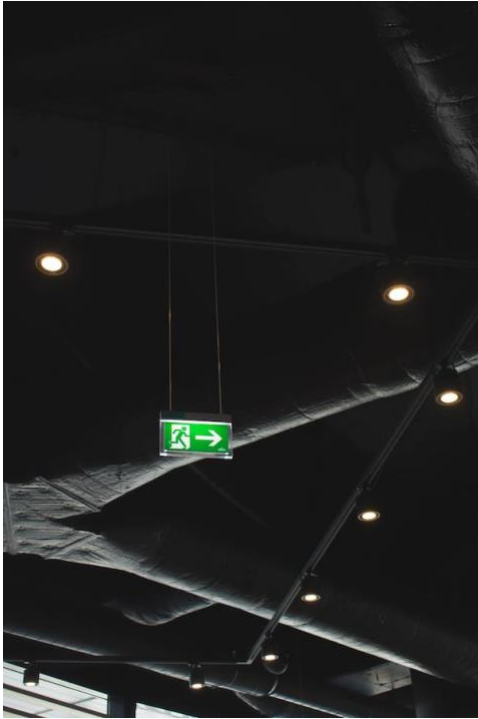


Exiting veganism: Identity residue, reaction or ambivalence?

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Feature photo credit: [niklas schoenberger](#)

Veganism is a dietary lifestyle that boasts of benefits to the planet and personal health, underpinned by a moral philosophy. More than a fad, for many, veganism is a part of *who they are*. Indeed, [studies](#) have found that, relative to vegetarians, self-identified vegans report that their diet is highly central to their identity. Vegans also tend to attribute high-levels of sentience to animals, [identify with animals](#), and strongly support animal rights.

Nonetheless, maintaining a vegan lifestyle represents a significant challenge for many people.

A [Fauntalytics study](#) estimated that there are approximately 5 times as many former vegans than there are practising vegans. This begs the question: what happens when a person abandons their vegan identity? Does the ethical framework that underpins their veganism also loosen?

Abandoning a group identity: What do we know?

While psychologists know a lot about why people identify with groups and the consequences of group identification, we have much to learn about what happens when a person psychologically sheds a core identity like veganism. Might certain representative behaviours persist – for example, might ex-vegans continue to [reject speciesist beliefs](#) or remain environmentally conscientious? Or are they pulled in the opposite direction in reaction to their previous identity?



What happens when a person psychologically sheds a core identity like veganism? Photo credit: [Markus Spiske](#)

One possibility is that individuals react strongly to their pre-existing identity and put effort into distancing themselves from it. This “clean break” form of exiting might be seen as the inverse of the overnight conversion experience: quitting an identity “cold turkey”. Clean-breakers, if they exist, would likely harbour negative attitudes toward their former identity and perhaps even regret their involvement.

A more likely scenario is that individuals continue to exemplify aspects of the identity as they shed it. Sociologists call this “[role hangover](#)” – the residual beliefs or behaviours carried over from a former identity as a person transitions away from it.

Research on exiting a religious identity offers a useful insight into the process of role hangover. “[Religious residue](#)” is a phenomenon that has been studied by social scientists. It has been observed that many individuals who abandon their faith continue, often throughout their life, to endorse beliefs or exhibit behaviours (e.g., charitable giving) associated with their former life. These ex-believers are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards practicing [believers](#) and God than those who have never been religious.

Like religion, do we see vegan ‘residue’?

If ex-vegans were to exhibit *identity residue*, we might expect them to continue expressing some of the behaviours and attitudes central to veganism. Most central to the vegan philosophy is the aim to avoid causing animals suffering. One way this core value might persist regards consumer habits. Relative to the average consumer, ex-vegans might prioritise products thought to have higher welfare standards, for example, shopping for local, pasture-raised meat.

More systematic work is needed to test this idea. However, some anecdotal reports from a [Guardian](#) article suggests that ex-vegans continue to exhibit behaviours that more closely align with vegan values than carnistic values, for example, by concerning themselves with the environmental impact of their eating habits.



Ex-vegans may continue to exhibit behaviours that align with vegan values, for example, taking action for the environment. Photo credit: [Markus Spiske](#)

More systematic evidence on vegan identity residue comes from the aforementioned study by [Faunalytics](#), which found that, on average, former vegans in the U.S. reported consuming relatively small quantities of meat – chicken (0.3 servings per day), beef (0.2) and pork (0.1) – though larger quantities of dairy (0.9 servings per day). This might suggest that ex-vegans *behaviourally* are less carnistic than the average omnivore who has never gone vegan.

