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Pescetarianism: The Choices, Experiences, and Trajectories of Seafood-Inclusive Dietary Lifestyles

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Pescetarianism: The Choices, Experiences, and Trajectories of Seafood-Inclusive Dietary Lifestyles

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Pescetarianism:
The Choices, Experiences, and Trajectories
of Seafood-Inclusive Dietary Lifestyles

Eric Lai

Abstract

Pescetarianism — generally defined as any dietary lifestyle that includes fish and shellfish but excludes beef, chicken, pork, and other land-based meat products — has grown increasingly common among American consumers, due in part to heightened societal interests in healthy eating and in mitigating the ethical and environmental ramifications of industrial livestock. Through 36 qualitative interviews with self-defined pescetarians regionally distributed throughout the United States, this dissertation generates a sociological framework for pescetarianism as a dietary choice and practice, disentangling the heterogeneous dietary constructions that elicit the pescetarian label; identifying the motives, rationales, and beliefs underlying decisions to adopt or maintain a pescetarian diet; and assessing how practitioners of pescetarianism navigate their social worlds. Through these analytic dimensions, the study addresses how pescetarian dietary choices can be defined and incentivized by cultural and regional influences, sociopolitical considerations, biomedical interpretations of health and nutrition, and other factors. This work draws from and identifies gaps in existing sociological scholarship on diets like vegetarianism and veganism; by constructing a new framework that addresses pescetarianism, the project ultimately elaborates upon and extends current understandings of how social influences shape emergent dietary practices — potentially informing not only future directions in the sociology of food, but also prospective efforts to reconcile the national palate with public health.

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Chapter One

Introduction

pes·ce·tar·i·an or pes·ca·tar·i·an \pe-skə-ˈter-ē-ən\ *noun* (probably from Italian *pesce* fish (from Latin *piscis*) + English vege*tarian*): one whose diet includes fish but no meat

Since the turn of the century, fueled by mutually reinforcing surges of interest in healthy diets and responsibly sourced food, the popularity of seafood has grown among consumers and the public. In the United States, after a fifteen-year period (1988-2002) during which per capita seafood consumption was just under 15.1 pounds — never exceeding 15.6 pounds in a given year — in 2003 per capita consumption surged past 16 pounds, a threshold that has been surpassed every year since (Van Voorhees, 2009). From 2003 onward, the average American has eaten larger quantities of seafood than at any other period in the nation's history.

Concurrently with this rise in seafood consumption, increasing numbers of people are opting for pescetarianism: diets that, generally defined, incorporate seafood while excluding the consumption of other types of meat. While the precise definition ascribed to pescetarianism — as well as the selection of foods included in a pescetarian's diet — varies by the individual, most (but not all) practitioners are characterized by their avoidance of land-based meats like beef, chicken, and pork; beyond their inclusion of fish and shellfish, pescetarian diets tend to converge with those of vegetarians (whose food choices, it should be emphasized, also vary significantly from person to person).

A 2007 survey found that 7% of the British population identified itself as pescetarian — a figure comparable with the 9% self-identifying as vegetarian (Key Note Vegetarian Foods Market Assessment Report, 2007). While surveys specifically citing

pescetarianism have not been conducted to date in the United States, polls on vegetarianism can be used to generate estimates of the pescetarian population. In 2009, 2006, and 2003, the Vegetarian Resource Group conducted national polls on dietary habits among Americans 18 years of age and older. In the primary polling question, respondents are presented with a list of foods and asked to identify those they never eat. In the 2003 version of the poll, one of the answer choices was "meat and poultry," with "meat" differentiated from "fish/seafood." 4% of participants selected this choice, stating that they never eat "meat and poultry" but do eat fish and seafood. While pescetarianism is not mentioned by name on the survey, it is reasonable to conclude that in 2003, 4% of Americans were effectively pescetarians — as compared with the 2.8% who identified themselves as vegetarians in the same year. Unfortunately, the "meat and poultry" answer choice was omitted from the 2006 and 2009 versions of the survey, replaced instead with separate choices for "meat" and "poultry"; thus, individuals selecting one may still consume the other. However, with seafood consumption rising nationally since 2003, the pescetarian population may be increasing as well. 9% of Americans consider themselves "almost vegetarians," choosing to eat "little meat or only fish" (McArdle, Katch, & Katch, 2006). With pescetarianism increasingly entering the public consciousness — a definition for "pescetarian," presented at the opening of this chapter, was officially added to Merriam-Webster's dictionary in July 2008 — it is reasonable to speculate that a sizeable proportion of these "almost vegetarians" would now identify themselves as subscribing to pescetarian dietary practices.

The rationales that motivate and choices that characterize pescetarianism are far from uniform; instead, as is the case under dietary approaches such as vegetarianism and

veganism, there exists significant diversity in practitioners' specific diets, as well as in the beliefs and processes that accompany the adoption and maintenance of new food practices. In addition to nutritional, ethical, and other beliefs, the longitudinal accumulation of experiences over the life course can play a determinative role in whether or why one chooses to make dietary changes. While some deliberate deeply about the meanings inherent to their food choices, others arrive at their dietary habits with little conscious decision-making:

> Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity. For some, that irrationality leads to a kind of resignation. Food choices are likened to fashion choices or lifestyle preferences… the messiness of food, the almost infinite meanings it proliferates, does make the question of eating — and eating animals especially — surprisingly fraught. Activists I spoke with were endlessly puzzled and frustrated by the disconnect between clear thinking and people's food choices. (Foer, 2009: 263)

Indeed, even as one of the most fundamental of human behaviors, the act of eating is often surprisingly difficult to understand or rationalize. While developing such understandings can prove challenging, the importance of food to human culture and society suggests that these are obstacles well worth overcoming.

The mission for the researcher, then, is to disentangle the factors — as irrational as they may initially seem — that motivate and ultimately generate individuals' dietary approaches. Food practices, entrenched and emergent alike, have drawn increasing societal and scholarly attention in recent years, for reasons ranging from health and nutrition to the ethical, environmental, and political. However, while sociological studies of vegetarians and vegans have been conducted and published for years (Wilson, Weatherall, & Butler, 2004), little such work has yet focused on pescetarians. This study is aimed at helping fill this gap in the literature by generating greater clarity in how

pescetarianism is defined, as well as identifying and characterizing the myriad factors that motivate the adoption of pescetarian eating practices.

Aims of the Project

The overall objective of this project is to generate a framework for understanding pescetarianism as a dietary choice and practice. To imbue the project with clarity in its approach, three specific aims have been designed to facilitate the articulation and elaboration of this framework, while concurrently focusing analytic attention on the breadth of pescetarians' definitions of and motives for their diets.

The first aim of this project is to identify how pescetarianism is defined. Like all dietary lifestyles, "pescetarianism" is not a singular practice, but rather an inclusive construction entailing an array of heterogeneous dietary practices. This study will seek to extricate the various definitions of pescetarianism, searching for commonalities, differences, and other themes characterizing its constituent dietary choices and habits. Even within a group of individuals all defining themselves as pescetarians, the precise set of choices — to include particular food items and to exclude others — will vary from person to person. The "pescetarian diet," then, in fact refers to a broad range of diets, each consisting of different foods, including different types of seafood. Identifying the scope of foods constituting these diets is a fundamental aim of this project.

The second aim is to assess the motives, rationales, and beliefs underlying the decision to adopt or maintain a pescetarian diet. The paths leading individuals to adopt pescetarianism are far from uniform. A range of beliefs — from health and nutrition to the environmental, ethical, and political — can contribute to the decision to shift one's

diet toward pescetarian practices. Of particular interest is how individuals arrive specifically at pescetarianism, as distinguished from vegetarianism, veganism, and other dietary options. For those who do decide to label themselves as pescetarians, the sum of their life experiences can be conceptualized as a contributing or foundational factor in the adoption of their new diets. An important goal of this project is to acquire a stronger understanding of these life experiences, which will be an important element in ultimately developing a framework that links the various motives, rationales, and other contributory factors that lead to the pescetarian decision. This framework must be sufficiently inclusive to account for the diverse range of biographical influences, as well as sufficiently synthetic to identify patterns in pescetarians' beliefs.

The third aim is to understand the social worlds experienced by pescetarians, examining not only how pescetarians' lifestyles impact their social interactions, but also how they explain their dietary motives to others, such as friends and family. A focal point of this analysis will be the social environments navigated by pescetarians engaged in defending, promoting, or simply following their dietary practices. Eating is fundamentally a social act, and an entire array of outcomes — including tension, debate, and misunderstanding — can arise when individuals in a group differ in their approaches to food. Practitioners of non-normative diets have been found to employ deflective rhetoric to "undermine anticipated negative attributions" that may be attached to their food choices (Wilson, Weatherall, and Butler, 2004: 571). Health reasons, for example, are commonly cited as the explanation for dietary practices, when ethical reasons are in fact the actual underlying motive. Usually, such rhetoric is used when individuals feel their diets may be normatively undesirable. Given the expressly social component of

eating — and in light of the criticisms of pescetarianism, which will be discussed in the following section — analysis of the rhetoric employed by pescetarians will be an important dimension of this aim. The areas of disconnect between underlying motives and overlying rhetoric will be of particular analytic interest. Also of great interest will be those cases in which rhetoric is used not to defend, but to promote pescetarian practices and advocate on behalf of the pescetarian dietary lifestyle.

Pescetarianism vis-à-vis Other Diets

As pescetarianism accrues social currency, it concomitantly draws greater scrutiny, in some cases generating criticism and debate. A *New York Times* piece declared that "'pescetarian' is a frequently used term for those alleged veggies who eat seafood (but not meat or fowl) and irritate meat eaters and genuine vegetarians the world over" (Safire, 2005). Sounding a similar note, a columnist in the British newspaper *The Independent* wrote that "being a pescetarian earns both the disapproval of strict vegetarians and the suspicion of meat-eaters" (Hickman, 2007). Given its position along the dietary spectrum, pescetarianism is perhaps unique in its ability to attract critiques from both those with more restrictive diets and those who eat more indiscriminately. Pescetarianism may draw additional attention and doubt simply by virtue of what is perceived as its nascent status amidst the universe of food practices. Such perspectives and attitudes, while perhaps common, conveniently disregard the socially constructed nature not only of pescetarianism, but of all dietary practices — vegetarian, vegan, or omnivorous — and tend to obscure and marginalize the breadth of motives underlying pescetarian dietary choices.

The misunderstandings between practitioners of different diets is ironic, as the set of reasons used to justify a particular diet can invariably be used, either in full or in part, to justify other, even contradictory dietary choices. This stems from the reality that dietary practices — while ostensibly discrete — in fact represent positions along a spectrum; indeed, the exercise of drawing distinctions between diets tends to produce categories that are artificially discrete, particularly given that beliefs and practices frequently overlap and interconnect. Different diets "can be supported by the same rhetorical resources and common-sense ideas" (Wilson, Weatherall, & Butler, 2004: 575). Further, as each individual practice encompasses a range of dietary choices and beliefs, a vegan and an ovolactovegetarian who both define themselves as "vegetarians" could, for example, espouse diets far more dissimilar than those of a self-defined "vegetarian" and self-defined "pescetarian" who both consume eggs, dairy, and fish products. Indeed, "vegetarians as a group are rather dissimilar," both in their motivations and in their food choices (Maurer, 2002: 14). For this reason, any given individual's explanation of a particular diet should be taken at face value; it is important to resist the temptation to draw overreaching conclusions from narrow slices of data. Instead, each individual pescetarian's dietary rationale should be interpreted and understood as what it is: too narrow to accurately represent the perspectives of some pescetarians, and too broad to apply to the views of others.

Reasons for Pescetarianism

What, then, leads individuals to adopt pescetarian dietary lifestyles? The answer does not lie solely in taste considerations, though a predilection for or against seafood

certainly can contribute to an individual's predisposition toward pescetarianism. Food choices — pescetarian or otherwise — are made within the context of an expansive social and cultural terrain, with multiple forces, dynamics, and tensions factoring into the ultimate dietary decision. These influences can function jointly or against one another, leading to nonlinear dietary pathways for many individuals. This section will address a number of the factors that motivate pescetarianism. By design, no claims to comprehensiveness will made here; this is intended merely as an introduction to the types of principles invoked by pescetarians in explaining or rationalizing their dietary practices. In many cases, the same ideas can be used to justify other, entirely different diets; given the inevitable intersections between even the most divergent food practices, this is a natural and expected outcome.

While the following statement was originally made in reference to vegetarianism, each of the reasons has been invoked by pescetarians as well:

> People have articulated a variety of reasons for adopting vegetarian diets: personal health, concern about the treatment of farm animals, environmental issues, world hunger concerns, and disgust at the thought of consuming the flesh of a dead animal. (Maurer, 2002)

In this introductory section, these rationales and others will be addressed, with an overview of the arguments commonly employed to support pescetarian dietary lifestyles. This will provide a foundation and background for Chapter 5, which will delve into the findings from this study and the motivations cited by pescetarians interviewed for the project. As in Chapter 5, this introduction will organize the various reasons by category, with the acknowledgement that overlap inevitably exists between these categories, owing to their artificial discreteness.

Under each category of reasons for pescetarianism, space will be devoted to counterarguments that can be mounted against it as well. This is intended not only to add an evenhanded quality to this discussion, but also to demonstrate that diet represents a site of significant contestation; "competing" diets in fact occupy a continuum — the same arguments can be used to support or defend multiple diets — and even the practitioners of one diet will have different, sometimes conflicting reasons underlying their food choices. Two individuals that both adopt pescetarianism for sociopolitical reasons may have entire opposing viewpoints on the healthfulness of seafood consumption; conversely, two individuals that adopt the diet for health reasons may argue over the impact of fishing on the environment. Of course, there are individuals beyond the scope of this study who simply choose other diets, like veganism or vegetarianism (though, owing to the fluidity between diets, many pescetarians are former vegans or vegetarians, and many current pescetarians will no doubt transition to other diets in the future). While this project is not a study on why individuals opt for non-pescetarian diets, an understanding of the factors contributing to such decisions will help situate this discussion in its broader context.

This overview will cover the following areas: cultural and regional influences, health, sociopolitical and environmental influences, and ethics and animal welfare. Further treatment of these topics can be found in Chapter 5.

Cultural and Regional Influences

Whether urban or rural, white or black, rich or poor, "as eaters, all Americans mingle the culinary traditions of many regions and cultures within ourselves" (Gabaccia, 1998: 226). This eclecticism is fundamental to American culinary habits. The country

certainly is not characterized by any one national cuisine, but what unifies us is our approach to food: multiethnic, multicultural, and interregional. On the one hand, this has certainly increased Americans' exposure to new foods, including a variety of seafood; it is not merely possible, but often easy to have access to sushi in the deep South or bouillabaisse in the rural Midwest. For individuals who have considered moving from an omnivorous to a more restrictive diet, the increasing range of food options has likely facilitated the process of dietary change. Those wishing to shift to pescetarianism can now do so readily, regardless of region or culture.

On the other hand, there remain unmistakable regional and cultural characteristics that suggest that the predilection for pescetarianism is indeed influenced by regional and cultural factors. While seafood options may be available everywhere, they remain more limited in particular communities and regions; by virtue of a lack of proximity to fresh fish and local tendencies toward red meat, a small town in Iowa simply will not offer as many possibilities for pescetarians as New York, Boston, or San Francisco. The chapter on findings includes an observation by a pescetarian in rural Indiana: "it's farm country and they put meat in everything." Her maintenance of a pescetarian diet is far more challenging than it is for those living on the West or East Coast, both in terms of local availability of and prevalent attitudes toward seafood.

Health

"Most people become vegetarians out of concern for their personal health rather than out of political consciousness" (Maurer, 2002: 100), with two impetuses contributing to health-driven dietary change: belief in the health benefits of vegetables,

and the desire to avoid the health ramifications of meat consumption. For health-based moves toward pescetarianism, the calculus is modified to consist of two parallel factors: the belief that seafood has sufficient nutritional benefit to merit its continued (or even increased) inclusion in the diet, and the desire to avoid the health ramifications of meat products aside from seafood. While these factors are of course related, in some cases one serves as a stronger motivator than the other. For example, an individual may subscribe wholeheartedly to the notion that omega-3 fatty acids are healthy and thus maintain their seafood but not land-based meat consumption; another person may assiduously avoid land-based meat products for health reasons, while at the same retaining seafood in the diet without much thought or enthusiasm. For other pescetarians, both motivations may serve key roles in their dietary lifestyles.

The distinction between these two factors is important, as they are promoted differently both by the media and by dietitians, researchers, and health providers. On the one hand is the prevailing wisdom that fish consumption is part of or even pivotal to a healthy diet. CNN's Sanjay Gupta encourages the consumption of salmon, tuna, and other fish with high concentrations of omega-3 fatty acids, which he argues "have been shown to reduce a person's risk of heart attack and heart disease and protect against stroke, dementia and other cognitive problems" (Gupta, 2010). In an article entitled "New Facts About Fish," the website WebMD.com leads with the following quote:

> "You should be much more nervous about how you're risking your health if you don't eat fish," says Dariush Mozaffarian, M.D., a cardiologist at the Harvard School of Public Health, who coauthored a recent study analyzing the pros and cons of fish consumption. "Seafood is a key source of heart-healthy lean protein — everyone should aim to have two servings per week." (Sole-Smith, 2009)

Consuming fish, then, is not only framed as healthy; *not* consuming fish is also framed as *unhealthy*. Given such the prevalence and ardency of such arguments, it is unsurprising that many pescetarians cite a belief in the nutritional benefits of seafood among the explanatory rationales for their diet.

The second factor, while related, is distinct in its focus and also in how it is promoted. The emphasis here is not on the health benefits of fish but rather on the ramifications stemming from the consumption of land-based meat products; due to their deleterious impacts on health, the latter should be excluded from the diet. Among the conclusions of the China Study — one of the most expansive epidemiological studies on health and diet to date — is that the consumption of meat ("steak, hamburger, chicken, turkey" and so forth) is associated with a panoply of diseases — including cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and several types of cancer — and should thus be categorically avoided, with a single exception: fish, in minimal quantities (Campbell & Campbell II, 2006: 243). Similarly, UCSF biochemist Clyde Wilson contends that, for optimal health, humans should cease all consumption of land-based meat products (Wilson, 2007). Even though they concentrate primarily on the negative characteristics of land-based meat, such information and advice can still serve to effectively promote pescetarianism over other dietary practices, ultimately contributing to the decision of some individuals to adopt a pescetarian lifestyle.

Health arguments in favor of consuming seafood, then, can be a counterpart to health arguments against eating other kinds of meat; combined, these positions may contribute to individuals' consideration, adoption, or maintenance of pescetarian dietary practices. Interestingly, health arguments are at times leveled against vegetarianism and

veganism as well, with criticism most often centering around the purported nutritional inadequacies of imbalanced vegetarian or vegan diets, and the solution framed (by pescetarians) as seafood consumption or (by omnivores) as intake of other types of meat (Wilson, Weatherall, and Butler, 2004).

Conversely, however, the health benefits of seafood have also been called into question, with successive studies warning consumers of the chemical dangers — including dioxins, mercury, and polychlorinated biphenyls — associated with fish consumption. Few governmental regulations have been implemented, let alone enforced, to protect the public from these risks; in fact, in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, seafood is inspected far less rigorously than even livestock-derived meat products (Grescoe, 2008), which have been held up as a model for insufficient safety standards and irresponsible oversight. Owing to the unfortunate convergence of widespread contamination and lax inspection, seafood — perhaps unsurprisingly — represents a leading cause of foodborne outbreaks in the United States (Nestle, 2003: 39). According to a Harvard study, even omega-3 fatty acids may not be beneficial to health; the findings reflected a statistically significant association between omega-3 fats from fish and an increased risk for breast cancer, as well as no impact on heart attack risk or overall mortality from heart disease (Campbell & Campbell II, 2006: 282).

Sociopolitical and Environmental Reasons

For those motivated with concerns for the environment — particularly vis-à-vis global warming — few actions have an impact as substantial as eliminating the consumption of red meat: "shifting less than one day per week's worth of calories from red meat and dairy products to chicken, fish, eggs, or a vegetable-based diet achieves

more greenhouse-gas reduction than buying all locally sourced food" (Weber & Matthews, 2008). Indeed, the environmental ramifications generated by the nation's hunger for red meat are startling. Even those attentive to issues surrounding carbon emissions may not entirely cognizant of the following statistics:

> Cows — as well as sheep and other cud-chewing animals called ruminants — are wicked polluters. Their exhalation and flatulence and belching and manure emit methane, which by one common measure is about *twenty-five times more potent* as a greenhouse gas than the carbon dioxide released by cars (and, by the way, humans). The world's ruminants are responsible for about 50 percent more greenhouse gas than the entire transportation sector. (Levitt & Dubner, 2009: 167)

The preponderance of greenhouse gas emissions is generated in the production phase, rather than in the transportation of foods to market. To induce changes in what is produced, including the reduction of meat and dairy originating from ruminants, consumers will need to shift the demand curve — and one mechanism of doing so is in eating and purchasing more environmentally friendly foods (Levitt & Dubner, 2009).

While these arguments in favor of reducing red meat consumption are striking by any metric, the environmental case against seafood consumption is no less compelling. Fish stocks worldwide are eminently threatened by overexploitation, with three-quarters of international waters categorized as "maximally exploited" (FAO, 2001). The devastation of fish in the wild cannot simply be averted through captive fish farming; in fact, the notion that aquaculture is environmentally friendly is, for many commercial species, a flagrant misconception. An average of 3.9 pounds of wild fish must be caught to generate the feed necessary for a single pound of farmed salmon flesh. Already, farmed salmon — still a small minority of the world's total output of farmed seafood — consume 15% of the overall fish meal and 51% of the fish oil in the aquaculture industry

(Grescoe, 2008: 244). In cases like this, fish farming serves to further exacerbate the devastation of wild fish stocks. Further, due to the high concentrations of nutrients and pesticides necessary to maintain the commercial viability of farmed fish, aquaculture is intensely pollutive, contaminating farmland, rivers, and ultimately the oceans, where hypoxic dead zones replace once-vibrant marine habitats.

The issue of livestock can also be used to make a case for pescetarianism on sociopolitical grounds, with the issue of optimal societal resource allocation as a focal point. On the one hand, raising livestock can be construed as suboptimal, inefficient resource use. The amount of grain fed to the world's cattle is enough to meet the caloric needs of 8.7 billion people; in the United States alone, the acreage of arable land used to grow feed for livestock — if used instead to grow crops for human consumption — would be sufficient to produce food for 400 million people, more than the entire U.S. population (Wicks, 2005: 274). On the other hand, for the human population to maintain a sufficient protein intake deriving solely from plant-based sources, the amount of land devoted to agriculture could potentially be so massive that it too would represent an inefficient allocation of resources (and, if arable land were insufficient, potentially lead to widespread malnourishment). A sensible allocation of resources, then, could be cited as an argument in favor of adopting a pescetarian diet. By drawing from existing wild fisheries as well as advances in aquaculture, seafood consumption — when combined with an otherwise vegetarian diet — can effectively navigate the middle ground between the grain-related inefficiencies of raising livestock for traditional omnivores and the land-related inefficiencies of growing crops for a global population of vegetarians.

While seafood consumption may help reconcile the tensions between allocating resources to food crops and to feed for livestock, fishing generates another, arguably more serious allocation problem: diverting scarce protein from the developing world to the developed world. Indeed, increased seafood consumption in the developed world is intricately linked with abject poverty in the developing world, where fishing communities sacrifice their local fish supplies for export and minimal earnings. In West Asia, for example, 23 million people earn less than $1 a day for their work in fisheries (FAO, 2002). Between 1978 and 1990, the supply of seafood to North America increased by 27%, and by 23% in Europe; in contrast, there was a 7.9% decline for South America, and a 2.9% decline for Africa (UNEP, 2002). This is a problematic shift, as fish represents a disproportionately vital food source for developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America; in these countries, fish supplies 30% of the protein, in comparison with a mere 6% worldwide (Halweil, 2006: 6). In many cases, those who make a meager living catching fish for export — usually to developed nations — themselves suffer from stark protein deficiencies and other debilitating nutritional ailments (Lopuch, 2007). The resource allocation argument, then, certainly can be framed as oppositional to pescetarianism.

Ethics and [Land] Animal Welfare

In the most common progression observed with vegetarianism, the new adopter "initially becomes motivated by health issues and gradually adopts ethical reasons as well" (Maurer, 2002: 4). Ethical dimensions have consistently been invoked to inform and support emergent dietary lifestyles; the belief that animals are sentient beings,

capable of suffering and feeling pain, has long inspired new converts to vegetarianism and veganism. Such a belief, however, can also be reconciled with and lead to pescetarianism. Many animal ethicists, philosophers, and scientists "draw the line of sentience somewhere north of a scallop," suggesting that mollusks and lower orders of shellfish are incapable of feeling pain, even as they are harvested (Pollan, 2006: 313). For the many who apply less rigor in their interpretations of the implications of biological details, fish in general are seen and conceptualized as lower organisms; an individual entirely opposed to consuming meat from land-based animals may feel little to no hesitation or remorse when eating seafood.

However, ethical arguments justifying pescetarianism are unlikely to convince those vegetarians and vegans who believe in strictly observing the boundaries between plant and animal products. Some may simply cast any presumption of other species' lack of sentience as misguided or hypocritical; others, such as fruitarians, go as far as avoiding even the killing and consumption of plants, save for those parts — namely, fruit — that fall off naturally. At the other end of the dietary spectrum, red meat eaters may argue that limiting meat consumption to shellfish is a self-indulgent, unavailing exercise, akin to perching oneself on a precarious slippery slope. Of all justifications for dietary choices, ethical motivations tend to induce the most shame, defensiveness, and deflective rhetoric, with health and other reasons frequently invoked to convince others that ethics are not part of one's dietary calculus, even if it is in fact the sole or primary consideration (Wilson, Weatherall, and Butler, 2004).

Evaluation

Ultimately, just as they are for all dietary choices, the rationales underlying and rhetoric justifying pescetarianism are complex, often fraught with contradiction and permeability to oppositional vantage points. Multiple beliefs compete for legitimacy and primacy in the calculation as to what to eat, how to describe one's diet, and ultimately how to rationalize dietary choices both to oneself and to others. Identifying, disentangling, and interpreting these competing and intersecting beliefs is critical to understanding why people eat as they do, particularly in the case of practitioners of relatively lesser-known dietary lifestyles like pescetarianism.

Diet and Identity

Central to the analysis of dietary choices is the intersection between diet and identity. Two individuals may have identical diets, but one may identify as a pescetarian, while the other may identify as a vegetarian. While this project was designed to incorporate individuals of both types into the analysis, it is critical to remain cognizant of the role that is played by identity in how people approach and conceptualize food. While their motivations may vary, "people can seek to differentiate themselves from others or, alternatively, convey their membership of a particular social group through their food consumption" (Germov & Williams, 2005: 18). For some, pescetarianism is little more than a label — a term that is loosely attached, sometimes more by others than by themselves, to their set of dietary choices. For others, however, pescetarianism is a form of identity ("I am a pescetarian") — a core component of one's understanding of oneself and of how one perceives and interacts with the surrounding social world. This spectrum

of associations between diet and identity, both weak and strong, is an important consideration for the project. This topic will be covered briefly in Chapter 4 and then at length in Chapter 6.

