

Vegan Faces in Anthroparchal Spaces: Student Reflections on Educational Experiences of Veganism in Nutritional Sciences

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Abstract

In *Our Children and Other Animals* (2016), Cole and Stewart explored the role of the school education system in the tacit and explicit teaching of anthroparchy, primarily through the normalisation and promotion of anthropocentrism. This paper argues that those teachings not only continue at university, but that higher education presents additional challenging practico-discursive spaces for the rationalisation of anthroparchy. This is prevalent in the nutritional sciences: disciplines that actively promote anthroparchal discourses, practices and cultures. The academic study of nutritional sciences traditionally privileges human gain, presenting pretences of human health to give false legitimacy to the commodification of nonhuman animals for human pleasure. Despite this, there is growing interest in this field from vegan students and vegan academics, seeking to reimagine nutrition as a science of liberation and change, primarily via the deprivileging of human agency. Energised and excited by the potential for nutrition as a tool for sustainable ecology, social justice, planetary health, and the freedom of nonhuman animals, these scholars must navigate and challenge a science in which their progressive imagination is not always welcomed. The role of vegan students in disrupting cycles of educational anthroparchy must be acknowledged, explored, and developed if nutritional sciences are to serve as a platform for vegan innovation and a catalyst of change. This paper presents the emergent thoughts of five vegan undergraduate students studying professionally accredited programmes of nutritional sciences on their educational experiences, practices, and discourses that present conflicts between academic tradition and total liberation. Co-produced with a vegan social science lecturer, this paper concludes with remarks on the future scholarship at the intersection of vegan sociology and pedagogy, towards a future in which nutrition may serve as a science of liberation.

Keywords: anthroparchy; anthropocentrism; higher education; nutrition; studentship

1. INTRODUCTION

Veganism and other forms of post-anthropocentric consumption (Marchesini 2019) are growing in popularity across all age groups. Although the statistical representation of veganism is contested, recent estimates describe approximately 720,000 people in the United Kingdom (UK) as being vegan, representing 1.2% of the national population (Food Standards Agency 2020). Though the demography of veganism is poorly understood, it is recognised that veganism is more popular amongst younger age groups, being most common amongst people aged 18 to 35 (Bryant 2019), likely due to greater long-term adherence to veganism if the plant-based diet is adopted in earlier stages of the life course (Kerschke-Risch 2015). Veganism is also more common amongst university graduates (Radnitz, Beezhold, and Di Matteo 2015). Despite this rising popularity, an emergent body of literature suggests that vegans in educational spaces experience social prejudices and stigmatisations related to their ethical praxis and values (Kahn 2011). Identified as a barrier to full or open engagement with veganism (Markowski and Roxburgh 2019), the experience of vegan studentship presents a novel area for sociological investigation, building upon scholarship in the social construction of veganism in early school years and adolescence (Cherry 2015; Lindgren 2020). This paper seeks to provide initial reflections regarding the scope for future studies of vegan studentship.

Anthroparchy refers to the social processes and means by which the human species dominates and subjugates nonhuman animals and other organic entities such as natural ecosystems (Springer 2021). Cole and Stewart (2016) identified two distinctive pathways for the promotion of anthroparchal practices in the school environment: a formal curriculum for the explicit teaching of the exploitation of nonhuman animals, and a hidden curriculum to facilitate practical application of those concepts, thereby normalising human dominance. In the pre-university education system, these pathways might be seen in examples such as a formal curriculum including home economics classes that teach nonhuman animal proteins as essential elements of human nutrition, and a hidden curriculum offering a field trip to a zoo. These pathways, whilst sometimes more subtle in nature, can be found in physical and conceptual learning spaces in higher education. Amongst other life sciences, this is particularly true in the teaching of nutritional sciences. Curricula for professionally accredited undergraduate programmes in nutrition, dietetics and food science demands the teaching and learning of content that may be comfortably situated, sociologically, at the intersection of anthropocentrism and anthroparchy: students are taught that the rights and interests of nonhuman animals may be negotiated or explicitly denied for human privilege, and that this may permissibly be expressed through violent action. For the theoretical framing of this paper, these disciplines will be described using the collective term “nutritional sciences”.

This paper seeks to explore emergent insights of the experience of vegan studentship in the nutritional sciences. Five vegan undergraduate students in these fields studying at the University of Nottingham, representing all degree stages, were provided with a prompt sheet of potential questions, framed as reflecting upon their lived or anticipated experience of veganism “before”, “during” and “after” university, though they were not required to answer

any questions in particular. This chronological breakdown of the student experience was intended to aid reflection, embracing the changes in experience and perception that may occur through the academic cycle.

