

How Food Shaming Meat Eaters Hinders Rather than Helps the Fight Against Climate Change

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Michael Schmitt's PSYC 461/960 course *Critical Social Psychology of Climate Change*. The assignment asked students to write a paper intended for a general audience, rather than a standard academic paper (i.e., contractions/casual language permitted; informed by research without requiring explicit citations/references), about any topic that incorporated aspects of a critical social psychological approach to climate change. The paper uses "Other" citation style.

"Shut...up about climate change if your mouth is full of meat." This is what was written on a controversial protest sign in a picture that was recently posted in the Canadian Vegetarians and Vegans Facebook page. The post initiated a heated discussion between fellow vegetarians and vegans about whether people can or cannot genuinely care about the environment if they eat meat, whether people should food shame others, and whether this food shaming facilitates or impedes moving toward climate justice.

People are becoming increasingly aware of the effects that eating meat has on climate change. Research has found that the production and consumption of livestock, especially cattle, significantly contributes to climate change due to the amount of greenhouse gas emissions it produces. Compared to the production of plant protein, the production of animal protein requires an average of 11 times more fossil energy. Animal production also leads to [numerous other harmful consequences](#), including water pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. It's understandable how learning these consequences of eating meat might motivate people to become vegetarian, and how it could result in feelings of anger among vegetarians out of frustration that other people don't appear to be matching their

efforts to help mitigate climate change, leading them to attack and food shame those who eat meat – especially meat-eating environmentalists.

It's easy to feel good about yourself when you know that you're doing something that's good for the environment. However, just because someone doesn't engage in the [most impactful individual behaviour](#) for mitigating climate change doesn't mean that they should do nothing at all, or that the other environmentally friendly behaviours they engage in aren't valid. If we're focusing on individual behaviours (even though they aren't as effective at mitigating climate change as collective action), then vegetarians shouldn't be criticizing others' individual behaviours unless they don't drive a gas-powered vehicle, never buy anything that isn't second-hand or locally produced, never travel by plane, don't use electricity in a community that relies at least partially on coal power, or live a completely zero-waste lifestyle. These are all behaviours that also contribute to climate change, so engaging in them while criticizing meat-eating environmentalists would be hypocritical. It's virtually impossible to live a 100% environmentally friendly lifestyle, but engaging in some pro-environmental behaviours is better than engaging in none at all. Therefore, it's crucial that vegetarians recognize that criticizing others' individual dietary behaviours hinders rather than helps the fight against climate change, particularly due to the role that privilege plays in assuming that everyone can become vegetarian, as well as the limitations associated with focusing only on individual behaviours. These two aspects will be discussed below.

Assuming that Everyone can Become Vegetarian Comes from a Place of Unrecognized Privilege

Privilege refers to being in an inherently advantageous position in society due to the particular social categories that a person belongs to. It's perpetuated and maintained by systematic and institutional forces beyond the control and awareness of individual people. The thing about privilege is that society often prevents people from realizing that they have it. Something that vegetarians who have privilege may not realize is that eating meat is often due to more than just ignorance about its effects on climate change or a mere choice. One factor that affects meat consumption is that people may need to eat meat for health reasons; for example, if they have severe iron deficiency and need to eat meat because [the iron obtained from animal sources is absorbed by the body more easily than iron from plant sources](#), or if they have food allergies or intolerances that limit their options for obtaining iron or protein from non-meat sources. Failing to take into

account the fact that not everyone is able to eat whatever they want due to differences in how their bodies function minimizes the realities of people who have various disabilities or health problems affecting their eating behaviours. Another factor affecting meat consumption is cultural traditions, such as how Indigenous peoples have long and meaningful histories with respect to their hunting and fishing practices. Ignoring the meat-consumption traditions of other, non-dominant cultures indirectly perpetuates their subordination by imposing the values of the dominant culture onto them (not to mention that hunting and eating one's catch doesn't contribute to climate change the same way that manufacturing meat does). Additionally, financial and time constraints may play a role in the types of food people are able to purchase, and meat is generally cheap and readily available (for example, at fast food restaurants). Believing that everyone can and should become vegetarian ignores the fact that vegetarianism is not easy if you come from a marginalized community or have low socioeconomic status. Therefore, just because these individuals eat meat doesn't necessarily mean that they can't care about the environment – it simply means that there are other factors in their lives, besides their environmental concerns, that affect what they eat. Having privilege gives individuals more freedom related to their dietary choices.

