

15. Vegan Men: Towards Greater Care for (Non)human Others, Earth and Self¹

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Abstract

The escalating climate crisis we are amidst, points to a profound lack of care for (non)human others and the Earth. Humanity's massive consumption of other animals for food is a key driver of climate change. Using the notion of care, this chapter examines veganism as a pathway for men to move towards more sustainable and egalitarian ways of living. The chapter draws on 61 qualitative interviews with vegan men based in Finland and Estonia. Aavik argues that veganism can constitute one tangible way for men to cultivate and practice greater care towards (non)human others, the environment and the self.

Keywords

Critical Animal Studies; Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM); ecofeminism; food; food politics; human-animal relations; masculinities; men; posthumanism; veganism; vegans; vegan studies

Biography

Kadri Aavik is an Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Tallinn University, Estonia, and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She works in gender studies (with a focus in critical studies on men and masculinities), critical animal studies and vegan studies – and their intersections. In her recent research, she has studied vegan identities and practices from gender and intersectional perspectives and the role of institutions in supporting and challenging the exploitation of nonhuman animals.

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Introduction: Men, masculinities and crises of care

In the past few decades, scholars, civil society activists and international organisations have increasingly stressed the need for human societies to move towards more sustainable ways of living. This includes developing a more viable relationship to ecosystems and to other species, in the era of the “Anthro”pocene² where we are facing the imminent and considerable threats of ecological and social strain if not collapse (Haraway, 2016; Kemmerer, 2014; Steffen et al., 2015). This suggests we are in the midst of existential crises of care – towards human and nonhuman others and the Earth.

Feminist scholars and activists in particular have challenged gender inequalities and envisioned ways to move towards more just gender relations. In recent decades, increasingly more (critical) attention has been paid to men’s identities, practices and roles in this context, notably by scholars in the field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM). Key questions emerging from this scholarship are: what are the avenues for challenging hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) or the hegemony of men (Hearn, 2004)? How can we foster the emergence of more egalitarian (i.e. more gender equitable and environmentally considerate) masculinities?

Men’s roles and agency in advancing more egalitarian gender relations (Flood & Howson, 2015) as well as in efforts to move towards more sustainable and ecological ways of living are being increasingly highlighted and studied (Hultman & Pulé, 2018; MacGregor & Seymour, 2017; MenEngage Alliance, 2016). Yet, it is still typical to study men mostly ‘as a monolithic group responsible for the negative effects of climate change’ (MenEngage Alliance, 2016, p. 2) and less often as (potential) ‘agents of positive change’ (MenEngage Alliance, 2016, p. 1). However, some more recent work has taken up this discussion, for example through examining and developing the notion of ‘ecological masculinities’, a concept that broadly refers to doing masculinity in more ecological and socially sustainable ways (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 51).

Most scholars and activists working with men, masculinities and the environment agree that there is a need to foster more caring and softer masculinities more attuned to “nature”. Yet, such declarations often remain vague and provide insufficient detail as to what this

² My use of “anthropo” in inverted commas reflects the idea, articulated by Twine (this volume), that not all humans are equally responsible for causing climate change and hence there is a need for a more nuanced and intersectional approach to understanding the causes of climate change and its effects on differently positioned groups and communities in the global power hierarchy (cf. Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). Twine suggests that responsibility for efforts to mitigate anthropogenic climate change must predominantly fall on those who are the most accountable for producing this problem in the first place. Also, other variations of the term have been used, such as Capitalocene and (m)Anthropocene (cf. Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 23).

should entail. In their work on ecological masculinities, Hultman and Pulé ask: ‘what might more ecologised expressions of masculine care look like?’ (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 165). In practical terms, what does ‘extending care to all life on Earth’ (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 177), as a goal, mean or involve? What are some specific ways for men to enact ‘broader, deeper and wider care’ in their everyday lives (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 178)?

This chapter engages with these questions by suggesting that veganism³ is one concrete framework in which to think of men, masculinities and ecologisation and a tangible path for theorising and enacting (more) ‘ecological masculinities’. This includes a positive transformation in men’s practices of gender and challenging unequal gender relations (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 53). Following Hultman and Pulé’s (2018) suggestion that an important element of ecological masculinities is care, I explore how vegan men relate to nonhuman and human others, environment, and themselves and how veganism can be one such caring pathway to consider.

More broadly, I hope to contribute to understanding and fostering social change and more ethical ways of relating to nonhuman others in the “Anthro”pocene (Haraway, 2016; Steffen et al., 2015), by addressing the interlinked questions of gender equality and ecological sustainability.

Human-animal relations, social and environmental justice

In recent years, a number of scholars and prominent international organisations have demonstrated that the current global ecological crisis is largely driven by humanity’s consumption of other animals on an industrial scale. This has now reached unprecedented dimensions globally, with farmed animals making up 60% of all mammals on Earth (Bar-On, Phillips & Milo, 2018). More than 70 billion land animals are killed for food annually (Faunalytics, 2018).