The responses to these reflective cues are presented here as a collaborative reflection on the vegan student experience in nutritional sciences, in a similar style to that adopted in a recent paper on vegan stigma (Bresnahan, Zhuang, and Zhu 2016). All five contributors are thereby recognised as co-authors, rather than research participants. The production of the paper in this format presents challenges when considering the opportunity for authorship is not open to all vegan students across the relevant courses. However, we also consider that the role of students as authors rather than research participants provides students with novel academic experiences that might not otherwise be accessed. Future developments of this approach might therefore see vegan student-researchers collaborating with vegan student-participants to further progress vegan scholarship concerning experiences of higher education.

This paper has been written as a co-production between five vegan undergraduate students and their vegan social science lecturer. The writing process recognised and followed best practice guidance in learner-teacher co-authorship of publications according to Burks and Chumchal's Decision Trees on Earned Authorship (2009) to empower student voice and promote co-production through fair and truthful recognition of student contributions in the production of knowledge. The authors also adhered to the Recommended Best Practices of the International Association of Vegan Sociologists (2021). In accordance with the latter's guidance on the disruption of the speciesist nature of the human/animal binary, this paper uses the term "nonhuman animals". Where the names of specific species of nonhuman animals are described, apostrophes are used to recognise nonhuman animal possession of produce that has been involuntarily taken by humans, with assumed anthroparchal violence.

2. MOTIVATING LIBERATION THROUGH NUTRITION

These reflections concern our experiences "before" university. We considered the role nutrition might serve in liberation of both human and nonhuman animals, mired by familial, institutional and cultural doubts about the health benefits or risks of veganism to humans. The nature of this influence was voiced in both directions; some of us found veganism through an existing interest in nutritional science, whilst others realised our professional interests in nutrition through veganism.

"Spurred by the majority of my family's doubt, I was determined to succeed at veganism and to not 'die of protein deficiency', as they all expected. I thoroughly researched all the nutrients in which I could possibly get deficient. I fell in love with cooking and through all this, I found a new path, to dietetics."

"My interest in nutrition, and my subsequent adoption of a vegan lifestyle, began with the discovery of the book "How Not to Die" by Dr. Michael Greger. Asking myself why some of the information being presented by him and other advocates for plant-exclusive nutrition

was not presented by healthcare institutions, was my initial motivation for applying for the dietetics course."

Some of us openly recognised initial anthropocentric motivations for adopting a plant-based diet: improving dietary health in humans and preventing non-communicable diseases in human populations were cited as key influences in initial abstention from consumption of nonhuman animals. However, those initial interests inspired further consideration of the ethical implications of plant-based diets, allowing for our transitions towards veganism as the post-anthropocentric value of plant-based diets was realised.

"I've been vegetarian since the age of 12, later becoming vegan a year before starting my course. I had already looked into nutrition at this point and my interest was a partial contributor to why I decided to follow a plant-based diet. I've now been vegan for almost four years and the more I've learnt about the ethical and environmental implications of diets based around nonhuman animal products, has further motivated me to stick to a vegan diet."

"Before turning vegan, I was set on medicine. However, after watching 'What the Health' and falling down the rabbit hole of vegan documentaries, my eyes were opened to the prospect of preventative medicine, of curing diseases that I was to treat as a medical doctor, before they manifested as a problem. I had never considered that nutrition could do this. This concept intrigued me on an individual basis, but also from a global perspective. A vegan diet could help prevent further damage of climate change. And, most importantly, I could still eat all my favourite foods and meals without harming a living being."

Following exploration of the potential for nutritional science as a platform for liberation of nonhuman animals, privileging of planetary needs and development of social justice matters, we came to see professions in the nutritional sciences as having potential for positive change. However, some of us experienced problematic anticipation of vegan studentship, recognising our experience of higher education was likely to be affected by being vegan.

"Before joining the course, I had already resigned to the fact that I may be asked to taste food of nonhuman animal origin. I now understand this is never the case, but this information would have been useful before enrolment. Whilst being interviewed for the course, I specifically avoided saying the word 'vegan' for fear of being rejected based on that fact."

"When I initially applied to university to study a degree in nutrition, I whole heartedly believed that I would be able to keep my personal affiliation with veganism separate from my educational environment. Of course, I anticipated that I would openly discuss veganism with my fellow students and the lecturers, but I believed that to achieve a successful career in nutrition, I would not be able to promote a vegan diet."

