

Gendered fare?



A qualitative investigation of alternative food and masculinities

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Abstract

Food and nutrition represents a new frontier of the sociological analyses of gender regimes and structures. This article draws from a qualitative study into the social, ethical and spiritual dimensions of vegetarianism. It explores the impact of hegemonic masculinity upon the adoption of meatless diets, in various social contexts where vegetarianism is characterized as effeminate, and lacking the essential ingredients for being a 'real' man. The data suggests that the belief that meat provides strength and vigour to men and the associated enforcement of meat-eating as a social norm is, according to a majority of the informants in the study, a key reason why vegetarianism is not an appealing choice for men. New knowledge about the role of gender norms in human food habits and practices will inform broader theories of gendered eating, and would also be highly useful in multidisciplinary efforts to improve public health.

Keywords: masculinities, meat, sociology of food and eating, vegetarianism

Western societies have become increasingly focused on a variety of food and eating practices, and the relationship of these practices to human perceptions of health, consumption, the body and identity (Lupton, 1996). The relationship between men, meat and masculinity is a growth area in studies of food and eating, particularly regarding how food becomes part of the way men 'do gender' (Julier and Lindenfield, 2005: 8; Sobal, 2005: 137). However, the experience of vegetarian men who reject the social and cultural norm of eating animals is harder to discern. This article explores the vegetarian man's interpretation and experience of hegemonic masculine

Journal of Sociology © 2010 The Australian Sociological Association, Volume 47(3): 261–278
DOI:10.1177/1440783310386828 www.sagepublications.com

norm enforcement, and how men who do not eat meat subvert, resist and accept multiple models of masculinity. Understanding a minority group's perspective on the role of food and cultural norms in shaping the development and expression of masculinities will strengthen and broaden established plans to improve men's understanding of, and access to, healthy food and lifestyle behaviours. It will also furnish public health stakeholders with new knowledge about the locus and character of food-related social constraints.

The following article will briefly review sociological literature, with an emphasis on structuralist and eco-feminist theoretical arguments regarding why men eat meat more often than do women. This includes an examination of the historical links between gender, caring and feeding. The second part of the article will then frame these theoretical positions within an analysis of qualitative interview data from vegetarian and vegan men who discussed notions of gendered food and eating in an Australian study of vegetarianism, completed in December 2007. The findings also examine the significance of new meat alternatives in vegetarian men's 'doing' of masculinity, and consider the social contexts in which these foods are prepared and enjoyed. The Western barbecue is seen as one significant place where manliness is socially calibrated by the consumption of meat, as it has been popularly scripted as the ritualistic birthplace of 'hunter' male bonding. Nonetheless, it is still frequented by vegetarians who have their own ideas about what 'real men' should eat.

Sociological approaches to meat, vegetables and gender

Sociological studies of food and gender are a fairly recent occurrence, but there are some notable exceptions. In a structuralist analysis of human food preferences, Twigg (1979, 1986) points to the strongly perceived elements of sexuality and virility associated with red meat. While not applicable to all cultures, this association implies a relationship between meat-eating and certain attitudes and practices that are ascribed to dominant forms of masculinity in the West:

Men in particular are thought in some sense to need meat, especially red meat, and a series of masculine qualities are encapsulated in the idea of red bloodness. It is part of the traditional image of John Bull, the beer quaffing, beef eating, fine figure of a man, and negative perceptions of vegetarianism within the dominant culture echo these ideas. (Twigg, 1986: 24)

Men who abstain from meat are, according to Twigg, rejecting dominant modes of masculine behaviour. They are abstaining from what is widely considered to be part of the process of becoming a 'real' man: 'Vegetarian men are thought to lack the "ruddy" good health or "red-blooded virile" approach of the meat eater' (1986: 24).

In an analogous theoretical blend of food and gender, Bourdieu (1984) argued that the British association between beef and machismo is also persistent in French culture. Men are said to favour red meats over all other animal products and vegetables because of their perceived masculine qualities and textures. Meat is often touted as filling and thus requires a healthy, manly appetite. It is not awkward and fiddly to eat, like fish or salads. Hence, Bourdieu explains that French people commonly perceive that meat is a superior food: '[Meat] the nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigour, blood, and health, is the dish for men' (1984: 192).