These staggering numbers point to a profound ethical crisis in human-animal relations (Best, Nocella II, Kahn, Gigliotti & Kemmerer, 2007). This crisis has institutional dimensions – the animal-industrial complex (Noske, 1989; Twine, 2012) is a speciesist social institution (Nibert, 2002)⁴, upheld and supported by governments, private business and individual

³ I focus on veganism, as opposed to vegetarianism, because the former, being more firmly rooted in an animal justice agenda, fully rejects the consumption of other animals and hence constitutes a more radical challenge to current unsustainable animal-based food systems and envisions non-exploitative ways of relating to other animals.

⁴ Speciesism (Ryder, 1970; Singer, 1975) is an ideology that assigns different value to beings based solely on their species membership. Speciesism considers humans as superior to non-human animals. The mechanism by

consumers. Critical animal studies scholars and animal advocacy organisations have drawn attention to and challenged this massive exploitation of other animals. The harmful consequences of consuming nonhuman animals on our ecosystems have been increasingly recognised by scholars and mainstream international organisations (Poore & Nemecek, 2018; Kemmerer, 2014; Steinfeld, Gerber, Wassenaar, Castel, Rosales, Rosales & de Haan, 2006; GRAIN and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2018). Animal agriculture is responsible for between 18% (Steinfeld et al., 2006, p. xxi) to 51% (Goodland & Anhang, 2009) of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, uses 70% of all agricultural land and 30% of all land of the planet (Steinfeld et al., 2006, p. xxi).

Beyond these devastating impacts of animal farming on nonhuman animals and the environment, a typically overlooked but crucial aspect is that the consumption of other animals has damaging consequences on human beings as well, particularly on the most vulnerable people and communities. For example, jobs in slaughterhouses involve some of the most dangerous work tasks, with high risks of injury, stress, trauma, poor pay and extremely low unionisation of workers. In many countries, this work is overwhelmingly performed by racialised/ethnicised people, often with migrant backgrounds (Eisnitz, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2010; Sebastian, 2018). In addition, climate change, driven in large part by the animal industry, disproportionately affects more vulnerable countries and communities, particularly in the Global South (on climate injustice, cf. Parks & Roberts, 2006). Therefore, our consumption of other animals is not only an issue of animal ethics or an environmental concern, but very much a social justice issue (including the social implications of climate change; e.g. environmental refugees). If we are to strive towards a truly equitable and sustainable world, we have to take seriously and challenge our treatment of nonhuman animals. This should involve moving beyond “Anthro”pocentric thinking in our discussions of ecologisation and an expansion of feminist intersectional paradigms to also include species (Twine, 2010).

In this context, there is an urgent practical need to adopt more sustainable and ethical ways of living and relating to other species. Given the unethical and unsustainable nature of animal-based food production, there is a pressing need to rethink our food consumption and food systems. Many animal advocacy groups, scholars and international organisations are advocating a move away from or reduction in animal-based foods. For example, the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health envisions a Great Food Transformation, where

which speciesism works is conceptually similar to for example sexism and racism as forms of discrimination which assign lesser value to and treat individuals unequally based on their gender and race, respectively.

food eaten by humans should be both healthy and sustainable – such food is largely plant-based (Willett et al., 2019). In addition, some key international health organisations have called for a reduction in or elimination of animal products from human diets stemming from health concerns (Wiseman, 2008).

In practical terms then, veganism could be thought of as one potential solution to the crises we are facing and a tangible way of practicing care towards nonhuman others and ecosystems⁵. Certainly, “de-animalisation” of the food system (Morris, Mylan & Beech, 2018) cannot only be achieved through individual (consumption) practices, but also requires large-scale institutional initiative and change.

Veganism, men, masculinities and care

Veganism is the practice of refraining from the use of animal products⁶. While the proportion of vegans among Western populations remains small, their visibility and cultural significance is increasing. Veganism is typically conceptualised (in the media and popular consciousness) as a diet, (personal) food choice or a lifestyle. Relying on previous work, I suggest that it is more insightful to think of veganism as a practice that rethinks and challenges exploitative human-animal relations, a form of political protest (Taylor & Twine, 2014) and everyday activism (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012; Vivienne, 2016). In addition, veganism serves as a powerful strategy to combat climate change. However, individual vegans’ capacity to produce structural change may be limited, as veganism can easily become a niche form of consumption, available primarily to a privileged few, particularly white middle-class people in Western societies⁷.

Veganism as a cultural practice and identity has been explored mainly in Western societies and cultures, paving way to the emergent research field of vegan studies (Wright,

⁵ Regarding the health and nutritional aspects of veganism, one of the world’s leading bodies on nutrition, the Academy of Dietetics and Nutrition (Melina, Craig & Levin, 2016) considers plant-based diets suitable, nutritionally adequate and healthy way of eating at every stage of human life. Plant-based diets even offer health benefits, preventing or alleviating certain life-style diseases. The most comprehensive evidence for this comes from two ongoing cohort studies – The Epic-Oxford Study (University of Oxford) and the Adventist Health Study (Loma Linda University). Both have issued a number of scientific publications, see <http://www.epic-oxford.org/epic-oxford-publications/> and <https://adventisthealthstudy.org/researchers/scientific-publications>. Positive effects of veganism have been identified particularly for men’s health (Orlich et al., 2013).