Theoretical Framework

As Chapter 2 will address more fully, social constructionism interfaces well with the sociology of food's "concentration on the myriad sociocultural, political, economic, and philosophical factors that influence our food habits," as well as its "focus on the social patterning of food production, distribution, and consumption" (Germov and Williams, 2005: 5). Given these areas of theoretical convergence, social constructionism has an important role to play in this study; conversely, this study may play a role in catalyzing new constructionist understandings of the decision to adopt pescetarian dietary practices. In light of its multidimensional approach — incorporating qualitative interviews and analysis focused on definitions, motivations, and rhetoric alike — this project may be positioned to simultaneously address, and perhaps even reconcile, overarching typificatory schemes and individual-level dietary idiosyncrasies.

More broadly, this study elaborates upon and extends current understandings of how social influences and motives shape emergent dietary practices. Given the interrelationships between diet and health, an expanded framework of how particular nutritional choices may be incentivized would be of potential significance in efforts to better inform food choices and, in turn, promote more responsible and effective stewardship of the public health. What are the circumstances under which marginalized but healthier dietary choices can be reconceptualized as normative options, and what social forces and individual impetuses might be harnessed to encourage the adoption of

such choices? The answer to questions like these could ultimately shape not only future directions in the sociology of food, but also the trajectory of healthy eating in our society.

Chapter Two

Theory and Literature Review

> *"Despite similar physiological needs in humans, food habits are not universal, natural, or inevitable"; in contrast, "they are social constructions, and significant variations exist."*
>
> Germov & Williams, 2005

While some express dietary preferences as little more than a new label or conceptualization surrounding food, others make the decision to follow a particular diet — whether pescetarian, vegetarian, or otherwise — as a reflection of a shift in ideology or a change in lifestyle, with ideology defined as "a symbolic system that people construct and manipulate, a set of interrelated meanings that may make sense to one group of people but not another" (Maurer, 2002: 70). Dietary change frequently is inspired by and draws from principles interpreted and applied inconsistently, depending on the individual or on the situation. Past sociological analyses of dietary practices have found that "an individual's actual eating patterns and his or her conceptualization of those eating patterns as a dietary stance or lifestyle may not always neatly fit with each other"; due to these disconnects, "in sociological terms, the conceptualizations must be as worthy of attention and analysis as the observed or reported patterns" (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997: 225-226). Ascertaining the sometimes uneven interactions between individuals' eating patterns, their self-definitions of their dietary practices, and their dynamics with non-pescetarians is an effort that lends itself to theoretical grounding in social constructionism. To further bolster these understandings, the theoretical review will be followed by a discussion of literature addressing the factors that motivate the adoption of pescetarian diets.

Theory

Social Constructionism

The pertinence of social constructionist theoretical literature suggests significant implications for the analysis of pescetarianism; in particular, the theoretical lens of the constructionist tradition can be applied to situate pescetarianism in its broader social contexts. In this section, social constructionist theory will be evaluated within the context of the sociology of food. Constructionists have played a pivotal role in the rupturing of taken-for-granted everyday realities; through its historical and contemporary lineage, the constructionist perspective has persistently "suggest[ed] renewed attention to familiar objects of enquiry" (Bury, 1986: 149). Perhaps more so than any other subject, food represents familiarity — quite literally, the everyday — and thus merits extensive constructionist analysis.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge the theoretical breadth encompassed within the social constructionist endeavor. The sociologists characterized as social constructionists occupy a wide range of theoretical positions; assessing the social constructionist terrain, Bury perceives a theoretical eclecticism plagued by "persistent contradictory connotations" (Bury, 1986: 161). In addition to their theoretical points of departure, social constructionists also diverge in the very strategies and methodologies they employ to explore the implications of their positions (Wright & Treacher, 1982: 11).

While maintaining cognizance of this theoretical and methodological diversity, the ensuing analysis is not intended to incorporate every strand within social constructionism; indeed, such a project would extend far beyond the scope of this review.

In the absence of such an objective — and for the sake of analytic productivity (some would say expedience) — the following pages opt for a particular course of navigation through the social constructionist literature, making no pretense of theoretical comprehensiveness. As a result, readers may elect to treat the conclusions presented here as conditional or cursory; my response, however, is that the diversity within the social constructionist literature compels analytic choices that rarely, if ever, can claim to represent the full spectrum of historical and contemporary constructionist scholarship.

The Meaning of Food

When Berger and Luckmann refer to "the reality of everyday life" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), it is difficult to imagine anything more fundamental to this reality than the dietary choices made on a daily basis. The social constructionist perspective — as the theoretical offspring of these authors' work — offers conceptual tools that can be utilized in the sociological study of pescetarianism and other dietary practices. Indeed, the maneuver of subjecting everyday reality to sociological scrutiny is a product of Berger and Luckmann's arguments in *The Social Construction of Reality*; it makes sense, then, to use those arguments as a starting point for a sociological analysis of food and food choices.

Berger and Luckmann make no equivocations or claims to philosophical pretenses in establishing their theoretical project. Their sociological interest lies in our mobilization of taken-for-granted everyday knowledge in our experiences and negotiation of a taken-for-granted everyday reality — a reality that is intersubjectively experienced and shaped (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Under this framework, food is an object, with

"different objects present[ing] themselves to consciousness as constituents of different spheres of reality" and "introduc[ing] quite different tensions into [one's] consciousness" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 21). Indeed, the ways in which we talk and think about food reflect a diverse array of tensions and multiple understandings: "food is often defined as good or bad, masculine or feminine, powerful or weak, alive or dead, healthy or non-healthy, a comfort or punishment, sophisticated or gauche, a sin or virtue, animal or vegetable" (Germov & Williams, 2005: 17). These terms characterize our everyday conversations surrounding our food choices, lending them a persistent intensity and centrality within our social realities. In their work, Berger and Luckmann sought to elevate everyday reality to the status of sociological subject — a variable for analysis rather than a theoretical constant.

Complementing their assessment of everyday objects, Berger and Luckmann also apply their analytic lens to everyday interactions. Of particular importance is their concept of typificatory schemes, unconsciously utilized in the patterning of face-to-face interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 30-31). This concept lays a pivotal foundation for sociological understandings of culturally patterned food preferences, as well as the social implications that flow from such preferences — topics that will be developed and investigated in greater detail in the section addressing diet and marginalization.

Food also attains theoretical salience in its intimate connections with health and illness. Diet can be conceptualized both as a cause of and as a treatment for disease; after all, food impacts both our predisposition toward and likelihood of recovery from sickness. In her analyses of food commercialism, Lupton finds that "the slippage between food as medicine and medicine as food in advertisements is significant"; while

"foods may not necessarily guarantee good health, the use of the labels 'low fat,' 'low cholesterol,' or 'high fiber' serve as reassuring (if often misleading) markers of goodness and virtue to the consumer" (Lupton, 2003: 46). This concords remarkably with Berger and Luckmann's argument that "the language used in everyday life continuously provides [us] with the necessary objectifications and posits the order… within which everyday life has meaning for [us]," and also that "language marks the coordinates of [our] life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 22). By changing the labels on food packaging to include language imbued with particular meaning — whether "organic," "local," or "sustainable" — manufacturers are successfully realigning the very coordinates by which we navigate our everyday reality (in this case, in the supermarket).

Of course, the very fact we shop at supermarkets and purchase foods that have been packaged, canned, and otherwise pre-prepared is itself a reflection of the multiple layers of construction that muddle our contemporary interactions with food. The innate unnaturalness of a neatly prepared fish filet or deep-fried piece of calamari or shrimp is lost upon children and adults alike. While the tide may be shifting, sizeable societal inertia remains attached to the disproportionate high consumption of red meat and processed fats and sugars, with an inversely low intake of fruits and vegetables. These phenomena, as clearly as any other, demonstrate how our reality is socially constructed — complexly, inexorably, and often insidiously. How else can our dietary preferences reside so far from naturally occurring foods? How else could an entire aisle of cereal varieties, each woefully laden with high fructose corn syrup, be labeled as "heart healthy"? And — most pertinent for this project — why is so much criticism and doubt

directed at individuals who, for reasons ranging from health to environmental consciousness, decide to eliminate all meat products but seafood from their diets?

This is the very project upon which Berger and Luckmann embarked: taking mundane aspects of our worldly experiences and subjecting them to investigation, contestation, and problematization. A burgeoning set of public and scholarly discourses are directing tough questions at the previously taken-for-granted realities of food production, distribution, and consumption. Such efforts are very much situated in the social constructionist mold. The task for theorists of this tradition will be to incorporate understandings from the sociological study of food into their broader understandings of how everyday life is constructed, experienced, and negotiated.

Diet, Identity, and Conflict

For the analysis of diet, identity, and conflict, Berger and Luckmann's notion of typificatory schemes is particularly helpful (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 30-31). Highlighting the unconscious patterning of interactions and relationships, this concept lays the foundation for a constructionist understanding of culturally patterned food preferences, as well as the social implications that flow from such preferences. The "creation of an external other, people and groups that are negatively stereotyped" (Crawford, 1994: 1355), represents a process by which such typificatory schemes are being generated and employed — to the detriment of those perceived as normatively undesirable. Mainstream American culture tends to valorize the consumption of beef and other forms of red meat, associating such dietary habits with strength and masculinity (Kamp, 2006); such patterning effectively marginalizes diets like pescetarianism and

vegetarianism. The potential for marginalization suggests that practitioners of purportedly marginal diets have an incentive to use deflective rhetoric to shield themselves from criticism and stigmatization.

Countervailing typificatory schemes, however, can also emerge, drawing both from active resistance by the alleged "external others" and from changing societal beliefs surrounding the relationship between food, health, the environment, and other factors. The perception of interconnectivity between humans' health, their food, and their environment has increased in social prevalence, as manifested in growing movements toward foods labeled as organic, local, and/or sustainable. As such labels accrue further traction, it becomes possible to envision a society in which subscribers to diets like pescetarianism may be able to more strongly assert themselves, and where concerns may diminish over how "food choice, preparation, and intake is going to affect a person's ability to maintain social relationships and cultural identity" (Ikeda, 2005: 294).

"Despite similar physiological needs in humans, food habits are not universal, natural, or inevitable"; in contrast, "they are social constructions, and significant variations exist, from the sacred cow in India, to kosher eating among the orthodox Jewish community" (Germov and Williams, 2005: 4). Beyond the social construction of food itself, the construction and patterning of food choices — and of differences in food choices — merits serious and sustained sociological scrutiny. Food habits do not arise in a vacuum. "Anthropologists and sociologists have identified many non-biological influences on food choices and food behavior," and these influences underlie the tendencies of "members of traditional cultures [to] have difficulty relating to the Western biomedical bias" (Ikeda, 2005: 289).

In “The Boundaries of the Self and the Unhealthy Other: Reflections on Health, Culture, and AIDS,” Crawford writes insightfully regarding the pivotal role of the idiom of health in processes of differentiation — of those who belong from those who do not, of healthy from unhealthy, and of the self from the other (Crawford, 1994). While the AIDS epidemic is far removed from the sociology of food, the other components of Crawford’s analysis readily maintain their poignancy and relevance when applied to this discussion.

Tracing the rise of health to prominence as a central cultural value, Crawford argues that “the concept of health is central to modern identity,” spanning metaphorical “connotations about what it means to be a good, respectable, and responsible person” as well as “prevailing images of class, race, and sexuality” (Crawford, 1994: 1348). Most incisive, however, is his assessment of the boundaries erected in the service of constructing one’s own healthful identity: specifically, that “the ‘healthy’ self is sustained in part through the creation of ‘unhealthy’ others” (Crawford, 1994: 1348). These “unhealthy others” are conceptualized as the diseased and socially distant — in essence, as harboring everything one does not wish upon himself or herself. The dichotomies and boundaries that receive our attention — the ultimate bases for othering — are contingent upon the matters of greatest salience in a particular social interaction; thus, even though Crawford addresses the othering generated by the AIDS epidemic, his theoretical framework is directly portable to the case of food. Extending the metaphorical links between health and respectability/responsibility, a case could be made that “other,” non-mainstream eating habits are frequently attributed to individuals’ personal faults and weaknesses, regardless of underlying motivations, beliefs, or other factors.

As anticipated in the previous section, Berger and Luckmann's typificatory schemes emerge again here. The "creation of an external other, people and groups that are negatively stereotyped" (Crawford, 1994: 1355), represents a process by which such typificatory schemes are being generated and employed — to the detriment of one's social counterparts. This case is a theoretical reaffirmation of Berger and Luckmann's observation that our experiences of interaction are, to a significant extent, shaped by our typifications of the people inhabiting our perceived social worlds and arenas. Going beyond Berger and Luckmann's foundational work, Crawford has identified typifying schemes of what constitutes a "good, respectable, and responsible" — or "normal" — individual; conversely and concomitantly, these also represent typifying schemes of what "others" are *not*. Those choosing to give up red meat are suddenly deemed "others" — worthy of neither trust nor respect. Such schemes become woven into the typified channels through which we interact with one another.

The interconnectivity between social constructionist analyses and the study of diet has important implications for the national conversation surrounding food. This is reflected, for example, by dietitians, nutritionists, and other health professionals' "need to consider how their advice on food choice, preparation, and intake is going to affect a person's ability to maintain social relationships and cultural identity" (Ikeda, 2005: 294). The empirical case of pescetarianism fosters its own set of theoretical questions and sociological challenges — and the engagement of these questions and challenges stands to benefit from focused application of the social constructionist perspective.

Literature Review

This section of the chapter will assess the substantive literature that has addressed issues related to diet. The attributes shared between pescetarianism and other types of food practices — in particular, their occupancy of what can be characterized as a single dietary continuum — allows for a perhaps unexpected approach: an analysis of pescetarianism that draws from sociological and other scholarship on vegetarianism and veganism. This approach will be utilized partially out of necessity, as little parallel work exists concentrating on pescetarianism alone. The literature review, however, substantively benefits from the theory and analysis that have been developed to assess vegetarianism and veganism, as they can be adjusted to apply to pescetarianism and other diets. The process of developing a literature review on pescetarianism despite a relative dearth of pescetarianism-specific material also contributes to the identification of existing gaps in the literature and what must be done to fill those gaps.

Vegetarianism and Veganism

The work of Donna Maurer has been critical in catalyzing understandings of vegetarianism and the underlying motivations driving the adoption of vegetarian diets. She observes that practitioners of vegetarian diets are more than a simple aggregation of individuals engaged in similar lifestyles; rather, vegetarianism transcends this, constituting a movement driven by ideology — drawing both from critiques of meat consumption and a vision for change on a societal and transnational scale (Maurer, 2002). While individual vegetarians may not be outspoken political activists, the movement is driven by institutions, organizations, scholarship, and coherent rationales — each of which contributes to the advocacy and growth of the vegetarian worldview. Among

these, Maurer identifies vegetarian institutions and organizations as the most critical facilitators of the movement, as they promote vegetarian lifestyles and enable a spirit of community among vegetarians.

To this point, pescetarianism lacks parallel institutions and organizations, limiting (or reflecting the absence of) potential momentum toward a full-scale movement. However, pescetarian lifestyles do incorporate and draw support from coherent rationales — an emphasis of this project — which suggests that, even against the dynamics generated by mainstream typificatory schemes, a foundation exists to at least ensure that pescetarian lifestyles will persist. Maurer notes that the rationales for veganism reflect a core "commitment to animal welfare or rights or to the environment, which helps vegans to maintain their lifestyle (particularly in situations where deviation from social expectations draws negative reactions from others)" (Maurer, 2002: 6). Many pescetarians' approaches to diet are anchored by commitments and values just as powerful, which is crucial when social pressures mount for shifts to more indiscriminate food choices.

However, while the core rationales for vegetarianism and veganism are deeply entrenched, they in no way guarantee homogeneity among vegetarians and vegans. Emphasizing this point, Maurer offers the following assessment:

> There are probably more differences than similarities among vegetarians. Although more vegetarians hail from the middle class than from any other socioeconomic group, for example, vegetarians range from the wealthy to the impoverished… although vegetarians are typically quite health conscious, there are vegetarians who eat junk food, never exercise, and use illicit drugs. Vegetarians as a group are rather dissimilar; their one universally shared interest is a concern about the consumption of meat. (Maurer, 2002: 14)

While these divergences underscore the imprudence of excessive generalization regarding vegetarians, they also offer an opportunity for juxtaposition and analysis of different types of vegetarians, and of individuals practicing vegetarianism for different reasons. For example, Maurer discerns differentials in commitment between vegetarians motivated for health reasons and those motivated due to animal welfare and ethics; she finds that the latter are much more committed than the former to their vegetarian diets and lifestyles. The absence of an ethical motivation generates "a tenuous lifestyle vulnerable to changing personal tastes and stressful social circumstances" (Maurer, 2002: 21). Conversely, vegetarians motivated by ethics tend to be more active in advocating for their diets and contributing time and effort to building the vegetarian movement.

Understanding these differentials in commitment is important, as they help contextualize shifts in diet — particularly in the cases of far-reaching trajectories that span multiple diets over the life course. While some pescetarians have maintained similar diets since an early age, most individuals adopt pescetarianism because they have been driven to do so by health, ethical, environmental, or other reasons or experiences; Maurer's work suggests that the particular combination of these motivations may be instructive in anticipating the extent to which pescetarians will be entrenched in their dietary lifestyles.

Culture and Diet

Anne Murcott has contributed significant insights — both in depth and in range — to the sociological analysis of food. Among her areas of scholarship, her examination of culture and diet offers particular value and contextualization for discussions of dietary

lifestyles. In one exercise, she frames the very notion of food choices as reflective of cultural influences (and such influences' displacement of any purely biological conceptualization of how people eat):

> Any one individual is observed to be capable over their lifetime of changing what they eat. Human beings are also observed to be selective: they do not eat all that is available to them… In the face of extraordinary variety in eating habits within the species, biological and/or genetic explanations for such selectivity have to be regarded as incomplete. Thus, some realm peculiar to human beings has to be canvassed to achieve suitably comprehensive understanding — provisionally subsumed under the heading of "culture." (Murcott, 2003: 24)

While "culture" can refer to any of several notions, including — but not limited to — a social group and its associated worldview and customs, it is by no means a unitary entity. Murcott observes that an expanded understanding of culture is frequently employed, subsuming not only customs, but also knowledge, beliefs, and morality (Murcott, 2003). Each of these dimensions plays a vital role in shaping our interactions with and navigations of the world, and — as reinforced by Maurer's discussion of ethical beliefs — they certainly impact the way we think about food. In large part due to our knowledge, beliefs, and morality, our most fundamental perceptions — indeed, our very senses — are culturally shaped and influenced; "what is meat to one is… poison to another, not necessarily literally lethally, but certainly metaphorically. Disgust can overtake any one of us" (Murcott, 2003: 33). Vivid demonstrations of this very point will be presented early in Chapter 5, which includes a discussion of negative experiences with red meat.

While morality is persistently a factor in our perceptions of food, it is particularly acute in emergent dietary arenas such as veganism, vegetarianism, and organic foods.

Murcott draws parallels between the respective lexicons of these arenas and that of ethics:

> Espousal of this [contemporary] variety of vegetarianism and health-foods is commonly found to be couched in a vocabulary of ethics. It is an ethics that draws boundaries in different places, tending to accord animals rights that are akin to those which are accorded to people… At the heart of such ethics is a notion that the planet, along with its flora and fauna, is to be conserved by attempting to reverse the ravages of industrialization and restore its earlier purity. Highly refined and processed foods are deemed artificial, thereby unacceptably remote from the purity of the natural, the whole, and the wholesome." (Murcott, 2003: 31)

The implication of this is that even when individuals discuss food choices in terms of health, environment, or other rationales purportedly dissociated from ethics, they are drawing from an underlying dynamic based in ethical notions and expectations. This ethical framework ultimately manifests itself in dichotomous conceptualizations of food, including natural/artificial, unprocessed/processed, and healthy/unhealthy; this generates "an opposition between foodstuffs containing genetically modified ingredients — artificial, unnatural, unhealthy — and those which are produced by methods accorded organic accreditation — untouched, natural, healthy" (Murcott, 2003: 32).

Warde's work has also generated useful insights into the relationship between culture and dietary practices. Among his key findings is the impact of "educational level, which might stand as a proxy for cultural capital, income, or social class... It plays little role in differentiating domestic practices, but becomes significant with respect to eating out" (Warde, Cheng, Olsen, & Southerton, 2007: 379). While the results of this quantitative study only enabled him to speculate regarding the reasons for this correlation between education and tendencies to eat at restaurants, the point is important regardless, as some pescetarians specifically eat seafood only at home — where others cannot see it

— while others tend to eat seafood at restaurants but avoid preparing it at home. The existence of a statistically significant impact on diet stemming from education, cultural, and social class suggests that these factors merit further consideration; in addition, the results from this qualitative study of pescetarianism may contribute to a greater understanding of quantitative results like those from Warde's study.

Surveying the landscape of culture and emergent dietary lifestyles, Warde contends that "social habits, routines, and conventions provide a source of general resistance to rapid change. Contrary to some recent accounts, social and group positioning is not yet defunct as a structuring principle of personal and collective experience in the food domain" (Warde, Cheng, Olsen, & Southerton, 2007: 381). This assertion reinforces the impact that what is typically understood to be "culture" — including social groups, habits, and routines — remains a critical force in skewing dietary lifestyles away from the experimental and toward the conventional. Warde acknowledges, however, that his quantitative approach may mask the underlying heterogeneity of his study population:

> Practices are variously organized, with people in different social positions participating in different kinds of ways, deploying their time, and indeed their money, in accordance with localized social conventions, styles and taste. A comprehensive study of the practice of eating would probably rely primarily on findings deriving from qualitative and ethnographic inquiries, which would in turn reveal much greater differentiation than does a generic investigation into the allocation of time across populations. Our study provides not only a context but also a rationale for further study of localized practices. (Warde, Cheng, Olsen, & Southerton, 2007: 382)

In recognizing the methodological limitations potentially impacting his findings, Warde also sees an opportunity for other work to build upon his own. Given the impact of methodology on results, as well as the need for further qualitative inquiry in the area of

dietary lifestyles, it is prudent to assess the research approach underlying this study of pescetarianism and the attendant analysis of its definitions and contributing factors.

Dietary Change

By its nature, the study of pescetarianism is effectively a case example in the broader analysis of dietary change, particularly since few individuals in the United States begin their lives as pescetarians. In the case of every participant interviewed for this project — and, in all likelihood, nearly every self-defined pescetarian around the country — the adoption of pescetarianism is the result of a conscious decision to shift away from another set of dietary practices. The transition between one diet to another is a topic of great interest in the vegetarian community, which similarly consists predominantly of individuals who did not start their lives as vegetarians, but rather arrived at the lifestyle by way of other diets. Pescetarians and vegetarians alike are often former omnivores; further, many pescetarians are former vegetarians, and many vegetarians are former pescetarians. The analysis of dietary change among vegetarians, then, can be a useful source of background information for understanding how such changes can also lead to the adoption of pescetarian dietary lifestyles.

Maurer writes that within the vegetarian movement, three key principles are ascribed to and associated with dietary change:

1. Individuals' decisions to adopt vegetarianism are a product of interactions with other vegetarians;
2. Among those who are initially resistant to dietary change, such change may occur eventually over time; and

3. Slow dietary change is more like to generate enduring vegetarianism than rapid dietary change. (Maurer, 2002)

Efforts to promote the adoption of vegetarianism often draw from combinations of these three principles. Encouraging a friend to incorporate a progressively larger and larger number of vegetarian meals into his or her diet, for example, channels all three elements: social interaction, overcoming initial resistance to change, and advising gradual change as a foundation for a sustainable shift in diet.

Regarding the first of these principles, Maurer argues that "every vegetarian is a walking advertisement for the potential benefits and hazards of vegetarianism," observing that vegetarian leaders "encourage vegetarians to be physically healthy, morally consistent, and personally likable — not entirely for the benefit of practicing vegetarians, but more to provide exemplars of behavior and appearance that others will want to emulate" (Maurer, 2002: 91). Here, vegetarianism diverges from pescetarianism, with the former benefiting from its status as a full-fledged movement with individuals in leadership roles. The substantive point being made by these leaders, however, could be an argument made by virtually any group, no matter how large or small: any individual — in this case, any vegetarian — has "the potential to attract new adherents by socializing and setting good examples" (Maurer, 2002: 93). Acknowleding that most vegetarians are former meat eaters themselves, vegetarian leaders advise tolerance for meat eaters and caution against fanatical advocacy, deeming it counterproductive for vegetarianism as a movement.

The second principle revolves around marketing vegetarianism so that it is palatable even to those who may initially be resistant to it. The key point here lies in

messaging; rather than telling others that they should consider adopting vegetarianism — which may provoke defensive reactions — one may instead present his or her own reasons for following the vegetarian lifestyle, with the hope that a more neutral approach to disseminating information may increase the likelihood of a receptive audience. This approach resonates among vegans as well. In response to concerns that veganism "scares people," the organization Vegan Outreach frames its outreach materials as information on vegetarianism, which it considers more conducive to social acceptability (Maurer, 2002: 95). Taking this concept a step further, EarthSave International avoids the terms "vegetarians" and "vegans" entirely, instead opting for "people who follow plant-based diets" (Maurer, 2002: 96). These advocacy strategies are all underpinned by a common belief: that dietary change cannot be expected to occur swiftly as a product of impassioned rhetoric. By contrast, efforts to encourage adoption of new diets must acknowledge and accommodate the frequently incremental nature of eroding barriers to change.

The third and final principle lies in the notion that gradual shifts toward vegetarianism are more likely to generate enduring dietary change, and — for this reason, as well as to grow the vegetarian movement — should be welcomed, not disparaged, by those who have already become vegetarians. Emphasizing the value of even small steps toward a vegetarian lifestyle, this stance is an intentional split from the opposing view that vegetarianism is an all-or-nothing proposition. Those subscribing to the all-or-nothing perspective would likely dismiss pescetarians as no different from omnivores; those believing in the value of incremental changes would likely see pescetarianism as but one step on a dietary trajectory leading ultimately to vegetarianism. Of course,

relatively few proponents of either vantage point would categorize pescetarianism as an end unto itself, though this would likely be more common among vegetarians who are former pescetarians. It is worth noting that the idea that gradual changes are more sustainable represents an area of disagreement among vegetarians; some argue that moderate changes are less productive than rapid, comprehensive changes, while others contend that the swift adoption of vegetarianism can generate benefits more profound, convincing, and thus enduring than any incremental shift.

Maurer's assessment of dietary change in the vegetarian arena provides a useful foundation for the analysis of pescetarianism. While the three principles of dietary change articulated by the vegetarian movement cannot be expected to be perfectly translatable across all dietary lifestyles, they are helpful nonetheless as a reference point for comparative analysis and juxtaposition. At a minimum, they can be generalized to increase their applicability; each principle can be reconceptualized as a dimension of dietary change. The first dimension would be social, revolving around the question of whether the adoption of a particular diet — such as pescetarianism — is linked to interactions with those who already follow that diet. The second dimension would focus on the level of resistance to a diet, as well as the type and duration of effort needed to overcome that resistance. Finally, the third dimension would center around the pace at which a diet is adopted, and whether incrementalist approaches are effective trajectories leading to such an outcome. Recast as these more generalizable dimensions, Maurer's three principles can help frame discussions of dietary change beyond vegetarianism, in turn contributing as a building block for the construction of a framework on pescetarian dietary trajectories.