These initial reflections on the motivations for vegan studentship, and the experience of vegans preparing to enter higher education, suggest a natural positioning for nutritional sciences as a platform for the liberation of nonhuman animals and addressing complex relationships between interests in human health, the sustainability of ecosystems and the

rights of nonhuman animals. Future explorations of anticipatory experiences of vegan studentship might further consider vegan stigma and perceptions of vegan privilege in guiding subject choice when making decisions about higher education.

3. EXPERIENCING THE FORMAL CURRICULUM

These reflections concern our experiences “during” university. The formal curriculum, as described by Cole and Stewart (2014) concerns the structured learning and teaching activities of an educational system: the prescribed learning material, the way it is structured to form curricula and the methods used to teach and assess students. In higher education in the UK, this typically takes the form of “modules”: the basic units of learning, expressed through timetabled teaching activities commonly known as “lectures”. On nutritional science programmes accredited by recognised professional bodies, students study a range of modules covering diverse material, primarily privileging human interests in accordance with professional competency and knowledge frameworks. This curriculum, however, is slowly changing, with new modules being introduced concerning planetary health to better make sense of the role nutrition plays in the co-dependence of human health and the sustainability of natural ecosystems. Optional modules in “animal nutrition” might concern the dietary needs of nonhuman animals, but the material is taught purposefully for the development of nonhuman animals for human consumption. We, the authors of this paper, had not studied those modules. Introductory modules during the first year of our nutritional science programmes concerned global food security, presented in anthropocentric contexts. Our reflections described lectures on these modules in some depth, particularly concerning the framing of this content as either concealing anthroparchy, or debasing veganism.

“The most challenging lectures have been those on agri-food systems, showing harrowing images of enslaved nonhuman animals and discussing in detail how they are ‘reared’ and ‘bred’. The discussion of how the nonhuman animals’ lives are ended prematurely was never mentioned.”

“My course discussed ‘free from’ diets and the topic of vegan and vegetarian diets is coming up in the future. Morals and ethics are always very briefly mentioned, but never discussed in detail. The learning experience is often a challenge as a vegan. The constant narrative by some lecturers is that ‘vegans should be careful’ or that vegans should plan carefully to avoid deficiencies. I am always the first to point out that care and planning is required by everyone wanting to eat healthier and is not specifically a vegan problem.”

“When I reached university, I was hopeful that the benefits of a vegan diet would be explored in my lectures. However, despite being vaguely mentioned, mostly when prompted by students, I was left disappointed by the lack of discussion, let alone promotion, of a plant-based diet. A diet that could help reduce the incidence of diseases such as diabetes should be celebrated in my field, not avoided. Many mentions it was given were almost always critical.”

Some of our reflections related to lectures that actively confronted the nutritional needs of nonhuman animals and the impact of food systems on the environment. However, this

may have been a mask for anthropocentricity: the dietary health of nonhuman animals was taught only to increase efficiency of the production of those species for human consumption, and the mention of the environment concerned the efficiency of land use to legitimise the privileging of human needs.

"Certain lectures advocated against [veganism] through poorly evidenced arguments such as 'soya milk causes mass deforestation', despite that most soy is fed to nonhuman animals. In lectures about sustainability, the main focus was on making nonhuman animal agriculture more environmentally friendly, but actually reducing nonhuman animal consumption wasn't mentioned."

"I found lectures on global food security particularly challenging when discussing veganism. It has been difficult to learn about the culling of nonhuman animals for 'meat' production, however it was interesting to learn about the different ways in which they are kept, purportedly optimising their welfare. One lecture specifically felt like a critique of the vegan diet. It was a lecture on sustainability, providing several examples of how vegans were contributing to environmental issues. It placed sole blame for rainforest deforestation on vegans just because vegans eat soybeans. What wasn't said was that a rapidly growing human population demands increased production of nonhuman animals, subsequently increasing demand for soybean meal. That need for soybeans to feed nonhuman animals results in deforestation, to cultivate land on which to grow more soybean crops."

"One guest lecture was given by a dairy farmer. He proposed that 'meat-free Monday' was a pointless exercise and that the healthiest diets must include some nonhuman animal protein several times a week. It was disturbing that on a course about giving evidence-based information to the public, someone from outside was allowed to give this advice."

We all reflected on a particular lecture series about the dairy industry on our degrees, taught annually as part of an introductory module on food security. These sessions evoked strong offence for varying reasons and raised concern regarding the promotion of dairy produce in the diet.