⁶ This typically stems from challenging the idea that non-human animals are commodities to be used to fulfil human needs; however, there are people who follow plant-based diets for health, religious or other reasons, without necessarily for animal ethics reasons.

⁷ Veganism – originally an animal justice movement grounded in ethics – is increasingly being co-opted by capitalism, as many large food corporations are reaping economic benefits by marketing vegan products and using veganism in their greenwashing agendas, in the new “green rush” (Stewart & Cole, 2020).

2015; 2019). Some of this research has focused on gender in the context of veganism, including on men and masculinities. This work has studied veganism (and also vegetarianism) in relation to men's identities and practices (Adams, 1990; Potts & Parry, 2010; Rothgerber, 2013; Wright, 2015; Sumpter, 2015; Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017; Mycek, 2018; DeLessio-Parson, 2017). Broadly, this scholarship suggests that going vegan offers potential for doing masculinity differently, yet, vegan men may (simultaneously) reproduce patterns or elements of traditional or hegemonic masculinity.

Vegan ecofeminist scholars (Gaard, 2002; Adams, 1990; Donovan, 1990; Kemmerer, 2011; Kheel, 2008) have revealed how the patriarchal social order promotes the objectification and exploitation of women, other marginalised people and non-human animals, hence suggesting that challenging exploitative human-animal relations should be a feminist concern. Adams (1990) argues that veganism implicitly challenges patriarchy. By refraining from consuming other animals and going vegan or rejecting 'meat culture' (Potts, 2016), vegan men adopt a posthuman (Wolfe, 2003) ethics of care and disrupt the link between hegemonic masculinity and meat eating (Adams, 1990). Thereby, vegan men open up avenues for 'the negotiation of new, nonnormative masculinities that challenge our traditional understandings of what it means to be manly' (Wright, 2015, p. 26). Yet, men's veganism alone is not sufficient to challenge injustice and "toxic" forms of masculinity⁸. This is most evident for instance in the case of men's Neo-nazi animal advocacy and veganism, as an extreme example (Forchtner & Tominc, 2017).

People typically become vegan for ethical, environmental and/or health reasons. What links all of these aspects is the idea of care and sustaining relationships of care (not necessarily explicitly articulated in these terms in vegan narratives) – towards nonhuman animals as sentient beings, local and global ecosystems and practices of self-care. Care has however been traditionally associated with women's lives and practices. For men, it has been argued that an orientation towards care and caring is rather exceptional (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p.165). When framed through the notion of care, veganism can be conceptualised as a 'responsive, affective ethics of nonviolence', built on feminist ethics (Jenkins, 2012, p. 505). Veganism can be thought of as an embodied everyday practice of care – for nonhuman animals, Earth, other

⁸ 'Toxic masculinity' is a somewhat contested concept. Broadly, it refers to (men's) doing masculinity in ways that harm human and non-human others. For a discussion on toxic masculinity, cf. Haider, 2016; Kimmel & Wade, 2018.

humans and the self. For men in particular, veganism offers potential to engage in and/or strengthen their sense and relationships of care.

Veganism is a form of care that typically involves no direct contact with the beings cared for. Instead, this care manifests itself in avoiding to support (institutional) violence towards non-human animals, primarily through consumption. Yet, in discussions on men and ecologisation, the importance men's (re)engagement with "nature" is often emphasised. However, veganism (in Western societies) is by and large an urban phenomenon, with most vegans concentrated in cities and thus lacking direct contact with the beings whose lives they seek to improve. Veganism allows us to relate to other animals more ethically and live more holistically in urban settings in the 21st century, without "returning" to "nature". It engages with the question of the importance of transforming masculinities in urban contexts (Hultman & Pulé, 2018, p. 209). As such, veganism as a form of care towards nonhuman others highlights the problematics and impossibility of distinguishing "nature" neatly from humans and human-made environments (culture and society), as argued by Haraway (2003).

On the research design and context: vegan men in Northern Europe

Research on vegan men and masculinities has primarily been conducted in and about Anglo-American countries, with little scholarship on vegan men elsewhere. I explore men's veganism in Northern Europe, focusing on men in Finland and Estonia. In both countries, vegans make up around 0.5 to 1% of the population (cf. TNS EMOR, 2018 for Estonia; K Group, 2019 for Finland). Despite these small numbers, veganism in both contexts has become increasingly culturally visible. Largely due to historical reasons, veganism is more accepted as an identity and practice in Finland in contrast to Estonia, where its reception, particularly by the medical and nutrition establishment, remains more unfavourable (Aavik, 2018, 2019).

In terms of gender, Finnish society exhibits more egalitarian gender norms and relations than Estonia, where more traditional anti-egalitarian masculinities still prevail, (Pajumets, 2012), partly as legacy of the Soviet past. As a commonality, in both countries, consuming animal products remains an important element of doing masculinity. Additionally, men may confront the narrative of the difficulty of veganism in cold Nordic climates and the perceived necessity to sustain oneself by consuming animal products.

