

# A bioethical approach: vegan and vegetarian experiences\*

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**Summary.** Veganism and vegetarianism are bioethical approaches as well as lifestyles and philosophies of life. There may be more than one reason why people choose to be a vegan/vegetarian. They can be discussed in terms of ethics, animal rights, respect for sentient beings, ecology and violence. In this study, veganism/vegetarianism is discussed in detail in terms of bioethics. A qualitative research was performed by using the snowball or chain sampling method and 40 people older than 18 years old and vegan/vegetarian for at least two months were interviewed. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with each participant from June 20 to October 24 in 2015. The data gathered in the study were evaluated in accordance with content analysis. Responses to open-ended questions were coded. Emerging themes were discussed and appropriate suggestions were made. The results of the study revealed reasons for adopting veganism/vegetarianism, ease and difficulties and benefits and harmful effects of these life-styles. It was concluded that veganism and vegetarianism could be dealt with in terms of bioethics.

**Key words:** vegan, vegetarian, ethics, bioethics, ecology, violence

## Introduction

Veganism and vegetarianism, gaining popularity in the world (1-4) are considered not only a type of nutrition but also a lifestyle and philosophy of life (5). Thirty-five percent of the Indian population, 9% of the Italian and German populations and 4% of the American population are vegetarian and 2% of the American population is vegan (4, 6).

The word vegetarian originates from the Latin word *vegetus*. In opposition to what is generally thought, it does not stem from the word *vegetable*. *Vegetus* means full of life, healthy and alive. According to a definition made in 1842, vegetarianism refers to a type of nutrition in which red meat, chicken and fish are not consumed, but eggs, milk and dairy products are consumed depending on preferences (7). Its definition was improved by all members of the International

Vegetarian Union in 2011 and vegetarianism was defined as a type of nutrition, the source of which is vegetables but which either includes or excludes animal produce like dairy products, eggs and honey (whether they are consumed or not depends on preferences) (8).

Veganism means not consuming animal produce at all (like yoghurt, milk and honey etc.). The diet of vegans involves vegetables, fruit, crops and nuts (e.g. walnut and hazelnut etc.) (9). Vegans also do not wear clothes made of animal products like wool, silk and leather, do not use products tested on animals (e.g. cosmetics, detergents and toothpaste etc.) and do not consume products containing milk such as chocolate, cake and pasta. They do not go to circuses since animals are used there and do not watch movies in which living animals are used (8, 10-14, 17). Veganism is dealt with separately although it is a part of vegetarianism (9). The word *vegan* was coined by Donald Watson and

\* This is a Doctoral Thesis of Department of Social Environment Sciences of Social Sciences Institute of Ankara University

the first vegan society was established in England (The Vegan Society) in 1944. According to The Vegan Society, the definition of veganism updated in 1979, is as in the following: “[...] a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms, it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals” (15).

In the present study, reasons for adoption of veganism/vegetarianism, ease and difficulties, general benefits and harms, ecological benefits and harms and bioethical evaluations of these life-styles were dealt with.

## Material and Methods

### *Study population and sample*

This study had a qualitative design. A purposeful sampling, called snowball or chain sampling method, was used and vegans and vegetarians living in Ankara, Turkey, were contacted. The study population included people aged over 18 years and being a vegan/vegetarian for at least two months. The study sample comprised of 40 participants accepting to participate in the study.

### *Development and administration of data collection tool*

Data were collected with an interview form prepared by the researcher in light of the literature (7, 8, 15-17). The form was composed of four parts and 18 questions. Part I included eight questions about demographic characteristics of the participants. Part II included two questions about descriptive characteristics of the participants in terms of veganism/vegetarianism (duration and type of veganism/vegetarianism). Part III included seven questions about opinions of the participants about veganism/vegetarianism (The reasons for vegan/vegetarian lifestyle, problems in social relationships because vegan/vegetarian lifestyle). Part IV included one question about whether the participants would like to add anything about the issue. They participants gave informed consent. The interviews, conducted with the participants, were recorded. Three participants declined voice recordings. Therefore, their

interviews were only written down. All the interviews were held between 20 June and 24 October in 2015.

### *Data Analysis*

Inductive content analysis was performed to evaluate data, which were obtained from responses to open ended questions. To achieve this, first, transcribed data were read by the researchers. Second, the data were coded and categorized by two researchers separately according to the predetermined themes based on the aim of the study (18). Then, the researchers discussed the themes, added the newly emerging themes and reached a consensus on them. This process allowed determining themes directly based on the data collected (n=21 for vegans and n=19 for vegetarians) and strengthening the credibility of the results.

## Results

Most of the participants (72.5%) were young. In fact, they were aged 18-34 years. More than half of the participants were female. The majority of the participants was single and did not have any children. Almost all the participants were university graduates or university students. The majority of the participants were working in private sector. Half of the participants were vegans or vegetarians for 1-4 years (Table 1).

Twenty-one participants were vegan. Most of them commented that they became a vegan after experiencing vegetarianism, which they described as a transition period. Only three participants, all of whom were male, became a vegan without experiencing vegetarianism (Table 1).