Twigg and Bourdieu represent a sociological minority who have opened the theoretical doorway to modern social analyses of foodways, incorporating gender political dimensions. They also highlight social class aspects of food choices that become significant in the public health context of administering nutrition advice to men who need to reduce their consumption of meat and animal products. These issues will be examined later in the article. In the interim, it is important to note that structuralist and eco-feminist sociological approaches to the study of food in modernity have argued that meat is laden with hegemonic masculine values which reflect the subordinate position of women and animals in a social and food hierarchy (Adams, 1990; Twigg, 1979, 1986). Choosing to consume a plant-based diet is thus transgressing dominant cultural and gastronomic norms of Western societies and all of the meat-eating values invested in these norms.

Adams (1990) extends the meat/patriarchy relationship further with an eco-feminist perspective. She claims that choosing alternatives such as vegetarianism and veganism transgresses a dominant gendered division of food that espouses a masculine/feminine food dichotomy. This division is said to be the social norm in mainstream Western foodways, and it includes a variety of meat-eating discourses that sustain the norm. For example, popular ideas that men must have meat to be 'strong' continue to be pervasive, despite national health warnings and large-scale studies about the increased risk of mortality from coronary heart disease (CHD) or other diseases related to the regular consumption of meat and animal products (Campbell and Campbell II, 2006: 117; Shepherd, 2009: 3; Sinha et al., 2009: 562). Adams (1990: 34) suggests that men who choose to abstain from the masculine privilege of eating meat will always be subject to ridicule and scepticism regarding their sexual orientation. Meat is a resource and symbol of hegemonic masculinity; abstaining from it is thus an unambiguous expression of non-traditional values, especially for men: 'Men who become vegetarians challenge an essential part of the masculine role. They are opting for women's food. How dare they?' (Adams, 1990: 138).

Vegetarian and vegan men are an under-researched minority in contemporary social science literature. The scholarly work which has been done argues that meat and animal products are widely considered and popularly touted to be an essential ingredient for masculine strength or an essential

component of an ideal type of masculine identity (Gough and Conner, 2006: 391; Jensen and Holm, 1999; Stibbe, 2004: 39). Food preferences, habits and practices are thus shaped by more than socio-economic factors and cultural capital. In her analysis of the socio-cultural and personal meanings of food, Deborah Lupton has argued: 'There is clearly a gendered division of food in contemporary western societies, incorporating a number of assumptions concerning types of food men prefer and those women prefer' (1996: 104).

Vegetarians and vegans would undoubtedly be familiar with this socially constructed division. While few scholars have made a direct reference to vegetarians, masculinity and meat, the following definition of the concept of masculinity by Connell and Messerschmidt suggests that it is readily applicable to food-related human behaviour in various social contexts:

Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 836)

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was developed by sociologists over two decades ago and it has profoundly influenced contemporary analyses of gender and sexuality (Kessler et al., 1982). This concept has been increasingly used in studies of food and nutrition because, like meat-eating, hegemonic masculinity is normative, and it embodies the most honoured way of 'being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). Gender-relevant sociological studies and conceptual developments are useful in clarifying a connection between human nutritional careers and established standards of behaviour and beliefs pertaining to what men, in particular, should and should not eat. The findings to be reported are concerned with a food-related set of masculine configurations that assist in interpreting food and gender-related behaviours and beliefs among men and women informants from an Australian study of alternative food habits and practices. This study deployed a qualitative research design that also allowed these informants to openly discuss and engage with a variety of issues such as animal rights, environmental ethics, health beliefs and spirituality.

Methods

The data excerpts for this article were collected as part of a larger study of the social, ethical and spiritual dimensions of vegetarian nutritional careers. The term, 'nutritional career' was originally devised by the British sociologists Beardsworth and Keil (1991, 1997) to illuminate the health-related beliefs and dietary practices of vegetarians and vegans. In the context of this Australian study, the concept refers to both past and present food habits, practices and dietary paths followed. The term 'nutritional

career' implies that beliefs about health are significant, and are thus connected to the social, ethical and spiritual dimensions of Australian vegetarianism. The research design deployed a combination of a purposive and snowball sampling regime in an effort to collect data from men and women across age groups, who identified as 'vegetarian' or 'vegan'. The sample also included forms of vegetarianism, both secular in nature and practised as part of religious disciplines, the latter of which are often overlooked in studies of food and nutrition. Reflecting the norm in the Australian vegetarian and vegan population, most of the informants in this study converted to vegetarianism after at least 15 years of eating a wide variety of meat and animal products.