The research that informs this chapter draws on semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews which I conducted in 2018-2019 with 61 people who identified as men and as vegans, based in Estonia (31) and Finland (30). They were recruited via the two largest

vegan-themed Facebook groups in the two language communities: Eesti Veganid (Estonian, ca 9000 members) and Vegaani (Finnish, ca 12 000 members). The interviewed men were between 18-56 years of age, with an average age of 34 years. The time they had been vegan ranged from a few months for some to nearly two decades for others. My research participants constitute a privileged group: they were white, predominantly ethnic Estonian or Finnish, typically middle-class, living in urban areas, and most had completed tertiary education. I analysed the interviews using a narrative approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Lawler, 2002), focusing on stories men told about becoming and living as vegan.

Main findings: towards greater care

Transition to veganism: recognising a need for change

Men's narratives of transition to veganism were diverse and rich. For most, the process was longer and gradual, beginning with vegetarianism, while a few quit the consumption of other animals more abruptly. Their points of departure and contexts in which their veganism emerged also varied: while some were located in social settings which were more conducive to a vegan transition (vegan or vegetarian friends, partners and/or family members, exposure to information about veganism, an existing set of values supporting anti-oppression etc.), other research participants did not inhabit such favourable conditions.

Despite these diverse experiences, a common theme throughout the transition narratives was a (gradual) realisation that a change is needed in one's behaviour towards what was deemed a more appropriate or harmonious way of living, in terms of relating to other species, ecosystems and/or own body and health. For most, this involved a recognition that the way we treat other animals is unethical and a desire to stop participating in this harmful practice. For others, the motivation had (at least initially) to do with their concern about the adverse health effects of animal products and the desire to improve their own health. For a few, knowledge about the environmental consequences of animal farming on an industrial scale prompted them to go vegan. It was typical for one of those three considerations to be the initial driver, and after a while, more than one or all of these reasons became important reasons to live as a vegan:

Panu⁹, 22, Finland: "The ethical aspect turned me gradually to veganism. I just couldn't consume animal products anymore because I became aware of the horrors and the suffering. So, first it was all about ethics and then I became more aware of the ecological consequences of animal consumption."

⁹ I use pseudonyms to refer to the research participants.

In several cases, an initial focus (only) on self-care gradually transformed into broader care for other life:

Timo, 38, Finland: “First, it was only for my own health, but it really changed I think already after being a vegetarian for half a year. It had drastically changed to rather moral or ethical reasons...really feeling with the animals.”

Transition to veganism involved intellectual components, as well as more visceral or emotional elements, however these cannot be neatly separated in the narratives. The more “intellectual” path – or at least emphasised as such by the men – involved first becoming familiar with philosophical perspectives on human-animal relations and animal ethics and/or being confronted with other types of (factual) knowledge on industrialised animal farming. In this process, men developed an awareness about the ethics of eating animals – a realisation that exploiting other animals, including eating them, is morally wrong and went vegan to eliminate the discrepancy between their values and everyday practices:

Markus, 40, Estonia: “First there was some kind of realisation, it started already earlier... this idea that someone has to die for me, for my choices. I couldn’t quite fathom this. It became very clear to me that there is a connection between my food choices and someone’s life. And that there is no justification to this. I googled about the suffering of animals... and then found all these videos, there are many of them on the internet. These videos showed what is going on in the egg and dairy industry. When looking at this material, I couldn’t understand how I didn’t know about this before. I was like in total darkness. And then we [with female partner] decided to become vegan. It all went very easily. But yes, the main reason was that we did not want animals to suffer because of our choices.”

Markus’s description of his initial “realisation” is akin to a feeling. It is significant that when looking for information about industrialised animal farming, he sought to find out about animal suffering first and foremost – enabling him to viscerally relate to nonhuman others, as opposed to intellectualising what is done to them. This illustrates the entanglement of rationality and emotions in moral action, as suggested by several CAS and ecofeminist scholars (Aaltola, 2013; Gruen, 2007).

For others, transition to veganism was initiated by more visceral or emotional experiences, such as a sense of disgust towards eating animals or a (vague) understanding that one is participating in something uncomfortable or wrong. Several men identified some particular meaningful experiences of relating to nonhuman animals in their earlier lives that according to them may have started a path towards veganism. This is illustrated by Tom’s experience of identifying with a nonhuman animal and witnessing her suffering when travelling with his father in South East Asia as a teenager:

