



Strategies Used to Communicate Dietary Change at a Vegan Resort

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Abstract

This article explores the communication of vegan practices at a luxury resort in Northern California. During the summer of 2016, I spent 12½ weeks examining how staff perceived, understood, performed, and discussed vegan and plant-based diets. I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews with staff to understand how they navigated interpersonal communications about dietary practices. U.S. structures and institutions, social and cultural practices, and mental schema presented specific difficulties to eating plant-based food and communicating dietary change. I observed that staff who regularly had conversations about vegan and plant-based diets developed nuanced communications which considered these underlying challenges. In this paper I will outline three strategies staff used to communicate dietary change and the implications of using such strategies.

Introduction

The phrase “you are what you eat” is central to the reason why dietary change presents challenges for social belonging. Although this phrase is commonly used to reference the effect of diet upon health, of concern is the way that dietary practices are reflective of morality and identity (Sassatelli 2004; Fischler 1988). Eating is a social activity, and diet is a significant way humans form and maintain social groups (Fischler 2011, 530). Shared understandings about food and dietary practices bond group members together and support communal procurement and division of food resources (Fischler 2011, 531). Dietary change can isolate individuals from social groups and impair their access to resources (Fischler 2011, 531). This provides a powerful motivation to communicate the boundaries and reasoning behind eating an alternative diet in order for one to experience social acceptance and have access to communal resources.

While veganism has not escaped the attention of social scientists, exploration of how individuals are communicating dietary change on an interpersonal level does not yet exist. Researchers who explore communications around behavior modification, marketing, and health largely focus on methods to improve professionals' abilities to communicate with their target audiences. This research follows Mohan J. Dutta's (2007) culturally sensitive approach to health communications where the researcher identifies values, beliefs, and practices of a target group to effectively communicate with that group (310). However, a culturally sensitive approach does not recognize the work of individuals in these communities to solve problems on their own (Dutta 2007). This research takes an inductive approach to understanding how staff are approaching communications about dietary change at a vegan resort. For this reason, I ascribe to Dutta's alternate culture-centered approach, which relies on respondents to identify the problem and develop their own solution (Dutta 2007).

To consider communications from an inductive approach, Barge and Little (2008) assert that skilled communicators do not rely on an application of rules, but rather develop responses within context. They, like Martin Buber (1958), a Jewish philosopher of dialogue, believe that interpersonal communications should focus on listening to and understanding others in a way that "values [their] experiences, contributions, and perspectives" (Barge and Little 2008, 519). Martin Buber's theory of I-It and I-Thou relationships differentiates between conversations motivated by manipulation and mutual engagement, respectively (Johannesen 1971, 377). Buber considered "genuine dialogue," following an I-Thou or dialogic relationship, to be crucial for communication between people with different habits and beliefs (Johannesen 1971, 375). Considering the framework of these theorists informs communications about personal decisions such as dietary change.

This research will explore the strategies staff developed to overcome the challenges of communications about dietary practices. For 12½ weeks I collected data at a vegan resort in Northern California. This resort, marketed as a luxurious vacation destination, presented a model of sustainable living. The attached vegan restaurant also offered nutrition and plant-based cooking classes. For all the plant-based and vegan resources the inn offered, only a handful of the staff were vegan, and a majority of the guests were not vegan. Many guests even arrived at the inn unaware that the resort served plant-based cuisine. Thus, the inn was an ideal place to examine discourse about dietary change due to the frequency with which staff communicated with guests and one another about alternative diets.

Staff at the inn knew me as a summer intern who attended college in the Midwest. As a white female who grew up on the West Coast, I was also familiar with the cultural norms of the area. When I arrived at the inn, I had been eating a whole food, plant-based diet for over a year and researching nutrition for nearly as long. My positionality entering the inn helped me to gain entrée with staff and to learn about these communications.

Methods

My research is based on seven semi-formal interviews with staff who worked at the resort. I used participant observation, conversations with staff, and background research to develop an interview guide relevant to the communication of dietary change at the inn. I selected a purposive sample to represent the variety of positions, diets, genders, and ages of staff at the resort. It was also important that staff I selected communicated with guests about the inn's mission, and sometimes more specifically, about vegan or plant-based eating. Because staff members' positions directly relate to their ideologies and experiences, I use pseudonyms and general job titles for my respondents in order to ensure confidentiality.