The participants usually mentioned more than one reason for their vegan/vegetarian lifestyle. The most frequent reasons were objecting to animal exploitation and ethics, followed by respect for life of sentient beings, ecology and conscience. The reasons why the individuals participating in the present study adopted veganism/vegetarianism were considered under different headings.

### *Objecting to animal exploitation*

The participants adopted veganism/vegetarianism as their lifestyle since they were against animal exploi-

**Table 1.** Descriptive characteristics of the participants (n=40)

<b>Descriptive Characteristics</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age Groups (yrs.)</b>		
18-34	29	72.5
35-49	9	22.5
50 and older	2	5.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	24	60.0
Male	16	40.0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	4	10.0
Single	36	90.0
<b>Having Children</b>		
Yes	2	5.0
No	38	95.0
<b>Education</b>		
High school graduates	2	5.0
University students	4	10.0
University graduates	25	62.5
Attending an MA or a PhD program	9	22.5
<b>Occupation</b>		
Academician	3	7.5
Teacher	3	7.5
Civil servants	6	15.0
Yoga trainer	2	5.0
Having one's own business	5	12.5
Working in private sector	16	40.0
Student	5	12.5
<b>Duration of being a vegan/vegetarian</b>		
2-6 months	3	7.5
6 months-1 year	0	0.0
1 year-4 years	21	52.5
4-10 years	8	20.0
More than 10 years	8	20.0
<b>Type of vegetarians</b>		
Vegan	21	52.5
Lacto-ovo vegetarian	12	30.0
Lacto vegetarian	2	5.0
Ovo vegetarian	1	2.5
Pesco vegetarian	4	10.0
<b>History of Becoming Vegetarian/Vegan</b>		
Directly becoming vegan	3	7.5
First becoming vegetarian and then adopting veganism	18	45.0
Vegetarian	19	47.5
<b>Towtal</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>

tation. They argued that animal products should not be used at all. *“Animals suffer somewhere I have never seen. The process starts and finishes there and animals are changed into food, put into packages and served. I’m not involved in this process and I don’t see it. I don’t know about the connection between them?”* (39-year-old female vegan). It seems that the participants became a vegan/vegetarian since they were against animal exploitation and that especially the vegans did not consume animal products and adopted and maintained a lifestyle objecting to this exploitation.

#### *Ethical views*

The participants noted that people categorized animals into two: animals to love and animals to eat and that this categorization is unethical. They believe that just as people with disabilities have rights and are treated like normal people, animals should also have rights. This belief was expressed by the participants as in the following: *“I think animals cannot be considered as goods, but humans categorize animals into several types: those to love, to eat, less intelligent and more intelligent. There are humans with Down syndrome, lower intelligence and not as strong as we are. People do not find discrimination against them ethical, but they find categorization of animals according to their appearances ethical!”* (21-year-old male vegan). A vegan noted that even the fact that humans are the most intelligent beings in the world does not mean that they can exploit animals: *“Humans are meat-eaters. My ability to eat does not require me to eat it.”* (19-year-old male vegan). They thought that veganism was a normal, expected and right attitude. *“Being a vegan does not mean loving animals. Actually, it means doing what is right”* (19-year-old male vegan). *“Inability of animals to express their lack of consent influences me”* (33-year-old male vegan).

#### *Respect for life of sentient beings: all sentient beings are equal*

The participants believed that all sentient beings and animals are equal. They argued that meat from cows and goats should not be eaten just as meat from cats and dogs are not. There is not a difference between animals. All of them are equally valuable.

Another reason why the participants became a vegan/vegetarian was that they respected life of sen-

tient beings. Some participants explained it as follows: *“People eating meat violate the right (of animals) to live”* (31-year-old female vegan). *“The primary concern of a vegan should be to object to speciesism and the main principle of veganism is that all living things are equal.”* (26-year-old female vegan).

#### *Ecology*

The participants also thought that vegan/vegetarian lifestyles were beneficial in terms of ecology. One of the comments made by the participants were as follows: *“Animal industry causes air pollution. I studied geography. I’m attending an MA program and searching for new information and I know about the issue”* (25-year-old female vegan).

#### *Violence*

The participants maintained that all types of exploitation should be considered collectively. They explained that violence against women and children and exploitation of children at workplaces should be considered together with exploitation of animals. Their argument was that one type of exploitation would lead to others and that none of them should be allowed to occur. One participant made the following comment about the issue: *“I’m in the opinion that all living things should have freedom. I think attempts to defend both animal rights and human rights should be made at the same time”* (33-year-old male vegan).

#### *Conscience*

Another issue discussed by vegans/vegetarians was related to suffering of animals during their slaughter. One participant commented as in the following: *“The slaughter cannot be humane. If we approve of it, then we will have to accept human abuse”* (24-year-old male vegan). Therefore, slaughter of animals should not be approved under any circumstances.

## **Discussion**

The most striking finding of this study was that the participants adopted veganism/vegetarianism for ethical reasons. It has also been reported in the literature that individuals most frequently adopt veganism/

vegetarianism for ethical, ecological and health related reasons (19-23). But health was never the primary reason; this was seen in another study too (24).