The consideration of the role that privilege plays in food shaming people who eat meat is important because the flipside of privilege is *oppression* – the experience of ongoing, unjust disadvantages because of one's membership in a non-dominant social category. This food shaming reinforces oppression indirectly. When people fail to recognize the advantages that they experience based on their group membership (for example, having the freedom to eat whatever they want due to having high socioeconomic status), they may begin to believe that their status is justified, and that people who are less well-off are deserving of their status. This deepens the inequality between privileged and oppressed groups. This has implications for climate change mitigation because the greater the inequality between groups of people, the greater the environmental harm.

The degree to which people experience the consequences of climate change is inherently tied to our social relationships with others. Members of privileged groups disproportionately benefit from economic activities that cause environmental harm, such as those who own large corporations and make money off of the meat production that emits excessive amounts of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. On the other hand, oppressed groups suffer

disproportionate costs, such as unusually high rates of rare cancers from exposure to chemicals and gas emitted by production facilities that are typically located in communities with a high percentage of oppressed groups. As long as there's a drastic difference in the advantages and disadvantages between privileged and oppressed groups, then it's likely that privileged groups will continue to engage in environmentally destructive activities (such as meat production) that benefit them economically, at the expense of oppressed groups.

Climate Change is Bigger than Individual Behaviours

Focusing only on individual behaviours, such as meat consumption, paints a very narrow picture of the causes of climate change and what humans should be doing to help mitigate it. It's important to recognize the effects that production and power dynamics have on climate change. Large, polluting corporations (and the governments that benefit from them) want individuals to fight with each other because this provides a distraction from fighting against them. Governments have more influence over individuals than over corporations, which is why individual behaviour is their target for change. Governments also attempt to hide the fact that the environmental harm inflicted by these corporations is exponentially greater than the harm that any individual could inflict by eating meat. Citizens are bombarded with messages implying that consumer demand dictates production processes. For example, people are told that if they keep buying eco-friendly products, then environmentally harmful products will stop being produced. With respect to meat consumption, this places the blame on individuals who eat meat rather than on the corporations who are mass-producing and distributing the meat, even though these corporations are the ones who create the advertisements and apparent need for their products in the first place.

When responsibility for environmental problems is placed on individuals, this prevents people from considering the larger factors at play. The ultimate goal of vegetarians who food shame meat-eating environmentalists is social change – they want people to reduce or cease their meat consumption in order to create vast climate change mitigation effects. But social change is driven by the ability to imagine the various ways to act collectively against producers, politics, and power, and this imagination is threatened by the focus on individual meat consumption. Climate change can't be resolved purely through uncoordinated consumer choice, so individual meat eaters shouldn't be the target of vegetarian environmentalists' anger. This isn't to say that individual behaviours are ineffective; they're simply not the only aspect that we should be focusing on.

The concept of power also plays a large role in contributing to climate change. *Power* is the capacity to influence others, getting them to do things they otherwise wouldn't do, through the implementation of values, rules, and decisions. It's inherent in human interaction, the relationship dynamics between social groups, and the process of achieving social change. Individuals can exercise power over/against one another (for instance, privileged vegetarians making members of oppressed groups feel guilty about their meat consumption), or they can exercise power as a group in pursuit of a shared goal (such as vegetarians working together with *all* people who care about the environment, regardless of their eating behaviours, to collectively mitigate climate change).