A total of 44 persons participated in an audio tape recorded interview and responded to a series of open-ended questions constructed to prompt conversation related to their food habits and practices, and social experiences. Interviews ranged in length from one hour to two and a half hours, with most averaging two hours. Following the central tenets of the grounded theory process meant that as the data collection advanced, unexpected issues raised by informants could be taken up with the next informant. The interview guideline thus expanded throughout the data collection period, resulting in a variety of issues being canvassed, and providing informants with greater scope to emphasize the dimensions of their vegetarianism beyond those sought in the initial interview guideline. To maximize the reliability of findings, all interviews were transcribed and thematic categories were produced based on an initial reading of transcripts. In keeping with established conventions for interpretive research, the resulting inferences and written analyses were thus supported and grounded in verbatim extracts from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Ryan and Russell Bernard, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The age group to which each informant belongs and their marital status at the time of the interview (e.g., married/single/partnered) will be shown at the end of each informant quote.

The grounded theory approach followed a constructivist incarnation of the original Glaser and Strauss (1967) model (Charmaz, 2006: 133). The study was contextualized by first drawing from historical materials to identify political, economic and cultural turning points in the emergence of plant-based food and eating practices in Australia and other countries. Theories and emergent themes are entirely derived from the interview data, but they nonetheless speak to the earlier constructed research questions that were framed by an extensive literature review of clinical and social science studies of vegetarianism. Another important aspect of the constructivist methodological approach is the navigation of the power relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. The choice of questions on the original interview guideline was central in addressing this issue. Power relations were deemed critical in terms of the marginal dietary status of informants and the defensive posture this might provoke when informants were asked to discuss their vegetarianism. Following the pilot interviews, questions on the guideline

were constructed in anticipation of *rehearsed political statements* that would defend or justify the participants' nutritional career choices. Thus, while informants were ready for the commonly experienced 'Why are you a vegetarian?' question, which might then be answered by a rehearsed political statement such as, 'I don't eat anything with a face', they were instead asked 'How did you become a vegetarian?' During the interview I therefore manipulated and 'colluded' with the interviewee to 'create and construct' stories (Nunkoosing, 2005: 704) but nonetheless enabled reflexivity and talk by advancing politically neutral *how* questions, rather than the demanding or justifying *why* questions that vegetarians encounter regularly throughout their social life course.

The interpretive theorizing of the interview data utilized in this constructivist approach thus covered 'overt processes' such as food and eating experiences at home, at work, and in other social contexts (Charmaz, 2006: 146). It also delved into the implicit meanings and thinking processes of the informants regarding the gender and food-related censure and scrutiny that they experienced, where they experienced it, and how they responded to what has been analysed and interpreted in the following findings as hegemonic masculine norm enforcement.

Findings

Twenty-five men from the total sample of 44 male and female informants (57 percent) abstained from meat. A strong pattern that emerged in the data from these men related to their experience of a gendered form of censure and scrutiny in food-related social contexts. Both men and women in the study talked about reactions to their food choice of both a positive and a negative nature. The positive aspect was characterized by genuine interest in what the informants ate, and in their reasons for not eating meat. The negative aspects were described as intrusive and unwanted questioning about *why* they would not eat meat, and the subsequent expectation that they would have to justify their food choices. In addition to having to justify not eating meat, vegetarian and vegan men must tolerate having their masculinity questioned, as a direct consequence of hegemonic masculine norm enforcement.

A social norm is a 'guide for action' which is upheld by social sanctions of either a negative or positive nature (Goffman, 1972: 124). The male informants in this study suggested that criticisms and comments expressing fault, bewilderment or severe disapproval, are the principal tools that non-vegetarian men use to ensure observance of, or obedience to, the established standard of consuming meat and animal products on a regular basis. The following findings will focus on one social locale that was strongly emphasized in the data, the barbecue: a place where the high status of meat and animal products is especially evident.