In the present study, the participants underlined lack of competence in animals. They explained that inability of animals to speak and express their feelings and opinions does not mean that humans can use or consume them. Inability to speak is associated with competency. When human-beings undergo a procedure, for example, when they are exposed to a medical intervention, informed consent has to be obtained from them. So that they can give consent, they are expected to have competence. It means that so that they can make decisions, they communicate, understand information given, have certain values and goals and have an ability to think about a given decision. When people do not have competence (patients with dementia, infants and unconscious people etc.), their first-degree relatives make decisions on behalf of them. Extreme care is taken about these decisions since one makes it on behalf of another (16). This decision-making process also applies to animals. This suggests that humans should have an ethical principle about animals. Clearly, the participants in the current study argue that if an object has a value in it and for itself, that thing has an internal value (25). Therefore, humans should respect animals since they have an internal value.

Another important finding of this study was that the participants were against speciesism. It refers to prejudiced or biased treatment of a biological species for the benefits of another (17) or considering one's own benefits as more important than others' (26). The participants believed that all sentient beings (women, children, animals and patients) should be respected and treated fairly.

In the current study, the participants emphasized another reason for becoming vegan/vegetarian; i.e. minimization of damage to the environment. The aim of vegan/vegetarian lifestyles is to minimize damage to the environment. However, it is nearly impossible for humans not to give harm to the environment in this technological era. People use many objects, material and energy (like pens/pencils, paper, television, mobile phones, computers, electricity and motor vehicles etc.) during a day. Most of their sources come from nature and using them may damage nature. In addi-

tion, growing agricultural products causes damage to nature. In the present study, one participant admitted that she lives in a city and does not know how all products are manufactured exactly and what they contain.

It is not possible for humans to survive without eating vegetables, while it is possible to live without animal products. In other words, humans can survive without using animals. One participant in this study said that humans need to consume vegetables to survive and that being an omnivore does not require eating meat. When veganism/vegetarianism is considered as "sustainable nutrition" (27), it is clear that the issue involves responsibilities of humans regarding lives of future generations (4, 25).

In the current study, the vegan participants were against becoming vegetarian. They argued that vegetarianism has conflicting practices. They explained that although vegetarians respected animal rights, they ate secondary animal products like milk, yoghurt and eggs. Yourofsky, an animal rights activist and lecturer, has also advocated that one should become a vegan rather than a vegetarian (28).

While ethics tries to find answers to open-ended questions about human relations by making judgments "good or bad", responsibility, an important element of ethics, is restricted with humans. Bioethics allowed expansion of human responsibilities for their relations with the ecosystem including animals, plants, air and water. It examines ethical problems arising in a network of relationships extending from all sentient beings to the ecosystem. It has a wide scope involving quite different subjects such as artificial fertilization, donation of organs, tissues and cells, embryological studies, cloning, gene transmission, agricultural policies, genetically modified organisms and environmental problems. In general, the core of bioethics is life; not only the life of humans but also the life of all organisms available in nature (16). Accordingly, the subject of veganism and vegetarianism, directly related to the life of animals and ecology, is bioethics.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants became a vegan/vegetarian for more than one reason. The primary reasons were ob-

jection to animal exploitation and ethical concerns. Other reasons were respect for lives of sentient beings, conscience, ecology, violence and speciesism.

The results of the study elucidated the reasons why the participants adopted veganism/vegetarianism. They gave importance to equality between sentient beings and therefore were against speciesism and violence. They thought that vegetarianism and veganism in particular should exist to ensure equality between all sentient beings. All they are equal and have the right to live in the world. Veganism means objecting to all kinds of exploitation (exploitation of animals, women and children etc.) and believing that all sentient beings are equal. That humans use and eat animals is not considered ethical and inability of animals to express their lack of consent for procedures they are exposed to creates ethical concerns. It is obvious that animal exploitation is associated with ethics. In fact, the participants did not find animal exploitation ethical.

It can be concluded that veganism/vegetarianism has many aspects including animal exploitation, animal rights, ethics, ecology, respect for lives of sentient beings, equality between sentient beings, speciesism and violence and that all these features are the subjects of bioethics. This suggests that veganism/vegetarianism is both a nutrition style and a bioethical approach prioritizing life of sentient beings and arguing for equality between all sentient beings.

From the abovementioned point of view, it can be suggested that incorporation of human-animal-nature relations based on bioethics, animal rights and love for animals into preschool education can be useful. In addition, provision of education about bioethics, veganism and vegetarianism for university students, especially candidates of health professionals (veterinarians, doctors and nurses) will contribute to creation of awareness about the issue. Using V-Label on vegan/vegetarian products will facilitate selection of products during shopping and help create awareness about the issue in the society.

The present study has one limitation. Since the snowball or chain sampling method was used, the sample included individuals knowing each other and belonging to a certain group. Therefore, the results of the study are based on opinions of a certain group. As a result, further qualitative and quantitative studies in-

volving different sections of the population in Turkey should be conducted.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the vegans and vegetarians who contribute to the study by giving their opinions.

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