Communicating Dietary Change at the Inn

The mission of the restaurant at the inn is to expose guests to gourmet vegan, plant-based food. As a noun, "vegan" references a lifestyle that does not include products that have animal origins. As an adjective used to describe the food at the inn, "vegan" meant that none of the food included animal products such as meat, dairy, eggs, or honey. What is significant, though, is that the owner actively considered the nomenclature used to advertise the restaurant. During my stay, I learned that the concierge and server staff had recently been trained to tell guests that the restaurant served a whole food, plant-based menu. "Whole food, plant-based" describes a diet of predominantly whole, plant foods. A plant-based diet omits processed foods, including refined flour and sugar, and minimizes or eliminates oil, salt, and animal products (Pulde and Lederman 2016). Some staff also stated that they had previously eaten a vegetarian diet, meaning that they did not consume meat. Finally, most commonly consumed by Americans, a standard American diet is "high in meat, dairy, fat, sugar as well as refined, processed, and junk foods... [with] low intake of fruits and vegetables" ("Standard American Diet" 2017). Dietary change, in this article, denotes a person's transition from eating a standard American diet to an alternative vegetarian, vegan, or plant-based diet. In this article I primarily focus on communications about the transition to eating vegan and plant-based diets, as these were the focus of the resort staff and restaurant.

The shift in nomenclature at the inn from vegan to plant-based was in consideration of common associations with these diets. Veganism is often approached from a perspective of animal ethics and is frequently related to morality. "Whole food, plant-based" is a newer term more often associated with personal health. Despite the fact that the food served at the restaurant was both vegan and plant-based, the owner tried to dissociate from negative vegan stereotypes by promoting plant-based discourses centered around health. Alternative diets can impact animal ethics, personal health, and the environment. One of these aspects is typically an entry point to learning about alternative diets and can inform

individuals' rationales for dietary change. Depending on an individual's dietary choices, there may be positive impacts beyond this personal rationale.

Within the context of the inn, staff developed strategies to negotiate the separate missions of the restaurant and the resort. Staff members' strategies to communicate dietary change evolved over time through trial and error, reflection of their own experience learning about and undergoing dietary change, and hearing about or personally viewing extremely poor communications. Overall, staff indicated that communications about dietary change at the inn have improved over time to better meet the needs of guests and staff and to facilitate a dialogue.

Underlying Challenges to Eating an Alternative Diet

Central to understanding the strategies staff used to discuss dietary change were three underlying challenges to eating an alternative diet: structure and institutions within the United States, social and cultural factors, and mental schema. These factors are not unique to the inn. Other research has identified similar elements as factors that influence dietary choice and as determinants of intention (Bisogni et al. 2002, 128; Fishbein 2000, 275). At the inn, these factors were the basis of staff members' belief that dietary change is a personal decision.

At a structural level, staff expressed that they did not have the same access to food that they enjoyed when eating a standard American diet. Staff shared sentiments such as, "There are a lot less places I can eat now," and expressed that finding food, particularly on trips, was difficult. Respondents indicated that within the process of changing their diet, they developed new locale-based cultural capital about how and where to shop for food. Depending on personal decisions around diet, staff experienced varying degrees of satisfaction around their ability to access food. Emily, the creative chef at the inn, was particularly aware of the increased cost of buying local, organic produce. Ava, another staff member, indicated that the cost of foods had previously been a barrier to eating a vegan diet.

Food also plays a dominant role in social settings. Food was a reason staff gathered with family and friends. Most staff had partners or family members that shared similar dietary practices. Don, the nutritionist, told me: "My wife... is overwhelmingly my best friend, for a whole host of reasons, but one is that we share basic, core, ethical values." Respondents indicated that having the same dietary practices as other people influenced their ability to be close with those people. Overall, staff identified social systems as significant for maintaining or changing their dietary practices. Staff who did not eat the same diet as their family explicitly referred to the inn as an important support in their life.

Finally, mental schema is a critical consideration. Mental schema, the rationale behind how ideas believed to be true cohesively fit together, is developed through an individual's history and personal experience (Lakoff 2002). Our mental schema informs our identity and includes narratives about why certain foods are

healthy and moral to eat. One staff specifically referred to experiencing cognitive dissonance when she noticed contradictions between her ethics and diet. Other staff mentioned this tension when they learned new information that did not fit within their mental schema. Don told me that there came a point when “[he] knew too much.” At this time, he modified his behavior to align with his beliefs. In this experience of schema failure, the nutritionist reconfigured his mental schema to integrate new information. By doing this, Don no longer experienced cognitive dissonance.

Any one of these reasons—structural factors, social forces, or mental schema—would be a challenge on its own. My respondents who had undergone dietary change indicated that they experienced all three of these pressures to greater or lesser degrees at one point or another. These underlying challenges are central to understanding why the staff used personal narratives, set examples, and waited to communicate with guests and other staff about dietary change.