Chapter Three

Methods

> *"There's plenty of data to be found, but it is often thin and malleable. Facts are important, but they don't, on their own, provide meaning – especially when they are so bound to linguistic choices. But place facts in a story – a story about the world we live in and who we are and who we want to be – and you can begin to speak meaningfully about eating animals."*
>
> Foer, 2009

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach employed for this project. This approach was developed to facilitate the collection and analysis of data addressing the three specific aims of the research:

- *Aim 1:* Identify how pescetarianism is defined.
- *Aim 2:* Assess the motives, rationales, and beliefs underlying the decision to adopt or maintain a pescetarian diet.
- *Aim 3:* Understand the social environments pescetarians navigate in following, defending, or promoting their dietary practices.

All three aims were designed to generate greater theoretical understandings of the perspectives of self-defined pescetarians, particularly as they pertain to their dietary practices. Accordingly, direct participation by respondents — in this case, through interviews — was a critical element of the research process. The following sections will provide further detail on the recruitment of these participants, the types of interviews conducted, and other data sources utilized. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the methodological elements applicable to each aim, setting the stage for the overview of findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Design

This study employs a qualitative methodological design to address the research questions. As suggested by past work in this area, such a design is well-suited for a study of this type; in contrast, "food diary" surveys, food frequency questionnaires, and other positivist methods tend to produce inaccurate records of dietary habits and consumption patterns (Krall & Dwyer, 1987). A qualitative approach is an effective way to capture potential overlaps and disconnects between participants' dietary motivations and rhetoric, as well as a reliable means of identifying and assessing dietary choices.

The emphases of this approach — "the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 10) — lend themselves to the use of intensive qualitative interviewing, which in turn serves as the primary data collection strategy for the project. Long used as a tool in qualitative research, intensive interviewing facilitates the exploration of participants' interpretations and perceptions of particular topics and experiences (Charmaz, 2006). While participants are given the option to decline any question they do not wish to answer, response rates in interviews tend to be high; the result is a rich amount of qualitative data (Appleton, 1995).

To supplement and add further texture to the data gathered through the interviews, qualitative document analysis was conducted as well. The incorporation of documents into the research process contributed to the generation of broader and deeper insights, reflecting perspectives and elements that would have been absent if interview participants had been the sole source of data. The following section provides further detail on both the participants and documents central to the analysis.

Data Collection

Participants

In determining eligibility for participation in this study, the researcher had the option to establish a set of definitions of pescetarianism to serve as eligibility criteria (for example, allowing only ovolactovegetarians who also eat fish and other types of seafood, while barring those who eating any other meat products). Under this approach, the type of diet qualifying individuals for participation in the study would have been explicitly defined in recruitment materials and in any conversations with prospective participants. An alternate option was to leave the determination of eligibility to the respondents themselves, with anyone defining themselves as pescetarians being accepted into the sample. Under this second approach, recruitment materials would solely mention that "pescetarians" were sought for this project, without any inclusion of a definition for or explanation of the term.

Following consideration of each option, the researcher decided to opt for the latter, based ultimately on a preference for a set of interviewees that covered as full a range as possible of those self-identifying as pescetarians or responsive to the pescetarian label. Of course, this ultimately opened the study's eligibility criteria to respondents' subjective self-definitions and self-labeling — including, for example, self-defined "vegetarians" who consume fish and other seafood products — but my belief is that this would not have been avoided even with a more restrictive recruitment strategy, and in fact is a desirable approach to recruiting participants and constructing the sample for a study on dietary lifestyles. Indeed, given the nature of how people make and interpret food choices, such variability is to be expected, not only for pescetarianism but for all

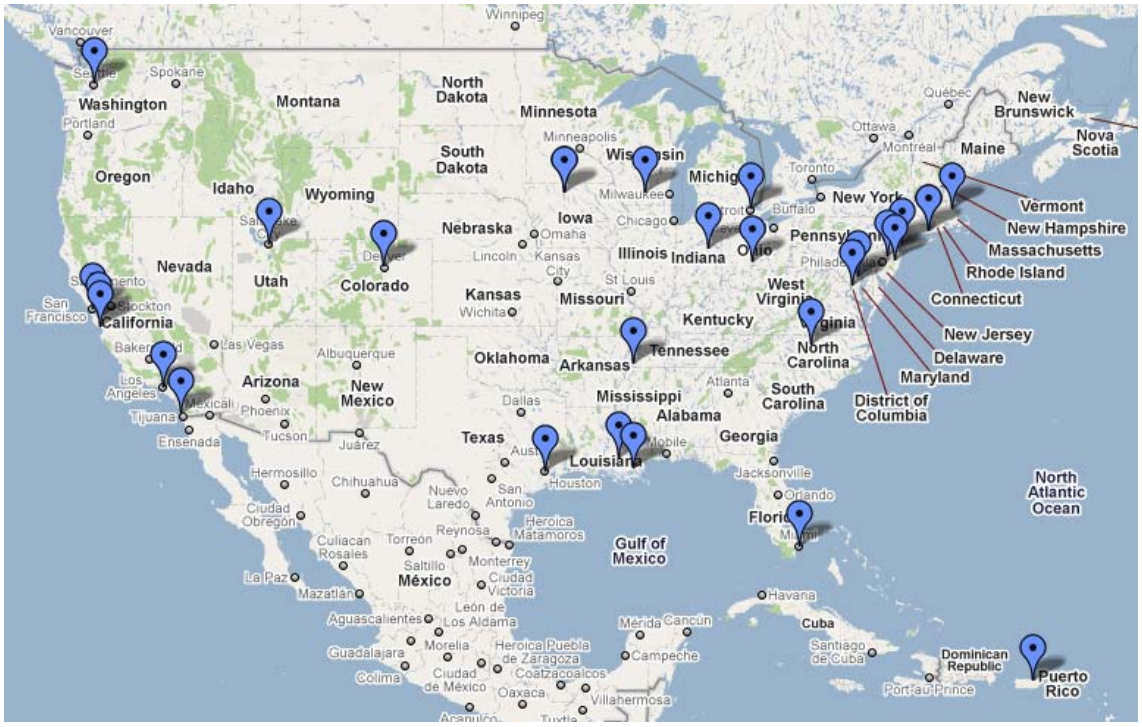
dietary lifestyles. As outlined in the project's specific aims, the assessment of the full breadth and diversity of pescetarian practices is an explicit objective of this study — one that is , in my view, more effectively accomplished through an inclusive sample rather than proscriptive definitions and criteria.

Stemming from this decision, a definition for pescetarianism was never provided throughout the entire recruitment and research process. Recruitment materials and text only mentioned that a study on "pescetarianism" was being conducted, and that "pescetarians" were sought for interviews. At the start of every interview, participants were asked to provide their own definition for pescetarianism; none of the respondents needed assistance from researcher in generating their definition. Recruitment was conducting using print flyers, broadcast email messages, and a variety of online social media, including Facebook groups on food topics (e.g., seafood and pescetarianism), a Twitter account set up specifically to recruit pescetarians, and Craigslist advertisements for a number of cities around the country. The Twitter account was not used to distribute advertisements or conduct outreach; the account was simply set up and updated with information on the study, and prospective participants found the information on their own and contacted the researcher to volunteer. Snowball sampling was also used as a recruitment strategy, with interviewees — many of whose social networks included other pescetarians — encouraged to spread the word about the project.

An informational letter detailing the study's purpose and methods was provided upon initial contact with each potential participant, who was then encouraged to use as much time as needed to consider whether to take part in the study. Among prospective participants, only those individuals who agreed to participate were included (all

participation was voluntary). Once consent had been obtained, the investigator worked with each participant to schedule the time and location of the interview; several participants preferred to be interviewed by telephone, which was helpful given the nationwide geographic distribution of the participant panel.

Figure 1 – Geographic Distribution of Participants



To broaden the spectrum of participants as fully as possible, theoretical sampling was conducted as the recruitment process progressed. For example, in anticipation of the potential impact of regional and cultural variations on dietary lifestyles, a concerted and sustained effort was made to recruit participants from throughout the country, with the vision of achieving a broad geographic distribution in the final panel of respondents. While the volunteers that emerged on their own — without any targeted outreach — in fact represented a wide variety of states, a parallel process was implemented in which

advertisements were posted on Craigslist pages for targeted regions. This helped expedite the recruitment of individuals from different regions. The overall strategy ultimately imbued the data with further diversity, as individuals from regions throughout the country were successfully included in the study (see Figure 1).

The final sample consisted of 36 individuals from a range of backgrounds, cultures, and regions. Among them were students — an unexpectedly small number, particularly in light of the vegetarian movement's "focus on children, teenagers, and college students as the most easily influenced populations" (Maurer, 2002: 97). These were a Latino undergraduate in Miami; another undergraduate in Madison, Wisconsin; a graduate student in Baltimore who doubled as a marathon runner; and a medical student in Los Angeles. Each of these individuals learned about the study through online social media — two via Twitter, one through Facebook, and one over Craigslist.

Individuals in the business and financial worlds constituted another set of participants. One was a small business owner in Boston; another owned a design firm in San Francisco. Both of these individuals were reached through snowball sampling. Two others — a business executive in Golden, Colorado and a financial services professional in Efland, North Carolina — found out about the project through a pescetarian group on Facebook. An accountant from Denham Springs, Louisiana volunteered via Twitter. A Puerto Rican auditor was interviewed as well, contributing perspectives from the United States territory.

Several participants work in the fields of education and health. One was an elementary school teacher in the Bay Area; another was a cooking and nutrition instructor with an urban gardening program in Baltimore. Others were health care providers: a

Veterans Affairs psychologist in Utah; speech language pathologists in Yardley, Pennsylvania and Rockaway, New Jersey; and a registered nurse in San Diego. On the management and policy side were a Baha'i health care management consultant in Los Angeles; a Korean project officer with a public health institute in Baltimore; and a Indian public health analyst from Houston, Texas.

Two participants worked in industries directly related to seafood. The first was a chef in Detroit, whose experiences in the kitchen forced her to handle meat products beyond fish, despite her personal adherence to a pescetarian lifestyle. The second was a commercial fisherwoman in Seattle, originally from Alaska, who also served as an advocate for communities and fisheries harvesting sustainably managed wild seafood. By virtue of their vocations, these individuals saw pescetarianism from a perspective quite different from that of the other participants.

The remaining participants cannot easily be grouped, but they provided critical insights nonetheless. These included a filmmaker in New York; an architect in Boston; a veterinary technician in Jackson, Tennessee; a lawyer in Connecticut; a city planner in Iowa; a manager at a software company in San Francisco; a legal assistant in Columbus, Ohio; and a photographer in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The heterogeneity of these respondents and the sample as a whole — geographically, socioeconomically, occupationally, and in other areas — suggests that pescetarianism is by no means limited to a single uniform group.

All interviews were conducted in 2009 and early 2010. Participants were interviewed individually and in private, using an open-ended interview guide. Generally, one interview was conducted per person, though follow-up questions were sometimes

asked, pending the agreement of the participant and a decision by the investigator that additional information would augment the data or analysis. Following each interview, the investigator generated field notes and memos documenting his impressions and initial analyses.

All interviews were recorded with participants' permission, which was obtained through verbal consent. No participants opted to decline the recording of the interview. All participants were assigned anonymous codes, which have been used to ensure that no personally identifying information could be associated with the interviews. The recordings were stored digitally and password-protected on the investigator's personal computer; only the investigator had access to them. For the final data set, all interview recordings were submitted to a transcriptionist; the resulting transcripts were reviewed by the investigator for accuracy. No identifying information was retained in the transcripts. Together with the memos and field notes, these transcriptions were imported into the qualitative data management software Atlas.ti.

Documents

Separately from the interview process, documents were collected and, as appropriate, added to the data set. The investigator searched a variety of media — including newspaper articles, magazines, and websites — for content pertaining to pescetarianism and the research questions. While pescetarianism has had a limited presence in the media, online sources offered some insight; for example, discussion boards on the food sites Chowhound.com and Yelp.com have played host to conversations and exchanges citing pescetarianism, engaging both supporters and

opponents. Utilizing these internet sources for data offered an unintended but additional research benefit: the anonymity of participants in online discussions. Documents were collected from all time periods, though ultimately most emerged from the 2000s.

Data Analysis

While the process of data collection — which proceeded until the achievement of saturation — was still underway, the investigator initiated the analysis, with the concomitant goals of distilling early findings from the data as well as identifying gaps in the data set. The latter assisted in the process of theoretical sampling and planning out next steps in the recruitment process. The analytic process proceeded according to qualitative research principles. Using an open coding approach — with no preexisting codes developed in advance — the researcher conducted a close line-by-line reading of each transcript and document, assigning codes to selected phrases, passages, and other text pertinent to the project's substantive aims.

Atlas.ti was used to facilitate the analysis. The software includes tools for coding, annotation, and visualization of data; these features were critical to the process of extracting meaning from the raw interview transcripts and accumulated documents. The investigator began with line-by-line and axial coding, identifying and exploring emergent themes in the data. A list of codes was started from the first interview transcripts and document texts; the absence of any code list preceding this process facilitated openness to the data as well as codes that fit the data. The code list was built upon as subsequent transcripts and documents were added; as each was introduced, the entire code list was revised to maintain optimal faithfulness to the data. As coding progressed, the

investigator produced a series of memos identifying conceptual categories and potential analytic directions. This iterative process facilitated a consistent, meticulous approach to the data that weighed alternate or competing interpretations.

This process was critical to the identification of emergent themes in the data; through the generation and ongoing adjustment of the code list, the resulting codes and categories ultimately tracked closely to and were substantively reflective of the original data. As data were accumulated and findings emerged, the process maintained its openness to and accounting for themes unanticipated in the original conceptualizations of the research aims. This powerful bridge from the data to the final analysis was instrumental in facilitating the development of a conceptual framework that aligned with the original research questions.

Ultimately, the use of a qualitative approach imbues the analysis of the data with the flexibility needed to accommodate individuals' varied perspectives on a multifaceted research topic. This is particularly important given the need to distinguish the motivations underlying particular dietary choices from the rhetoric and rationalizations employed to justify those choices. The task of analyzing the intersecting and competing motivations, constructions, and beliefs behind pescetarian choices is facilitated by qualitative research's tendency to "crosscut disciplines, fields, and subject matters" through "interconnected interpretive practices" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 2-4). The final analysis benefits from the qualitative methodological "capacity to represent difference(s), complexities, multiplicities" (Clarke, 2005: 23).

Data Sources and Analysis for Each Aim

Aim 1: Identify how pescetarianism is defined

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews comprised the primary data collection strategy for this aim. Individuals defining themselves as pescetarian were recruited for these interviews; recruitment materials referred simply to "pescetarians," — without any further elaboration — allowing for minimal researcher interference with participants' perceptions and definitions of pescetarianism. Each participant was asked to provide a definition for pescetarianism, with the investigator asking follow-up questions as needed to identify how pescetarianism was being positioned relative to other types of diets. The result of the interview data and analysis was the development of a framework situating different definitions of pescetarianism along a continuum. This is discussed in Chapter 4.

Aim 2: Assess the motives, rationales, and beliefs underlying the decision to adopt or maintain a pescetarian diet

As with Aim 1, open-ended interviews were utilized as a key component of data collection, offering critical perspectives on why pescetarians eat as they do. Participants were asked to detail the experiences and motivations that led them to adopt pescetarianism; for some individuals, these experiences centered around elaborate dietary trajectories, proceeding from one diet to another before the eventual adoption of the pescetarian dietary lifestyle. Other individuals' motivations were tied more strongly to beliefs and knowledge in various areas. These findings are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Aim 3: Understand the social environments pescetarians navigate in following, defending, or promoting their dietary practices.

Again, interview data factored heavily into the analysis of this aim, with a number of participants providing compelling stories of their interactions with non-pescetarians. However, more so than with the other aims, online forums on websites — particularly those with pages and articles dedicated to food — were utilized in the analysis as well. The effort to assess how pescetarianism is rationalized, defended, and promoted by its practitioners — in the face of both supporters and critics — was strengthened through the incorporation of this online textual analysis. Discussion forums host impassioned online conversations surrounding food-related topics, providing useful material for the data set and ultimate analysis.

Chapter Four

How Pescetarianism is Defined

"More recently, I've been calling myself a pescetarian because I learned the meaning of the word. Normally, my family and friends would refer to me as a vegetarian and it didn't really feel right."
Participant from
Denham Springs, Louisiana

The first aim of this project is also its most fundamental: understanding how pescetarianism is defined by individuals identifying themselves as pescetarian. While the definition may appear self-evident based on the discussion in the preceding chapters, it is important to reiterate that pescetarianism is represented not by a single diet, but rather by a spectrum of dietary lifestyles — each of which can be presented, construed, and interpreted as qualifying for pescetarian status. It is not sufficient or representative, then, to simply cite the Merriam-Webster definition for a pescetarian: "one whose diet includes fish but no meat." For those who eat this way, the meaning of the term carries much more weight and complexity. In fact, the definitions employed by some individuals clash and contradict with the definitions employed by others; for the purposes of this project generally and this aim in particular, this is an entirely expected and acceptable outcome. As discussed in Chapter 3, the entire recruitment process was predicated specifically upon materials that avoided any mention of a definition for or even a description of pescetarianism, so as to minimize bias and allow respondents to define their diets on their own terms. In keeping with this approach, the distributed text simply stated that "pescetarians" were sought for interviews. Interestingly, some of the individuals who responded and ultimately participated actually did not identify themselves as pescetarians

during these interviews, but their responses added further texture and nuance to the definitions that will be discussed in this chapter.

How, then, is pescetarianism defined? The answers to this question are linked to and often dependent upon the labels used by participants to describe their respective dietary approaches. In the most straightforward cases, participants simply labeled themselves as pescetarians; these individuals frequently offered the clearest distinctions between their definitions of pescetarianism and those of other diets. In other cases, participants identified themselves not as pescetarians, but as vegetarians or variations thereof; their responses underscored the blurriness of the boundaries between pescetarianism and other diets, including but not limited to vegetarianism. Considered as a whole, the interviews illuminate the lack of consensus that characterizes the defining of diet. However, rather than impeding the clarity of our understanding of pescetarianism, this diversity of perspectives reflects the multiple pathways that can lead individuals to eat in similar ways — as well as the range of terminology and interpretations that ultimately become associated with that dietary lifestyle.

The following sections span the definitions of pescetarianism offered by the participant interviews, documents, and other data sources analyzed as part of this project. While no claims are made regarding the extent of this chapter's inclusivity — indeed, it is a virtual certainty that other definitions have been and are used by pescetarians not involved with this project — the material here is sufficient to suggest the breadth characterizing self-defined pescetarian diets. It will also provide a foundation for the next chapter, which will continue the overview of research findings by addressing the motivations and rationales that lead individuals to subscribe to this type of dietary

practice. The discussion here begins with its natural starting point: "traditional," "by the book" pescetarianism.

"Traditional" Pescetarianism

One of the few online resources dedicated to the topic of pescetarianism, the website www.pescetarianlife.com leads with this definition:

> A pescetarian diet excludes land animals and birds, but includes fish, mollusks, and crustaceans in addition to fruits, vegetables, plants, legumes, nuts, and grains. Eggs and dairy may or may not be present in the pescetarian's diet.

For several — but far from all — self-defined pescetarians, this is the diet that applies to them. Accordingly, the definitions they offer resonate with and echo this set of food choices, and are in some cases so similar that they are virtually indistinguishable. One respondent from Baltimore, Maryland described pescetarianism as

> a dietary lifestyle where one consumes plant-based foods, with no necessary restrictions on dairy or egg either way, and then any seafood products — but excluding any meat products other than fish. (Interview 2)

For the sake of expedience and ease of reference, definitions in this vein will be referred to as "traditional" pescetarianism. This will help simplify the discussion in this chapter; it is important to remember, however, that this is an intentionally arbitrary designation, as the definition here holds no particular claims to primacy (or "tradition," for that matter) relative to other definitions.

The excerpt from the Baltimore participant includes an important classification that merits further consideration, as it recurs throughout all of the interviews. The last part of his definition specifies that his diet excludes *"any meat products other than fish,"*

which indicates that he classifies fish as a type of meat. This is a critical distinction, and one that generates little agreement between observers, pescetarian or otherwise; as will be discussed shortly, several participants state that they do not consider fish to be a type of meat. This, of course, impacts the nature of the definition of pescetarianism, as those who believe fish is *not* meat are more prone to believe that a vegetarian can eat seafood and yet legitimately be referred to as a vegetarian. For those who believe that fish *is* meat, a definition of vegetarianism that includes fish consumption is contradictory.

In acknowledgement of this point — and perhaps owing to my own personal bias that fish should indeed be classified as a type of meat — I will restrict our definition of "traditional" pescetarianism to exclude any belief that fish is not meat. This clarification forces into a separate category any definition that suggests a seafood diet can be labeled as pescetarianism *or* vegetarianism. The traditionalist position, then, holds that anyone who eats seafood is by definition *not* a vegetarian of any kind, and is instead a pescetarian (or, if he or she consumes seafood as well as other types of meat, an omnivore). An interview with a Boston participant falls under this perspective:

> As far as pescetarianism versus vegetarianism — vegetarianism I see as eating no meat of any kind, including that of fish or poultry or beef or anything along those lines. Omnivorous means that essentially you'll eat anything. (Interview 6)

Here, on the topic of meat exclusion, fish is mentioned in parallel with poultry or beef. Such equivalence is not drawn by all, however. A substantial number of people consider poultry and beef — but not seafood — to be meat; these individuals' definitions of pescetarianism are excluded from the category of traditional.

In the construction of the traditional definition, another key topic revolves around eggs, dairy, and animal byproducts. Consistent with the respective definitions offered by

pescetarianlife.com and the Baltimore participant, the traditional definition allows for eggs and dairy to be included under the pescetarian diet. Individuals may choose not to eat these foods, without any impact on their pescetarian status. However, most pescetarians opt for a diet that resembles that of the following participant:

> I don't eat any sort of red meats, chicken, poultry, or any other sort of meats basically, just strictly fish — but I'm not limited in terms of other animal byproducts, so I eat cheese, milk, dairy, and eggs. But in terms of animal flesh, it's only fish or shellfish. (Interview 1)

Animal flesh is not the only area toward which this definition applies; a strict pescetarian would also refuse to eat foods that have been prepared with non-seafood broths, such as chicken broth, beef broth, or other broths prepared from meat sources beyond the scope of the pescetarian diet.

As a final point (one which at first glance may seem self-evident, but merits mention nonetheless), it is worth noting that just because someone is a pescetarian does not mean he or she is open to eating all types of seafood — just as a vegetarian will not necessarily eat every type of vegetable or fruit. While some pescetarians may literally eat every type of seafood, this is not considered a prerequisite for pescetarianism. The definition for "pescetarian" simply suggests that, within the category of seafood, at least some items are included in one's diet — whether fish or shellfish, freshwater or ocean-based, wild or farm-raised, or otherwise. As a matter of clarification, all mammals are excluded, including dolphins, porpoises, and whales. As one participant stated, "by 'fish' I mean not mammals in the ocean, but *actual* fish, and anything lower on the food chain" (Interview 5).

A definition consistent with all of these principles qualifies for inclusion in the "traditional" category. In contrast, each of the ensuing definitional categories diverges in

some way from one or more of these principles; however, while the definitions may not be "traditional," the practitioners of the diets in question can and in many cases do identify themselves as pescetarian.

Pescetarianism as Vegetarianism with Seafood

A similar but semantically distinct definition of pescetarianism is that it is the sum of vegetarianism and seafood consumption. While the actual diet involved may not differ in any way from traditional pescetarianism, an important nuance is attached to the manner in which it is conceptualized; suddenly, "vegetarianism" — absent from the original definition — becomes part of the vocabulary invoked to describe an element of the pescetarian diet. In a way, this represents a bit of a shortcut, particularly for explanatory purposes, as pescetarians may say they eat seafood but are *otherwise* vegetarian. Nonetheless, this definition is a conceptual leap from its traditional counterpart, as the latter is invoked by pescetarians who would specifically refrain from referring to themselves as vegetarian in any way.

A participant from Fort Wayne, Indiana helps illustrate the difference in mindset between this and the traditional definition:

> *Participant:* Usually I would consider it [pescetarianism] to be lacto ovo vegetarianism plus fish.
> *Eric:* Do you refer to yourself as a pescetarian, or do you use some other term?
> *Participant:* Yes, I do. I call myself pescetarian. (Interview 27)

Unlike individuals in the next category (who refer to themselves as vegetarians), this participant still describes herself as a pescetarian. However, while the Baltimore participant offers the traditional definition — avoiding any mention of vegetarianism —

here the respondent conceptualizes pescetarianism as the sum of four elements: lacto + ovo + vegetarianism + fish.

An interesting aspect of this definition is that it implicitly assumes that the audience understands what is meant by "vegetarianism." Unlike the traditional definition, which spells out the types of foods included in and excluded from the diet ("a dietary lifestyle where one consumes plant-based foods, with no necessary restrictions on dairy or egg either way, and then any seafood products — but excluding any meat products other than fish"), this version tends to be substitute "vegetarianism" for any mention or description of "plant-based foods." This is demonstrated by the remarks of a participant from Jackson, Tennessee:

> The difference between vegetarianism and pescetarianism is... I eat mostly vegetarian foods, but I do eat fish a couple times a week. (Interview 8)

For conversational purposes, "vegetarian foods" may suffice, but as a definition, it fails to resolve the ambiguity of what the individual eats. Beyond fish, one would not be able to discern any specific dietary choices.

The same Tennessee participant also raises a point relating to the discussion of fish as a type of meat. She defines a pescetarian as "someone who does not eat meat or poultry but does eat fish" (Interview 8). This is another point of departure from the traditional view that fish *is* a type of meat. While she still does refer to herself as a pescetarian — and, in her first excerpt above, she specifically differentiates between vegetarianism and pescetarianism — her classification of meat and fish as separate ultimately contributes to her definition's placement in this rather than the traditional category.

It could be argued that this category is the product of excessive granularity; after all, these differences in definitions may have little or impact on individuals' diets. However, given the social constructionist attributes of food discussed in Chapter 2, my argument is that the way individuals conceptualize and define their diets has a tangible influence on how and what they eat (and think about eating), as well as on their interactions with others around food. This will become especially clear with the next category of definition, whose proponents — despite their diets — do not even refer to themselves as pescetarians.

Pescetarianism as a Subset of Vegetarianism

The third and interestingly most common definition is of pescetarianism as a subset of vegetarianism. Subscribing to this conceptualization, a participant from Texas defined pescetarianism as follows:

> I think it's a subset of vegetarianism. I do, in my head, think I'm still a vegetarian — but I happen to eat seafood. So, it's a weird situation where I think about seafood the way I think about eggs — because I think that eating eggs still makes me a vegetarian, I think having seafood still makes me a vegetarian. (Interview 12)

The analogy between seafood and eggs is a new notion, absent from the previous definitions but representative of the type of perspective that ultimately reconciles seafood consumption with the self-application of the vegetarian label. A Los Angeles respondent offered an even simpler definition, stating that a pescetarian is "a vegetarian who eats fish." While the reasons underlying and driving the use of this designation differ from person to person, they are linked by their preference for the label "vegetarian" as opposed to "pescetarian."