Barbecued meat as an essential ingredient of masculinity

So it's true. There is evolutionary, genetic and sociological evidence that can back up why men hang around the barbecue and women are in the kitchen preparing the salads. It is part of an ancient ritual performed by our prehistoric ancestors and carried on even today. (Slater, 2006)

The barbecue appears to have a prominent place in Australian life. As the above quote from the prime-time commercial television health program, *What's Good for You* suggests, both academics and popular media are drawn to essentialist and causal statements about why barbecues are dominated and enjoyed by men. A recent BBC news story, entitled 'Australia's Thrill for the Grill', described the barbecue as having a 'singular place in the national psyche' (Bryant, 2009: 1). The cooking and eating of meat exclusively by men around the barbecue is also touted as a 'natural' phenomenon. Deploying Darwinian language about the proper order of things, British archaeologist, Dr Mark Horton, while touring Australia, argued that the gender demarcation at the barbecue is grounded in evolution (Horton, 2006: 3). Horton cited fossil evidence showing examples of men hunting for meat, and suggested that these fossils indicate an instinctive or genetic drive among men to cook and eat barbecued meat. The barbecue is interpreted thus as a modern equivalent of our ancestors' camp fires. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* provided an unproblematic canvas for Horton's claims with articles respectively titled: 'Blokes on the Barbie Down to Evolution' (Horton, 2006: 3) and 'Why Blokes Barbecue: Ancient Embers Reveal All' (Colquhoun, 2006). It is worth noting that political economy might be more at work here than evolution and genetics, as the 'ancient embers' did not reveal for the benefit of readers that the archaeologist quoted is also one of a number of paid 'advisors' for Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). This institution is a powerful agribusiness player in the global marketplace. Peace (2008: 5) describes the MLA as 'the agricultural equivalent of oil companies and chemical firms', because of their lobbying influence and their instigation of a series of highly successful television and advertising campaigns that promote the regular consumption of red meat. For Peace, this is one significant case that highlights the need for social science and humanities research to explicate and critically analyse the taken-for-granted ideas, norms, rules and values related to food.

Popular ideas about meat, men and barbecues were strongly emphasized by vegetarian men in the data. From their perspective, the consumption of meat at the barbecue is bound up with hetero-normative assumptions about qualities that are considered typical or appropriate to being male. Men who have converted to vegetarianism talked about the hetero-normative scorn to which they have become accustomed since abstaining from meat. Close friends and family members were reported to be a major source of criticism

and jibes, and the social context of the ‘Aussie barbecue’ emerged as a site in which meat and animal products are revered as the food of choice for a ‘tough bloke’. The barbecue was cited as a definitive and classic example of meat-centred social bonding among men in Australian culture:

it’s the blokes around the barbecue. Men around the barbecue cooking the meat, and not having much to do with the vegetable matter, and having a few beers and being blokes, and this is very intimately tied to the meat in my experience. I daresay people think it’s something primal and stereotypical to think men are the hunters you know, standing over the kill, cooking the kill. (married, aged 26–34)

The informant quoted above, George, believes that refusing to share in the cooking of ‘the kill’ presents men with significant challenges. He is a tertiary educated graphic designer on a low to moderate income. George’s vegetarianism is strongly associated with his interest in volunteer activities with environmental groups and Amnesty International. He therefore expressed a degree of experience with engaging in non-mainstream endeavours, which has helped him in making the transition to vegetarianism. He described having to tolerate varying degrees of ‘argie-bargie’ or verbal wrangling at almost every barbecue he attended because he would not eat flesh foods. It is interesting that, despite his discomfort at having clearly marginal status to that of other men around the barbecue, George made it clear that he would not abstain from what he defined as a significant social bonding experience. He felt that it was important to show other men that any concerns that they expressed regarding his vegetarian nutritional career were *their* problem, not his, and thus he would continue to participate in barbecues and other social events involving the sharing of food. Nor did he or any of the other informants express a sense of powerlessness or insecurity that is often attributed to deviations from an ‘ideal type’ or ‘compulsory’ masculinity (Connell, 2002: 136). It is rather, resistance, subversion or tolerance of food-related norm enforcement that is evident among vegetarian men like George:

As for me, I’m right in there. I just find a clear spot on the barbie and slap down my tofu steaks or whatever else I’ve got. And it’s interesting actually because there’s always a bit of argie-bargie around the barbie, because all the blokes will have a bit of a cook and a bit of a banter ...

Food has an essential role in George’s participation. ‘Tofu steaks’, veggie burgers, hot dogs and sausages are among a host of relatively new plant-based products that vegetarians and vegans use as a social instrument or transitional aid to vegetarianism, especially at barbecues and other festivities where meat and animal products are the centrepiece of the occasion. George has therefore engaged in the traditionally feminized practice of eating tofu, but he has redefined it in masculine terms and added to the ‘multifarious attributes’ and norms associated with hegemonic masculinities,

such as the eating of barbecued meat (Gough, 2009: 69). The use of these alternative foods also represents another major and unexpected pattern in the data that illustrates the close relationship between vegetarian food, ethics, and social life.