"Another lecturer voiced an opinion that I personally found offensive to mothers that allow their young children to consume soya milk. I am a vegan mother who chooses to bring their child up on a (mostly) vegan diet, including the use of soya milk and soya-based products. Said products, I was told, were 'not fit for a dog to consume, let alone children'. I know these comments were not directed towards me personally, and despite the negative press against even moderate consumption of soya being now outdated, if a university lecturer is strongly voicing this opinion, then it is no wonder that the layperson may feel the same way about such products."

"A lecture on the nutritional value of dairy provided a photo advertising how dairy farmers help human babies to grow healthily. The lecturer then went on to slam almond milk. A lot of vegans on the course were furious after this lecture. I think I got about halfway through the lecture before I gave up. After that, I really hated listening to these lectures, I even skipped some of them, which is not like me at all."

Despite our recognition of these challenges, about the content of the formal curriculum promoting anthroparchal norms, we also highly valued the rigorous science, intellectual curiosity and academic professionalism of our lecturers in providing platforms for the exploration of plant-based nutrition.

"The negative experiences on the course have been with academics from outside nutritional science, on modules about the wider agri-food system. Although annoying at the time to hear negative opinions on vegan diets, and unsupported claims on the health benefits of products such as 'dairy', the fact that these academics were not likely to be keeping up-to-date with scientific studies into the nutritional value of these products, and the vegan alternatives, made it easier to take their statements with a pinch of salt."

"The nutritional science academics have had positive opinions on veganism. They are very accepting and encouraging of plant-based alternatives and vegan diets, so long as they are followed healthily and all nutritional requirements are still being met. As vegetarian and vegan diets are supported by the British Dietetic Association and National Health Service, these opinions are justified and have made me feel validated in my dietary habits as a vegan student."

Regarding the formal curriculum, it is evident, as somewhat expected, that anthroparchal discourses in nutritional science programmes evoke a profound emotive response in vegan students. We experience a binary of academic repulsion and support: academics who engage in anti-vegan narratives devoid of scientific integrity contrasting with scholars who embrace a scientific curiosity, being open to critical discussion of anthropocentric science and the emergent ideas that contest them. Future developments in this area of research and pedagogy could concern vegan-centric audits of curricula and their alignment to the practice guidance of professional regulators, as veganism becomes subject to increasing legal protections (The Vegan Society 2020).

4. NAVIGATING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

These reflections further concern student experiences "during" university, but outside of scheduled learning activity. Less tangible than the content of lectures and modules is the invisible and often unspoken normalisation of anthroparchy through the hidden curriculum. Cole and Stewart (2014) focused on the tacit endorsement of human dominance in schools via eating spaces and teacher-led consumption practices in lunch breaks. Whilst those dietary norms are replicated and maintained at university, social spaces in higher education are more pronounced, with the majority of students living on or near university estates for at least short periods during their degree. In our reflections, the social impact of veganism on participation in the student experience was voiced through the problematisation and, to some extent, medicalisation of veganism.

"I am always wary of telling people I am vegan to avoid any negative comments but coming to university I have had more positive experiences than negative. There are more vegans on this campus than I expected and that has made it easier to be more open about

it. There are some people I just know are going to give me grief about it, so I keep it to myself."

"In a cookery session, I was in a group that was asked to make omelettes. None of my group members had cooked omelettes before, so I jumped in so that staff would not be disappointed with our performance. I started to feel uncomfortable and was very aware of the smell of the chickens' eggs. I did manage to brave the experience in the end but brought up the experience with a member of staff. I was advised to book a counselling session to develop coping strategies should I be required to do this sort of work again in the future."

The teaching, framing and otherwise conceptualisation of veganism in the formal and hidden curriculum gave us the opportunity to reflect upon the role of scientific integrity in the promotion and study of veganism. This challenged us to consider anthropocentrism that occurs in the vegan diet, such as agricultural practices that may not directly harm nonhuman animals but threaten the sustainability of natural ecosystems.

"It is clear that a vegan diet is something that is continuing to grow in popularity, so ensuring that nutrition professionals are educated with the correct, scientific information surrounding a vegan diet is paramount in ensuring that we can confidently and accurately work with vegan, or vegan curious, clients in our careers ahead."

"Certain parts of the lectures have made me rethink my diet from a sustainability perspective. I hadn't realised how bad almond milk was for the environment. I can accept scientific justifications as to which parts of the vegan diet may not be great because I want to have a part in improving the environment, however the way in which these messages were shared was what didn't sit right with me, as if everything we're doing as vegans is useless and that we may as well give up and just 'enjoy meat'."