This definition encroaches on contentious terrain, because while these individuals refer to themselves as vegetarians despite their consumption of seafood, strict vegetarians — those who avoid meat products of any kind, including fish — are often less apt to use the term "vegetarianism" so inclusively. This hints at the visceral reality and potential conflict that can become entangled even with artificially constructed labels. A New Orleans participant noted that "people get pretty angry if you call them a pescetarian when they're a vegetarian or a vegan" (Interview 14); conversely, while some who follow pescetarian diets accept or even prefer being referred to as vegetarian, others (the traditionalists, by this chapter's terminology) find such labeling inaccurate and frustrating.

Why, then, would individuals who eat pescetarian diets insist on referring to themselves as vegetarians? For some, this answer has a social dimension — emerging particularly from the expedience of using an already-familiar dietary label:

> *Participant:* I would say pescetarianism is a subset of vegetarianism, although I have a lot of people who disagree with me.
> *Eric:* So how do you refer to your diet?
> *Participant:* I always say vegetarian, because I don't think very many people would be familiar with "pescetarian," and then I say I eat fish and seafood on occasion. (Interview 18)

Here, pescetarianism's relative unfamiliarity compared to vegetarianism is cited as a reason for associating with the latter, along with the participant's personal belief that pescetarianism is indeed subsumed by vegetarianism. However, even among those who are less fervent in the belief that pescetarianism falls under vegetarianism, the social pressures to label themselves as vegetarian remain. The experience of a respondent from Madison, Wisconsin typifies these pressures:

> Generally I say I'm a vegetarian just because it's easier — if I say pescetarian, most people will ask, "what's that?" I like fish — when the opportunity presents itself, I'll eat it. But it's easier to just say I'm a vegetarian and have people understand that. (Interview 7)

Even as an opportunistic consumer of seafood, this participant finds that the convenience of explaining her diet as vegetarianism — and consequent avoidance of food-related questions from her peers — is strong enough for her to shed all identification as a pescetarian. Such experiences are not limited to those in the Midwest; for those subscribing to pescetarian dietary practices, the challenges associated with navigating social arenas and networks are similar throughout the country. The previously cited Los Angeles participant explained that few in her social circle had heard of pescetarianism — and that accusations would erupt whenever she described herself using the pescetarian label:

> I usually refer to myself as a vegetarian just because a lot of people aren't really familiar with the term pescetarian and would be like "What? Whoa! Are you trying make up this term for your diet?" (Interview 9)

Faced with such questions, these participants ultimately decided that identifying themselves as vegetarians would most effectively minimize the dietary confrontations in their social interactions.

Even for those who do not face such social pressures, the vegetarian label can hold appeal. A respondent from Iowa commented that the combination of her limited seafood consumption and the inconvenience of explaining pescetarianism to others prompted her to associate herself with vegetarianism:

> I say I'm vegetarian because I eat so few fish — or fish products limited to what's been certified by the Marine Stewardship Council — and that's a lot to explain to other people. (Interview 21)

This instance of self-labeling carries an intriguing additional dimension: the restriction of the participant's seafood consumption to products certified by the Marine Stewardship Council, an international program that promotes awareness of seafood emerging from sustainable fisheries. The integration of environmental concerns into the selection of foods constituting one's diet provides foreshadowing to Chapter 5, which will address the factors and motivations underlying the decision to opt for pescetarianism. In this participant's case, even the environmental considerations fueling her choice of diet were not sufficient cause for her to label herself a pescetarian — a move which presumably would generate additional forums for her to share and discuss her strongly held principles on food and sustainability. It is telling that the desire for social order and conformity can at times outweigh even the most powerful, deeply rooted political beliefs.

Beyond the social elements, the tendency to assume the vegetarian label also arises from beliefs about the nature of fish themselves. Indeed, the aforementioned debate surrounding whether to classify fish as meat is most pronounced for those who eat seafood but define themselves as vegetarians. One interviewee remarked succinctly, "fish seem to be among the lowest animals" (Interview 5). The dialogue on this topic, however, does not revolve entirely around biological classifications. Further detailing her analogy between seafood and eggs, the Texas participant explained:

> There's the biology of fish — not having an advanced neural system or something like that. But honestly, just to me, a lot of what I eat happens to do with texture. And to me, seafood and eggs — the way they're prepared, the texture of it — just doesn't remind me of meat. One of the major reasons I stopped eating meat, besides health reasons and religious reasons, was just because I didn't like the taste of it, the consistency of it. Seafood in general doesn't remind me of that. And so I don't classify it as meat. (Interview 12)

The dietary classification of fish, then, does not merely depend on biological relationships or cultural interpretations; in this case, taste factors — including texture and consistency — motivate this participant's differentiation between meat and seafood. This example underscores the social constructionist influence on the ways diet is defined. While biological, ethical, or other perspectives would inspire some individuals to classify seafood as a type of meat, the individual experience of food — the roles of one's senses, including taste — leads others to generate a rather different classification. These perceptions of food in turn impact the definitions and labels used to describe one's dietary choices.

The interactions between these factors can also generate more unexpected outcomes. For example, some individuals do classify seafood as meat, yet paradoxically continue to refer to themselves as vegetarian:

> There's the whole issue of "Well, are fish evolved enough organisms? Do they feel pain? Do they have any sense of life and death and what's happening to them?" And I guess then people can justify being a vegetarian who eats fish because fish aren't as highly evolved an organism as birds or mammals, which provide the other meats that people are eating. (Interview 9)

Here, in a departure from the prior participant, no ambiguity is attached to the notion that fish is a type of meat. Despite this, however, biological and ethical skepticism — regarding the evolutionary position of fish, as well as their ability to experience pain and other stimuli — is employed to justify the respondent's continued self-identification as a vegetarian. This case lends further credence to the observation, expressed both by participants and in the scholarship on food, that numerous individuals label themselves as vegetarian even while they consume meats and other foods of animal origin.

Interestingly, all of the participants quoted in this section responded to recruitment materials stating solely that *pescetarians* were sought for interviews. As discussed in Chapter 3, never in any of these materials was pescetarianism defined, nor was vegetarianism or veganism mentioned. As evidenced by the interview data, certain individuals' tendency to label themselves as vegetarians did not impede their interest in participating in this project; without any additional prompting, they understood and interpreted "pescetarian" to be a label that addressed them as well. It was a surprise in the interviews, then, to hear so many individuals assert that they identified not as pescetarians, but as vegetarians instead. This outcome can be interpreted as an understandable product of the tension between competing dietary conceptualizations — and accordingly, as an appropriate transition to the next and final section of this chapter.

Conflicting Perspectives

Given the evident permeability between these definitions, it seems fitting to end this chapter with a section demonstrating the conflict and contradiction that can emerge even within a single interview. An exchange with a participant in New Jersey is an illustrative case:

> *Participant:* I'm vegetarian. I eat dairy. To me, my definition [for pescetarianism] is some of kind of vegetarianism, either being a vegetarian or a vegan, and also including fish, but no chicken, no beef, no chicken stock, no other animal products, no other things derived from any other animals other than fish. For me, right now I'm also lacto ovo vegetarian, as well as eating fish.
> *Eric:* Would you consider pescetarianism to be a subset of vegetarianism, or would you say they're two separate things?
> *Participant:* It's not really a subset. It doesn't fall under vegetarian; it's like a variation. I consider it like a variation. I don't consider it true vegetarianism. (Interview 17)

Within the span of less than a minute, the participant labels herself as a vegetarian, while noting that she eats fish; defines pescetarianism as "a vegetarian or a vegan" who eats fish while avoiding other animal products; and finally closes with a statement that a pescetarian diet "doesn't fall under vegetarian... I don't consider it true vegetarianism." While seemingly self-contradictory, this shift highlights the challenges confronting efforts to understand dietary choices (even our own). Individuals who define themselves as vegans and also consume seafood may be uncommon, but — in light of the difficulties associated with reconciling one's diet with the labels constructed to describe that diet — such cases cannot be deemed nonexistent or impossible. A single individual can, within four sentences, transition from categorizing pescetarianism under vegetarianism to disavowing any association between the two. While the description of one's own diet may seem like a fairly straightforward exercise, the evidence suggests that quite the opposite can be true.

The approach used to recruit participants for this study explicitly avoided providing a definition for pescetarianism. While this was an intentional move to allow participants to provide their own definitions, a respondent from Washington, DC struggled with the boundaries separating different diets:

> I consider pescetarianism to be anything that involves eating fish. So whether it'd be fish or mollusks or seafood or sushi or caviar — anything of that nature, I consider pescetarianism. Whereas regular vegetarianism — I see people that just eat the vegetables and fruit, and I just struggle with the ovolactopesco issue. I'm not sure who gets to define: if you still have eggs in your diet, is it considered an ovotarian? Is pescetarianism just [eating] fish?
>
> I always get a little confused on that, and I think that is kind of defined by the person, because I have some friends that are vegetarians, yet they still eat chicken. So I don't know where the dividing line is, but I consider if

> you eat any sort of meat, you are not a vegetarian — however, fish is okay in my book (laughs) to be considered a vegetarian. (Interview 3)

Amid her self-professed confusion, she raises a critical point: regardless of the "official" definitions expressed in the dictionary or other sources, dietary labels have been and will continue to be ultimately defined by the individual. As a product of this, there will always be self-professed "vegetarians" who eat chicken or purported "vegans" who eat fish.

Summary

The boundaries between dietary definitions may suggest that logic should apply to the designation of particular labels, but — to reiterate a point from Chapter 1 — "Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity… Food choices are likened to fashion choices or lifestyle preferences… the messiness of food, the almost infinite meanings it proliferates, does make the question of eating — and eating animals especially — surprisingly fraught" (Foer, 2009: 263). Because dietary labels often converge with a sense of identity, individuals invest in protecting and guarding the definitions they have constructed, even if their dietary choices suggest they should do otherwise.

As we move on to Chapter 5 and its discussion of the motivations underlying pescetarian diets, it will be important to remember that pescetarianism holds different meanings for different audiences and participants. Even among people who eat virtually identical foods, the labels they use to describe their diets (and themselves) can vary considerably. Each of the factors used to generate these dietary definitions is an arena subject to debate and disagreement; questions as seemingly elementary as whether to classify seafood as meat prompt heated conversations within social circles. Given the

dearth of common ground on such issues, it is perhaps remarkable that these participants are actually subscribing to the same diet. Chapter 5 will delve into the reasons underlying the adoption of the pescetarian lifestyle.

Chapter Five

Paths to Pescetarianism

> *"This is the way I choose to eat. It bothers me to eat [land] an**imals, so I don't eat them. You can eat whatever you want to — it doesn't bother me — but this is a choice for me. This what I choose to eat. I just feel the benefits of eating fish outweigh the benefits of eating poultry, beef, pork, and other animals."*
>
> Participant from
> Memphis, Tennessee

This project's second aim is also the heart of this work: understanding why individuals opt for a pescetarian diet. As the preceding chapters have suggested, the reasons are spectacularly varied and, in some cases, complex and profound. To impose an artificial degree of order on the discussion, this chapter is organized by section, each covering a different a different subset of beliefs, rationales, and motivations; however, it should be noted that these sections impose arbitrarily discrete boundaries between reasons that frequently overlap with, complement, or even contradict one another. Further, one person may express several motivations at a given point or may use different rationales over time to explain a changing — or unchanging — diet. For some individuals, lifelong beliefs have consistently driven their dietary choices and ultimately their pescetarianism; others have seen their dietary motivations and rationales shift circuitously over the years, with pescetarianism representing but the current point in their respective dietary journeys.

While some of the definitional issues raised in Chapter 4 will be referenced here where appropriate, this discussion will for the most part address motivations that retain their relevance and applicability regardless of the precise way in which pescetarianism is defined. In some instances, the definitions employed will be made evident by the

participants' stories; however, even in such cases, identical or similar rhetoric can often be used to rationalize pescetarianism defined in other ways — as well as other diets altogether. The three aims for this project were designed to reflect this socially constructed reality, with a substantive differentiation between the first aim — which focuses on definitional issues — and the second aim, which centers around factors contributing toward the adoption of pescetarianism.

This discussion will begin with a common motivator for pescetarian diets: negative experiences with red meat and other land-based meat products. The decision to adopt a pescetarian diet is inherently concomitant with a (sometimes separate or subconscious) decision to avoid another type of diet; there are also instances in which a pescetarian diet is conceptualized as a stage in a process of dietary change (usually trending toward increasing restrictions on food choices, though examples of the opposite trajectory are documented in this study as well). For many pescetarians, the origins of such decisions and processes lie in meat-induced stressors or trauma experienced earlier in life.

Experiences with Meat Products

For many respondents, episodes experienced during childhood had a transformative and enduring effect on their perceptions of and relationships with food. A disproportionate share of these impacts emerged out of negative experiences with meat products like beef or pork. A participant from Washington, DC looked back at the pivotal moment that immediately led her to cease all consumption of red meat:

> I was a day over thirteen — I was in high school or middle school at that point — and I found a piece of gristle in my hamburger at McDonald's.

> And it just really stressed me out. After that, I went home and told my parents I'd never eat red meat again, and they were like, "okay, whatever." They just thought it was a fad or a phase that I was going to go through. But since then I've become *more* strict… I was just disgusted by the idea of gristle and fat. (Interview 3)

For this respondent, a single childhood trip to a fast food restaurant more than sixteen years ago produced an irreversible turning point for her dietary lifestyle. The vividness with which she remembered and recounted this experience was striking; her disgust with the gristle in her hamburger resonates to this day, as evidenced by the agitated inflection with which she relayed the story. The dismissive response that greeted her announced disavowal of red meat is a reaction common among the social networks of those interviewed for this project (and of the author, for that matter). While this participant was only thirteen years old when she conveyed this decision to her parents, dietary change for individuals of any age is often met with skepticism and doubt (A personal anecdote: during a conversation regarding my pescetarian diet, a colleague once remarked, "It's just a matter of time before you end up eating at McDonald's again. You won't be able to stop yourself." Time has thus far proven her prediction inaccurate; I still find McDonald's as unappetizing now as I did when — and indeed before — I adopted a pescetarian diet). However, regardless of such skepticism, most participants in this study have demonstrated substantial dietary resolve — a testament, in part, to the deeply transformative impact that can be generated by experiences with food over the life course.

For some respondents, these pivotal experiences with red meat did not even involve sitting down for a meal, let alone taking a bite. A participant in San Diego,

originally from San Francisco, recalled early lessons in the link between animals and meat products:

> As a kid, I started watching my mother prepare meals, and I realized where meat like chicken and pork came from. My parents went to Chinatown a lot when I was a kid, because that's where we did our Asian grocery shopping. I would see them unload pigs from the shop and that kind of freaked me out. That was initially why I wanted to stop eating meat. It just kind of grossed me out. I'm not eating it knowing where it came from. (Interview 18)

Stories like this convey a critical point: environmental, ethical, or other knowledge-driven reasons are not the sole drivers and motivators of dietary change. Fundamental human instincts and reactions — in this case, disgust — are very powerful, particularly for children just learning to situate food in its broader contexts. While an older person may observe the scene at a market in Chinatown, reflect upon the implications and ramifications of animal cruelty, and ultimately decide that eating red meat is no longer appealing, in this case the participant, as a child, arrived at the same dietary conclusion for a simple and inexorably powerful reason: what she saw disgusted her.

By no means were experiences of disgust limited to young children. An assessment of the participants in this study suggests, in fact, that an individual's age has little impact on one's susceptibility to negative events involving land-based meat products — or on the dietary changes such events may catalyze. A participant from Connecticut had a distressingly graphic and visceral experience — traumatic, one would imagine, for a person of virtually any age — during her college years:

> I went home for the weekend for my sister's senior prom. And my father made beautiful steaks on the grill for her prom night meal. Right as I was about to cut into it out on the back deck, it literally shot blood into my face. I pushed my plate back and said, "I'm ready to quit red meat." (Interview 16)

While this respondent had previously reflected upon the notion of implementing changes to her diet, she had never acted upon such considerations. Through its sheer repulsiveness, this incident prompted a swift actualization of these thoughts; she has been a pescetarian since. Despite the trauma ensuing from this experience, the respondent's family — as with that of the aforementioned participant from DC — was initially resistant to any intimation that she was adopting a pescetarian diet, citing the difficulty of preparing meals that met her needs and restrictions. However, over time, not only was she was able to assuage her family's concerns, but — through sustained lobbying — she successfully persuaded her father to enroll in cooking classes and learn how to prepare seafood, ultimately resolving the culinary impasse that had confronted their household.

Of course, these experiences do not solely center around negative encounters with red meat, nor do such experiences necessarily ensure that one will gravitate toward pescetarianism specifically. Indeed, many individuals experiencing similarly traumatic episodes may simply opt for vegetarianism or other, more restrictive diets; some simply brush off such incidents and continue with their original food practices. However, among those who do elect to adopt pescetarianism, concerns about and negative experiences with land-based meat products — including chicken and turkey — lead their dietary paths in a direction congruent with the inclusion of seafood. The experience of a respondent in Columbus, Ohio typifies this sort of pathway; her story is an illustrative example of factors that influence and facilitate the adoption of a pescetarian diet:

> I knew that I absolutely hated red meat. I would not eat that. But, I was more flexible when it came to turkey... I was always okay with turkey and chicken, but over time I was always the one who got the tendon. I was always the one who got the strange looking imperfections or the vein or something disgusting in my piece of chicken or turkey. I would be munching along and then, all of a sudden, I would bite down on something

> that was unchewable or something that didn't taste like chicken. Or just the odd textures. That instantly ruined the meal for me… Every time I would tell someone that, they would tell me to get over it or just spit it out or whatever. But that wasn't good enough. The whole meal was ruined from that point on. (Interview 26)

Analogous to the DC respondent's experience with gristle in a McDonald's hamburger, this participant — who already had an aversion to red meat — encountered a relentless array of chicken and turkey products with tendons, veins, and other parts with "odd textures." It is worth acknowledging here that the act of eating — experiencing the taste as well as texture of food — can factor critically into one's propensity toward making particular dietary shifts. While a typical omnivore may consume chicken and turkey without complaint, let alone repulsion, the Columbus participant's sensitivity to and distaste for the less savory elements of these foods finally led her to her breaking point:

> The last time this happened, I was eating a chicken sandwich at work, and it happened twice in the same sandwich. It was so disgusting. I was biting down on stuff that I couldn't chew, and I looked closer and it didn't look good to me all of a sudden. I thought, "I am so sick of turkey and chicken." I was just sick of it. (Interview 26)

Like the DC participant's hamburger and the Connecticut participant's steak, here a chicken sandwich — and the disgust it generated — served as the final catalyst for enduring dietary change. However, the momentum for such change does not inexorably lead individuals to pescetarianism; other factors contribute to the adoption of the pescetarian diet instead of other possibilities, such as vegetarianism and veganism. In this case, taste provided the bridge for her ultimate dietary decision:

> From that point on, I decided to stick with salmon. I have never had that problem with salmon. I have never really had that problem with any fish. I decided, "No more. I've had enough with those bad experiences. I am just going to stick with fish." I love fish, for many reasons. It's healthy, it delicious, we have a lot of good restaurants in this area who know how to

> fix extraordinary seafood. So I'm just going to stick with that. (Interview 26)

Interestingly, the participant's framing of land-based meat revolves predominantly around the appalling nature of eating "unchewable" chicken and turkey pieces, but when she shifts to discussing her decision to narrow her meat consumption to salmon and other types of fish, her framing is quite different. After mentioning that eating strictly fish allows her to avoid "those bad experiences," she goes on to describe fish as "healthy," "delicious," and — when prepared by local restaurants in the Columbus area — "extraordinary." While partially driven by taste considerations, her affinity for consuming fish clearly stems from other factors as well. This suggests that the negative experiences with chicken and turkey alone may have been insufficient to drive her toward pescetarianism; however, when considered concomitantly with her positive impressions of fish — in terms of health benefits, taste, and sheer enjoyment — her decision to cease her consumption of poultry effectively brought a pescetarian lifestyle into focus as the most fitting dietary outcome.

The next section will address pescetarians whose experiences are no less influential, but by definition far more varied: those who started not from omnivorous diets, but from vegetarianism and veganism. While pescetarians are commonly linked by a history of negative experiences with meat products — regardless of whether they are former omnivores, former vegetarians, or former vegans — the routes leading vegetarians and vegans to pescetarianism tend to differ quite considerably from those followed by omnivores.

Shifts From Vegetarianism and Veganism

Some participants' paths toward pescetarianism cannot be traced to a single memorable incident or event. Instead, they have embarked — sometimes not entirely by choice — on nonlinear dietary trajectories, with omnivorous, vegetarian, and vegan diets each assuming contributing roles at various stages. In these cases, while viscerally negative experiences may be among the factors producing dietary change, they are virtually never the sole drivers of such change. In this and the following sections of this chapter, other factors — beliefs, rationales, and motivations — will be critical to the discussion. However, for some individuals, even the most circuitous pathways and motivations ultimately lead them to an unmistakable dietary destination: pescetarianism.

A respondent in San Francisco provided a detailed account of a dietary journey that started from birth and eventually culminated with his adoption of a pescetarian lifestyle. This is an intriguing case, as his dietary arc proceeds through a number of clearly distinct stages. In a case perhaps disproportionately common in the Bay Area, the story begins with his being raised a vegetarian in his infancy and toddlerhood:

> I was born in Berkeley to hippie parents who were vegetarian when I was four... I was vegetarian until I was maybe like three or four. And then, growing up, we ate meat — less than once a day, but a few times a week. I thought that was normal, pretty normal. But what I noticed all along my childhood, if I ate a steak or anything that had visible amounts of fat on it — particularly steak — I would throw up… not like vomiting, but I would just spit out this kind of like oily, bitter kind of thing… I just didn't process it very well. (Interview 22)

Up to this point, this story sounds similar to those in the previous section; for this participant, the consumption of meat products with visible fat caused an adverse physical reaction. However, in a departure from the other respondents, this individual was not noticeably disgusted by his recollection of these reactions. This remained the case as he

went on to describe his physical reactions to dairy products like milk and ice cream, which he also could not process. As a result of these problems, he minimized his consumption of fatty meat and dairy products during his childhood years.

This dietary phase continued for over a decade, with little variation, until after he left Berkeley. For college, he moved to Oregon, where — in large part due to his new surroundings and networks — he tried vegetarianism for the second time in his life, and for the first time voluntarily:

> As soon as I left home and got to college… at my school, it felt like half the people were vegetarian. It was just sort of like the thing to do. But as soon as I tried going vegetarian — well, I couldn't. I never really did that much dairy anyway, and I like being extreme. So I figured, I might as well go vegan. (Interview 22)

This participant's second stint as a vegetarian lasted for about one year, becoming a relative footnote in his broader dietary journey. While his vegetarian phase was merely transitory, the fact he attempted it at all is reflective of the substantial impact that new settings and prevailing trends can have on one's dietary decisions. Ultimately, however, the influence of his social networks was outweighed by his inability to process dairy and core unwillingness to follow the status quo. To accommodate these traits, he turned to veganism — which proved to be a diet he could adopt wholeheartedly:

> I always really liked cooking, and I've always been really into food. And at the time I was young, so I thought veganism was kind of like a challenge — I thought it was extreme and a challenge. I could go do it. And so I did. I basically built a house of people who were also all vegan... I actually set up the first website on veganism. (Interview 22)

His devotion to veganism as a movement was striking; his time in college overlapped with the early years of the internet, which allowed him to claim the distinction of starting

the first vegan website. He surrounded himself with a vegan social network, which further cemented his role as an advocate for his diet.

As time progressed, however, he found the strength of his convictions tested, as he began to perceive inconsistencies and difficulties inherent to his vegan lifestyle. Questions emerged in a range of areas, from his core beliefs and actions to his very ability to follow a vegan diet:

> I was never the kind of vegan who wouldn't wear leather. I mean, I wouldn't have bought a leather coat, but leather shoes were fine. I wasn't a religious or a spiritual vegan. It was just the aesthetic — to some extent ascetic — and then to some point, health-oriented and a little environmental. I have a lot of friends who wouldn't even wear wool because that's sheep, but I was never that hardcore. (Interview 22)

Perhaps in an echo of his adoption of vegetarianism due to its prevalence in college, the participant could not help but assess his vegan principles in the context of — and in juxtaposition with — the beliefs practiced by his peers. This is an interesting tendency; while some individuals insulate their beliefs, intentionally or otherwise, from outside influences, in this case an open advocate of veganism felt a certain vulnerability owing to what he characterized as his relatively incomplete embrace of the vegan lifestyle. Diet, it seems, is rarely solely about food; here, the participant held his veganism in lower regard due to the absence of key non-dietary dimensions: spirituality, religion, and the refusal to wear wool or leather. This self-evaluation highlights the interconnectivity between belief systems and dietary choices, underscoring the impact the former can have on the latter. In light of the participant's self-perceived dearth of dedication, it is perhaps unsurprising that over the course of his six years as a vegan, he maintained a level of openness to food choices inconsistent with vegan principles:

> I had always told myself that if I ever felt a craving to eat meat, that I would do it. What I noticed along that time is that like if I was visiting with family, sometimes you'd end up in a restaurant where there'd be nothing vegan on the menu. And I'd be kind of stuck in this situation. And what I'd end up doing is eating the vegetarian thing they had on the menu. (Interview 22)

The participant's openness to vegetarian food choices in the absence of vegan options may be a manifestation of the disconnect he perceived between his vegan diet and the lack of a religious or spiritual basis for his vegan lifestyle. In this case, that disconnect may have contributed to the eventual dissolution of his veganism. It is worth noting, however, that the next section of this chapter will feature the example of a Houston, Texas respondent who was vegetarian for religious reasons and decided to adopt pescetarianism anyway; indeed, even factors that may appear determinative of a certain dietary lifestyle can be moderated or overcome by other circumstances. In the case of the San Francisco participant, his longstanding physical difficulties with dairy consumption were insufficient to impede his occasional consumption of non-vegan vegetarian foods:

> Usually, if there's nothing vegan on the menu, but there is something vegetarian, on the East Coast it's always going to be something like fettuccine in alfredo sauce. And I would just feel miserable after that. And I was just thinking to myself that mostly I'm doing this for health and environmental reasons, and I felt that fettuccine in alfredo sauce is way worse than a piece of grilled fish for the environment. And for myself. (Interview 22)

Here, the story begins to incorporate health and environmental considerations — factors that will discussed later in this chapter. This is also the first instance in which he mentions seafood and a potential return to meat consumption; while the relative environmental impacts of fettuccine alfredo and grilled fish may be debated, his very consumption of the former represents a clear break with the dietary lifestyle of a vegan advocate. This served to accelerate his progress toward the next phase in his dietary arc:

> So I started having this feeling like I wasn't being internally consistent. I had to break a little bit, and I felt like I was breaking the wrong way. And so I thought, well, maybe I should break the other direction [toward a less restrictive diet]. But I still hadn't done it. I was still kind of in this state. (Interview 22)

The participant's feelings of internal tension epitomize the dimensions of unpredictability inherent to any set of lifestyle choices, as well as the vulnerability of any diet to swift changes in course (a phenomenon familiar to those who have attempted weight loss programs but struggled to fight off cravings for proscribed foods). While one may choose his or her diet based on particular beliefs or motivations, rarely if ever can these be static and unchanging — and new realizations can in turn generate shifting patterns of food consumption. Having strayed from his veganism, this participant did not choose to redouble his efforts to reestablish his veganism or even return to vegetarianism; rather, he opened the door to a move in an entirely new dietary direction:

> So then one day I was with my little brother and we were sitting in a Chinese restaurant, and he had soft-shell crab. I just looked over at the soft-shell crab, and I was like, damn, that looks good. And so I ate one. And I was like, wow, that's good. I thought somehow, if I was going to break six years of veganism, eating a whole crab would be sort of a hardcore way of doing it. And it was good. And at that point, I thought, I guess I'm a pescetarian now. I was pesco-vegan. (Interview 22)

On its own, the leap from veganism to eating crab may seem impulsive; however, this move had been prefaced by the growing sense of cognitive dissonance that had pervaded his dietary thinking. That said, dietary preferences can be truly fickle; with one bite, an individual — whether vegan, vegetarian, or pescetarian — can instantly switch to another diet (or, if he or she so chooses, simply characterize it as a momentary lapse). This participant decided that, with the consumption of the crab, he had become a pescetarian

or “pesco-vegan” (a relatively uncommon but not apocryphal term). He went on to explain what he meant by this:

> I was basically eating no eggs or dairy, but I was eating fish. It was probably several years before I cooked fish at home. But when I went out [to eat], if there was nothing vegan, I would eat a piece of fish. That lasted for about a year. Then it progressed… if there was nothing vegan that looked good, I would eat fish. And finally I reached a point where, if I ate out, I would mostly eat something that had fish in it. (Interview 22)

Of course, by the traditional definition, a vegan does not consume any animal-based product, let alone fish filets. This participant, however, certainly had not subscribed to a traditional arc of dietary lifestyles. Demonstrating a dexterity with navigating fluid labels, he employs the term “pesco-vegan” as a shorthand to describe his food choices, which — aside from fish — continued to exclude dairy and other animal-derived food products. This transitional phase provided a bridge to increasing levels of seafood consumption:

> Now I'm at a point where I probably cook with fish at home between once and twice a week. And if I eat out, I generally order something that has fish in it — but I don't eat out that often. So that's my trajectory. (Interview 22)

His trajectory also was shaped by an important change in his life: his marriage. While he and his wife initially engaged in distinct dietary practices, together they were able to decide on a unique convergence:

> When I met my wife, she was vegetarian and I was pesco-vegan. We basically decided to do a union of our dietary preferences instead of an intersection. So I started eating cheese, which was really rough, but I got through it. And she started eating fish. (Interview 22)

This reintegration of dairy into his diet marked the final step in his dietary journey, at least up to the present. He now refers to himself as a pescetarian rather than a pesco-

vegan, and his wife ended her vegetarianism in favor of pescetarianism, giving both of them an in-house support network for their dietary practices.