Personal Narratives

Staff at the inn frequently relied on their personal experience learning about and changing their diet to talk about dietary change. Guests who were interested in learning about veganism at the inn had to contend with the same underlying challenges as staff members who had experienced dietary change. The staffs’ personal narratives highlighted both their rationale behind changing their diet and how they overcame the three aforementioned challenges.

Almost all the staff I interviewed who were vegan or plant-based communicated that the primary reason they chose these diets was because they physically felt better. Most narratives included experimentation spurred by information from books, documentaries, doctors, family, or friends. In this process of self-experimentation, staff tried different foods and routines before integrating the ones they liked. For long-term changes, respondents negotiated U.S. institutions and structures, social and cultural forces, and their own mental schema. Within their personal narratives, respondents typically described one or two underlying challenges as more problematic than others.

For example, from a young age Ava knew she wanted to be vegetarian. She experienced more cognitive dissonance eating a standard American diet than a vegetarian diet, but sociocultural and institutional factors made it difficult:

I remember watching *The Simpsons*, and Lisa was vegetarian, and I thought she was so cool. So even from a little kid I always wanted to do it, but was always, at the same time, kind of worried what my family was going to think, or... it just seemed kind of overwhelming I guess. And then when I finally decided, “Screw what they think, I’m gonna do it” in high school, the first thing my mom said to me was, “Well, you’re cooking for yourself from now on.”

Ava received both encouragement and discouragement from all three underlying challenges to eat an alternative diet. She experienced cognitive dissonance eating meat at a young age and identified with *The Simpsons* character Lisa. Yet when she decided to go vegetarian, the resources to which she had access at home were compromised. She also struggled on an institutional level to access food after she moved out. High cost and low availability were ultimately reasons she returned to eating a standard American diet. Later on, she desired to return to eating a vegetarian diet and transitioned with her boyfriend. It is through that support system that Ava began to eat a vegan diet, which is what she continues to eat today.

In contrast to Ava, Don began exploring alternative diets in his twenties after he had finished college. He said, “The circumstances of my life were easy. I was living on my own. I didn’t have a family. I was buying my own food, so it wasn’t that big of a deal.” Don’s independence when he changed his diet was distinct from other staff who identified social support systems as important for their transitions. Don, rather, had a heuristic approach, which was initially motivated by his stumbling across documents that associated veganism with environmentalism. Don’s independence ultimately allowed him to make changes when he learned new information and minimized his experience of cognitive dissonance.

Another staff member, Brett, did not learn about alternative diets until he arrived at the inn. At first, coming to work at a vegan resort every day was a bit overwhelming. When he started working at the inn, he experienced social pressures to think about diet in a new way. “I grew up with a certain way of cooking and eating; I didn’t think about it so much. It was already there. Like it was a part of me.” The longer Brett worked at the inn, the more his mentality changed. “It’s more like, ‘Okay I’ll listen.’ I’ll take what I think I like, what I can handle right now, deal with it, and go back for more.” Brett did not refer to structures and institutions being a problem. His job at the inn and role as the primary cook and shopper in his family gave him control over what he ate. Alternatively, they were very aware of social and cultural influences at home and at the inn and considered the inn to be the primary reason he explored new dietary practices.

As a final example, Caden, a staff member particularly cognizant of social supports, considered dietary change to be quite relatable as he experienced the same underlying challenges as other staff. Personal narratives at the inn showed how the underlying challenges of dietary change can be experienced and addressed differently. Through their narratives, staff explained how they overcame these challenges, the rationale behind their dietary change, and why that rationale was longstanding. Staff experiences often related to their position at the inn, and guests worked with different staff based on what underlying challenges they experienced most acutely.

Setting an Example

As Don pointed out, his behavior was only significant to others because “[he] eat[s] in a way that most people overwhelmingly don’t eat.” Most staff who ate vegan or plant-based diets at the inn had been doing so for a number of years, so they experienced their dietary practice as normal. Setting an example was not about performance, but rather making themselves accessible as a credible resource for guests who had questions.

Position titles, such as “nutritionist” or “creative chef,” were a way staff identified themselves as educated on the topic of their expertise. Don, the nutritionist at the inn, was referenced in multiple interviews as an excellent resource to learn more about diet and as a support when undergoing dietary change. This was a result of more than just his degree in nutrition—Don considered exercising and healthy eating an integral part of his practice as a nutritionist. Don told me, “To me, it is always about the example.” This belief was informed by one of his first experiences talking about plant-based and vegan diets:

I remember the first book I ever got given. I worked for an actor and he was reading it and he was talking about it and it wasn’t like judgment to me, and I was like, “That sounds cool, what’s that?” And he was really super healthy. And so I was like, “Oh, something’s working.” I remember totally thinking that.