Various forms of power are involved in the maintenance of the current unsustainable system of meat production and consumption. For example, power is exercised to keep meat prices low by obtaining cheap land from relatively powerless individuals or countries and by replacing labour with cheap and environmentally harmful machines. Additionally, power is exercised by large corporations to perpetuate the idea that the low cost of meat is beneficial for consumers. Societal norms also have power over consumers by way of making meat appear to be a necessity in meals and by associating meat consumption with masculinity. These power dynamics maintain meat consumption and make the production process resistant to change. Power is the most effective when least observable, and consumers are generally unaware of these forms of power – they only see the cheap meat prices.

Ignoring the role of power can be dangerous because it can lead to incorrect assumptions about what drives change in society, as well as unrealistic expectations about how easily certain sustainable practices can be spread. This lack of awareness about the role of power likely plays a role in vegetarians assuming that it would be relatively easy for everyone to become vegetarian and believing that these individual choices alone would significantly reduce meat production and its resulting impacts on the climate. Realistically, though, real sustainable consumption will only emerge through skillful organizing, collective action, and the focused exertion of influence; in other words, through the dynamics of power. The ability to recognize the role that power plays in meat production and consumption is the first step to deconstructing power and achieving the social change required for mitigating climate change.

How Vegetarians can Use Their Knowledge and Passion in a More Productive Way

Many people who are currently vegetarian were not born vegetarian. Realizing that meat consumption has profound negative effects on the climate and turning this information into a lifestyle change is a process that doesn't just happen overnight. Also, this process is a lot less likely to happen if meat eaters have vegetarians attacking them rather than supporting their concern for the environment. Accusatory approaches to *social influence* (getting people to change their behaviour) are ineffective because this will make people want to dismiss the problem rather than engage with it. Vegetarian environmentalists should civilly educate and support individuals who want to help fight climate change rather than telling them to "shut up" over the fact that they didn't become vegetarian before engaging in other pro-environmental behaviours – this language is divisive in a time where we need to come together to fight climate change effectively. Given that social influence is more successful within groups than between groups, instead of creating a divide between vegetarian and meat-eating environmentalists, using language that emphasizes that these groups have the same goal of mitigating climate change and are therefore members of the same group (for example, "if *we* care about climate change, *we* can reduce our meat consumption") will be more effective in getting more people to adopt a vegetarian diet. Attacking meat eaters may lead them to feel defensive of their eating behaviours, which may in turn accentuate the ingroup and outgroup boundaries between meat eaters and vegetarians, rather than motivating meat eaters to reduce their meat consumption. This group division is problematic because social change is greater when more people are involved. Related to this point, individuals who are neither vegetarian nor climate activists may see this divisive, food-shaming behaviour as immature or foolish, potentially preventing them from joining the cause. Therefore, vegetarians should instead engage in less accusatory and more productive strategies for encouraging others to limit their meat consumption (if possible) and help mitigate climate change.

If vegetarian environmentalists want to get more people on board with becoming vegetarian (while keeping in mind that not everyone will be able to cut meat out of their diet), one strategy could involve shifting societal norms. Specifically, research has found that exposure to *dynamic descriptive norms* (information about how other people's behaviour is changing over time, leading people to anticipate a changed future world and increasing people's perception of

how important the change is to others) can lead to attitude and behaviour change with respect to meat consumption. This attitude and behaviour change even occurs in the face of opposing static norms (such as the current notion that meat should be part of every meal). It's difficult for just one individual to change norms, so this would need to be a collective effort. Therefore, getting as many vegetarian environmentalists as possible to make the dynamic norm of reducing meat consumption more salient, rather than shaming people for eating meat, would be a much more effective strategy for getting people to reduce their meat consumption.

It's important to realize and remember that collective action is required for social change and climate change mitigation. As long as vegetarian environmentalists are criticizing and shaming meat eaters, especially meat-eating environmentalists, collective action will not be easily achieved. Recognizing that privilege, meat producers, and power are the enemy, rather than individual environmentalists who happen to eat meat, opens the door for vegetarian climate activists to effectively act in ways that help save the environment.

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