Tom, 41, Estonia: “I was in this resort, this kind of hotel at the base, at the foot of some beautiful mountains covered in rain forest. I was staying with my dad... , we were kind of just hanging out there for a day or to. I just went exploring and I found this concrete pool, swimming pool with the mountains behind it. And at the edge of this pool there was a concrete cell, so it was like concrete on three sides and on one side there were thick metal bars. And inside there was an orangutan... she was... quite lifeless. I mean she was obviously alive. Her hand kind of wrapped around the steel bar... . She did not look at me so much as looked through me. Her eyes glazed over. For all intents and purposes, she was gone. I think she was not...at all engaged in the world. She...I would imagine even if I was able to open the bars, I doubt she would have been bothered to climb out. And that really stuck me. It just hit me with an immense sadness that I felt, looking into her eyes that felt very much like my own. I identified with her as a being, not just another in inverted commas animal. But a being that I identified with, I related to, that I felt like... and I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if I was in that cage. What kind of life that would be, how I would cope, how I could survive in such a situation? But looking at her, I could imagine, could be not so dissimilar to what it might be like if a human being was in such a state. So that kind of hit home in a new way perhaps for me at the time...that you know...these boundaries I was drawing between myself, others, and then non-human animals was such a farcical distinction that I was really hard for me to cling on to that... I couldn't do that with all human decency. So, I felt that it was not right for me to be treating animals the way I had been.”

Such profound experiences did not always result in going vegan instantly. Tom, for example, transitioned years later. However, he and some others retrospectively identified such moments as significant in their paths towards veganism, as these encounters initiated some kind of a spark or planted a seed: an (unconscious) thought process or a path of moral development.

Notably, some transition experiences began not with an intellectual or moral awareness but with a vegan praxis or transitioning to a plant-based diet first, without any (strong) ethical commitments initially, as exemplified by Indrek's experience:

Indrek, 34, Estonia: “It all started when my partner became vegan, practically overnight. I didn't know what veganism is. She threw everything [non-vegan] out of the fridge, well not everything, but she didn't any more want to eat and cook [animal-based foods]. I obviously respected her decision and didn't want to put her in an uncomfortable situation where she would have to cook meat or something. So, we started eating vegan at home, it was her influence. ... She needed to talk to someone about these things and as we discussed it, my interest grew. First, it all seemed foreign to me, I made no connections. ... But then I realised that I'm participating in taking someone's life....After I had not eaten meat for a long time, I tried it. I didn't like it, it seemed disgusting. Because all this had become very real. It really was someone's body part. It was very unpleasant to eat it and from that moment on, I realised, no way. So, I became vegan through this sensation.”

In the case of Indrek and others who first started eating plant-based in social settings conducive to veganism, behaviour change preceded a change in values - an approach to social change advocated for example by Tobias Leenaert (2017), who argues that moral awareness may not necessarily be the main factor in ending unethical social practices. It may be easier for people to morally denounce a practice when they are not personally participating in it (Leenaert, 2017).

Meanings of veganism

Men's conceptualisations of veganism varied slightly, partly depending on their (primary) reasons for being vegan. Broadly, however, living as a vegan was considered the best or the only acceptable way to live. It was seen as the best way to practice non-violence and care, as well as to minimise harm as a result of one's life and choices, mainly towards nonhuman animals but also typically towards other living beings:

Tapani, 35, Finland: "The leading idea for me...[is] how you can minimise the harm with the resources you have."

Even for those whose main aim was to avoid causing harm to other animals, veganism was a way of contributing to a better world more broadly, a more caring and sustainable way of relating to the environment, others and to oneself:

Eetu, 18, Finland: "I knew I was doing something right and correct by not contributing to animal suffering and also not causing as much environmental impact and then also because the way I eat or because of the vegan diet, I also knew that the Western diet can cause you a heart attack and so by diet and lifestyle you can really make a difference in your life and well-being."

Veganism then was regarded as a conscious way of life and intervention to the world, rather than a lifestyle or a trend which could be adopted or rejected on a whim.

Transformation of the self

Typically, men identified going vegan as an important change in their lives. For many, it was part of a broader personal transformation which included, for example, giving up alcohol, taking better care of one's health, spiritual awakening or mental/scholarly development. In some cases, these processes were taking place in parallel with the shift to veganism, in other instances, going vegan was regarded as a catalyst for some of these changes.

Veganism was recognised as a new "normal" for the men and for most, an important part of their sense of self, with no possibility of going back. Men typically noted an increased sense of awareness of what is going on in the world and openness to new knowledge, an emergence of a more critical mind, intertwined with increased empathy:

Timo, 38, Finland: "Veganism has made me a more empathetic person: less arrogant, less ignorant. And also this drastic change, I think that's also freeing a lot. You know, when you grow up in a cultural environment where it's normal that you eat meat and then you find out it's actually wrong: I've been doing that all my life. I never questioned it and now that I start thinking about it I find out it's... more wrong than anything else that I ever did. It's like I've been doing this completely wrong thing, like just completely bad and I've just been doing that for years and I had no idea because everyone is doing it."

And that kind of frees yourself from your culture in a way, because you start doubting also other things around you. ... [I became] a more critical thinker towards my cultural environment and also the government or like towards the country that I live in. ... Nobody told me that they [farmed animals] have been caged and that they have never seen the sunlight. Nobody told me that. Where is the consumer protection there? The slaughterhouses should be... should have glass walls and then this information should be available and be provided....I'm certainly much more critical due to the fact that I found out that I had been betrayed all my life, not learning, not being told that it's completely wrong to do what everyone does?"

