



CAPTURING INEQUALITY AND ACTION IN PROTOTYPES: THE CASE OF MEAT-EATING & VEGETARIANISM

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Introduction & Methods



Sainsbury Magazine by Toby Scott

Prototypes are mental representations of best-fitting cases within categories that conserve cognitive effort by efficiently representing phenomena. What remains unclear is how more complex aspects of social life are understood in prototypical terms and how prototypes relate to boundary work and multiple axes of inequality. To stimulate a sociological perspective on prototypes, the authors investigate conceptualizations of prototypical meat-eaters and vegetarians. The gendered meat/plant schema, which associates meat-eating with masculinity and plant-focused diets with femininity, often guides thinking about meat. Yet, multiple axes of identity are also implicated in meat consumption or abstention, raising the possibility that people will hold more complex ideas about these categories.

The authors analyse interviews with 131 adults in the Peel region of Ontario, Canada, an ethno-racially and class diverse area. Interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017 by 22 students in two senior undergraduate research classes at the University of Toronto-Mississauga.

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Findings

Meat and Masculinities

The Multicultural Muscle Man

This category reflects and reinforces a schematic dichotomy connecting meat-eating to masculinity. The salience of this prototype among the respondents likely reflects the prevalence of meat in the typical diet, familiarity with the gendered meat/plant schema, and an association between muscles and the ideal masculine body. Additionally, some respondents broadened the meat/plant schema beyond gender to include race and culture, by connecting the meat-eating prototype to various non-white ethno-racial identities.

“[A meat eater has] a masculine figure. Maybe with a chiselled body or something like that. Scruffy beard, big beard, big arms, big muscles, beefy.... I mean you wouldn’t see a big beefy guy eating a salad or something like that, right?”

*Canada's National
Observer via Shutterstock*

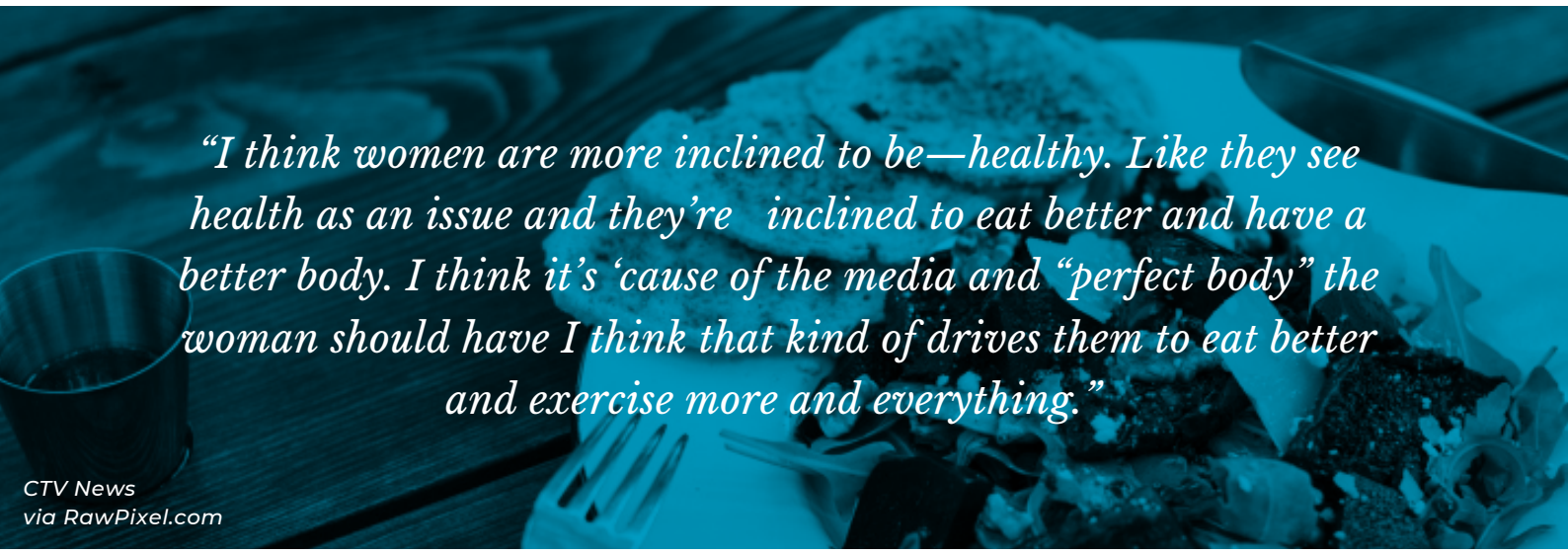
The Meaty Fat Man

Another prototype through which respondents connected meat to masculinity was the “meaty fat man”, who, in their descriptions, doesn’t care about his weight or his health, and who is frequently described as white, unthinking, and having a large belly. Their descriptions of the “meaty fat man” as “unhealthy” and “irresponsible” reinforce a broader fatphobic culture that both emphasizes individual responsibility for health and equates body fat with poor health. Their visualisation of this prototype as white once again highlights the racialization of the gendered meat/plant schema.

Plan-Based Diets, Femininity, and Religion

The Skinny/Rich Vegetarian Woman

The skinny/rich vegetarian prototype reflects an association between femininity, plant-based food consumption, and concerns about body size. This prototype was also frequently associated with whiteness. Here, respondents broaden the meat/plant schema beyond gender again by bringing in classed and racialized elements. This vegetarian prototype was sometimes positively associated with lifestyle politics connected to animal welfare and the environment, but also negatively associated with class privilege, superficiality, and trendiness.



“I think women are more inclined to be—healthy. Like they see health as an issue and they’re inclined to eat better and have a better body. I think it’s ‘cause of the media and “perfect body” the woman should have I think that kind of drives them to eat better and exercise more and everything.”

CTV News
via RawPixel.com

Religious Vegetarians

Many respondents associated vegetarianism with Asian cultures and certain religious affiliations, unsettling the gendered meat/plant schema. This vegetarianism was seen as rooted in tradition and morality, in contrast to the skinny/rich vegetarian image framed as “trendy”. Meat-eating respondents often associated religious vegetarianism with embodied traits like being “soft”, “thin” or “weak”. These qualities sometimes invoked an emasculation of vegetarian men, but were also articulated across genders, complicating a simple gendered meat/plant schema.

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