

What makes a vegetarian? It's not what's on the plate

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They say you are what you eat. But that may not be true for vegetarians.

A Cornell undergraduate and his academic adviser have come up with a new way to think about vegetarians. And it's not just about what's on their plates.

The new theory proposes that [vegetarianism](#) is an identity, not just a series of decisions about what to eat. Choosing a plant-based diet – and a wide variety of ways that people think, feel and behave in relation to that choice – provides vegetarians with a sense of self, the researchers said, just as race, religion, gender or sexual orientation can provide an identity for others. The paper was published Jan. 18 in *Appetite*.

"It might seem that vegetarianism is just a diet," said Daniel Rosenfeld '18, co-author of the paper. "But for a lot of people, it can have a large impact on how they feel about themselves and how they reflect on who they are. Following a plant-based diet is really a core part of their identity."

Eating a [vegetarian diet](#) and identifying as vegetarian are two different things, the authors said. For example, a 2012 survey found that 5 percent of adults in the United States considered themselves vegetarian. But only 3 percent actually ate a plant-based diet. And some who avoid animal products may not consider themselves vegetarian at all, according to the paper.

Rosenfeld, a human development major, came up with the idea of a vegetarian identity when he was taking a class on racial and ethnic identity with his co-author, Anthony Burrow, assistant professor of human development in the College of Human Ecology.

Learning about theoretical perspectives on race as identity, Rosenfeld began to see similarities between how people speak about vegetarianism and race. "Race and vegetarianism seem so different," he said. "But when we look through a psychological lens at how any behavior or self-attribute can define who we are, it becomes very clear that people who identify with a racial group or with this plant-based diet group can both be thought of through identity frameworks."

Drawing on several psychological theories, the Rosenfeld and Burrows' Unified Model of Vegetarian Identity describes 10 measurable "dimensions," or aspects, of a vegetarian identity.

The first three aspects – historical embeddedness, timing and duration – involve the social contexts that shape how someone sees themselves as an eater. For example, the time and place in which we live can affect expectations about how and what we eat; moving to a city with lots of vegetarians may influence someone to adopt a more vegetarian [diet](#) and maybe even change how they self-identify.

Other dimensions include how people incorporate their food choices into their sense of self. Salience and centrality, for example, involve the extent to which being vegetarian is a defining feature of one's identity.

Motivation also plays a role. A notable finding is that vegetarians have different dietary motivations than people who eat just a small amount of meat but aren't fully vegetarian. While only 21 percent of those in the low meat-eating group were motivated by animal welfare concerns, this figure was a whopping 71 percent among vegetarians, Rosenfeld said.

"These results suggest that having ethical motivations about animal welfare is more strongly associated with going full-on vegetarian, rather than just decreasing one's meat intake," he said.

Some dimensions refer to how positively or negatively a person feels about vegetarians and omnivores. For example, a vegetarian may feel disgust, anger or resentment when she sees someone wearing a fur coat or leather jacket; those feelings are part of what Rosenfeld and Burrow call "low omnivorous regard."

Of course, food choice is also a factor. The dimension of "strictness" measures how closely one adheres to a [plant-based diet](#), while the dimension dietary pattern refers to the foods one avoids, such as eggs, dairy or fish.

Dietary strictness has caused some methodological inconsistencies across studies, Rosenfeld points out.

"If a participant identifies as vegetarian but eats meat occasionally, should a researcher label them as a vegetarian?" he said. "It's these intricacies that make studying vegetarianism so exciting. Going forward, I hope our [identity](#) model can provide a new perspective for making sense of what seems nonsensical."

More information: Daniel L. Rosenfeld et al. The unified model of vegetarian identity: A conceptual framework for understanding plant-based food choices, *Appetite* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2017.01.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.01.017)

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