In this situation, the nutritionist asked a question, and when the actor told him about the book, Don became interested because he considered the actor to be “super healthy.” Don believed that having a healthy body helped his clients consider him a credible source of information about diet. The nutritionist indicated that he wanted “to embody fun and light.” This was a consensus among staff who aimed to use the example they set as a form of communication. These staff repeatedly referred to the appearance and practice they worked to maintain as “vibrant,” “grounded,” “fit,” and “healthy.”

Food was another way staff set an example. Two staff stated that they liked to set an example through the food they ate and prepared for others. They believed that sharing food was a gentle approach to introduce a vegan diet. In her experience, Ava indicated that “the best thing to do is just cook for people and then they’ll ask me questions if they’re curious, and, if not, they still know they ate some vegan food, and it tasted good.... And then they can hopefully make more connections on their own.” Ultimately, her primary objective, like that of the resort’s restaurant, was to increase individuals’ exposure to vegan food. While the nutritionist relied on his activity and physical appearance to draw interest, Ava hoped to broaden others’ understandings of what food can be made of and taste like. She wanted them to have good experiences because it is through these experiences that people begin to challenge the conceptions they develop about food while eating a standard American diet. Just like anything new, these experiences

have the potential to generate curiosity and cause cognitive dissonance. Setting an example is a low-risk way to get people thinking about diet. At a minimum, individuals are given reason to think about veganism, and following the path of least resistance, guests may even try new food, which can alter perception and incite them to think critically about the food they eat.

Through the examples of different staff, guests interested in learning about dietary change were able to see how vegan and plant-based eating are conceptualized in a variety of ways. The diversity of perspectives helps illuminate what is taken for granted, such as how much time we spend preparing food and how we conceptualize a meal. In this way, the staff set examples that prompted individuals to think more critically about how their dietary practices are socially and culturally produced.

Waiting

Overall, staff shared the sentiment that they should not initiate conversations about diet with guests. The staff were more interested in developing a practice and model at the inn that would intrigue guests to the point that they would ask questions themselves. The staff members' commitment to only having conversations about dietary change that were initiated by guests established the inn as an optional resource for guests. Waiting prefaces conversations and narratives about veganism, and staff often described situations where they used this strategy along with the strategy of setting an example.

Waiting first relies on individuals establishing themselves as knowledgeable resources for others who want to learn more information. Sometimes, staff members explicitly established themselves as resources through their position, a blog, or a talk. Less explicitly, other staff members claimed that the example they set was enough. Don described the importance of waiting when he referred to a conversation he had after a talk he gave at VegFest, a plant-based living conference:

I did a talk one time in Portland, and this woman comes up, and she wasn't vegan but she had come to my talk and liked it and she said, "I'm really having a hard time with dairy." And she had questions about it. And we're having this nice conversation.... I'm not judging her. She is finding out information and there's a good chance she is going to make a change. She's not feeling well... she felt open enough to me to have an honest discussion in a non-judgmental, supportive way.

Don identified himself as a resource by speaking at VegFest where he was expected to talk about dietary change. The woman—I call her Alice—expressed her interest in learning more by approaching Don after the talk. But this decision was informed by her experience listening to his talk, where she identified Don as someone she could trust. By waiting for her to ask a question, Don was able to address the

specific challenges she was facing in giving up dairy. Conversations about dietary change that took place when staff used this strategy were very specific, and the focus remained on meeting the needs of the person asking the question. Through Alice's initiation of the conversation, Don was given context, which allowed him to recognize the work Alice had already put toward dietary change. In this way, waiting creates conversation dynamics that remind individuals of their agency over dietary choices.

When staff were identified as a resource through their example, they usually increased others' exposure to ideas, experiences, and access to resources through their proximity. Ava described this when she told me about how her boyfriend—I call him Rick—became vegan:

When I met him, he told me he had never met a vegan before. I would always be the one to cook, and he would gladly eat whatever I made. I think just eating all that food that I was making started to open him up. And then after he had been eating vegan pretty much all the time, then I started talking to him more about why, and then he started to really get it.

Increased access to vegan food was an important catalyst for Rick to become vegan. Within their relationship, Ava made vegan food more accessible than a standard American diet. Because Ava was the primary cook, Rick was able to eat a vegan diet without having to build up the capital necessary to prepare vegan food himself. It was not until after he had been eating vegan food for a significant time that they began to have conversations about the reasons why people eat a vegan diet. At this point his perception about what it meant and felt like to eat a vegan diet was already informed by his experience. His decision to eat a vegan diet only became further informed when they began talking about animal ethics. According to Ava, Rick continued to eat a vegan diet even after their relationship ended because animal ethics became the primary reason he ate vegan food, rather than easy access.