George emphasized that the barbecue is the place where men can 'have a bit of a cook'. This too is significant, as feeding, caring and the cooking of food is rarely the province of men in Western cultures. Yet the barbecue seems to quarantine masculinity from conjecture and ridicule about men doing 'women's work'. DeVault (1991) has explicated the gendered relations of caring and feeding the family and found that cooking is widely understood as an essential 'womanly' activity and, by extension, how women 'do' femininity (1991: 95). Cooking meat is also part of this project of servicing the needs of men, and has been identified as a form of protest against prevailing norms and ideas about the status of women in modern societies. Leneman (1997) has examined links between vegetarianism and the women's suffrage movement in late 19th-century England. She argues that vegetarian practices of the influential British suffragists, Charlotte Despard, Constance Lytton, Leonora Cohen and Maud Joachim, are an example of the strong ties between abstention from meat and struggles for women's rights (1997: 273). Vegetarian suffrage leaders argued that wives would have more time in their lives to pursue interests outside home and family responsibilities when the burdens of preparing animal flesh dinners were lifted from their lives (1997: 278).

In addition to popular prescriptions about meat being 'men's food' the kitchen remains a problematic space for men to enter. Neuhaus (2003) argues that in the United States, cookbooks and magazines continue to define male cooks as hobbyists only, and then only in certain places such as the barbecue. The food-related activities of vegetarian men suggest a significant departure from these norms.

One of the informants in this Australian study, Rama Dasa, cares and feeds as part of his low-paid vocation and voluntary devotional service within the Hare Krishna faith. All Krishna devotees must cook and feed, and nurture the physiological and religious health of the wider public as part of the practice of their 'bio-spirituality' (Nath, 2010: 356). Rama Dasa is a mature English-born Hare Krishna convert with a Jewish background. He enjoys cooking on a regular basis, but does not share George's tolerance for the meaty barbecue, or his tolerance for comments about men needing meat. Rama Dasa teaches vegetarian cooking classes, and he is an authority on vegetarianism because of his vast experience travelling throughout Australia and overseas, conducting vegetarian cooking classes to vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike. As a single parent, there is no doubt in his mind that there are, 'plenty of masculine vegetarians', but he has heard many meat and masculinity-related comments. Rama Dasa observed that men will enforce

meat-eating as a social norm by sharing jokes and stridently claiming that they need their flesh foods. In his experience, the barbecue is venerated as hallowed social ground for the ‘dinkum’ beef-eating man:

Often for instance when I am teaching classes in people’s homes – I come in to do dinner parties in people’s homes and teach classes in people’s homes – and often the situation is that the women are the ones who attend the classes and they bring their partners along, and their partners come because they are their partners, but their own personal eating choices are elsewhere and [the men say] they would be quite happy to be out there next to the barbie. And so, occasionally when people start to drink and stuff and loosen up, their tongues loosen a little, they make crude comments about the fact that they would rather be eating a steak or sausages or things like that ... (single, aged 51–8)

Food, health, faith, feeding and vegetarianism are strongly interrelated in Rama Dasa’s interpretation and expression of masculinity. His idea of being a man is guided by Vedic scriptures, and by his responsibilities and experiences as a father and teacher. His closer involvement with food and his interest in health is thus not a consequence of ‘metrosexual’ preoccupation with health discourses (Gough, 2007: 332), but rather is predicated on his relationship with ‘God’ or Krishna.

Meat, sexuality and strength

The reported food-related experiences of vegetarians, particularly men, revealed a strong theme regarding a widespread public association between meat, male sexuality and male strength. Choosing *not* to eat meat at barbecues and other social gatherings can be greeted with suspicion and unease. It is sometimes also perceived as a controversial and provocative act. It subverts one of the defining elements of heterosexual male identity and hegemonic masculinity, which is the desire of men to prove that they are *not* girls (Evans and Thorpe, 1998: 19; Seidler, 1989: 10; Williams, 2002: 292). Although they might not approve, the male informants in this study have seen that the barbecue is a significant social site, especially for non-vegetarians. It is a place where groups of men can consume an assortment of grilled meats and, in doing so, enjoy their perceived shared status as ‘real men’. Moreover, in accordance with meat-eating norms, these ‘real men’ should also be heterosexual men. The social contexts in which men discuss various ideas about masculinity can also give rise to normative statements about sexual orientation. Studies of North American hegemonic masculinity suggest that expressions of homophobia are especially blatant among men in homogeneous masculine settings (Anderson, 2008: 605). Of course it is inaccurate and impolitic to describe barbecues as breeding grounds for intolerance and hatred, yet it is worthwhile considering the status or possible stigma that is attached to a vegetarian man who also happens to be gay.