The theme of becoming aware, through encountering the realities of factory farming, of unjust and exploitative institutions and the need to challenge these systems was prominent, expressed by some as “exiting the Matrix”. This realisation was described as inducing disbelief, anger and frustration, which led to the development of a critical perspective on institutions and society:

Eino, 40, Finland: “[I] realised that in our society we are puppets and we have been brainwashed to consume. ... The food industry had brainwashed people to eat so much meat and consume without the thought of what it would do to the world and to the animals. ... We have been brainwashed not think of butchering, and the real consequences of our consumption have been taken away from us and hidden, so that our ethical challenges and choices do not compromise our willingness to consume. ... I felt angry and I felt disappointed. I felt like I have been deceived. I felt that I had been brainwashed. ... I'm a person of science. I'm person of reason and of logical thinking and I started to connect some dots I started to ask questions and I started to think what are the other things that I have been lied about. So, I kind of I felt deceived and betrayed and brainwashed and at points, very angry towards the establishment”.

Some thought of themselves as always having been compassionate people prior to their vegan transition – by going vegan, they put this empathy in practice. Others noted that it was veganism that made them more compassionate and caring:

Tanel, 31, Estonia: “I will never eat meat again. I have had nightmares where I've eaten meat. I will start to cry about this ... If I talk about some kind of emotions and feelings, then, after I decided to go vegan, I ... I don't remember how long it took, but like this empathy or love or understanding...towards animals...that increased a lot. I became much kinder. ... The tree that grows here is as important to the world as I am. So yes, I became more caring and loving. Especiallly towards animals.”

On the contrary, for some, the darker side of humanity was revealed, which caused frustration and negative emotions, particularly in the initial stages of veganism:

Sami, 30, Finland: “Maybe it's due to veganism but maybe more like some misanthropic feelings have developed. Like when you see society who's not changing as quickly and to the direction you hope it to change like... then you get frustrated about it.”

Men who described feeling anger and frustration upon becoming vegan, typically no longer experienced these emotions, or at least not to the initial extent, after having been vegan for a

while. For many, the importance of kindness and consciously cultivating compassion and care towards other human beings was important in efforts to move towards a vegan world:

Toomas, 39, Estonia: “I see [in the vegan movement a lack of compassion towards the society, towards other members of the society, towards the mainstream. ... We have to have empathic understanding if we are to solve the problem. And this concerns the vegan movement! We need to understand the other side.”

On the whole, men overwhelmingly highlighted the emergence of a more positive sense of self, stemming from living their everyday lives in accordance with their values, contributing to a better world and systemic change:

Ilmari, 27, Finland: “It was it was very very like empowering. It was like you're in control of that because it is, you know, and because I was like, oh I'm responsible for what happens in the farms. But also, you know, in a way you're also not, because you're indirectly responsible. So, it was empowering to be like, well, at least I'm cutting myself out of that.”

Notably, the positive sense of self emerged as a result of caring about the lives of nonhuman others – a form of other-directed care.

Beyond a change in values and mentality, going vegan also involved positive physical transformation for several men. Even those men for whom health reasons were not an important driver behind their veganism, began to increasingly practice self-care:

Ott, 28, Estonia: “I was a junk-food vegan when I went vegan. I couldn't care less about food But then I saw a documentary called Fat, Sick and Nearly Dead ... It's not really a vegan film but it makes you think about your health. After seeing this film, I realised two things: first, I want to start eating healthier and second, I need to buy a blender. And then both things happened and now I'm a person who makes a smoothie for himself every morning.”

Ott's experience illustrates the typical path of transition: starting from one motivation or aspect of veganism and becoming more knowledgeable about others, as a result of becoming immersed in new information about veganism. Regarding physical changes, most men, even those who did not consciously pay attention to their health, claimed that veganism made them feel better in their bodies and minds (feeling lighter, having more energy, losing weight, better mental wellbeing etc.).

Care for human others: Vegan men's gender and intersectional politics and practices

Whether and how vegan men link veganism to gender and other justice causes is an important aspect of ecological masculinities (Hultman & Pulé, 2018). I identified two main ways in

which these connections were made. First, veganism was explicitly regarded as part of a broader agenda of social justice, part of one's egalitarian values and progressive politics:

Veli-Matti, 34, Finland: "Basically it's the same thing: racism violence, speciesism, veganism, like they all go together. I don't see different being violent to humans or animals."

Transitioning to veganism was seen as expanding one's understanding of interlinked forms of oppression:

Markus, 40, Estonia: "Veganism makes you very sensitive to injustice towards animals. It is a thing of privilege. We are in such a privileged position in relation to animals that we have taken the right to call them things. ... This idea of superiority has been unpleasant to me since I was a child. Someone taking a position of authority not because of their worth, but for some other reason. For example, in relations between men and women – I have already observed this before my veganism – often men want to show women their place."