Unfortunately, no data was collected from omnivores to make a direct comparison. However, some unpublished experience-sampling data from our own lab makes for an imperfect comparison: a sample of 249 omnivorous participants from the UK reported eating 1.6 servings of chicken, 1.4 servings of beef and 1.4 servings of pork per day. Extrapolating from these results, it is possible that never-been-vegan omnivores are consuming approximately one extra serving of meat per day than former vegans.

Probably the most direct evidence of identity residue comes from a qualitative study by [Menzies and Sheeshka \(2012\)](#) that sampled 19 ex-vegetarians in Ontario and found that most of the sample reported practising a diet that more closely resembled a flexitarian or reducaritarian diet compared to the average meat consumer.

Reactive and ambivalent ex-vegans

The discussion so far paints a fairly rosey picture of vegan de-identification. But might some former vegans exhibit a more extreme reaction to their past lifestyle?

A recent study by [Aguilera-Carnerero and Carretero-González \(2021\)](#) of online “anti-vegan” communities show that many of these groups have ex-vegans in their ranks, who can be observed acting as “*implacable anti-vegan activists*” that share their experiences to warn and admonish others of the seductive misinformation of vegans. Likewise, a quick Youtube search for the term ‘ex vegan’ returns videos of former vegans expressing strong, antithetical attitudes towards vegan ideology. For instance, one ex-vegan YouTuber stated that veganism is a “*horror story*” that “*almost killed*” them.



The number of ex-vegans who seesaw to identify as “anti-vegan” remains unclear. Photo credit: [Yakuplpek](#)

Yet, this evidence is largely anecdotal and the exact proportion of ex-vegans who seesaw to identify as “anti-vegan” is unclear.

Other ex-vegans may be better characterised as occupying a state of *ambivalence* about their dietary practices. A pioneering study by [Barr and Chapman \(2002\)](#) interviewed a sample of 35 former vegetarians, who had followed a vegetarian diet for, on average, 3.3 years. The beliefs of these former vegetarians were compared with those of current vegetarians and non-vegetarians.

The authors found that former vegetarians were more like non-vegetarians in some respects, but more like current vegetarians in other respects. For example, they agreed more with non-vegetarians that meat and dairy can have positive health benefits, but agreed more with vegetarians that meat and dairy can also be a source of potential contaminants, such as “*unnatural hormones*” and antibiotics. It’s possible that many ex-vegans may exhibit similarly ambivalent attitudes with respect to animal products.

More directly, in the [2014 Faunalytics study](#), it was estimated that approximately 37% of former vegans are interested in re-adopting their former vegan diet. This suggests that some former vegans are in a state of flux about their diets, hovering somewhere between the dietary identities of semi-vegetarian and vegan.

Reflections, caveats, and conclusions

Why might some ex-vegans react strongly to their former lifestyle, while others seek to gradually renegotiate the boundaries of their dietary convictions? The study of vegan drift is too nascent to draw firm conclusions about what differentiates such individuals.

Though the process of shedding a vegan identity has parallels with that of a religious identity, it is clear that there also exists some important differences. For one, when individuals shed their former religious identity, they often experience psychological rifts (and at times *physical* rifts) with family members and

friends. This is not generally the case for ex-vegans who often complain about never having a community of like-minded supporters in the first place.



Unlike veganism, shedding a religious identity often comes at the cost of losing life-long connections. Photo credit: [Pixabay](#)

Furthermore, while the motivations for leaving veganism are often social in nature (e.g., [not finding other vegans or fitting in with others](#)), the same cannot be said for leaving religion. Religious identities are often inherited – transmitted within families – and adherents may leave because of a change in their worldview, for example, shifting from a belief in supernaturalism to empiricism. The shift away from veganism is probably less epistemological. Some beliefs might motivate an exit – for example, believing that vegan diets are nutritionally inadequate – but such beliefs do not appear to be the principal reasons for exiting.

Moreover, we must consider that some social identities are “soft” identities, with permeable boundaries, whereas other identities have more rigid boundaries. Veganism may better qualify as a “soft” identity that shares many underlying values with neighbouring dietary identities, such as vegetarianism and pescetarianism.

If the “role hangover” model best characterises the bulk of ex-vegan experiences, then perhaps exiting veganism should be viewed less like exiting a particular religious identity (e.g., ex-Methodist or ex-Hindu) and more like moving from being highly religious to being less so. One does not completely throw off the ideological underpinnings, but applies them with less stringency or fervour.