To recap, this participant proceeded through the following sequence of dietary phases: vegetarianism, omnivorism, vegetarianism, veganism, and pescetarianism. For each of the latter three phases, distinct factors prompted his adoption of the dietary lifestyle in question. He became vegetarian for a year due to the influence of friends in college. His inability to process dairy and desire for a challenge then led him to adopt veganism, which he followed and advocated for several years. Over time, he began to identify inconsistencies between his diet and his convictions — including health and environmental considerations — which finally resulted in his adoption of a pescetarian diet.

The complexity of this one participant's story demonstrates how dramatically and rapidly dietary practices and beliefs can shift. While beliefs may often inform practices, at times divergent practices may precede or lay the basis for new beliefs and lifestyles, as when the participant ate fettuccine alfredo as a vegan, or when he ate soft-shell crab as a bridge to his pescetarianism. Certainly, one can imagine that unforeseen events may influence this individual to change his diet again in the future; he anticipated this possibility himself, fearing that he could be tempted to resume consumption of land-based meat. He felt confident, however, that he would maintain his present diet, because he felt it best reflected his inner values and beliefs; eating any meat beyond seafood would lead him to "feel like I'm going to move to a world where I mostly eat land animals, and I don't want that. You decide how you want to be, and then you just act that way as often as you possibly can — and that turns you into that kind of person"

(Interview 22). Ultimately, this may be the most appropriate summary for this pescetarian's journey: a search for a diet that best fit the type of person he wanted to be and life he wanted to live.

Cultural, Religious, and Regional Influences

While cultural, religious, and regional factors are difficult to isolate — both from other categories and from each other — the stories in this section reflect the critical roles these factors can play in shaping diet. A respondent in Miami provides a useful starting point for this discussion:

> I'm Catholic — for Lent I've given up eating red meat, poultry, and everything else but fish. So I've done it for 40 days at a time. But now, just recently, I'm trying to do it more as a lifestyle, more for the long term. (Interview 29)

This participant's pescetarianism grew out of his knowledge that, as a Catholic, he had been successful in following a fish-only diet during Lent, which presented what were effectively forty-day windows for experimentation with new dietary practices. These trial runs were particularly critical, because as Cuban Americans, his family tended to expect, prepare, and eat meals heavily reliant on red meat; without his experiences with Lent, he would not have been as confident in his ability to adhere to a pescetarian diet over his family's objections. Pescetarianism was the diet most consistent with his underlying beliefs, with regard to both health and ethics, but he needed evidence that following the diet was a realistic option — and in the end, his Catholic upbringing provided the opportunities he needed to gather and accumulate that evidence. This enabled him to transition to an exclusively pescetarian diet — the outcome he had envisioned for himself.

Certainly, even in the absence of a religious dimension, culture and region retain significant influences on diet. In some cases, like that of a participant in Indiana, these impacts manifest themselves in the form of obstacles:

> There are still restaurants where they won't have a food listed as having any meat ingredients, but it does. I'm from Indiana, so it's farm country and they put meat in everything. (Interview 27)

To maintain her pescetarianism, this respondent — who originally adopted the diet due to an inability to process land-based animal protein — had to be extraordinarily vigilant, at times guarding against intentionally misleading claims from her family about the meat content in their home-cooked meals (after preparing a dish with meat broth, her family would purposefully refrain from notifying her, instead contending that the meal was vegetarian — with the meat broth causing her to fall ill soon therafter). She found that eating out at restaurants required comparable mindfulness, as descriptions on menus offered no guarantees of full disclosure or accuracy regarding the inclusion of meat ingredients. While she was frustrated by these experiences and the challenges of finding appropriate food choices, she resigned herself to the realities of her location, citing the dietary tendencies of the Indiana countryside. Despite these challenges, she demonstrated great persistence in following a pescetarian diet, though some of this dedication may have stemmed out of necessity, due to her physical difficulties with digesting meat products other than seafood.

In other cases, culture and region serve as enabling factors, facilitating and catalyzing pescetarian decisions. The story of a participant from New Orleans reflected such a case:

> Down here, every season it's a different type of seafood that's available... Right now, it's crawfish season so everyone's flocking to the crawfish —

> you have it twice a week, every week, which is pretty normal down here while it's in season. We have a crab season where everybody eats crab. (Interview 14)

While this participant had already wanted to follow a pescetarian diet primarily due to her affinity for land animals, her ability to do so was greatly enhanced by her location in the seafood-rich Gulf Coast region (it should be noted that this research was conducted prior to the 2010 Gulf oil spill). In quite a departure from the circumstances confronting the Indiana respondent, here the popularity and availability of fresh seasonal fish and crustaceans made the pescetarian decision both feasible and unencumbered. The skepticism surrounding pescetarianism in the Indiana farm country was absent here, if only because the ubiquitous nature of seafood consumption in New Orleans mitigated any tendency to raise questions regarding food choices and diets that omit land-based meat products. A temporal element also sustained the participant's interest in and appreciation for seafood:

> I don't know which [season] is my favorite because I swear that every season that comes around [brings] the best crawfish boil or crab boil or shrimp boil we've had yet. I would say that tuna or something would be my favorite [seafood], but there's so much good stuff coming from the sea down here that's it's hard to choose. (Interview 14)

With different types of seafood in season throughout the year, this respondent enjoyed not only an abundance of culinary riches, but one that consistently introduced enticing new food options. This diversity of seafood is unavailable to many pescetarians, particularly those in landlocked states, underscoring the varied role of region as an enabling factor for some but an obstacle for others.

Culture, religion, and region can interact in unforeseen ways, particularly when the influence of one factor outweighs the influence of another. For the aforementioned

Miami respondent, religious factors — in his case, Lent — generated the foundation and confidence needed for his eventual adoption of pescetarianism. In doing so, however, he had to diverge consciously from elements of his Cuban American culture, which strongly encouraged red meat consumption. Another interesting set of cases involves cultures or religions that tend to occupy the more restrictive end of the dietary spectrum. A Hindu participant in Houston, Texas detailed the process that led her from vegetarianism to her current diet:

> Up until I was 10 years old, I was a pure vegetarian, because I'm a practicing Hindu. I come from a Hindu family. I was a pure vegetarian, and from there, I think I started eating mainly just eggs and chicken. And from there, I started eating more and more meat. I pretty much ate everything minus pork. (Interview 12)

Over time, she gradually broadened her diet to include more and more types of meat; this was particularly striking in light of the religious basis for her initial vegetarianism, as well as the context of her grandparents, who were strict vegans and did not tolerate even the presence of eggs in the household. She explained that the shift in her diet was motivated by geographic and cultural influences, which were particularly pronounced in the Wisconsin town where she was raised and went to high school:

> It was mainly my surroundings, my environment. My friends ate a lot of meat. It was offered in school. It was mainly the cultural environment that I was in. I lived in a town in Wisconsin that had very few other Indian people. You just adapt to where you are. You end up going to your friend's places for Thanksgiving. And they say, "Try some turkey. You might like it." You end up trying things that you usually wouldn't. And that's how I actually started eating meat. (Interview 12)

This story reinforces the pivotal quality of the influence of social networks on diet, but with an added cultural dimension — or, one could argue, the lack thereof, given the minimal size of the Indian community in Wisconsin. In the absence of such a

community, rituals such as Thanksgiving exerted an effect on this participant's dietary decisions. Unexpectedly, as she began eating turkey and other foods beyond the scope of her original vegetarian practices, even her vegetarian family members began playing a role in facilitating her expanding consumption of meat:

> It got morphed into my families' customs. Even though my mom was a vegetarian and still is a vegetarian, she started making these other types of meat, other than just chicken, which is a staple — most Indian people that eat non-vegetarian food usually eat chicken. She tried to make the other types of meat, and so it just got incorporated into our routine. (Interview 12)

This reaction by her family — acceptance, encouragement, and even the preparation of meals with land-based meat — is particularly interesting, as it parallels that of the families of the other participants that have been discussed in this chapter. The difference is that while the other participants adopted pescetarianism and were then pressed by their meat-eating families to return to a diet with more meat products, here the participant adopted the more inclusive diet on her own, which then sparked changes in her vegetarian family's routine and approach to meat. The fact that even a vegetarian family would be willing to support and encourage red meat consumption by their child is a noteworthy phenomenon, perhaps suggesting the incisiveness of cultural pressures toward a "mainstream" meat-heavy American diet. However, in a further twist, this familial support ultimately laid the foundation for the participant's eventual pescetarianism:

> I realized that whatever my mom made at home, even though if it was turkey or chicken, she had a way of making it that was much healthier and much leaner, and it was never usually fried. I went to college in Texas, in the South, and a lot of the options were meat-based; there was either beef or pork or fried chicken. And it was just not appetizing — I think having those types of foods on a daily basis just did not make me feel good. (Interview 12)

The skill of the participant's family in preparing what she characterized as "much healthier and much leaner" meat dishes had the perhaps unintended effect of accentuating the unsavory characteristics of the fried meat products at her college in Texas. As a result of her ongoing consumption in school of foods she found unhealthy and unappetizing, her perceptions of land-based meat began to shift back in the other direction — to the point that she virtually stopped consuming it altogether:

> I slowly just started taking it out of my diet. It wasn't even conscious — I would just grab other things instead, and then I realized that I completely didn't have any type of meat in my diet for a long time. (Interview 12)

This set up interesting scenarios for her trips back home, where her family, having adapted to preparing meat dishes for her, continued to do so upon her return. However, because of her hiatus from meat consumption, her physiological reactions were more jarring when she attempted to resume it:

> When I would come home, my mom would make some chicken curry or something like that. And I would have it at home, and my body wouldn't respond well to eating meat again. And so I just stopped eating it out of choice and habit — I made the decision to switch over to just seafood and eggs. (Interview 12)

Prompted by the decline in her red meat consumption — which curbed her ability to process even meat dishes prepared by her family — and her desire to maintain an adequate level of protein intake while at school, she moved on to her pescetarian phase, which has now been ongoing for the last five years. Accommodating the disparity in food options offered to her at home and at school, pescetarianism enables her to eat well regardless of her location or surroundings:

> After that, I realized that if I could be vegetarian at home and still get the amount of protein that I needed, just because Indian food has a lot of dal and a lot of protein in it.

> When I did make a conscious decision to eat seafood, it was mainly because in college I wasn't getting that [protein], and seafood was probably the healthiest option to somehow get some more protein in my diet. (Interview 12)

By adopting a pescetarian diet, she successfully reconciled her lifestyle and culture with the challenging dietary landscape presented to her in Texas. This success is not hers alone; as the next section of this chapter will address, many individuals — whether former vegetarians, former omnivores, or both — find that a pescetarian lifestyle represents a satisfactory means of reconciling competing tensions. The new diet then becomes easily sustained, as in this participant's case:

> So I switched over [to pescetarianism] — I really enjoy it, and I think it would be really hard for me to give up seafood now, because it's become incorporated into my diet. (Interview 12)

This story demonstrates the complexity of the dietary arc that can emerge from a vegetarian upbringing, and the range of motivations that can drive each phase of that arc. The gradual acceleration in her consumption of red meat was encouraged by the cultural environment in Wisconsin, which outweighed the influence of her vegetarian family and her Hindu upbringing. The eventual decline in this meat consumption was catalyzed by her college experience in Texas, where the meat dishes available, unlike those in Wisconsin, prompted disgust and avoidance. Finally, her decision to adopt a pescetarian diet was initially motivated by concerns about adequate protein intake and then sustained by her enjoyment of seafood.

The multidimensional interactions between cultural factors, nutritional requirements, and dietary practices figure prominently into the story of a Filipino participant from San Francisco. Despite the predominant cultural affinity for meat

products, her approach to food was grounded in and shaped more by ethical considerations:

> I'm Filipino, and Filipino food is all meat based, but I just never really ate a lot of beef to start with. It was never a huge part of my diet. It was the morality — knowing that animals were dying so that I could eat them bothered me a lot. (Interview 24)

These concerns over animal welfare overrode the meat-heavy influence of Filipino cuisine and led her to a series of phases, progressing over several years, in which she alternated between vegetarianism and meat consumption. College, travel, and her concern for animal welfare all contributed to the following dietary sequence:

> I experimented with vegetarianism in college. In '94-'95, I was a vegetarian, and then I went back to eating chicken. I had a couple of experiences when I spent Christmas in Hawaii in December '97. I went to a luau, and they brought the pig in — it was gray. And they buried the pig, and they roasted it. My stomach just absolutely turned. It was the sight of this pig that had died — it brought up all of the issues of morality that I've had for a while. So after that, I decided I was going to stop eating meat, and I turned vegetarian in '98, right at the beginning of the year in January. (Interview 24)

The participant's negative experience at the luau echoes the traumatic episodes addressed in the first section of this chapter, although here a concern for animals is explicitly tied to the visceral reaction to the sight of the pig. However, these factors were not sufficient to overcome what she eventually identified as a nutritional deficit stemming from her return to vegetarian diet; after eating chicken for several years, she felt that her body had grown accustomed to a certain minimum threshold of protein consumption. A visit to her physician brought this issue to the forefront:

> The protein issue came up in a doctor's appointment. I was having trouble with the protein and not getting enough. It takes a little while for your body to adjust. I was in the process of educating myself about what to eat, when to eat it, and what protein I needed to eat more of. The doctor said if I wanted to incorporate seafood into my diet, that would probably be a

> good way to make sure that I'd get enough protein. And truthfully, I began to eat fish because I really like sushi. (Interview 24)

Her nutritional concerns and affinity for sushi ultimately became the basis for her pescetarianism. Unlike the respondent in the last section, who shifted from veganism to pescetarianism to reconcile internal inconsistencies in his conceptualizations of food vis-à-vis his lifestyle, this participant adopted a pescetarian diet more out of perceived nutritional necessity. This transitions us into the next section, which focuses on individuals who categorize veganism or vegetarianism as their ideal diet, but arrive at pescetarianism as an acceptable or realistic middle ground.

Pescetarianism as Middle Ground

A number of participants stated that, based on their beliefs, they had intended to pursue vegetarianism or veganism, but — whether for expedience or other reasons — ultimately settled on pescetarianism as an acceptable medium. Among those falling under this category, a participant in Boston described her reasoning:

> I knew I couldn't go vegan because that's too much of a jump from being an omnivore and eating whatever you want. So I decided that I'd try giving up beef, pork, and poultry for a while and then see where I was. In a while, maybe I'll give up fish or maybe I'll give up dairy. Probably not, but at least it's something. (Interview 4)

Motivated by stories on industrially raised livestock — gleaned from reading *Fast Food Nation* and other books — this respondent strongly considered adopting a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. However, she felt that given her starting point as an omnivore, such a move would be too great a leap; she feared that if she were to completely cease her consumption of meat products, she would have difficulty finding a sufficient variety of foods she could eat (in her words, she was afraid of "not eating anything you're used to,

whatsoever"). In light of these concerns, she decided that pescetarianism suited her. She reconciled seafood consumption with her views on industrial livestock through a particular set of conceptualizations and rationalizations — by no means unique to her — regarding the comparative humaneness of slaughtering fish vis-à-vis land animals:

> As far as still eating fish, honestly — you kill a fish in a different way than you would kill a cow. Fish do count as a form of life, but I guess I think the way they're killed is more humanely done or less brutal than it is towards a cow. (Interview 4)

The notion that fish are killed in a humane way relative to cows is certainly vulnerable to contestation, but for this participant, the idea was sufficient for her to proceed with a pescetarian rather than vegetarian or vegan diet. Indeed, individuals' perceptions and manner of processing information can have a determinative effect on the diet they decide to pursue. Whether accurate or otherwise, sources of information deemed credible are used to inform perspectives, beliefs, and lifestyles.

An offbeat example of this was provided by a Baltimore participant, who adopted pescetarianism based on advice from a rather unlikely source:

> I went to a Tony Robbins seminar in New York. At the end of it, he really pushed hard for this pescetarian diet, saying that he really liked the vegetarian idea, but he thought the health benefits for fish were so great that he eats fish. He tends to do a lot of research in areas and devotes a lot of his time to finding people who are getting the best results in areas. So, you know, I trust what he says. (Interview 5)

On the subject of dietary advisors, Tony Robbins is not typically the first name that comes to mind; perhaps for this reason, the participant was meticulous in framing the basis for his confidence in Robbins — which in turn provides some context for the dietary change that emerged as a result:

> I don't want to feel like I'm brainwashed by him or anything, but he actually motivated me to start [a pescetarian diet]. He issued what he

> called a "ten-day challenge," and he said just do this for ten days and see how it goes. And I did that because I had such a good time at the seminar. But then, after the ten days, I felt like, "I love doing this," so I stuck with it. (Interview 5)

The seminar — while promoting the virtues of vegetarianism and pescetarianism alike — convinced the respondent to attempt the latter. Like others discussed in this chapter, he found the diet enjoyable, ultimately leading to his decision to follow his ten-day trial with a decision to adopt pescetarianism for the longer term. However, despite his adoption and continued maintenance of the diet, he professed some unease with the final outcome:

> I still don't love the idea of eating fish. And I have kind of hoped to become a full vegetarian at some point. But, for now, it would just be too much. It would be too much inconvenience when I go out. (Interview 5)

Upon further consideration, he believed that pescetarianism represented the dietary path that best accommodated his needs, even if it did not reflect his core preference for a vegetarian diet. Social pressures and the desire to fit in — whether at restaurants, family meals, or other social settings — can be a major motivator of dietary decisions, even when they are at odds with deeply held beliefs or preferences.

The case of another respondent in Boston exemplifies the dietary behaviors that can emerge from such pressures. Though he began as a vegetarian, his job required that he take clients out to business dinners, usually at steakhouses. He found that when he ordered a vegetarian entrée, these clients would suddenly stop talking business and instead start asking questions about his diet. The ensuing distractions and discomfort he experienced pushed him toward adopting a shift in his dietary practices, not out of any internal convictions, but more out of a desire to conform with social (and, in this case, work-generated) expectations:

> It was a little bit more convenience. I am in a business where I'm frequently having to entertain people and bringing people out to restaurants, that sort of thing. Rather than drawing attention to myself every single time... I'm a relatively private person, I don't necessarily like to make a scene of my dietary habits or anything along those lines. But it became more and more of an issue every time I would eat out. (Interview 6)

The interruption of business-related conversations with questions regarding his food choices grew into a recurring issue, with each incident generating more and more frustration — stemming not only from the impact on his job, but also from his preference for avoiding conversations on topics, like diet, that he considered personal. This presented him with a difficult scenario, as his vegetarianism was rooted in concerns for animal welfare. After much deliberation, he arrived at his next dietary step:

> I decided that fish and seafood was something that I could handle because I had in fact gone fishing. I felt like I could deal with the — whatever you want to call it — the karmic guilt or shame of killing and eating a fish; I had in fact killed fish, so I could deal with eating it as well. (Interview 6)

Finding that ordering seafood entrées at business dinners did not provoke the questions and distractions brought about by vegetarian orders, he shifted to pescetarianism out of need and rationalized it by recalling his boyhood, when his father took him fishing. In his mind, he was able to reconcile his concern for animals with his consumption of fish by linking his personal experiences with fishing to an alleviation of the "karmic guilt" associated with eating seafood. He noted that he had never killed a cow or a pig, and as a result he never would have been able to mount that same rationale for consuming land-based meat products. Pescetarianism represented a diet that he ideally would have liked to avoid, but — in light of the demands of his business — was an acceptable middle ground.

Health

The nutritive profile of seafood is a frequently cited rationale for pescetarian diets. In some cases, the healthfulness of fish is tied to advice from medical professionals; in others, fish are cast as a healthier alternative to industrially raised livestock, with the industrial-scale agricultural system associated with hazards not only for the animals themselves, but also for the humans consuming meat products from that system. The first story — that of a Bay Area participant whose health care experience ultimately produced shifts in her diet — falls under the former category:

> I was blood tested and had high cholesterol, and my doctor advised me to not eat red meat or eat it in very limited quantities. I did an extreme diet, because I wanted to take my cholesterol down. Omitting red meat and having a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet made my cholesterol go down a little bit — but not enough that it stayed in the safe range. Diet and exercise, omitting red meat, did not significantly drop my total cholesterol score on its own. So, they put me on a statin drug. (Interview 10)

Interestingly, what the participant characterizes as "an extreme diet" excluded red meat but still included poultry, underscoring the definitional ambiguities associated with conversations on food. Unfortunately, the diet and exercise regimen that she started in response to her blood test and doctor's advice failed to bring her cholesterol levels under control, forcing her onto a statin. Considering the changes she had already made to her lifestyle, this was a frustrating outcome for her; however, realizing her health was at stake, she sought further dietary recommendations from her physician:

> After a year of that, I decided to stop eating poultry and other types of meat and just limit it to seafood, because the doctor said that fish was a heart-healthy food and something that I should probably keep in my diet for health reasons. Of course, I'm supposed to omit shellfish because of the cholesterol, but I'm from Maryland and I like crabs. So, cholesterol, crab, shrimps — those things I eat in very small quantities and rarely. (Interview 10)

In this space, no judgments will be attached to the qualifications of physicians to provide dietary advice. For this participant, her doctor's classification of fish as a heart-healthy food choice was sufficient for her to cease consumption of all meat except fish. While pescetarianism is typically defined to include seafood in a broad sense, in this case a critical distinction must be drawn between fish and shellfish, as the latter is linked to high cholesterol and, for this participant, was to be consumed only minimally — a difficult but necessary step for someone from the Chesapeake Bay region.

Concerns about health do not always involve the input of medical professionals; for some individuals, they are intertwined with critical perspectives on the ramifications of factory farming. Invoking these issues, a respondent from Los Angeles looked back at an international trip that ultimately catalyzed his decision to adopt a pescetarian diet:

> I spent four months in Africa, two months in Zambia, two months in Cameroon, where I did eat lots of meat. But prior to that, I had my grandparents die of heart disease. There are so many people that have cancer and other diseases. And the way that animals are raised in parts of Africa is very natural, and the way that animals are raised and slaughtered here is not natural. (Interview 23)

This participant's observations in Africa provided him with a basis to compare his experiences with and impressions of meat products in the United States. Suddenly, he viewed his family history and broader epidemiological studies with a newfound understanding: namely, that livestock in America — unlike their counterparts overseas — are raised in ways that are "not natural." The use of this phrase as a pejorative is telling, as analysts of the food industry have debated the meaningfulness of terms such as "natural" and "organic." Terminology notwithstanding, the participant's perspective was clearly changed by his travels abroad:

> I don't have an issue per se with eating meat. I just don't agree with the way the animals are produced, and I feel healthier not eating meat. I kind of lost my appetite for meat when I came back, and I just decided that I was going to become a pescetarian. (Interview 23)

Indeed, while characterizations and definitions of "natural" may vary, in this case the disparities between the pastoral approach to raising livestock in Africa and factory slaughterhouses in the United States were sufficiently striking to convince this respondent to cease all consumption of meat from land-based animals. The participant draws an association between the manner in which animals are raised and the healthfulness of the meat products derived from those animals. He proceeded to elaborate upon his understanding of the specific health issues emerging from the consumption of land-based meat:

> This whole issue with hormones and beef, and these reports of girls going through puberty faster because of all the hormones, and McDonald's and stuff like that, made me think about what impact that has on the cells in my body and how that can cause unhealthiness within me. And I also just feel lighter when I don't eat meat as well. (Interview 23)

While he was much more skeptical of land-based meat products, this participant also expressed an attentiveness to potential issues regarding seafood. For example, owing to concerns over mercury content, he monitored his consumption of several species of fish, particularly in the case of tuna. He also was mindful of the debate surrounding the sustainability of the world's fisheries, acknowledging that "this is a major dilemma that I think I block out of my mind, but it's kind of hypocritical to say that you don't like killing animals but you kill fish all the time." To the extent possible, he referred to the information from the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program to make seafood choices that were both healthy (e.g., low in mercury and other contaminants) and sustainable.