Despite some challenging experiences of the hidden curriculum (Cole and Stewart 2016), we reflected on the support that staff in the nutritional sciences provide and the positive aspects of learning nutritional science in a supportive community of intellectually curious vegan and non-vegan students.

"To my surprise, there are several vegan students and staff in the nutritional sciences community at our university. Not only that, but there are also other students beyond my course who are very interested in learning more about veganism, including how exactly evidence-based nutrition can be used to support and promote a vegan diet."

"The lecturers who I have worked with in practical sessions have been very understanding of dietary requirements and have made cooking practicals accessible for all. Throughout hands-on practical classes, I have always felt I had the option of abstaining from cooking with nonhuman animal products myself by delegating these recipes to other members of the cooking group. This has allowed me to still achieve the learning objectives of the practical sessions by overseeing the cooking process and end-product without having to handle or consume nonhuman animal products myself."

Discussion of the hidden curriculum also evoked diverse reflections, suggesting that vegan students might experience something of a "sink or swim" dichotomy at university.

This perhaps calls for the integration of vegan studentship in the pastoral support offered in higher education, discussion of veganism as a form of protected identity (The Vegan Society 2020), or a general shift in higher education discourses towards a more open and reflexive discussion regarding the politics of nutrition.

5. LOOKING TOWARDS A FUTURE OF TOTAL LIBERATION

These reflections concern our visions and expectations of our lives and careers “after” university. To end our reflections on vegan studentship, we reflected on our intended graduate destinations. These are presented here without equivocation or interpretation, towards a future of valuation and recognition of veganism in academic spheres and a body of emergent vegan sociological scholarship to support it.

“I want to provide information to anyone wanting to change their dietary habits towards a plant-exclusive diet and provide information for those that are already following this lifestyle. This motivation has not changed since joining the course. If anything, it has provided me the insight that my expertise and knowledge will be needed as the movement gains more traction.”

“In the short time since I have started my degree in nutrition, I have taken a ‘180’ and decided that I will 100% incorporate my personal affiliation with veganism into my professional work in the future, and I very much look forward to it.”

“My current intentions for post-university employment involves working in the mental health specialism of dietetics. As this will likely involve working with individuals with eating disorders or history of disordered eating, it is unlikely that I will bring my personal dietary views into my clinics. This is because although it plays a positive role of dietary abundance and variety in my life, it may be seen as a form of dietary restriction and further disordered eating in my future patients. I will instead continue to focus on the evidence-based guidelines specific to my patients and only prescribe treatments to my clients which follow these and are suitable for their current mental and physical states.”

“I want to work as a paediatric dietitian. I will most definitely promote veganism and help families who wish to raise their children as vegans. There is not enough information readily available on this, in fact there seems to be a lot of judgement towards those who are raising children as vegans as if this will make them weaker or underdeveloped compared to meat eaters.”

“As a nutritionist, I will generally promote a more plant-based, evidence-based diet where reasonable. Patient-centred care is stressed in our curriculum and if a plant-based diet will support the physical and wellbeing of our clients, then information about it should be given. It is my opinion that this knowledge should be promoted and discussed much more widely in our curriculum so nutrition professionals, the bridge between confusing nutrition science and the general public, are aware of the benefits of a plant-based diet, not to push onto unwilling clients but as another method to help fight against diseases, promote sustainability and improve the lives of our clients.”

Our summary collaborative reflection on these visions of a future of vegan scholarship and studentship is a remark on the positivity we see in our futures. The anthroparchal practices and discourses we experienced “before” and “during” university have generated and motivated further aspiration for championing veganism in our careers and beyond. To this end, whilst the anthroparchal spaces in nutritional science may sometimes be challenging to experience, they also challenge us to address the culture that perpetuates them and support vegan discourses that dispute them.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As in society and culture, vegan studentship in nutritional sciences is situated within a complex micropolitics of change. In all three of the “before”, “during” and “after” stages of vegan experiences of higher education, we recognise a dichotomy in which vegan students experience both support and contention from a range of social actors. Our role in progressing nutritional sciences as those of total liberation offers potential, but this potential is mired by framings of veganism in familial, institutional and cultural contexts that problematise veganism to further legitimise anthroparchal discourses and values. As this body of conceptual work develops, vegan scholarship that values the experiences of vegan students beyond the nutritional sciences may further provide opportunities for liberation. We therefore conclude this paper with a call to embrace the scholastic potential of vegan sociology and the role students might play in its development.

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