Within her relationship, Ava created conditions in which Rick could develop a mindset that would be more receptive to learning about a vegan diet. It was her belief that “you have to be in the right mental state [to make changes].” The staff considered guests asking about dietary change to be an indicator that guests were receptive to learning more information. When people form questions, they develop rationale behind their interest, which contextualizes the information they learn. A heuristic approach, or the act of someone learning information independently, is empowering. Waiting allows people to approach dietary change for personal reasons. Maintaining control over the speed of learning about diet and the integration of new practices makes dietary change less overwhelming and stressful. Creating space through this strategy, staff were considerate of others' mental schema and supported a heuristic approach.

The staff typically stumbled across the benefits of waiting as a strategy when they set boundaries to not talk about diet unless they were asked. Dietary change, as outlined before, has underlying challenges which are distinct from the decision to change dietary practices. Commenting on people's diets if they have not asked can be rude or intensely insulting. Waiting ensures a level of permission and receptivity, which decreases chances of compromising relationships. Boundaries around conversations about dietary change are useful because they serve to recognize individuals' agency over their decisions. Don shared with me an experience where these boundaries were challenged, and the rationale that kept them in place:

One friend had a heart attack and he got really mad that I hadn't told him stuff, and I said, "I *never* [bring up another person's diet]. You know I'm a nutritionist, if you felt like you needed to change, come to me, ask me for help." If I had gone to him, before his heart attack, and said, "You shouldn't be eating this," he probably wouldn't have changed anything. He probably would have thought "Mind your own damn business," and then after the heart attack he's like, "Why the hell didn't you tell me 'stop eating this stuff'?" Because that's not my business.... I always come back to it, what will actually create change?

Within his practice, the nutritionist tried to make himself accessible to guests at the inn and anyone else who asked, including his friends. But through his experiences, Don had seen and heard of terrible communications that severely crossed personal boundaries. Within his practice, Don created parameters for his work to best meet his and his clients' needs, and this meant that their health was their business until they asked for help. He would not compromise on this. As Don pointed out, he cannot know what health problems others have. He can guess, but unless they are looking for help and have incentive to implement changes, this information could be a source of increased stress and could further exacerbate problems. Don's practice was respectful of individuals' agency over the choices they made. He was considerate of the fact that motivated, long-lasting change comes from individuals who are personally invested in the results of that change.

How These Strategies Work Together

Reciting personal narratives, setting an example, and waiting can be used individually, but some combinations are particularly common. For example, if someone is using the strategy of waiting, he or she is usually setting an example during this time, which sets the foundation for the other person to consider them a credible source when conversation takes place. Providing personal narratives and setting an example also work together, because it is through the example that we set that narratives make sense and can be understood. Finally, waiting and providing narratives are also an important combination. When someone uses

these two strategies at once, narratives are oriented toward the person asking a question rather than toward the speaker's own ends, which effectively creates an I-Thou relationship. Staff indicated that the most productive conversations used all three strategies. Using these strategies made staff aware of the goals of the guests they spoke with and informed the guests' interest to talk about dietary change. All three strategies also improved staffs' ability to be authoritative and credible sources because they usually, to some extent, developed a relationship with the guest and showed that their behavior and narrative were cohesive.

Findings

Despite the penchant for interpersonal communications about dietary change to be contentious, the staff at the inn developed strategies that promoted the experience of a luxury resort. The development of these strategies relied on staffs' personal experiences undergoing dietary change. Three underlying challenges underpinned staff members' experiences learning about and eating alternative diets: institutional and structural factors, social and cultural forces, and mental schema. Staff used these challenges to inform the three strategies they used to communicate dietary change at the inn: providing personal narratives, setting an example, and waiting. These strategies promoted understanding of how people experience dietary change, how alternative diets are conceptualized and performed in a variety of ways, and how dietary change is a personal decision. These findings can be applied in a variety of settings as we think about interpersonal communications around change and difference.

This research was limited in its scope. I did not explore insulting, rude, or offensive communications and did not address the specific backgrounds, identities, or appearance of individuals who were a part of these discourses. Further research should explore why respondents consider some communications about dietary change to be positive or negative, how communications about dietary change support the purpose of the speaker, and which are the similarities and differences within staff narratives addressing the underlying challenges of dietary change.

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