Speaking on animals generally and fish in particular, a participant in Rockaway, New Jersey described how she also accounted for health concerns — particularly stemming from the presence of contaminants and the manner in which animals are raised — in her practice of a pescetarian lifestyle:

> I avoid farm-raised fish at all costs, and I don't eat shellfish. I just eat fresh, wild-caught fish. A lot of it's the treatment of the animals. Some of it is health concerns. Mercury keeps me limited, and I try to stay to the small fishes. It's a lot of things that I've read. It's just general health awareness, and things about how animals are treated and stuff that's kept me from eating other meat. (Interview 17)

As a reaction to the industrial farm system, she avoids not only land-based meat, but farm-raised fish as well; she also avoids larger fish, which tend to have greater accumulations of mercury in their flesh. Given the health concerns that motivate many individuals to adopt pescetarianism, it not surprising that these same concerns impact the specific types of seafood that are incorporated into their pescetarian diets. Indeed, pescetarianism is far from uniform; just as different individuals have their respective reasons for their dietary lifestyles, the seafood choices that constitute those diets vary as well — sometimes due to taste, but also because of the variety of factors discussed in this chapter, some of which preclude the consumption of particular species of fish or shellfish.

Sociopolitical and Environmental Reasons

Another set of motivating factors for pescetarianism lies in the broad category of sociopolitical and environmental considerations. These factors tend to derive not from individuals' life experiences per se, but rather from information and knowledge they have accumulated, whether from school, the media, their own research, or other sources. As is

the case for health beliefs, these considerations can be motivators for avoiding land-based meat on its own or in conjunction with limiting seafood consumption to particular species.

Providing an expansive account of the sociopolitical and environmental factors pertaining to land animals, a participant in Baltimore explained the rationale for his pescetarian diet:

> There's the manure runoff, from the production. There's the fossil fuel input that goes into growing the feed crops that are then fed to the animals. There's the heavy antibiotic use in the livestock animals — the continual low-dosing that I think create public health risks for human populations by encouraging the development of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria in the animals themselves. (Interview 2)

This excerpt touches upon several of the environmental issues commonly linked to land animals, including the energy required to sustain livestock on an industrial scale, the antibiotics and chemicals integrated into the production process, and the pollution and other byproducts that are generated by these operations (the respondent highlighted three additional points relating to pollution: "the environmental and the greenhouse gas issue from deforestation for feed crops, the deforestation for pasture lands, and the methane emissions from cattle"). All of these are harnessed as arguments against the consumption of land-based meat products. Further, environmental concerns are associated and entangled with health issues, such as the potential impact that antibiotic-resistant bacteria may have on humans consuming meat products. Continuing along this vein, the participant's concerns also incorporated dimensions relating to social justice:

> In terms of both equity and public health, you have unusually low-income minority populations living near factory farming operations that suffer the brunt of atmospheric and water pollutants and all of the downstream effects of that — as well as the workers in the plants themselves who face

> a high risk of morbidity, injury, respiratory disease, and so forth from inhaling all of the toxins that arise largely from manure. (Interview 2)

Environment, then, is tied to social and political perspectives on the unfair burden that factory farming imposes on underserved populations. For the respondent, all of these factors — environmental, social, and political — were arguments against industrial-scale farming; in turn, they were invoked by the participant as his case against the consumption of meat products originating from land animals.

Factory farming operations, of course, do not occur solely on land. Aquaculture generates diverse ramifications for ecosystems, as does the depletion of the world's fisheries, which has been an ongoing environmental concern for decades. A respondent from Iowa offered an interesting case in which concern for the world's fisheries was not only reconciled with but also motivated a pescetarian diet. Initially, she had been a strict vegetarian for several years, and in fact did not even particularly enjoy eating seafood. However, she believed strongly in the power of consumers' purchasing decisions as political statements, and she was particularly devoted to environmental causes, which had been the motivator for her original adoption of a vegetarian diet and avoidance of seafood and other types of meat. Her path to pescetarianism was a unique one:

> I had the idea that fisheries were overfished, and it seemed like there were a lot of negative environmental impacts from fishing — just as there are from raising meat or poultry. So, I just excluded the whole thing. But then, once I learned about the Marine Stewardship Council and their process for determining that it wasn't essentially environmentally bad to eat these things, I wanted to give them the economic support, and so I decided that eating those products was more important or a better statement than not eating them. (Interview 21)

Across the entirety of this project, this was the only case in which a pescetarian diet was motivated by support for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a London-based

organization that aims to improve the management and sustainability of international fisheries. To date, it is the only widely recognized organization to have developed fishery sustainability standards in compliance with the Food and Agriculture Organization's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (Lopuch, 2007). Through accredited third-party certifiers, the MSC awards certification to fisheries that, in its view, engage in sustainable practices in the commercial management of their fish stocks. By acquiring MSC certification, fisheries acquire the right to advertise and market their seafood products with the MSC logo — branding that is intended to inform (and acquire market share among) consumers seeking to make environmentally sustainable food choices.

Cognizant of the MSC's objectives, this participant decided to support the organization's mission — and, in turn, the promotion of sustainable fisheries more generally — by shifting from vegetarianism to pescetarianism, with the latter limited strictly to MSC-certified seafood products. While seafood did not rank among her preferred food choices, she identified MSC products that she found sufficiently appealing and affixed them to her otherwise vegetarian diet. For social convenience, she continued to refer to herself as a vegetarian, as publicly she continued to eat solely vegetarian items (she prepared and ate her seafood at home). Nonetheless, her overall diet was unmistakably distinct from its prior, strictly vegetarian phase — a shift owing solely to a desire to support sustainable fisheries.

Ethics and [Land] Animal Welfare

The final category that will be presented in this chapter revolves around ethics and animal welfare. As discussed in Chapter 4, meat is frequently defined to exclude

seafood; analogously, conversations regarding animal suffering and animal treatment are often conducted without accounting for fish or shellfish. Perhaps for this reason, many individuals assert that their reason for adopting pescetarian diets lies in a concern for animals, but these concerns are either not extended to or considered substantively different in the case of fish. Nevertheless, the issue of animal rights is a geographically widespread motivation for pescetarianism, as respondents across the United States reported its influence on their dietary decisions.

Looking back at her perspectives over the years, a participant in Memphis assessed the origins of her concern for animal welfare and what ultimately grew into her decision to adopt a pescetarian diet:

> My love of animals has been something that I've had since I was a child. I'm trying to think if there was just one factor that led to it. I just didn't like the idea of eating other animals over the years — and then finally, a friend of mine sent me a video that showed the way animals were treated before they were slaughtered and everything. It really made me go ahead and make that decision. (Interview 8)

The key here is the latency of the participant's beliefs; while for years she "didn't like the idea of eating other animals," she did not act on this notion until her viewing of a graphic video on animal cruelty, which served as the catalyst for her decision to implement changes to her diet. This type of trajectory — latent or underlying beliefs that are converted, sometimes suddenly, to dietary action — occurs for many individuals, but it is particularly prevalent among those whose motivations include ethical dimensions. In this and numerous other instances, educational materials on animal cruelty predominantly address land-based livestock, with fish marginalized or absent in conversations around ethics.

Fictional representations of animals in popular culture can have an impact no less transformative than that of graphic documentaries on the industrial food system. For a participant in New Orleans, a well-known children's movie generated an epiphanic moment, which in turn prompted an immediate and enduring shift in her understandings of food and her dietary choices:

> When I first saw "Charlotte's Web," it thoroughly affected me — I would not eat pork from that point on. I might have had bacon maybe three times in my life, and that was on top of a salad. I was overwhelmed with guilt when I would eat pork. I thought it was so sad when I first saw the movie. It clicked in my head as a young kid, like "Wow! These are *animals* that we're killing!" It just struck me as something that was really difficult to grasp. The way I viewed it, I would rather Wilbur live than me eat bacon. (Interview 14)

This story serves as an intriguing parallel with the first section of this chapter, which addressed the role of negative experiences with red meat in driving individuals to adopt pescetarianism. However, while the previous stories involved experiences such as the actual tasting of food or personally witnessing animals slaughtered at markets, here a work of fiction was instead the catalyst for dietary change. A further distinction — and perhaps more important as well — is that, unlike the participants who had been impacted by negative experiences, this respondent ties in a specifically ethical theme: "I would rather Wilbur live than me eat bacon." In contrast, the other participants shifted away from eating land-based meat simply due to the feelings of disgust that had resulted from their experiences.

Formal education — in this case, in ethics — represents another site of potential dietary influence. A participant in Golden, Colorado assessed the lessons she culled from her coursework and its impact on her perspectives on the food industry:

> A school project that I was doing highlighted some of the more disturbing facets of factory farming — specifically factory-raised cattle. I was in an ethics class, and so I was researching the beef industry and learning the ins and outs of factory farming and slaughterhouses — what goes on there, the treatment of the animals, the treatment the animals receive while they're actually alive. (Interview 11)

This coursework represented the respondent's first exposure to an ethical analysis of industrial-scale farming. Her findings, however, did not prompt a solely academic reaction; instead, she used them to catalyze changes in her dietary lifestyle, including her approach to and understanding of the sources of her food:

> The whole thing was extremely distasteful for me, and I thought it was a good time to be cautious about my decisions and make sure I knew exactly where my food was coming from — how it was being treated — and make decisions without my head being in the sand or pretending like I didn't know better. (Interview 11)

While not fictional in nature, again the material in question sufficed to push the participant toward pescetarianism. Together, these stories indicate the power of knowledge and information in driving dietary decisions. While the origins of such information vary in depth and quality — certainly, from a cursory assessment, "Charlotte's Web" would not necessarily be an expected candidate to change lifelong views on animals — their effect on individuals' food choices nonetheless can be dramatic and enduring.

Summary

In reviewing her rationale for her pescetarian diet, a respondent from Santa Cruz provides a fittingly overarching synopsis for this chapter:

> It's everything — it's ethical, commercial, spiritual, karmic, health. I think there's all kinds of things in red meat we just don't need, like growth

> hormone, genetic modification, and antibiotics — things that I just don't want to put in my body. (Interview 15)

Similarly, a participant in Pennsylvania — reflecting upon a dietary journey that had spanned several years and time zones — addressed her multidimensional rationale for adopting a pescetarian dietary lifestyle:

> It was in part for considerations of animal rights and thinking about suffering; in part thinking about farming practices and the confined spaces in which most animals are produced in this country; and in part for further environmental considerations, with the amount of methane and CO_2 that are produced for animal food production, both in the US and globally. Also, at that time I was looking to lose some weight, and it seemed to me that limiting my intake of unhealthy foods might also be beneficial for weight loss. So it was a whole number of factors coming together all at once. (Interview 20)

Concerns about animal welfare, environment, and health often cluster together, generating net forward momentum for shifts in diet. These concerns can be prompted by newly acquired knowledge, life experiences, or a combination thereof, with the former no less influential than the latter.

The mutually reinforcing factors contributing to pescetarianism are reflective of the rich diversity of pathways that lead individuals to this diet. Of course, some of these paths are more direct, as in the case of those who have had profoundly negative experiences with land-based meat products. Such encounters can occur during childhood or adulthood; be purely visual, as in the case of a child watching pigs unloaded at the store; or, most viscerally, can happen at the dinner table — gristle in a burger, blood splattering from a steak, repulsive textures in poultry. The common thread between these experiences is the disgust and dietary change they often generate.

For others, the path to pescetarianism is not so simple. Some seek to adopt veganism or vegetarianism, but social reasons or expedience — in one case, the desire to

maintain a low profile during business dinners at steakhouses — preclude them from doing so, leaving pescetarianism as a satisfactory middle ground. Others follow the opposite trajectory, starting as vegans or vegetarians but finding that, with the passage of time, their dietary lifestyles have diverged from (or even grown to contradict) their core principles, beliefs, or biological needs. For many of these individuals, pescetarianism represents the reconciliation of principle — ethical, philosophical, environmental, or otherwise — with dietary practice.

Culture, religion, and region are critical factors as well, interacting with each other and with other influences on diet. In one case, a Hindu participant was raised a vegetarian in Wisconsin, only to shift — due to the absence of other vegetarians in her social network — to consuming land-based meat products; her move to Texas, in turn, convinced her of the unhealthiness of such products, leading her to ultimately adopt pescetarianism. Despite protests from their respective families, a Cuban American participant in Miami, Filipino participant in San Francisco, and Caucasian participant in the rural Indiana countryside opted for pescetarian lifestyles as well, even while acknowledging the predominance of red meat in their cultures' cuisines.

Whether on the advice of health professionals or due to concerns about land-based meat sources, many individuals adopt pescetarianism based on health considerations. One participant was advised to do so by her physician as an approach to managing her high cholesterol; others moved to pescetarian diets as a precaution against heart disease, cancer, and other diseases, or to avoid the health hazards associated with industrially raised livestock. Health considerations generate diverse dietary practices even within

pescetarianism, with some individuals avoiding shellfish and others minimizing their mercury intake from large fish.

Sociopolitical, ethical, and environmental motivations also contribute to pescetarian decisions, with participants expressing concern for the low-income minority populations that disproportionately suffer the effects of pollution and runoff from factory farms, as well as criticism of the fossil fuels and antibiotics used to raise livestock on an industrial scale. Advocacy on behalf of the welfare of land animals is a major factor in many pescetarians' disavowal of beef, pork, poultry, and other land-based meat products. As a participant in New Orleans stated, "I would rather Wilbur live than me eat bacon." Environmental considerations can be powerful motivators as well. One individual, a longtime vegetarian, decided to adopt pescetarianism to show support for the Marine Stewardship Council, an international organization that certifies sustainable fisheries; by purchasing seafood products from only Council-certified sources, she feels she is contributing toward responsible management of the world's rapidly depleting fish stocks.

As demonstrated by the pervasive interconnections between the sections in this chapter, motivating factors for and pathways to pescetarianism — and indeed, any diet — rarely act in isolation. Rather, various combinations and permutations of these factors influence individuals' dietary trajectories, with life experiences and social networks converging with knowledge to shape decisions about food. The separation of factors into discrete categories may be a useful analytic exercise, but it obscures motivations that are frequently much more interwoven and complex. The rationales that lead to and choices that characterize pescetarianism are far from uniform; instead, there exists significant

diversity in the beliefs and processes that accompany the adoption and maintenance of pescetarian dietary lifestyles.

Chapter Six

Pescetarians' Social Worlds

"I'm surrounded by people who are eating cheeseburgers all the time, so sometimes it does take a fair amount of effort to maintain my diet… My three vegetarian friends don't look down on me at all for eating fish; that makes me happy. If the opportunity arises, I definitely vouch for vegetarianism or pescetarianism."

Participant from
Madison, Wisconsin

The decision to adopt a pescetarian diet is concomitantly one's entrance into a new social arena, characterized by ongoing interactions and negotiations with individuals who eat differently or carry different values or views on food. For some pescetarians, these social worlds offer acceptance or even support; for others, however, social interactions surrounding food are inexorably contentious and combative. The case of a participant in New Jersey is a dramatic demonstration of the latter:

> My wedding was supposed to be pescetarian — our whole wedding that we had just a year and a half ago. My stepmother — this is my father's wife — she grew up in Virginia, in the South. She felt it was an *insult* to invite her family to come far to my wedding, and not serve them meat. She didn't consider fish [to be] meat. I explained all of these options we were having — I went [with a] buffet instead of sit down, mainly to appease her, so we'd have more options. If we had served sit down, there would have only been two or three entrée choices, whereas with a buffet, there were all these different kinds of pastas and seasonal foods. The caterer was prepared to give us a pescetarian wedding that was also kosher. Lots of dairy.
>
> My stepmother went behind my back and arranged a private dinner — she arranged for her family to be served a meat meal in a different room. It went against my wishes. During the wedding, during the speeches and stuff, her whole table left my father there all alone at a table, and she and like 10 others in her family went to a separate room, and were fed some kind of chicken dish, chicken and dairy together. It violated my vegetarian beliefs, and also [was not] kosher. The caterer too — the fish was supposed to be all wild-caught, and [instead] it was farm meat. It was

> just the levels of that, of manipulation by the caterer and everything, it was horrible.
>
> But the part with the pescetarian thing really came from my stepmother. She wrote me a long letter where she thought *I* should apologize to *her*. I have the letter somewhere. But some of the things she quoted were embarrassment about inviting her family — she said that we ordered special meals for my husband's parents, because they need low fat and low sodium, they're on medical restrictions, and she's like, "You accommodated his parents, but you did nothing to [accommodate] my family. My family eats shellfish, and my family eats meat." So, she said that I didn't consider their dietary preferences, and that their names were on the wedding invitation, her name, and that it was an embarrassment for them to come and not be served a proper meal. (Interview 17)

Among the potential sites for food-related conflict, deception, and subterfuge, it is difficult to imagine any more devastating than one's wedding. As a practitioner of both pescetarianism and the Jewish faith, this participant hoped to host a wedding reception consistent with her deeply held principles. Her stepmother, however, interpreted these principles as an affront, arguing that fish was not only not meat, but also beneath her family. Finding it insufficient to express embarrassment that her name had been on the wedding invitation, she colluded with the caterer to arrange a separate meal, neither pescetarian nor kosher, that ultimately tore apart the participant's wedding reception.

Naturally and rightfully, the participant was infuriated by this turn of events. What should have been a simple difference of dietary opinion had manifested itself in the most extreme way possible, effectively dividing her family and stepfamily. The complicity of the caterer in her stepmother's scheme led her to consider potential legal action:

> Oh, I was upset. I was going to do a lawsuit. There were more things too: the caterer never even cooked the food herself. She ended up getting it from a kosher pizzeria. We were supposed to have things like pumpkin ravioli and roasted root potatoes, root vegetables. I was trying to get as much seasonal stuff from New Jersey as possible. It ended up being like a

> baked ziti, and it wasn't the same caliber of food. I was going to do a lawsuit for consumer fraud, but we've been so busy with other issues that I haven't pursued that yet. I don't know if I will. It's just too much. I think it's too much money. The attorney that I was happy with would only work with an hourly rate. I don't really have the money to invest into that.
>
> My stepmother and I still aren't talking after a year and a half. She obviously didn't respect my pescetarianism and thought that it was cuckoo to begin with. So, it was a huge, huge thing. And a lot of it was the food. People take food so personally. (Interview 17)

This sobering story underscores the fact that individuals do not adopt or engage in dietary lifestyles in isolation; rather, every decision, motivation, and rationale represents a site of potential contestation and conflict with those occupying one's social world. While such conflict may not typically be so vehement or life-altering, it certainly would be erroneous to suggest that it does not or cannot arise from deep-seated differences. Indeed, disagreements over food frequently transcend superficiality, reaching magnitudes typically associated with the personal. The pescetarianism dietary lifestyle can prompt such disagreements, with outsiders interpreting pescetarian choices as personal encroachments.

The first section of this chapter will cover a cross-section of the more contentious social interactions that confront pescetarians. While some of these scenarios are byproducts of culture or geography, their unifying characteristic is a common origin — specifically, non-pescetarians' volatile reactions to the pescetarian dietary lifestyle.

Conflicts with Non-Pescetarians

No matter where in the country they reside, pescetarians are invariably surrounded by non-pescetarians — omnivorous, vegetarian, and vegan alike. The dynamics between pescetarians and their non-pescetarian counterparts are partially

dependent upon the latter's specific dietary lifestyles. A participant in Colorado who had formerly lived in Oregon and Washington detailed the differences she observed between these regions of the country:

> I actually find that food offerings in terms of markets and restaurants and things are much better in Oregon and Washington. But socially, it's easier in Colorado. My experience in the Pacific Northwest was that folks are extreme no matter what their view is. So, if they're a vegetarian, they're an extreme vegetarian; if they are an omnivore, if they're a carnivore, they're extreme about that as well.
>
> People are real defensive about their choices. And so the extreme vegetarian crowd thinks that you're a poser for eating fish, and the people who are carnivores are offended by your choices because you're somehow threatening their choices or making them question what they believe.
>
> There seems not to be a good place to fit in there, whereas in Colorado people are much more accepting of your choices. It's just more laid back, and folks aren't getting too freaked out about it. (Interview 11)

Despite the wider variety of seafood options available in the Northwest, this participant finds pescetarianism easier to practice in Colorado, which — unlike Oregon and Washington — lacks vocal communities organized around food. This case exemplifies the pivotal role of social dimensions in shaping one's dietary lifestyle. Due to the absence of an organized pescetarian community, pescetarianism presents much greater challenges in areas where vegetarian and omnivorous communities are dominant. The participant's experiences also underscore the disparate but equally critical reactions from vegetarians and omnivores, who — for their own respective reasons — take umbrage at the pescetarian lifestyle.

Shielded by the anonymity of the Internet, some of the most vitriolic anti-pescetarian statements can be found among comment threads on food-related articles.

The following excerpts were posted in response to a recipe written by a self-described pescetarian and published on the website HuffingtonPost.com:

> He's a "pescetarian?" What a fatuous little dilettante! You're a freaking OMNIVORE!! Like most healthy humans. "Look at me! I'm a vegetarian, except I sometimes eat animals! But my flesh eating is superior to yours because I only eat animals with gills. Just ignore that the commercial fish farms feed them a grain/petroleum-based feed (and what fish doesn't prefer their sorghum unleaded?). And they clean the dregs that aren't completely filtered by the giant machinery from the bottom of the pond every year whether it needs it or not. That's fish ****, so it's gotta be good for you!" You're a one-man rebuttal to "fish is brain food."

Anger and profanity emerged in another comment, similarly assuming and ascribing narrow motivations to pescetarians:

> Being a pescetarian is such a cop-out. And it's usually the people who aren't fully vegetarian that are the biggest ****s about not being one. All or nothing; do what you want but don't act better than me because you don't eat meat that isn't in water. It's still a living, breathing being that you have to kill in order to eat.

Addressing the aforementioned comments, a third poster retorted: "You know what? Some people just don't like any flesh, but fish. Save the high and mighty judgment, okay?"

While not always as confrontational or antagonistic as they are online, numerous instances were cited of vegetarians criticizing pescetarian lifestyles. A participant in Santa Cruz, California looked back at some of the dismissive comments she had received from vegetarians toward her pescetarianism:

> The people who are very vegetarian or vegan, they still have the reaction of, "Well, you're not a vegetarian. When are you going to take the next step?" It's just kind of seen like a stepping stone in between. There's definitely a friction between the groups. I try not to press my views on others, but I think it's good for people to… realize there is another way to eat. (Interview 15)

Here, vegetarians are described as perceiving pescetarianism as nothing more than a transitory phase on the path to a fully vegetarian diet. The participant struggled to counter these notions with arguments that pescetarianism, not vegetarianism, was in fact her chosen diet. In her view, the friction between pescetarians and vegetarians resulted from the failure of the latter to accept the legitimacy of the former.

Echoing these views, a participant on the opposite end of the country — in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania — described the relative lack of social support for pescetarianism compared to vegetarianism:

> There is much less of a support network element to being a pescetarian than I had found in the past as a vegetarian. And certainly a lot of vegetarians would look at somebody who's a pescetarian and say, "That person is just a meat eater. Are they fooling themselves? They're eating meat. They're eating animals, so they're really no different from an omnivore." (Interview 20)

This participant expresses frustration that, unlike in her vegetarian days, it is difficult to find individuals who eat similarly. Vegetarians do not accept her, categorizing her not as a pescetarian, but as an omnivore.

Despite the views of vegetarians, pescetarians often find no greater acceptance from the other end of the dietary spectrum. Several participants shared stories that, in no uncertain terms, depicted omnivores as no less dismissive than vegetarians. Acknowledging the difficulties of being a pescetarian in Tennessee, a participant from Memphis discussed the aggressive questions directed at her due to her diet:

> "Why? Why don't you want to eat meat? What's wrong with you?" That was the main thing. "Why? Why don't you want to eat it?" I would explain and people just thought I was trying to be difficult, basically. People thought I was trying to be difficult and picky. (Interview 8)

The notion that her pescetarian diet implied something was "wrong" with her was shared not merely among her lay peers. Even medical professionals questioned her pescetarianism, presenting debatable or patently false claims as dietary advice:

> A couple of times I've been to the doctor and I've mentioned that I don't eat meat or poultry or anything, and they'd say, "You really need to watch out, you're going to get anemic" and things like that. Whereas a younger doctor I've been to more recently is more open to it. The younger people tend to be more respectful. (Interview 8)

The suggestion from a physician that pescetarianism leads to anemia reflects the intensity of the broader social pressures against her maintenance of the lifestyle. She finds reason for optimism in the respect accorded from younger individuals to her dietary choices, but her social world is nonetheless characterized by immense biases against her pescetarianism, as well as by concomitant demands that she conform with the omnivorous lifestyle predominant in the region.

A participant in New Orleans — having left the area after Hurricane Katrina, lived for a time (and adopted pescetarianism) in California, and then returned home — encountered a degree of skepticism for which she had been unprepared, owing largely to the acceptance she had found for her diet on the West Coast:

> When I first moved back here, I went over to dinner with close family friends. I sat down, and this big guy with a Southern accent asked me, "How can you stop ordering steaks? Come on girl, eat up." And I said, "I can't Mr. Ronny, I'm a pescetarian now." He goes, "A pesca *who*? What in *darnation* is that?" I was like, "I actually don't eat meat anymore, I eat fish instead." And he said, "You're one of them rabbit people, eatin' that lettuce! You like grass?" I have gotten that response from old Southern men or a few friends of the family. They just don't get it — they don't comprehend it — why you would choose not to eat a nicely cooked piece of meat, you must be losing your mind. So I've gotten that from quite a few people down here actually. It's very different compared to out west. Very different in the South. (Interview 14)

This participant experienced New Orleans in two distinct ways: first as an omnivore, and later as a pescetarian. As a result, she was particularly well-positioned to observe the differences in social environment generated by a pescetarian dietary change. Unfortunately, the differences were not favorable to her; upon her return from California, she quickly discovered that all of the acceptance she had taken for granted as an omnivore had vanished, replaced instead by accusations that she was "one of them rabbit people" and enjoyed eating grass. Such reactions were far from unusual; instead, they were typical, whether among her family friends or other circles in the community.

However offhanded or jestful, remarks like this can take their toll on the recipient. A participant in Washington, DC commented that since childhood, she has consistently heard the same phrase made in reference to her:

> "Oh, she's so picky" — I still hear that to this day. And it kind of drives me crazy when people say it. But I've just grown to live with it and it was really hard for my friends' parents, because at that time I was still going over to my friends' houses to have dinners and lunches and what have you as a child, and they didn't grasp the idea that I was a pescetarian. So they would make lasagna or something with meat, and they just thought I could deal with it. I eventually had to pick all the meat out and scrape the spaghetti sauce off, and then I was just left with eating pasta. I would say my friends' parents actually had the worst time dealing with my choices, more so than my parents or my friends. (Interview 3)

On top of being labeled as "picky," this participant struggled with limited food options in her childhood. Even at their most well-meaning, her friends' parents were unable to adapt to her dietary needs.

