At first, she talked about veganism all the time but then she started to feel ashamed for it. There is a negative stereotype of vegans and she felt annoying and demanding. Therefore, it feels better to surround herself with other vegans and today a lot of her friends are either vegan or vegetarian. There are fewer male vegans and she believes this is partly due to the patriarchy and women having an easier time relating to the oppression. She also feels like there is a difference in how male and female vegans are perceived. She feels like her as a woman is more questioned and is expected to a lot more while men are more accepted and respected in their decision. The reasons for her being vegan is constantly changing, now it is mostly because she feels disgusted by the idea of eating meat or dairy.

It is a question of class, but not because it is not technically available for all. When veganism becomes a trend, it is capitalized and is made into an identity, which can be dangerous. People can get excluded but at the same time it can be nice to be a part of a group. However, if the rules are too strong, it can be limiting. Identity-making happens in relation to others but it is not something she thinks about every day because everyone knows she is vegan. In other situations, she has to assert herself. She feels like a cliché sometimes. It is strange to be vegan but not feminist, however they are not the same thing and should be separated. Naturalness is a strange concept since very few things in our society are natural. Eating meat and dairy is

harmful and therefore we shouldn't do it, that should be enough. She doesn't want to be a hypocrite but when it comes to veganism many people want to question you.

14. Woman, 24 y/o, 2020-04-16

She became vegan for ethical reasons after seeing a documentary. Gender has an subconscious impact for her. Women are more exposed to diets and the patriarchy tells women to be more caring and nurturing. Men are in charge of the barbequing. Women might be shown more frequently in the question of veganism as well. Feminism and veganism are both about equality, almost strange to be vegan but not feminist. It is also a question of class, a privilege, sometimes more expensive with vegan products. Depending on context she feels like she is perceived differently, sometimes radical, sometimes not. It is something difficult to bring up that she is vegan and is therefore easier to surround yourself with like-minded people but it has not been a active choice. Her diet has a big impact on her identity, it is reflected in many of the choices she makes. It shapes her but she is not entirely sure how, maybe because it is sometimes the first thing that people find out about her.

She doesn't want to provoke people, she is more of a silent activist. Veganism has a bad reputation, perceived as privileged, radical and selfish. She loves animals but for her the transformation firstly intellectual and then emotional. We have gotten used to our "right" to eat meat and she believes that people have a wrong idea about how much meat we have eaten historically. Food is culture, it is deeply rooted in us and very connected to nostalgia. The cognitive dissonance can suddenly come to her but then also disappear at times.

15. Woman, 33 y/o, 2020-04-16

She became vegan for ethical and later for environmental reasons. She became vegetarian when she was 11 years old and grew up in Norrland, so it was very different. She is a animal lover and grew up on the countryside where they slaughtered their pigs, which was very traumatic for her. She is not very intrusive but answers happily when people ask her questions about veganism. It was harder to be vegan before when it wasn't as common, now most people are positive. She is able to justify her food choices and is making a change in society, however she hasn't really felt like she identifies with a certain group. She believes it is easier for women to become vegan, it is manly to hunt and barbeque etc. This is changing though. Feminism, veganism and racism are all together in some sense since they share basic principle, however, they are not the same thing. Veganism has often been connected to alternative groups, taking a

stand against the system, such as hippies. She doesn't feel like she has sacrificed anything. Veganism is one of her strongest identity markers. She is part of a minority and therefore it is important to feel solidarity. She goes her own way, doesn't care about what people think and is stubborn. She feels very strongly that she is right in her decision. The vegan community doesn't represent a homogenous group in the same way that it used to, today there is greater variety in who becomes vegan.

16. Man, 26 y/o, 2020-04-16

Became vegan through information from a friend and through YouTube. He has now started to go to a more whole food plant-based diet. At first, his choice in diet was perceived as a bit strange by people in his surroundings but eventually it was normalized. It was difficult for him to make the change but being susceptible to information and support from other vegans made it easier since he was able to explain himself more. The macho culture has an impact, men who barbecue etc. It is seen as feminine to be vegan, women might be closer to feelings of empathy. Feminism and veganism should be pretty closely connected because they are pretty similar and female animals are more exploited. For him, it started with a question of what he could do for the environment, now the ethical aspects are important as well. Eating meat is not something that we have to do so why do it. The only sacrifice is that there are some things that he cannot eat but he has gained a lot more things from it than what he lost.