One informant in this study, Brad, is a young Anglo-Australian man on a low to moderate income in the telecommunications sector. Like George, he eats meat alternatives such as tofu and plant-based hot dogs, and enjoys socializing with his non-vegetarian friends at barbecues and other festivities. However, he openly identified as a gay man during his interview and candidly stated that ‘coming out’ was also the beginning of him questioning many aspects of his life, including his former meat-oriented nutritional career. Brad is also aware of popular ideas about meat and masculinity, but he dismissed them as a socially constructed nonsense. He blamed advertising companies for deliberately marketing vegetarian foods for women only, and thus further cementing popular ideas that food without meat is ‘womanly’. He also described the idea of the ‘Australian men standing round the barbecue’ as the foundation of Western cultural beliefs that ‘manliness’ and vegetarianism are incompatible:

I imagine it would be hard for a man to justify being vegetarian because of the idea of the ‘man standing round the barbie’. I mean, I don’t have the kinds of friends that think like that, but I can imagine it would be hard. Some of those cultural institutions like the bronze blue-eyed Aussie, I don’t know where it comes from, but in summer in Australia it’s all about barbecues and beer and stuff like that ... (single, aged 26–34)

While the barbecue stood out in the data, there were other sites mentioned, such as Christmas and birthday dinners, and the workplace lunch hour, where the consumption of meat is enforced among groups of men as an essential aspect of ‘manhood’. These events did not pose a threat or challenge to Brad’s masculine identity, as his white-collar workplace and social circle were not critical of his nutritional choices. However, as mentioned earlier, the kinds of jobs that men do, and their social class, can have significant bearing on what they might be expected to eat. One informant who works in the building industry described numerous social interactions with other men, especially at lunch, where meat-eating is considered essential. Mal is a mature and experienced master-builder who was born into a vegetarian family. In stark contrast to the majority of the informants, he expressed no interest in animal rights or environmental ethics. Mal has only remained a vegetarian because of his dislike of the taste and smell of meat. In his physical appearance, Mal looks the part of the hegemonic male, but his robust heavy frame and his vigour at building sites confound his work colleagues, as they cannot believe that a moderate to high level of physical exertion is possible for a vegetarian man:

They think it is amazing because I am a fairly energetic person, and I’m reasonably strong and they think that is impossible. [With me] Not on meat, you know, they really do. Also, I’m a bit heavier than I should be (laughter) and they sort of think that is impossible, you know, with a vegetarian diet. If there are loads to be lifted and things to be carted around I’ll keep up with the best of them you

know. I'm getting older now, I'm 52, but I still can do a reasonable amount, and some of the fellers are quite surprised by that. (married, aged 51–8)

It is clear from what little sociological data exists related to food and masculinity, that the workplace reactions described by Mal are likely to be experienced by other vegetarian, vegan and semi-vegetarian men who work in the building industry. A qualitative analysis of barriers to healthy eating among British men found that they will not want to give up foods high in saturated animal fats if they believe these foods are necessary for manual labour and can thus appease a 'manly appetite' (Gough and Conner, 2006: 391–2). Moreover, in a Finnish study, Roos et al. (2001) explored the relationship between men, masculinity and food via qualitative interviews with a sample of Finnish carpenters and engineers. Interestingly, like Mal's workmates, the carpenters in this European study were sceptical as to whether vegetables could be considered proper food. They referred to plant-based foods as 'rabbit food'. They believed that it was not healthy to abstain from meat and that they could not work in the building industry if they did so (Roos et al., 2001: 51). Overall, the carpenters talked more about 'needing meat', 'avoiding vegetables' and a need to satisfy their 'hearty appetites', whereas the more highly educated engineers in the study expressed more interest in maintaining good health and enjoying a variety of vegetables in their diet (2001: 53). Of considerable public health concern is a more recent study of health and the social construction of masculinity in a popular American men's health magazine. Stibbe (2004) carried out critical discourse analysis on six issues of the US edition of *Men's Health*. He found that the magazine constructed a masculine, muscle-building image of meat, while vegetables were portrayed as effeminate:

Even in articles dealing with heart disease, cancer, diabetes, or hemorrhoids, the magazine fails to link red meat with disease or any other negative consequences. Instead, meat, and particularly beef, is consistently associated with positive images of masculinity. (2004: 39)

Popular beliefs which link meat and animal products with being a 'strong man' can produce adverse health outcomes. Coronary heart disease (CHD) is a major cause of death for men and women in Australia and most other Western societies, and it is often attributed to an excess of saturated animal fats in the human diet (Barnard et al., 2000; Koebnick et al., 2005; Sadvovsky, 2000). Elevated blood pressure is also affected by diet and activity, and is the key contributor to cardiovascular and cerebrovascular events. Hence, the most recent evidence-based recommendation to patients is to reduce animal fats and all highly refined foods in their diet, and increase their consumption of plant-based foods (Morgan, 2009: 46–54).

One informant in the study drew not only from his life experiences as a convert to vegetarianism but also from his medical science background when he emphasized the more serious implications of the Aussie male's love

of meat. Ross is a young Australian-born man of Chinese heritage. In his vocation as a general practitioner, he deals with many patients who have the warning signs of CHD, such as high cholesterol levels and excessive body weight. He decided to convert to vegetarianism later in life as an educated adult. Ross wanted to be healthier, fitter and leaner, which in his view, could be achieved by adopting a vegetarian diet. He extends his medically informed personal approach to health and diet to his patients. He discussed the difficulties of encouraging male patients to make essential dietary changes that will lengthen their lives and improve their overall quality of life. In his experience, male patients with potentially deadly high cholesterol levels have proven to be particularly resistant to medical science-based nutritional guidelines. Ross stated that in cases such as these, he must make suggestions which, if implemented, can assist in reducing high blood lipid levels (fats in the blood). For example, he has asked patients with high cholesterol levels and other precursors to heart disease to try to eat only lean cuts of meat, smaller portions, or perhaps include meat-free days in their diet. He has found that men are especially difficult to win over, because they are 'very oriented towards meat and barbecues and meat pies and that sort of stuff'. Consequently, Ross believes that the social norms of eating meat and animal products are restricting the diversity of the male palate and the variety of foods that men of all ages could, and arguably should, have in their nutritional career to maintain good health:

It's not overt resistance, people don't say: 'I'm not going to do that!' But it comes across to me that it may be more difficult for them to modify their diet ... (married, aged 26–34)

Ross expressed a complex personal and culturally derived understanding of the significance of meat. He is a Chinese-Australian who has spent most of his life enjoying a wide variety of Asian meat-based dishes. He discussed how much he has missed some of the more festive and flamboyant animal-based meals, as he had only been vegetarian for a few years at the time of the interview. Like most of the males in his age group, he too indulges in meat alternatives, especially when attending barbecues. Vegetarian schnitzels, sausages and hot dogs are relied on as a transitional aid for new converts and a valuable social instrument throughout a vegetarian's social life course. Their deployment can also be seen as one way in which vegetarian and vegan men compensate for their disinclination to engage in other masculine behaviours, such as cooking and eating meat. In a case study of masculine identity and health-related behaviour, De Visser and Smith (2006: 693) argue that the trading of masculine competencies might be an essential process for men who reject hegemonic masculinities, as it facilitates the construction of alternative masculine identities without losing sight of the established standards. For younger men who do not have the religious discursive protection that Rama Dasa

enjoys, meat alternatives seem to provide a smoother entry into ordinarily more difficult territory.

Discussion: food, health, gender and social theory

The aforementioned findings indicate that men's beliefs about the importance of meat might be evident in all ethnic and socio-economic strata. Notwithstanding evidence of clustering in manual labour occupations, discourses emphasizing masculine 'toughness' prevail across many cultures and class structures, and they have been seen in the gender regimes and structures of top management in large-scale corporate or white-collar industries, and elite parts of medical science, the police and armed forces, and rural settings (Alston and Kent, 2008: 144; Connell, 2002: 102; Messerschmidt, 1997; Williams, 2002: 307). At the barbecue, meat appears to be a valued hegemonic masculine resource. Messerschmidt (2000: 305) argues that masculine resources are contextually available practices that can be drawn on so that men and boys can demonstrate to themselves and others that they are 'manly'. The resources that are utilized for masculine construction change situationally. This notion of 'masculine resources' has critical resonance in the context of meat consumption and hegemonic masculine norm enforcement. Within this theoretical stratum, meat can be defined as a highly symbolic yet tangible hegemonic masculine resource. In various social contexts, such as barbecues, it is consumed by all men involved.