Parents, of course, play a pivotal role in their children's diets — but when they disagree with the food choices their children make, the results can be traumatic. A participant in North Carolina looked back at her parents' unaccommodating response to her decision to adopt pescetarianism:

> When I was in high school, I said, “You know, I just don't want to eat this way anymore,” and my mother said, “Okay, that's fine. You can eat salad.” She proceeded to fix every casserole under the sun, which meant that the *only* thing in the house that did not have meat in it was going to be salad. And when you are a teenager, it is kind of hard to live with. (Interview 19)

This episode would not be the last involving food, confrontation, and family. She later married an omnivore who also had issues with understanding:

> And then later there was a husband who — when I said, “Less meat. I am not comfortable with this. I think my body would be better without it” — he said “Okay, don't eat it. Just because I cook it doesn't mean that you have to eat it. Of course, I cooked it and I cannot believe you are not eating it," and all of that kind of crap. (Interview 19)

These lifelong familial conflicts led her to a perhaps inevitable conclusion about her pescetarian practices: “It is best for you to make those kinds of choices when you have a supportive family” (Interview 19).

A participant in Los Angeles had a less contentious experience, but nonetheless had to press his family to accept his pescetarianism:

> My family wasn't that into it. They were afraid that I wasn't going to get enough nutrients and I was going to get sick as a result. I lived at home for a year in between school, and they were very understanding and they adapted all their cooking. My mom started making traditional Persian food with meat substitutes and these different types of processed tofu that are kind of like meats. So they were respectful of it. They still think, "Why don't you just eat a little bit of meat every once in awhile?" but I don't oblige. (Interview 23)

As with the Connecticut participant discussed in Chapter 5, in this case the family — after some initial resistance, along with some ongoing encouragement of meat consumption — eventually adjusted its food preparation to accommodate a diet free of land-based meat products. The Los Angeles participant went on to note that he himself

was certainly not free of biases regarding diets different from his own. Looking back at his days as an omnivore, he recalled his reactions to vegetarianism:

> I think what annoyed me about vegetarians — and I used to make fun of vegetarian before I became a pescetarian — is that some of them just are a little too radical. They try to make you feel guilty about what you're eating, and I don't believe in doing that. (Interview 23)

For this reason, this participant chooses to limit the extent and magnitude to which he encourages others to consider adopting pescetarianism. This is an important point. In social worlds, individuals are not solely acted upon; instead, they also can choose to act upon others. The following section will address individuals who promote pescetarian dietary lifestyles.

Pescetarian Advocacy

While some pescetarians choose not to push others to adopt the diet as well, others are vocal in expressing their advocacy. However, ardency in one's support for pescetarian lifestyles does not necessarily correlate with contentiousness in one's interactions with non-pescetarians. A participant in Madison, Wisconsin carefully differentiates between a perception of strident vegetarian advocacy and her efforts to encourage dietary change:

> In Wisconsin, people are basically meat and potato eaters, so I guess people would be like "Why? Oh my gosh, I could never do that." I guess people still don't really understand like. I try to explain it in a nice way — I don't want to become preachy whenever I start talking about it. I think [among] a lot of people I know, the only vegetarians they seem to have ever encountered are ones that have preached to them, saying things like "You're doing the wrong thing by eating meat." I'm not like that, so people just seem kind of shocked. I do say "Try to cut some meat out of your diet, because it's not that hard and it does have a bigger positive impact than people could even imagine"… If the opportunity arises, I definitely vouch for vegetarianism or pescetarianism. (Interview 7)

Both among advocates of pescetarianism and more passive pescetarians, the notion of "preachiness" is mentioned repeatedly as a pejorative. In most instances, participants state that they are careful to avoid preaching to others about their diets. For example, a Los Angeles respondent remarked, "I feel like there are a lot of very self righteous vegetarians out there. And I don't want to be stuffing my beliefs on other people" (Interview 9). However, in a limited number of cases, participants acknowledged that they themselves preached the virtues of pescetarianism. A participant in Baltimore looked back at the outcome of what had been a more vehement strain of advocacy:

> Without a doubt, I was really preachy, but I learned. I lived with this girl I was dating for three years and she was a meat eater. I learned how sensitive people are with their diet, with what they eat. I started teaching cooking. I know how hard it is to tell someone, "Well, what you're eating or what you have in your diet is very dangerous or not so good. It's not very healthy. It's not good for your body." I know how sensitive people are to that. I also learned that being preachy, just yelling at people or whatever, isn't the best way to get through to them, either. Now I just try to lead by example. (Interview 13)

Having tempered the aggressiveness with which he promoted the pescetarian lifestyle, he reviewed the lessons he had learned as well as the new approach that had emerged from those lessons:

> I think that listening to people, not being preachy, and just making the food look, smell, and taste as good as you can. Also, having a nice figure, being super energetic, and not getting sick. People see that and they might think, "Well, wait, this guy might be on to something." I think having an open mind — because you're going to meet a lot of people without open minds. I think having an open mind is very huge, too — a big part of it. Accepting them for their diet, as well. Not being judgmental. I felt like I was judging people before. I don't think that was very healthy and that didn't help my cause at all. So, not judging, holding that part of me back, and honestly trying to offer them something that is good for them. (Interview 13)

Whereas his previous advocacy had met with little or no success, he believed his new tact would better position him as he sought to earn converts to pescetarianism.

Of course, such efforts generate varied results. Encouraging others at her workplace to adopt pescetarianism, a respondent in Boston encountered an entire range of responses:

> The dynamics of how people have viewed it are interesting, because one [coworker] had the same reaction as me, another took it under consideration but still ate meat once in a while, and another one just totally disregarded it. (Interview 4)

While she was able to successfully convert one coworker to pescetarianism, her efforts were less effective in the case of a second coworker, and a third disregarded her entirely. The participant speculated on the possible reasons for these disparate reactions:

> I think it has to do with how open-minded people are. When I grew up my parents were very open and honest, and encouraged my brother and I to be. Whatever we wanted to do, they supported us, so I'm very much of an extrovert, and I'll talk about anything, I'll talk to anybody. And I will go anywhere. I feel like interpretation comes from the person's personality. (Interview 4)

Interestingly, like the participant in Baltimore, this participant links open-mindedness in one's personality to openness to new dietary possibilities. However, in her reflection upon the coworker whom she successfully convinced to adopt pescetarianism, this theme does not recur:

> I'd come in everyday and talk about how white sugar is bad for you, how they kill cows. I think she took it as a dietary — like a health approach. She viewed it as, "I want to lose weight." That was her main goal. And I don't know if she has. I haven't really questioned her about it. I haven't really noticed any excessive weight loss from her. So the point about how terrible sugar is for you — she's like, "Oh, I'm cutting back on sugar, and I'm only eating a pescetarian diet." I think she was convinced for the weight loss thing. (Interview 4)

The second coworker, like the first, primarily was concerned with health issues, although these were more severe and also deterrents against the adoption of a pescetarian lifestyle:

> And the girl who was on the fence about it — she said she had other dietary restrictions already because of her health. So it was like, "If I could give it up, I would, but I already can't eat 90% of things that regular people can eat." I think she cut back a little on eating red meat, but she still eats meat. (Interview 4)

Health concerns were not an issue for the third coworker, but her dietary trajectory was not discernibly impacted by the participant's advice:

> And then the other girl, who totally disregarded it, is definitely an introvert. She married and doesn't really do much and lives in her own little world. She ended up just ignoring me as opposed to embracing it. So it didn't really affect her as much as it did the other women. (Interview 4)

Interestingly, in this last instance, the participant does attribute the coworker's decision to disregard her advice to an introverted personality. For each of these coworkers, the participant's views are speculative, but they nonetheless reflect a very real phenomenon: the wide divergence in the reactions prompted by a single set of dietary suggestions. This, in turn, is consistent with the findings in Chapter 5; just as diverse rationales can lead to the pescetarian decision, equally diverse (and sometimes virtually identical) rationales can lead to decisions to pursue other dietary paths.

Tolerance and Support from Non-Pescetarians

While less common, some pescetarians are greeted with generally tolerant or supportive responses toward their dietary lifestyles. Among these is the former vegetarian in Boston who adopted pescetarianism for business reasons:

> My wife — who is not a vegetarian or a pescetarian — was a little relieved just because it was easier on her, in that I could eat things that she

> was eating, at least. A lot of my other friends who had been vegetarian with me from the beginning had given up a long, long time ago, and so I don't think a lot of people had any negative association to it. And a lot of people just didn't even know. (Interview 6)

This participant was perhaps most pleased that his motivation for shifting to pescetarianism produced its intended result — a deflection of the critical questions that had always been directed at him when he was a vegetarian:

> At this point, when I do have a business dinner or something like that, it never draws attention when I order fish or tuna steak or anything along those lines, as opposed to when I'm having to go off the menu because I'm looking for a vegetarian plate. The world does not cater to vegetarians — and not necessarily to pescetarians either, but certainly to a larger extent than to vegetarians. (Interview 6)

His latter point is an intriguing one, as it diverges from the experiences of pescetarians who have encountered great difficulties in their interactions with vegetarians and omnivores alike. The support of his wife and business partners for his pescetarian lifestyle likely bolsters his perception of the challenges of vegetarianism relative to pescetarianism.

Despite his initial fears that his decision to adopt a pescetarian diet would be met with disapproval or criticism, a participant in Baltimore found that his use of technology helped him successfully avert such reactions among his family and social circles:

> I expected that there would be some sort of resistance to it by family members and things like that. But, you know, really, it has kind of been positive. I started this blog online about it, and that's kind of made it easier because I announced it on this blog and shared it with everyone. So everyone just kind of accepted it. I feel like, if I were showing up at relatives' houses and said, "Oh, by the way, I'm pescetarian now, so I can't eat what you made," then that, I think, would create some problems. But, because of the way I've done it and just announced to everyone that this is what I'm doing now, there hasn't been any negative reaction. (Interview 5)

This participant raises the importance of medium in how messages about diet are communicated. As he observes, arriving at a relative's home and turning down a meal with meat would invariably generate consternation or scorn. However, by announcing his decision to adopt pescetarianism on his blog — if anything, certainly a much more neutral arena than the dinner table — he was able to communicate the news instantly to his family members and friends, creating acceptance rather than criticism.

Regional variations also impact the likelihood that pescetarians will experience supportive environments. A participant in Los Angeles noted that the tolerance she enjoyed surpassed even her own expectations:

> This might just be the people I know, but I found that everyone is very understanding of it. A lot of the time I'm surprised because people ask me ahead of time, "Oh, are you a vegetarian?" I think it has a lot to do with just living in California. I don't think it's that way in other places. I have been kind of surprised, but I've never, in six years of being all over the place, no one's ever been like, "You'll eat a fish but not a cow? What? Why? Who does that?" So I've never really gotten like a negative reaction. People sometimes say, "Oh my gosh, I could never give up hamburgers" or whatever. But no one has ever questioned my reasoning. (Interview 9)

A respondent in New York found that over time, his immediate social circle had evolved to consist of individuals similarly open-minded about pescetarian, vegetarian, and vegan dietary lifestyles:

> I would say the majority of people that I'm friends with at this point are either vegan or vegetarian or pescetarian. All the girls I've dated over the past like five years.. it just seems pretty common, in terms of the people that I hang out with. It's not a prerequisite in terms of hanging out with people, but it just seems like it's kind of common. (Interview 1)

Given the stories in this chapter, many pescetarians would likely envy the support network enjoyed by this participant. Having taken what he himself described as an unusual route to pescetarianism — the book *Omnivore's Dilemma* convinced him to

cease all consumption of land-based meat products — he felt that dietary motivations were an intriguing driver of discussion:

> I think the only thing that might set me aside from other people if I sit down and have a conversation is that my motives I think are a little bit different than other people's. My reasoning is somewhat specific and maybe a little weird — I think sometimes it gets to be an interesting point of conversation because they may not even be aware of the sources of my motives, and perhaps it's something that they'll look into. I don't think people are dismissive about it — I think they might be more interested just because it seems somewhat uncommon. I don't feel like I experience too much resistance. (Interview 1)

This may be the social world that most pescetarians strive for — an environment in which differences in motivations, rather than differences in diet, are the most common conversational topic.

Negotiations Between Pescetarians

Among the sample in this study, there were only a few instances of interactions between pescetarians, likely owing to the relatively small pescetarian population. However, the interactions that were reported merit assessment here. A participant in North Carolina noted the variations among fellow pescetarians in her networks:

> Among my friends, it seems to be that there are people who choose to eat seafood because that's as high up the food chain as they're willing to participate. There are people like my husband who don't like oysters, but he doesn't have a problem with people eating oysters. He just doesn't like them. But there are people who don't eat chicken, because they have a problem with having chickens processed. (Interview 19)

In drawing a contrast between pescetarians who choose seafood for ethical reasons and those who choose (or exclude) specific options based on taste, she acknowledges that her husband does not impose his dislike for oysters on others. The notion of conflict between pescetarians is not mentioned as a factor here; rather, the emphasis is on the beliefs that

inspire particular food choices. She also specifically highlights pescetarians who avoid chicken products due to how they are processed. Conversely, while addressing variations among his pescetarian friends, a participant in Baltimore commented on a chicken-related contradiction among some of his vegetarian colleagues:

> There are people that are way more committed, and their ideas of eating are a lot different from mine. I know people who call themselves vegetarians that eat fried chicken on a monthly basis. (Interview 13)

For this participant, level of commitment is one of the critical metrics that distinguishes pescetarians — as well as practitioners of other dietary lifestyles — from one another. These varying levels of commitment are among the factors on his mind in his interactions with other pescetarians.

In perhaps the most representative case, a participant in Indiana finds comfort and solace in knowing other pescetarians. She addresses the dynamic she shares with a close pescetarian friend:

> My really close friend that is pescetarian — she does it for religious reasons. She's a Muslim and rather than just phasing out pork, she phased out all meat except fish. It's nice to have someone else to go out to eat with and to discuss family reactions to it, because her family is the same way as mine where they eat a lot of meat. So, we talk about how to cope when we're preparing meals with family and what we can do to adapt it to a pescetarian lifestyle. It's nice to have someone to talk with about that. (Interview 27)

This story demonstrates the benefits of interacting with others who participate in similar dietary lifestyles, and concomitantly highlights the challenges associated with a dearth in such interactions. Perhaps owing to their small numbers, pescetarians appear not to be particularly confrontational in their interactions and negotiations with one another. While dietary differences are certainly noted and acknowledged, these tend not to escalate to the

point of argument or conflict — a distinction from some of the overtly hostile interactions between pescetarians and non-pescetarians.

Summary

The participant in Indiana provides a fitting conclusion to this chapter. Her observation is that, more than any other factor, people's assumptions about pescetarianism are the catalyst for disagreement and misunderstandings:

> I'm very upfront with my friends and family that it doesn't bother me that they eat meat. A lot of people make the assumption that I'm vegetarian because they haven't seen me eat a lot of fish. They make the assumption that I won't like to be around them when they're eating meat. And it's kind of endearing in a way, but people often apologize when they are ordering meat in a restaurant around me — they'll say, "I want the hamburger. I'm sorry, Claire." And I just think it's funny, but that's how people respond; they tend to make the assumption that you do it for environmental reasons, or animal rights or things like that. (Interview 27)

As these assumptions accumulate, non-pescetarians tend to develop superficial characterizations of pescetarian dietary lifestyles — characterizations that mask the diversity of pathways that lead individuals to make decisions about food:

> I think that for the most part vegetarianism and pescetarianism have a bad reputation. People kind of assume that it's environmental types that go vegetarian. And I think that's because they're just ignorant to the fact that there are a lot more people who eat in that way. I mean, I know a lot of people who do it for religious reasons, or for taste reasons — I even have a friend who's vegetarian for financial reasons, because meat's expensive. And so I think people make the assumption just because they don't know other reasons why you would lead that lifestyle. (Interview 27)

Recognizing these assumptions is one step; rupturing them is another. This participant is careful to clarify misunderstandings in her own circles, but her final point is perhaps the most important: "I caution people that they should really ask people why they've chosen the diet they have" (Interview 27). More than anything else, the simple question "Why?"

— when coupled with a willingness to listen and understand — can contribute significantly toward clearing up even the most profound differences of dietary opinion.

Chapter Seven

Understanding Pescetarianism

"I think I'm doing the best I can with the information that I have. I realize my choices are not ideal in the least. And that's one thing that is funny — people will get threatened by your choices and the fact you're not eating land-based protein. But even though my choices aren't 100% ideal, it's a little world I've defined for myself that I can live in."

Participant from
Golden, Colorado

The overall objective of this project was to generate a framework for understanding pescetarianism as a dietary lifestyle and practice. Three specific aims were designed to shape the qualitative research process, facilitate the analysis of the data, and ultimately provide a foundation for organizing the findings into productive conclusions. The first of these aims centered around definitional issues — how the notion of pescetarianism is constructed — while the second aim focused on contributing factors underlying the adoption of pescetarianism. The third aim concentrates on the social environments pescetarians navigate in making, promoting, and defending their dietary choices.

Aim 1: Identifying how pescetarianism is defined

Review

The first aim of this project was to identify how pescetarianism is defined. As demonstrated by the diverse definitions presented in Chapter 4, pescetarianism is not a singular practice, but rather an inclusive construction entailing an array of heterogeneous dietary lifestyles. Some pescetarians exclude eggs and dairy; others occasionally eat

land-based meat; still others limit their seafood consumption only to particular types of fish, excluding shellfish or species associated with greater risks of mercury and other toxins. Perhaps even more remarkable than the range of practices is the range of labels used to describe those practices. Divining the boundary separating pescetarianism from vegetarianism proves to be a particularly challenging exercise for many, with definitions falling under three general categories: pescetarianism as vegetarianism plus seafood, pescetarianism as a subset of vegetarianism, and pescetarianism and vegetarianism as entirely distinct dietary entities. Even among individuals following virtually identical diets, the self-definitions associated with those diets may vary widely.

While these definitions and labels may, upon cursory examination, appear arbitrary and thus inconsequential, in truth they have important impacts on the interactions between pescetarians and their non-pescetarian counterparts. As discussed in Chapter 6, in some cases strict vegetarians bristle at the notion of pescetarians who describe themselves as vegetarians, dismissing them as liars. Even some pescetarians who label themselves only as pescetarians are subjected to such assessments; a participant in Philadelphia noted the relative absence of support networks for pescetarians, who end up hearing comments such as "That person is just a meat eater. Are they fooling themselves? They're eating meat. They're eating animals, so they're really no different from an omnivore" (Interview 20).

The treatment from omnivores is frequently as unwelcoming. A participant in New Orleans, having recently adopted pescetarianism, tried introducing the term at a family friend's barbecue, inciting the following reaction: "A pesca who? What in darnation is that?... You're one of them rabbit people, eatin' that lettuce! You like

grass?" (Interview 14). To many omnivores around the country, pescetarians fall into the same group as vegetarians and vegans and are regarded as outsiders. A participant in Indiana observed that "for the most part, vegetarianism and pescetarianism have a bad reputation" (Interview 27), underscoring the role of labels — even dietary ones — in defining identity and interactions within social worlds.

Analysis

In surveying the various constructions of pescetarianism, the critical question that emerges is how pescetarians come to define their dietary lifestyles in a particular way. The answer to this question has implications for the more fundamental issue of identifying who adopts pescetarianism in the first place, and the reasons such dietary shifts occur. Each of the definitions offered in Chapter 4 was offered by or constructed based on multiple participants' insights. Analysis of patterns across these various participants is a crucial exercise in developing a greater understanding of the influences driving individuals toward particular definitions of pescetarianism.

The first definition — termed the "traditional" definition for the sake of expedience — was offered by a few participants, including a project officer with a public health institute in Baltimore, and a small business owner in Boston. The former was a Korean male in his 30s, while the latter was a Caucasian male in his 40s. The project officer had been pescetarian for twelve years, but in the year preceding his interview for this project, had made an effort to eat less seafood and instead consume a more predominantly ovolactovegetarian diet. The small business owner had been a vegetarian for about thirteen years before being pushed by the demands of his work — specifically,

business dinners with clients — to adopt pescetarianism, which he had been following for 2.5 years at the time of his interview. Both of these participants shared a familiarity with the distinction between vegetarianism and pescetarianism, with one attempting to shift toward vegetarianism and the other essentially having been forced away from it. It is perhaps this familiarity with vegetarianism — and the relatively recent shift from a vegetarian to a pescetarian lifestyle, and vice versa — that generated a greater meticulousness in their definitions of the pescetarian diet.

The second definition, pescetarianism as the combination of vegetarianism and seafood consumption, was also presented by a small number of participants. These included a photographer from Fort Wayne, Indiana — a female in her 20s — and a veterinary technician from Jackson, Tennessee, a female in her 30s. At the time of their respective interviews for this project, the former had been pescetarian for six years, and the latter had been pescetarian for four years. Notably, both resided in entirely rural areas, where neither vegetarianism nor pescetarianism are common; the absence of vegetarians and lack of awareness of pescetarianism in the community may contribute to a greater willingness to define pescetarianism as a diet with a vegetarian component. Further, having followed pescetarian lifestyles for several years, both participants may have felt a certain stability in their beliefs, leaving them less compelled to subscribe to a more exclusive definition of pescetarianism.

By far the most commonly invoked, the third definition deems pescetarianism a subset of vegetarianism. Subscribers to this definition actually refer to and label themselves as vegetarians, though this did not stop them from volunteering to participate in a study with recruitment materials that only mentioned pescetarianism. The

participants that described pescetarian as a type of vegetarianism included a registered nurse in San Diego; a college undergraduate in Madison, Wisconsin; a city planner from Iowa; a medical student in Los Angeles; and a Hindu public health analyst from Houston, Texas. With the exception of the nurse, who was in her 30s and had been followed a pescetarian diet for 22 years, all of these individuals were females in their 20s and had followed pescetarianism for three to six years. The most common characteristic across these self-described vegetarians may be their views on how fish should be classified, as suggested in the following excerpts:

- "Fish generally aren't particularly intelligent, as far as I'm concerned" (Interview 7).
- "There's the whole issue of 'Well, are fish evolved enough organisms? Do they feel pain? Do they have any sense of life and death and what's happening to them?' And I guess then people can justify being a vegetarian who eats fish because fish aren't as highly evolved an organism as birds or mammals" (Interview 9).
- "There's the biology of fish — not having an advanced neural system" (Interview 12).
- "I would be able to fish for myself and hunt a fish on my own, whereas I don't feel comfortable doing that with other animals. I don't think morally it is wrong to eat fish as my dinner — it just don't bother me as much as [eating] the other animals" (Interview 18).
- "I have no moral concern with catching a fish and killing it and eating it or processing it and eating it. If a lot are caught and die that are never used, that would be problematic, I suppose. Since I do eat fish, I assume or don't think about that and assume it's not happening" (Interview 21).

These participants' views on the ethics of killing and consuming fish are strikingly consistent. Of course, these opinions are by no means shared only among those who define themselves as vegetarians who eat seafood; however, it seems that such views are a contributing factor to the usage of this definition. Conversely, those who associate fish more closely with other animals have much less reason and demonstrate a much lower

inclination to define themselves as vegetarians; the definitional boundary established between fish and meat, then, is a critical contributor to the choice of label employed.

A surprising element is that no evident correlation appears to exist between participants' educational or cultural background and the belief that fish are less evolved or intelligent species. Every self-defined pescetarian had at least a college education; most had a graduate or professional degree. The West Coast, Midwest, South, and East Coast were all represented in this group. Even those with strong ethical or moral beliefs with regard to eating land animals were prone to have little equivalent concern for fish. Beliefs about animals as food and the classification of fish as animals seem to be ingrained well beyond the scope of education, suggesting factors in individuals' upbringing that merit further analysis.

Aim 2: Assessing the factors underlying the decision to adopt or maintain a pescetarian diet

Review

The second aim of the project was to assess the motives, rationales, and beliefs underlying the decision to adopt or maintain a pescetarian diet, as well as the social situations and conflicts that pescetarians must navigate in daily life. Motivating factors for and pathways to pescetarianism — and indeed, any diet — rarely act in isolation; rather, various combinations and permutations of these factors influence individuals' dietary trajectories, with life experiences and social networks converging with knowledge to shape decisions about food. Traumatic experiences with land-based meat products can generate enduring dietary change. Others follow dietary journeys that take them across

multiple diets — omnivorous, vegetarian, and vegan — before they ultimately arrive at pescetarianism. A range of beliefs — from health and nutrition to the environmental, ethical, and political — can contribute to the decision to shift one's diet toward pescetarian practices. For those who do decide to adopt pescetarianism, the sum of their social, cultural, and other life experiences can be conceptualized as a contributing or foundational factor.

Analysis

The identification of the myriad pathways and motivations leading to the adoption of pescetarianism is but one step in a broader effort to understand how those pathways and motivations themselves emerge. Part of this work will be to disentangle whether variables such as region seem to have any patterns of association with pescetarian rationales, which in Chapter 5 were organized by section — each constructed from the experiences of multiple participants. In the following pages, these participants and their stories will be revisited, with an eye toward identifying key trends applicable within and across the various paths to pescetarianism.

Negative experiences with meat products can have lasting impacts not only on individuals' perceptions of food, but on the food choices they make over the life course. When those experiences center around land-based meat products, the resulting dietary pathways can lead to diets such as pescetarianism. However, such negative encounters do not guarantee particular dietary outcomes; some individuals shrug them off and continue with their original diets. In this study, no such instances were reported. Participants mentioning negative experiences with land-based meat were profoundly

affected; these individuals, all female, included a 28-year-old health policy analyst at a nurses' organization in Washington, DC, who had been pescetarian for half of her life, fourteen years since a negative experience with beef; a 34-year-old registered nurse in San Diego, who had been pescetarian for 22 years; a 24-year-old lawyer in Connecticut, approaching her two-year mark as a pescetarian; and a 26-year-old legal assistant in Columbus, Ohio who had followed a pescetarian diet for one year. Just from this sample, it is evident that profound negative experiences with land-based meat can occur at any age and have lasting impact. It is important to note that these participants experienced actual episodes in which meat was physically witnessed or consumed, provoking a visceral reaction on the part of the respondent. At the time that such incidents occur, dimensions such as ethics and health do not factor into the participant's reaction, which instead is mainly one of disgust. Over time, however, ethical, health, and other motivations may contribute to the maintenance and sustainability of the pescetarian dietary lifestyle.

Some individuals arrive at pescetarianism after prior phases as vegetarians, vegans, or both. One participant, a 37-year-old manager at a software company in San Francisco, was raised a vegetarian and then an omnivore, tried vegetarianism again for his first year of college, shifted to veganism for six years, and had been a pescetarian for the eleven years since. A small business owner in Boston was vegetarian for eleven years before switching to pescetarianism. A public health analyst in Houston was raised a vegetarian by her Hindu family for the first ten years of her life, became an omnivore, and then adopted pescetarianism. Interestingly, for these three participants, there was little to no overlap between their reasons for adopting vegetarianism. After being raised a

vegetarian by his parents, the participant in San Francisco returned to the diet due to the influence of his peers in college; the Boston participant preferred vegetarianism for reasons related to animal ethics; and the Houston participant was a vegetarian for religious reasons, though she began eating meat when she moved to Wisconsin for college. Paralleling this set of differences, each participant also had different reasons for then moving on to pescetarianism. The SF participant tried veganism but felt it was not the best match for his principles and lifestyle preferences, a discordance that ultimately led to his adoption of pescetarianism. The Boston participant moved on for business reasons, due to his clients' skepticism regarding his vegetarian food choices. The Houston participant found that over time, she lost her ability to process land-based meat, leaving seafood as her preferred source of protein. These participants' stories are a powerful demonstration of the dynamic nature of diet, regardless of whether one is on the West Coast, East Coast, or in between.