Before we subsidized meat, it was a luxury product. Root vegetables and legumes are still cheap, he thinks that it's not really an economic aspect to who can eat meat. If you are never questioned of your diet it is hard to make a change, but information is available everywhere today, so that's not an excuse to keep on in an unsustainable manner. Veganism is more normalized today, but there has been an increase in environmental vegans and health vegans. He thinks that ethics should be at the center, otherwise you cannot get rid of the anthropocentric values. Veganism is a big part of your identity, since it affects many parts of life. "Naturlighet och nödvändigt är inte samma sak"/"Naturalness and necessity is not the same thing". We don't need to eat meat simply because it appears natural. Before, the stereotypical vegan was very characteristic, but today it's harder to tell. He thinks and hopes that veganism will become more common, it wouldn't be that big of a change.

17. Woman, 45 y/o, 2020-04-16

She became vegan because she was inspired by her sister and wanted to try the food. Eventually, the environmental aspects of it became her prime motivator. She doesn't want to bother anyone by proclaiming that she's vegan, but she has noticed a larger acceptance of it lately, it has become mainstream which is nice. This has also changed the previous stereotypical view of vegans as hippies. She thinks that there are more female vegans, but it could appear that way because they feel more comfortable talking about their veganism. She doesn't see any connection between feminism and veganism, and she doesn't appreciate radical vegans since they give other vegans a bad reputation. Veganism is a part of her identity, but sometimes it's hard for her to combine her veganism with her sustainability, she might buy leather items second hand, for example. She likes to cook from scratch, and doesn't understand wanting to let nutrition pass through an animal when you can eat it directly. She hopes that veganism will become the norm, not least because it's practical, for example in schools. If meat becomes a luxury item, not everyone has to become vegans.

18. Woman, 28 y/o, 2020-04-17

She has always been interested in the environment and sustainability, and the more she learnt about meat production, the worse it felt. She eventually couldn't handle the dissonance and became vegan after starting to study environmental science where she became influenced by her studies and people in her program. She doesn't have many vegans around her, but many vegetarians. She thinks that there is a general lack of knowledge about what it means to be vegan, and few people are willing to question their own choices. She thinks that public figures and authorities in Sweden has painted a negative picture of veganism as insufficient or unhealthy, although this picture is changing as it's becoming more mainstream. It's good that different motivations for veganism such as care for the environment or health exist, because they diversify the perception of who is allowed to become vegan. The stereotypical vegan is young, educated, white and left wing, from a middle-class background.

The gender aspect is a big part of veganism. What you choose to eat becomes very clear in student circles, for example at "sittningar" and other social get togethers. She feels that men have been more skeptical of her food choices in that type of situation, and the critical men are the loudest. Those who condemn veganism as lame or silly makes it difficult for guys who want to become vegan. There is a deeply rooted animosity towards veganism among "macho" guys. Given that men and women are equally empathic, women would still have more social freedom to show that part of themselves. Perhaps women aren't questioned about their

veganism the same way men are. She thinks that the representation between the sexes is uneven for vegans (more women) but even for vegetarians. Male vegan influencers have been more prominent lately, which is very helpful for the positive representation of male vegans. She doesn't see an ideological connection between feminism and veganism. They are similar since women and animals are both exposed groups, and many vegans and feminists and vice versa, but they should not be equalized.

She's tired of suspicious, judgmental or accusatory questions, like when people question the effects of soy production for biological diversity. She doesn't like when people around her eat meat, but she won't force anyone, rather inspire. However, she feels that they need to know what it takes to produce the meat and thereafter make well informed decisions about their diets. It was hard to announce her veganism in the beginning, but it has become more mainstream, and people rarely react negatively about it. She believes that many people stop eating meat to be sustainable, but it normalizes when people realize that it's both easy and tasty to eat plant based. For her ethics and environmentalism are equally important, and being vegan has made her more open minded to other perspectives. Other characteristics that she values in herself are curiosity, discipline and ambition. Food is a big part of her life and her identity, but not because of the food itself but because that choice reflects her core values.

There is a low tolerance within the vegan community. If you say that you're a vegan, you can never do anything wrong. Probably because you preach morality to others and therefore never can waive your own moral grounds. Vegans like to find faults with each other's behaviors. She has a completely plant based diet, but she's not a full out vegan in every aspect of her life. Since sustainability is her motivator and she would consider buying second hand leather. There is definitely a class aspect to veganism, it's mainly about knowledge and how it's spreading. The middle class has the money, knowledge and tradition for the vegan lifestyle, while the lower class might lack the funds and the higher class might lack the tradition. However, there is a gradual change taking place in all classes. Most people have a choice and the possibility to take responsibility for their actions. The argument of naturalness is invalid in this aspect - why does it matter if we've been hunting for thousands of years when we have the ability to choose today? In the future, the number of non-spoken vegans will increase.