The emergence of a more critical perspective on society upon going vegan, discussed in the previous section, was seen as helping to develop an awareness of various forms of injustice among humans:

Niko, 26, Finland: "Maybe it's kind of that's one thing that's kind of made me question more — also about other things. Kind of examine my values and not just doing things that other people are doing and 'that's okay'; look more critically at things ... like for example, the gender issue. I used to be more ambivalent about it — or at least, 'that doesn't concern me, so I don't have to think about it'. So, I would say that it has also had an influence on that."

It was typical for some Finnish research participants in particular to explicitly articulate veganism as part of a broader set of values and politics, such as pacifism, non-violence, anti-racism, pro-feminism, which they held even before going vegan. They challenged hierarchies and unjust power relations and sought to better understand and examine their own (male) privilege. These men typically had social science (including gender studies) degrees, lived in the biggest Finnish cities, and their social circles were largely composed of like-minded people with similar leftist political leanings. This illustrates how some social and cultural contexts are more conducive to the emergence of veganism and linking it to a wider social justice agenda. Notably, virtually all such men had opted out from the compulsory military service for men in Finland and chosen the civilian service, a decision which preceded veganism for most and aligned with their pacifist ideas:

Lukas, 25, Finland: "Ever since I kind of started having some kind of political consciousness, the main idea for pretty much all my beliefs is that I don't want to cause any unnecessary harm to anyone. So,

veganism goes in line with that, as well as this doing the civilian service and all my other political beliefs as well.”

Rejecting the army service was recognised by these Finnish research participants as an important element or turning point in their biography, signifying their (emergent) pacifist values. For some, this constituted their first public act of defiance which shaped them as young men, as they challenged a social (gender) norm and acted in accordance with their ethical beliefs. The civilian service that they opted for typically involved some form of care work.

The men who explicitly identified as pro-feminist and espousing an intersectional agenda, tended to express critical views on (some forms of) masculinity:

Gordon, 48, Finland: “I think toxic masculinity is damaging not just for animals but also for women, for you know, people of different sexual preference. I see these all connected, and you know, it's a big, it's a big problem for a lot of different beings on this planet when men think that they have to be this way and are raised to be this way. That's I think harmful to a lot of different creatures ... Because all creatures on this planet deserve respect and freedom and equality.”

Some recognised going vegan as facilitating their personal transformation as men, towards more caring and emotional selves, seen by some as characteristic of other vegan men too:

Lukas, 25, Finland: “I feel like maybe being male and vegan, it has kind of like opened me up more to these softer emotions or these kinds of things that would not be considered like necessarily as masculine features. Because I have been vegan, that is already something that sets me somewhat apart from these things. It has kind of opened space. And I've kind of seen this same thing in a lot of these vegan male friends of mine.”

Emotions figured prominently in men's narratives of transitioning to veganism and experiences of living as vegans, often in parallel and intertwined with claims that going vegan is a “rational” and “logical” choice. Men spoke of strong emotional and visceral reactions they experienced when witnessing cruelty towards non-human animals. The emotions cited also included anger and frustration. These insights also demonstrate how emotions, particularly empathy, are an essential part of moral agency, as pointed out by several critical animal studies and ecofeminist scholars (Aaltola, 2013; Gruen, 2007). While (the expression of) empathy has been traditionally associated with women, vegan men's accounts of relating to non-human animals are a compelling illustration of how empathy is cultivated and practiced by men.

Men spoke of standing out in some social settings due to their veganism, particularly in interactions with non-vegan male colleagues and friends. In these situations, some engaged in

efforts to challenge other men's meat-eating and thereby redefine norms of masculinity, as a form of everyday activism (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012; Vivienne, 2016):

Olavi, 33, Finland: "Many of the CEOs I know are maybe a bit guilty of being machos. And eating meat is sort of... eating a good steak is basically a sign of masculine power and money also. So, eating that juicy steak is in those circles... if you want to go to a dinner, you don't eat anything but steaks. So, and usually I'm the only vegan during those dinners, so it's... there are many conversations during those evenings and usually I'm being laughed at.

Kadri: Okay. How does that make you feel?

Olavi: That I have still some work to do. It's challenge. I mean I enjoy having conversations. I enjoy like educating and teaching other people. I'm sometimes guilty of preaching also, but I mean usually if there's conversation about me being vegan and in those circles, it ends up like in a lengthy discussion about ethics and what is right and so forth. So, it's actually always a good place to sort of shake up the old traditions."

In the situation described above, Olavi is simultaneously engaged in vegan and pro-feminist (micro)activism, as he challenges his male peers' doing of privileged masculinity which is partly accomplished by collectively consuming the bodies of other animals. Such overt challenging of social norms was however exceptional, as most men preferred to act as (silent) role models, including in social interactions with other men.

As a second way of relating to gender and intersectionality, connections between veganism and other social justice causes were not explicitly made or seen as unimportant. For a few, veganism and animal justice were deliberately seen as separate issues, not to be linked:

Peeter, 33, Estonia: "I would totally keep them separate. I somehow understand this connection, but ... I think it's a thing that would alienate men [from veganism] ... I mean, if you put them all together, then if you are vegan, you always have to be a feminist and to support gay rights etc. It would be great if people were like this, but even if someone wants to be all that and agrees to all this, but if you ask them to commit to all this, they would say "Hey, this is too much for me". ... I see this connection and why there is a synergy there, but I think these should be thought of as separate issues."