Cultural, religious, and regional influences are fundamentally entangled with one another; their various permutations and combinations have significant implications for dietary pathways. The experience of a Cuban undergraduate student in Miami represents one such case of converging factors. His family prepared meals heavy on red meat; however, they were also Catholic, and Lent provided him with opportunities to experiment with a pescetarian diet. His Florida location afforded him the seafood options necessary to sustain his new pescetarian lifestyle over his family's objections. On the other hand, a photographer in Indiana also faced protests from her family over her diet, but her region and its culture, rather than facilitating her diet, only offered additional obstacles; in her words, "it's farm country and they put meat in everything" (Interview

27). It is probably no accident that over two-thirds of the participants for this study hail from coastal areas of the country, as it is simply more feasible to follow a pescetarian diet in such regions.

Aiming originally to adopt vegetarianism, veganism, or other more restrictive diets, a number of individuals deem pescetarianism an acceptable middle ground and decide to retain seafood in their diets. Two participants in Boston fall under this category, though their pathways differ from one another. The first, a 24-year-old female architect, started as an omnivore but wanted to give up all meat consumption. However, concerned that might be unable to eat a sufficient diversity of foods, she ultimately decided that pescetarianism would be an acceptable alternative, leading her to exclude only land-based meat from her diet. The second, the small business owner in his 40s, switched from vegetarianism — his diet for over a decade — to pescetarianism in order to better fit in during business dinners, where the topics had often drifted from work to his choice of a vegetarian entrée. A third participant in Baltimore who "hoped to become a full vegetarian at some point" felt that a pescetarian diet was the most expedient option, though the idea of eating fish still did not sit well with him (Interview 5). In these and similar cases, social factors and the convenience of a less restrictive diet seem to lead individuals to pescetarianism rather than their original goal of vegetarianism.

Without any other background information, it would be reasonable to guess that health factors are the leading motivator for pescetarian diets. The findings from this project, however, suggest that while many pescetarians generally do consider seafood to be healthy, there also exists substantial wariness regarding its potential health ramifications, such as contamination through mercury and other chemicals and toxins.

Further, even among those who do regard seafood as a healthy food source, many adopt pescetarianism primarily for non-health reasons, with health relegated to a tangential factor or nonfactor. With that said, there were several participants for whom health was the key reason for their chosen dietary lifestyle. For a few, there is in fact little choice in the matter; a Bay Area schoolteacher learned from her doctor that she had high cholesterol, which led her to cease all consumption of red meat. When this change failed to reduce her cholesterol, she was placed on medication, compelled to end her consumption of poultry and other land-based meat, and advised by her physician to retain seafood in her diet for health reasons. The role of medical advice in dietary decisions is an intriguing one, particularly given the aforementioned lack of agreement surrounding the healthiness of seafood. Sharing the views of many with similar feelings on the topic, a 25-year-old filmmaker in New York discussed the challenges associated with determining whether fish is a healthy food source:

> It's a complicated question. If you were just to say, here is a cow and here is a fish that were both raised in completely natural ways, I guess I would feel like the fish would inherently or intrinsically be a more healthful food. But when you get into some of these other elements that I think are more complex — in terms of our water being polluted, in terms of mercury content, in terms of some fish coming from farms or perhaps not being raised in the most ideal setting — I think it then becomes a little more vague. But I guess in a purist sort of form, if you're able to eliminate all those elements, I guess I would regard fish as being more healthful. (Interview 1)

A speech-language pathologist in Rockaway, New Jersey had similar reservations about the healthfulness of seafood. She incorporated these concerns into her diet, omitting farm-raised fish and shellfish and exclusively consuming mostly small wild-caught fish, which she believed reduced her mercury risk. Conversely, some pescetarians do not restrict themselves in this way; for example, a management consultant in Los Angeles

decided to stop eating land-based meat after a trip to Africa, where he found cattle and other livestock were raised in ways he deemed much healthier than their equivalents in the United States. For him, the decision to adopt pescetarianism was in itself a healthy one, by virtue of the meat products he was eliminating from his diet.

Often presented in combination with health and other factors, sociopolitical and environmental reasons also serve as key motivators for pescetarianism, both in terms of reducing consumption of land-based meat products and also (less commonly) in terms of supporting sustainably sourced seafood. As cited by pescetarians in this study, the environmental ramifications of livestock are numerous, including — but not limited to — manure runoff from farms; fossil fuels used to grow feed and transport products across the country; the antibiotics used to fatten animals; deforestation, erosion, and other impacts from pasture land; and the greenhouse gas emissions from cattle. Factory farms also have sociopolitical implications, including the low-income minority populations that live in close proximity to the farms and suffer the effects of the soil, air, and water pollution — as well as the low-wage workers on the farms themselves, who toil through dangerous, unsafe conditions. Aquaculture and fish farming, of course, also have deleterious effects on the environment, which were cited by a number of participants as a concern (though not one that precluded them from following pescetarian diets).

A unique driver for pescetarianism was mentioned only by one participant, and likely is not common nationally or even in regions with a high density of seafood eaters. Originally from Iowa and now residing in Boston, a city planner decided to switch from a vegetarian to a pescetarian diet as a means of showing support for the Marine Stewardship Council, and international organization that certifies sustainable fisheries

around the world. Certified fisheries acquire the right to apply the MSC ecolabel to their products; the label is intended to differentiate these products and help them acquire market share, particularly among environmentally conscious consumers. Despite her lack of any particular affinity for seafood, this participant's belief in consumer choices' ability to generate sociopolitical impacts led her to abandon what had been four years of strict vegetarianism. Such a belief is by no means common, but is one demonstration of the wide range of motivations that can effect dietary change.

The final and most commonly cited type of rationale lies in ethics and a concern for the welfare of land animals. Participants making an ethical case for their pescetarianism almost uniformly do not feel equivalent (or any) concern for the welfare of fish; nonetheless, their beliefs about livestock and other land animals are sufficient to result in new or modified food choices. The respondents who mentioned ethical concerns included a veterinary technician in Jackson, Tennessee; a bartender in New Orleans; and a business executive in Golden, Colorado. The veterinary technician professed a love for animals since she was a child, and indeed that affinity eventually grew into her choice of career. The bartender was profoundly affected by the children's movie "Charlotte's Web," which led to cease all pork consumption — presaging her eventual adoption of pescetarianism. Upon learning in a class about the industrial practices surrounding factory-raised cattle, the business executive decided she no longer wanted to consume animal products produced by the factory system. These three individuals are representative of the vast majority of those citing animal ethics as a motivation, suggesting the powerful influence of an intrinsic affinity for animals, as well as representations — both fictional and nonfictional — of animal slaughter.

Aim 3: Understanding the social environments pescetarians navigate in following, defending, or promoting their dietary practices

Review

The third aim was to identify not only how pescetarians arrive at their diets, but also how they navigate their social environments. Eating is fundamentally a social act, and an entire array of outcomes — including tension, debate, and misunderstanding — can arise when pescetarians and non-pescetarians engage in social interactions. Most of these misunderstandings arise from characteristics attributed to pescetarians via often unfounded assumptions, as well as the perceived encroachment of pescetarian beliefs on non-pescetarians. Pescetarians themselves are certainly not innocent of making such assumptions, with many attributing qualities such as "preachiness" to vegetarians. Aggressiveness toward pescetarians is accepted by some as an unfortunate ramification of their dietary choices, social circles, or geographic location. Other pescetarians, however, believe in promoting or advocating on behalf of their beliefs about food and diet, encouraging others to consider adopting pescetarian dietary lifestyles as well.

Analysis

When pescetarians' dietary practices and beliefs are dismissed by non-pescetarians, much of the ensuing frustration derives from the profundity of that dismissal: dietary choices are made not in a vacuum, but as a product of a life's worth of experiences and beliefs. When one's dietary lifestyle — like other elements and dimensions of one's identity — is summarily disregarded, an opportunity is lost for social interactions surrounding those experiences and beliefs. This is especially unfortunate, as

in many cases vegetarians and pescetarians, for example, share significantly overlapping perspectives on food and society. In this context, the conflicts between the groups seems particularly counterproductive. The withdrawal of vegetarians, vegans, and omnivores into their respective dietary communities, while socially understandable, generates a large net loss in the social capital available not only to pescetarians, but to all members of a social world.

A Los Angeles participant offered his insights on the factors contributing to dietary misunderstandings and misconceptions:

> I think food is something that's taught, something that's learned — it's cultural, and it's very difficult to learn that on your own. I think that we place no emphasis on that in school — we have one health education class in high school, but we don't learn anything about food. It's like home economics; some schools still have that, but where else are you supposed to learn about it if all you know is eating fatty, greasy foods? That's what you develop a taste for as well. And people don't travel either, so it makes it even harder. (Interview 23)

Indeed, despite the primacy of food in our lives, we as a society know surprisingly little about it. While culture historically has served as the guidepost for dietary habits, its role has grown muddled in today's multicultural, transnational world. The absence of consensus on food has both facilitated and grown from a proliferation of assumptions about what we should eat and why; at the same time, emergent diets like pescetarianism are marginalized and attacked by more entrenched dietary communities. Such efforts mask the underlying truth, which is that the absence of a consensus is not necessarily a negative — instead, it represents an opportunity. There is no one way to eat, and greater efforts must be made to increase social awareness of and openness to other approaches to food.

The participant continued, detailing what he identified as a lack of awareness not only of perspectives on food, but also of the multiple food choices available to us:

> I don't think that more people should necessarily eat more fish, but I think more people should turn to alternative sources of protein other than what Americans have been raised with. They just don't know about it. They don't know how to do that. (Interview 23)

The challenge, then, is to shape society's navigation of food through sustained education — disseminating information not only on multiple dietary lifestyles, but on the breadth of our food choices, the impact of those choices, and the stories of where our food originates:

> I think you have to have sustainable, humane, ecologically friendly ways of raising cattle or hogs or chicken, and you'd have to have the same for fish. (Interview 23)

Of course, anyone — not just a pescetarian — could have made these statements, and that is precisely the point: conversations about food are conducted far more territorially than is justified by any actual substantive differences.

A Framework for Pescetarianism

To begin the discussion of a pescetarian framework, it is appropriate to look first to preceding work. As discussed in Chapter 2, Maurer presented three principles of dietary change stipulated by the vegetarian movement:

1. Individuals' decisions to adopt vegetarianism are a product of interactions with other vegetarians;
2. Among those who are initially resistant to dietary change, such change may occur eventually over time; and

3. Slow dietary change is more like to generate enduring vegetarianism than rapid dietary change. (Maurer, 2002)

The first principle suggests that social contact is critical to the adoption of vegetarianism. However, the case of pescetarianism may not subscribe to this principle. Many pescetarians (the author included) are the only pescetarians they know in their social networks. Referring to pescetarians as a collective entity, a participant in Boston commented that "it's not as much of a defined group or as much of a vocal group, let's say, as vegetarians… pescetarians don't necessarily get the same press in that sense" (Interview 6). This hardly sounds like the voice of a flourishing dietary movement; indeed, it would be far-fetched to contend that pescetarianism has attained even a semblance of movement status.

The second principle reflects efforts to encourage the adoption of vegetarianism. As with vegetarians, few individuals begin their lives as pescetarians. The adoption of pescetarian or vegetarian dietary lifestyles is thus inherently the result of a process over time, with individuals sometimes displaying an initial resistance to change. Observing such resistance, vegetarian movement leaders argue that well-crafted messaging can be an effective means of promoting dietary change, even to what would ordinarily be an unreceptive audience. While this may in fact be the case, most pescetarians in this study stated that they were content not to engage in rhetorical arguments over food practices; a business executive in Colorado commented, "I've learned a lesson — that food is a very, very emotional and a very personal choice for people, so I've gotten to the point where I pretty much don't discuss it at all" (Interview 11).

The third principle suggests that gradual dietary change can be more enduring and sustainable than rapid change. Building upon this is a belief that embracement of incremental shifts is an effective strategy to encourage individuals to adopt a new dietary lifestyle. In fact, the sample in this project included several individuals who had originally sought to become vegetarians, before concluding that pescetarianism represented a more feasible alternative. The principle suggests that vegetarians would encourage such incrementalism, although in practice (as discussed in Chapter 6) a sizeable proportion vegetarians dismiss pescetarians as nothing more than omnivores. That said, the core of the principle — that dietary change can occur over time, with sustainable results — is essentially true in many cases, though in other cases the swift adoption of pescetarianism is found to be no less enduring.

While imperfectly applicable to pescetarianism, these three principles can be generalized to increase their relevance, particularly if they are reconceptualized as dimensions of dietary change. The first dimension is social, revolving around the question of whether the adoption of a particular diet — such as pescetarianism — is linked to interactions with those who already follow that diet. The second dimension focuses on the barriers to a diet, as well as the factors that overcome that resistance. Finally, the third dimension centers around the pace at which a diet is adopted, and how dietary change can be generated sustainably. These will be the basic building blocks for the discussion to follow.

Based on Chapters 5 and 6, it is fairly evident that social factors — the first dimension — are relatively absent from pescetarianism. Especially in light of the relative rarity and anonymity of pescetarians, few individuals decide to adopt the diet based on

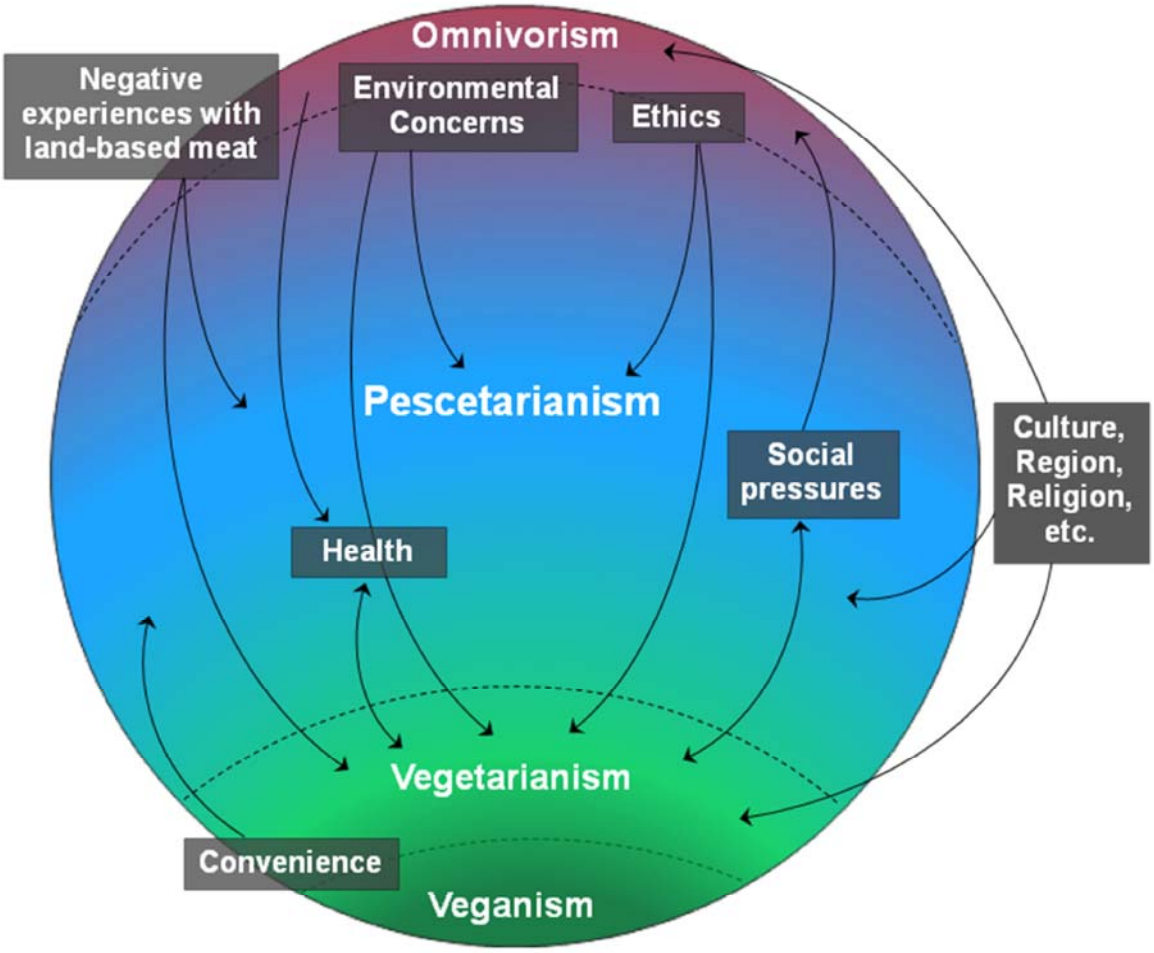
the recommendations of their peers or colleagues. If anything, the social factors that do exist are negative: for example, vegetarians who are harassed by omnivores into including meat in their diet and ultimately decide that seafood represents an acceptable middle ground. When issues manifest themselves — whether in the form of confrontation or other interactions — pescetarians usually have little choice but to address them in isolation. What is interesting instead are the coping mechanisms and other navigational strategies employed by pescetarians to maneuver through their social environments, particularly when pescetarian communities and support networks are absent or minimal.

The second dimension — factors that overcome resistance to pescetarianism — are virtually intrinsic to seafood itself. Based on the findings, a vast majority of pescetarians do generally categorize seafood as a healthy food source. Further, as described in Chapters 4 and 5, many individuals do not even consider fish to be meat, leading a surprising number to label themselves vegetarians despite their pescetarian diets. The stories of individuals who switched to pescetarianism from vegetarianism or veganism also offer insight into this dimension. What led these pescetarians to first adopt other diets? The reasons, of course, are as varied as the reasons for pescetarianism itself; region, culture, religion, health, and other factors all contribute. In the end, however, none of them were able to sustain a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. Lifestyle preferences, convenience, cognitive dissonance, business reasons, and a need for fish-based protein are among the many reasons cited for the ultimate shift to pescetarianism. Omnivores making the shift offer additional reasons, such as concerns related to the environment, animal ethics, and sociopolitics, as well as viscerally negative reactions to land-based

meat products. All of these factors are contributors to the adoption of pescetarian dietary lifestyles.

The third dimension, pacing, transitions this discussion to the elaboration of the framework for pescetarianism. As demonstrated by the first and second dimensions, several factors lead to the initial adoption and eventual maintenance of the pescetarian diet. Depending on which factors are central, the pace of adoption and likelihood of sustainability can vary. Figure 2 is a diagrammatic representation of the framework.

Figure 2 — Framework for Pescetarianism



The sphere represents the spectrum of dietary lifestyles, with the colors corresponding with the actual food choices entailed: red for omnivorous diets, blue for pescetarian diets, light green for vegetarian diets, and dark green for vegan diets. The colors intentionally bleed through the dotted lines to indicate that all of these diets fall along a continuum, situationally (and in some instances, frequently) intersecting and overlapping. Indeed, "omnivorism," "pescetarianism," "vegetarianism," and "veganism" are ultimately little more than arbitrary labels; they approximate, but cannot perfectly represent, their respective constructions/diets.

The arrows indicate the directionality of each factor's effect. For example, ethics pushes omnivores to adopt pescetarianism or vegetarianism, while convenience drives vegans and vegetarians toward pescetarianism. Some factors, such as health and social pressures, work bidirectionally in some instances (e.g., pushing pescetarians toward vegetarianism/veganism and vice versa) and unidirectionally in others (e.g., health drives omnivores toward pescetarianism, while social pressures drive pescetarians toward omnivorism). Enabling factors such as culture, region, and religion sit outside the sphere, as — depending on their specific combination — they can push individuals in any of the dietary directions.

The length of each arrow indicates the magnitude of each factor — and concomitantly the extent to which the resulting diet can be expected to be sustainable. Environmental concerns are likely to be much stronger in an omnivore who switches to vegetarianism than in an omnivore who switches to pescetarianism. For the vegetarian, the strength of those environmental concerns will likely lead to an enduring dietary lifestyle; for a pescetarian, the relatively weaker environmental concerns suggest that

other factors need to contribute in order for maintenance of the diet to be achieved. The variability in dietary sustainability echoes Maurer's discussion of the differentials in commitment between vegetarians motivated for health reasons and those motivated due to animal welfare and ethics, with the latter group demonstrating greater commitment than the former to their vegetarianism.

More broadly, the issue of dietary sustainability relates to the varying conceptualizations of pescetarianism and other diets. For some individuals, the notion of diet is strictly confined to a set of food choices. For others, however, diet means something more; in defining pescetarianism, a participant in Baltimore invoked the term "dietary lifestyle," linking his beliefs regarding and approach to food to his general worldview and principles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this participant was among those citing sociopolitical and environmental concerns as reasons for his avoidance of land-based meat products.

At the same time, even those with strongly held beliefs may limit their application of those beliefs to their food choices. A former vegan in San Francisco noted that his ethical qualms with meat consumption did not preclude him from wearing leather or using other non-food animal products. A distinction must be made, then, between the motivating factors for or against a particular diet and the broader worldview or lifestyle in which those factors are situated. For some, diet and lifestyle converge into a unitary entity; for others, food choices are governed by principles separate from those shaping decisions in other areas of life.

Similarly, the food choices that constitute a diet and the labels used to describe that diet may be potentially divergent from each other. Among a group of individuals

that all eat seafood but exclude other types of meat, some will describe themselves as pescetarian and in no way vegetarian, while others will label themselves as vegetarian (even though the term "pescetarian" may still resonate with them, as in the case of some participants in this study). For this and other reasons, pescetarianism — despite the increasing popularity of seafood consumption — has yet to achieve the movement status attained by vegetarianism and veganism. Many individuals eating pescetarian diets simply do not identify themselves as pescetarians, instead opting for a diversity of other labels. This reduces what are already limited opportunities for social support among pescetarians; the majority of the participants interviewed for this project noted that they were the only pescetarians in their respective social networks or communities. A pescetarian movement would likely need to be predicated by a stronger sense of pescetarian identity and the coalescence of currently disparate and dispersed pescetarians into a more cohesive group.

The potential for pescetarianism to grow into a movement will also be contingent upon how nations address the increasing challenges facing the world's oceans and seafood supply. Despite the efforts of groups like the Marine Stewardship Council, the preponderance of fisheries around the world are unsustainable, overfished, or already depleted; by some estimates, virtually all fisheries worldwide may be commercially depleted by the year 2050 without significant interventions and reforms to current fishing practices (UNEP, 2010). The levels of seafood consumption in the United States and other countries may be contributing to this unsustainable spiral, underscoring an unfortunate tension: as seafood grows increasingly popular among consumers — owing in large part to the beliefs and motivations addressed in this study — it has at

concomitantly reached unprecedented levels of scarcity. In the absence of intervening changes in the rates of both harvesting and consumption, seafood will in a matter of decades no longer be a viable food source. The international community's response to this challenge — as well as others, such as the safety and toxicity of fish — will be critical to the possibility of a pescetarian movement and, more broadly, the future of seafood consumption in the United States and abroad.

Limitations

Certain qualifications should be attached to the findings and outcomes from this project. While these limitations do not disrupt or nullify the work, addressing them would undoubtedly strengthen the project. For example, while a concerted effort was made to recruit a sample spanning all regions of the United States, the reality is that not every state or territory was ultimately represented. Ideally, the sample would include multiple pescetarians from all regions of the country. Further, the ideal sample would be fully reflective of the gender, age, racial, and socioeconomic diversity in the nation overall and in each region specifically.

As an unavoidable consequence of developing a regionally diverse sample, many of the interviews were conducted over the phone rather than in person. The preferred approach to a qualitative project of this type would involve in-person interviews with all participants; however, due to funding, time, and other constraints, such an approach could not be employed in conducting the research. While convenient, telephone interviews certainly lack dimensions critical to in-person interviews, including visual cues, gestures, and physical emoting. Substantively, the project may not have suffered extensively from

this limitation, but it is important nonetheless to acknowledge the impact it may have contributed to the process.

While a majority of the respondents for this project are younger individuals — with the youngest being a handful of college undergraduates and graduate students — the still-significant number of older participants suggests that the skewed age breakdown is likely in part attributable to the process employed for data collection. With interviewees recruited over social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Craigslist, it is understandable that most of the participants would be from the age categories known to use the Internet more frequently and intensively. However, given the usefulness of the data collected from participants who have followed pescetarianism for more extensive periods — in a few cases, a decade or more — it is reasonable to conclude that revising the recruitment and data collection methods to generate a more representative age distribution would add to the strength of the ultimate data set.

Self-reports of food practices are also known to suffer from issues related to reliability, even when respondents are making good-faith efforts to recall and convey their food choices as accurately as possible. The qualitative interviews were designed to create as much space as possible for participants to be forthcoming and honest about their practices. Despite this, it is certainly possible — even likely — that some participants, unintentionally or otherwise, answered questions on their dietary lifestyles in ways that did not fully represent their underlying perspectives or beliefs. Especially on a topic as fluid as diet, responses may gravitate toward idealizations of reality; it is simple, for example — and by no means unusual — for individuals to state that they follow a strict diet, when in fact they frequently deviate from that diet due to challenging circumstances.

Future Research

While this project addressed pescetarianism in the United States, it is a diet with an international presence. During the course of the recruitment process, pescetarians from the United Kingdom, Russia, Australia, the Philippines, and other countries volunteered to participate. However, given the regional diversity within the United States alone, I decided that a focus on American pescetarians would more than suffice for this work. International comparisons, then, represent a natural next step for future research. It will be interesting to apply this project's research questions to pescetarian practices in other nations. What are the differences, for example, between the definitions and rationales employed by pescetarians in the United States and in other countries? Similarly, how do social environments for pescetarians compare between the U.S. and elsewhere? The answers to these questions will be insightful in building our understanding not only of pescetarianism in particular, but of dietary practices more generally both within and across borders.

Another potentially productive future avenue is the addition of an ethnographic element to this research. As noted in the limitations section, while self-reports and phone interviews are useful, nothing can replace in-person dialogue and observations. By introducing ethnography into the research methods, the potential arises for studying not only qualitative conversations about food, but also food practices themselves: preparing meals, eating, socializing, and so forth. Combined with qualitative interviewing, such an ethnographic approach could generate very powerful conclusions about people's interactions with food in the context of their social environments.

To provide further context — as well as to acknowledge the broader dietary spectrum in which pescetarianism is situated — future studies could also focus on pescetarians concomitantly with practitioners of other diets, such as vegetarians and vegans. Of particular interest would be those individuals whose food choices lie at the margins; self-described "vegetarians" who eat fish, for example, could be contrasted directly with vegetarians who avoid all consumption of seafood and other meat products. The motivations, rationales, and current diets of former pescetarians would also be an area of analytic productivity, particularly since the sampling strategy for this project only included current pescetarians.

As pescetarianism accrues social momentum, an area to monitor is whether — even despite challenges in the areas of seafood sustainability and safety — a movement begins to build among practitioners of the diet. Just as vegetarianism and veganism have grown more influential with investments and advocacy from their respective communities, a pescetarian social movement would add an important social dimension to a status quo consisting largely of disorganized and often isolated individuals. By joining together, those who follow pescetarian dietary lifestyles would be able to generate greater net forward energy — and at the same time would offer intriguing new possibilities for future study.

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