There is a need for further studies focused exclusively on the gender dimensions of mainstream and alternative food habits and practices, both in Australia and in other countries. In places, such as the barbecue, vegetarian and vegan men are often exposed and disparaged for not living up to one of the principal dominant contextual ideals of hegemonic masculinity: the consumption of meat. The punishment or censure meted out to vegetarians tends to be ignored, laughed off or sometimes verbally challenged by the majority of men in this study, and the findings reported suggest that some vegetarian men find it amusing, and sometimes even empowering, to subvert the social norm of eating meat. The study of masculinities in food-related contexts thus presents a suite of theoretical implications for the broader study of gender. If, for example, vegetarian men subvert or contest dominant social norms and take their vegetarian sausages, tofu steaks and burgers to a barbecue, do they represent a new form of masculine hegemony? The comments of the informant, Mal, regarding his ability to 'keep up with the best of them', might exemplify a protest expression of maleness (Connell, 1995: 117). In Mal's case, this is a kind of masculinity that subverts or challenges the hegemonic standard of maintaining strength and vigour through the consumption of meat. Walker has further teased out the conceptual threads of protest masculinity by proposing a split, using the terms *anomic protest masculinity* that is, 'freer from societal constraints',

and a more limited *disciplined protest masculinity* that is characterized by social pressure and constraint, with potentially negative consequences (2006: 6). These notions of challenge or subversion within masculine social enclaves have resonance with Mal's, George's and many other male informants' food-related social experiences. It was clear for example, that although Mal shares all the physical traits, and many of the values and norms of his peers, his food choices are surprising and unexpected to them, and they make him distinct. The finer details regarding how this distinction is interpreted and then acted upon by dominant masculinities in Mal's and other social groups across age categories have not yet been qualified. Hence, food-related protest masculinities could have an anomic destructive nature or a disciplined integrative character that functions to increase solidarity, particularly among vegetarian and vegan men. If German sociologist Norbert Elias is correct in his prediction of a civilizing process in which meat lovers will gradually be supplanted by more vegetarians in human societies (1978: 121), then perhaps we can also expect an emergence of competing and alternate masculinities, which resist or challenge static incarnations of hegemonic masculinity (Bandyopadhyay, 2006: 187). The emergence of meat analogue or mock-meat products such as plant-based hot dogs, sausages and bacon, might also precipitate a reiteration, departure or shift from conventional forms of hegemonic masculine expression (Gough, 2009: 68; Hunt, 2008: 466). Whatever the outcomes, there is certainly no seismic shift in Western food and eating right now, as meat and animal products remain popular staples (Campbell and Campbell II, 2006: 109). It is therefore important to recognize the public health implications of having conventional animal-based Western food preferences as a culturally dominant and gender definitive gastronomic norm. The comments made by the general practitioner Ross, based on his medical knowledge, suggest that these concerns are especially relevant regarding the health of meat-eating men. The key characteristics, multiple expressions and forms of masculinity, socially constructed influences and differences in how men think about food and appropriate eating, in comparison to women, should also be considered when future plans are drafted to improve public health and nutrition. Moreover, new sociological research should consider the food-related dimensions of gender, and the extent to which masculinities are socially calibrated by the consumption of meat, animal and other food products.

Conclusion

Given the negative attitudes of men toward vegetarian and vegan nutritional careers, an improvement in men's health by virtue of a reduction in dietary saturated animal fats and an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption, might be difficult to achieve. Hegemonic masculine norms pertaining to food and eating are the likely culprits here. Recent studies of the

social determinants of men's health indicate that representations of men within hegemonic systems can influence both male and female definitions of a 'healthy lifestyle' (Bramham, 2003; Madill and Hopper, 2007: 44). It is certainly in the public interest to demonstrate how ideal types of masculinity and male eating patterns are constructed and promoted by individuals and cultural stakeholders. Widespread advertising campaigns that encourage the consumption of specific meat and animal products seem to consistently appeal to our primal instincts about what is 'natural' or what we are 'meant to eat'. From the perspective of the majority of vegetarian informants in the Australian study, meals without meat are still widely considered by non-vegetarian men to be feminine dietary choices, while meat and animal products are the superior food for a 'real' man.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Ms Desiree Prideaux and Adjunct Professor Claire Williams for their review and comments on various drafts of this article. Thanks are also due to all three anonymous reviewers for their assistance with the development of this paper.

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