However, even those who did not explicitly identify as pro-feminist and/or did not practice intersectional politics, recognised in some form or another the links between masculinity and meat eating and gender stereotypes that prevent many men from going vegan. Also, many shared (mostly negative) experiences of standing out as a vegan in masculine work environments and among non-vegan male friends. In these narratives, research participants typically presented themselves as different from other men – as more aware and caring, distancing themselves from 'toxic' forms of masculinity. Even those men who did not overtly position themselves as pro-feminist, admitted to having become more empathetic and caring, through relating to non-human animals and their suffering.

Conclusions

This chapter has engaged with gender, social change, sustainable food practices and human-animal relations at the age of the “Anthro”pocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Twine, *this volume*). I have explored how ecological masculinities (Hultman & Pulé, 2018) might look like in more concrete terms, through the framework of veganism, drawing on narratives of vegan men in Finland and Estonia. I examined men’s veganism through the notion of care – towards non-human animals, environment, other human beings and the self. Some or all of these forms of care were either consciously pursued by the men in this study as ethical ideals or emerged inadvertently through their vegan praxis.

Men considered going vegan as a significant and positive change in their lives. The process of transformation started with an intellectual, emotional or visceral recognition that a change is needed in how one relates to other animals, the environment and/or one’s own health. It was typical for one of these aspects to be the main driver for going vegan, however, for virtually all men, more than one of these later became important, as they gradually learned about the ethical, environmental and health aspects of veganism. Men named greater awareness, a sense of openness, a more critical mind towards social institutions and cultural practices, a more positive sense of self and better physical wellbeing as effects of going vegan. Overall, then, transitioning to veganism was a transformative experience in men’s biographies which opened up new – more considerate – ways of relating to other beings and surroundings.

In terms of care for human others, for some men, particularly in Finland, veganism was part of a broader set of values and politics which included non-violence, pacifism, pro-feminism, anti-racism and other leftist ideas, typically often already present before going vegan. For these men, veganism fit neatly into their intersectional agenda of anti-oppression, which they broadened to include other animals. These men recognised traditional ways of doing masculinity as “toxic”, welcomed more egalitarian masculinities and wanted to be part developing more just gender relations. Yet, other men did not explicitly link veganism to other social justice causes.

However, a neat separation of vegan men into these two groups is not necessarily possible or justified. It was common for men who did not position themselves as pro-feminist or were not explicitly concerned with questions of social justice, to cite minimising harm as a key principle in their lives. Some admitted that veganism enabled the emergence of a more caring, empathetic and aware self or a (re)awakening of an already existing compassionate self. Though learning about the treatment of other animals in the animal-industrial complex and the damaging consequences of this system to the environment, men became more aware

of the institutional nature of exploitation. These insights may be conducive to facilitating greater compassion and care for others, even if not consciously or intentionally having or cultivating awareness on gender and intersectional inequalities. However, to be truly transformative, I argue that men's veganism has to include explicit awareness of and sensitivity towards various other injustices and forms of oppression, alongside concern for nonhuman animals.

Overall, I suggest that for men, veganism could serve as one concrete way to perform care and ultimately contribute to the emergence of (more) ecological masculinities (Hultman & Pulé, 2018). Yet, the seemingly transformative potential of men's veganism also warrants some critical engagement. A crucial question to ask is whether and to what extent men's veganism – as an individual practice enacted first and foremost through consumerism – translates into broader social and institutional change, in terms of altering human-animal relations and the hegemony of men (Hearn, 2004)? Everyday practices of individuals, such as veganism, certainly have an impact in microsettings and are therefore an important part of social change. However, they do not directly result in structural changes, such as ending the use of animals and challenging speciesist social institutions. Indeed, as a consumer practice, veganism does little to challenge capitalism as a primary destructive force on Earth which is directly responsible for large-scale animal oppression (Nibert, 2017). For the emergence of a more ecologically sustainable world, there is a need for veganism and vegans to critically engage with consumption and capitalism.

Regarding the potential for changing gender relations, despite evidence of alternative ways of doing masculinity by vegan men in microsettings, either intentionally or less consciously, it is unclear whether and how these alternative gender practices challenge vegan men's privileged position in the gender system and in the social hierarchy more broadly, echoing the findings of previous studies (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017). By doing masculinity in different ways, vegan men may change the content of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) but are less likely to shake men's hegemony itself.

Despite these limitations, veganism constitutes a tangible way in which men can (begin to) practice care for human and nonhuman others, the Earth and themselves and thereby move towards more ecological masculinities. The need for (privileged) men in particular – as a powerful social group – to cultivate more empathetic, kinder and caring ways of being and relating to all life is imperative and urgent in these times of escalating crises. Given that oppressions are interlinked, social and environmental justice cannot be achieved without animal justice.

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