



# VEGANISM



**An exploration of vegan identity through narrative**

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# Abstract

This thesis is centred around veganism, or more specifically, vegan identities. The goal with the paper is to explore how vegan identities are created, how they develop and how they are sustained. The majority of available research on the area of veganism are quantitative studies that divide larger groups of vegans in general categories or motivations for including veganism as a part of their lifestyle. This study explores vegan identities qualitatively with the purpose of contributing to the existing knowledge within the field with in-depth analyses of four single case studies and thereby a fuller understanding about which mechanisms are in play when vegan identities are shaped.

The meta-theoretical approach to this paper is social constructionism. Cultural psychological and sociocultural perspectives contribute to this paradigm with approaches that focus on meaning-making processes. Tania Zittoun's (2009) introduces concepts of 'ruptures' and 'transitions' that leads to changes in the life-course with a focus on how identity, knowledge and sense play together in a dynamic way.

The approach to exploring vegan identities is to conduct narrative interviews. Through the analysis of small stories, four analyses of different vegans' narrative are presented. These offer different positions on veganism, each focusing on and going in depth on the nuances of what is relevant for their narrative and their identity.

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# Introduction

The most common definition of vegetarianism is abstaining from eating meat – this, however, is not the only definition. Some people identify with being vegetarian by avoiding all animal products while others occasionally or on a regular basis consume meat, fish, poultry or dairy (Ruby, 2012). This results in new definitions such as lacto, ovo, pesce and flexitarian that have entered everyday language in order to keep pace with the fact that vegetarianism, veganism and other related ways of eating and living become more popular. In spite of this popularity, vegetarianism is not a new phenomenon but can be traced back all the way to ancient Greece and India even though the term ‘vegetarianism’ was not coined until the middle of the nineteenth century. Historically, religious and different ideological notions of a pure body or spirit and aversions to kill other living beings for their meat have often resulted in abstaining from eating meat. In other parts of history, poverty and scarcity have been the reason for meat restraint across the world (Spencer, 1995). Veganism, as is the case with vegetarianism, does not have a clear-cut definition, as both scholars and laypeople widely vary in how they use the term (Ruby, 2012). Vegetarianism and veganism have rarely been compared in research projects. Instead, the similar but different phenomena are often lumped together as a consequence of not having clear definitions (ibid.). As will be pointed out later, however, veganism appears to be the next and perhaps a more extreme step from vegetarianism as the motivations behind the two appear to be similar (ibid.). The term ‘veganism’ was coined by Donald Watson in 1944 when he formed The Vegan Society, a non-profit organisation providing guidance for living a vegan lifestyle. The definition of veganism within The Vegan Society is “a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose” (The Vegan Society, 2018). This definition will be adopted in this thesis but the relevance of living according to a strict definition will be discussed throughout the paper.

Veganism is a big trend at the moment as it has become an increasingly debated topic in Western countries with various celebrities, politicians and organisations spreading the news that veganism is the best lifestyle to aspire to live by today. It does not seem to become less so, so the question of whether this can be seen as just a trend

arises (See e.g. Nielsen et al., 2018; Knudstrup, 2018; Kyhn, 2016; Steenberger, 2016; BBC, 2018 A; BBC, 2018 B). This increasing demand for vegetarian and vegan products could be understood in a larger frame. The world, in particular the Western part of it, has a heightened awareness of climate changes, health and animal welfare and there are some compelling arguments for reducing the amount of meat we eat as it takes a lot of animal feed, water and space to produce meat compared to plants and on top of that it emits a lot of CO<sub>2</sub> (See e.g. McMichael et al., 2007, Stehfest et al., 2009). At the same time, health organisations across the globe, such as the World Health Organisation, increasingly speak in favour of plant-based diets and their beneficial effects on people's health (Kyhn and Viksø, 2011; WHO, 2018).

This debate and focus on veganism is also evident in Denmark – a country with a long history of farming animals and where food consumption, especially of meat, dairy and eggs, is the fundamental basis and the centre of attention in most social settings and traditions (See e.g. Madindex, 2015; Wederkop and Christensen, 2003; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2018). In recent years, Denmark has developed towards a country where organics, animal welfare and responsibility for the planet have become an important part of the political agenda and where they increasingly take up time in many people's everyday practices (Poll, 2018). Tendencies, such as the decision to stop selling cage eggs in certain supermarkets (Coop, 2017), quality/welfare labels on meat (Coop, 2018 A; Dansk Supermarked Group, 2017) and organic products (Coop, 2018 B; Dansk Supermarked Group, 2016) are visible when you take a stroll through a Danish supermarket. The same goes for products labelled “vegan” which are becoming more and more visible and available as the demand increases (Dahlager, 2017; Coop, 2018). This development is, with good reasons, more obvious in larger cities where veganism is more widespread.

In spite of this development towards a more vegan-friendly Western part of the world, practicing veganism in Denmark is not a mainstream or necessarily a practical thing. It is not necessarily easy to find vegan foods that are also healthy and convenient and this is the case both when it comes to restaurants and supermarkets. This is especially evident when living in small towns in the countryside. Denmark's agricultural history may be a major factor in this respect as the gross national product historically has been highly influenced by the farming of pigs and cows. In the light of

this, an explanation could be that large meat and dairy companies spend many resources on campaigning against the increased interest in veganism and vegan products which compete with the products they are trying to sell. For example, the Danish food company, Arla, has very recently run a campaign that attempts to restrain people from, if not ridicules, vegan ideologies and the growing vegan trend in the Danish society (Arla, 2018). This point will be discussed later in the paper. Vegetarianism and veganism are often intensely debated and scrutinised in cultures where the economy historically has depended on meat consumption (Ruby, 2012). This could, in part, explain why vegetarians and vegans are still a small minority in countries like Denmark and could also be seen in light of the recent cultural debate about the ‘Danish national dish’, roast pork, that has been discussed over the last few years in relation to Denmark becoming more and more multicultural and the right-wing discussion about this (Svane, 2013). From this discussion, arguments for traditions and “sustaining” Danish culture appear to be similar to the arguments used when advocating meat.

There are different reasons for being vegetarian and vegan, as will be explained in the next section, and in many ways, it fits in a broader debate in society at the moment. Perhaps veganism can be understood as a way of framing oneself as a conscious citizen who cares about the environment and the planet, the welfare of other people and animals and one’s health. Whatever the reason for practicing veganism is, it is assumed here that culture plays a role in how people feel about animals, agriculture and their industries. Focusing on vegan identities, different components of what shapes identities and how they develop will be elucidated in this thesis. This will include looking into the meaning individuals ascribe to their lives, the knowledge they hold and their identities and how these concepts affect each other as well as the ruptures and transitions in this interplay that make them all change.

As previously mentioned, ideas of what veganism involves vary greatly. In this study, four different interviews have been conducted with participants who all think of themselves as vegan yet follow different rules. The reason for this is possibly that they give importance to and position themselves with different aspects of stringent vegan lifestyles. The focus in this thesis lies on the decision to become vegan and the narrative that the individual creates about being a vegan and on the implications this

lifestyle decision has on the identity they create. Therefore, the participants in this study may have different ideas about what criteria they have to live up to in order to call themselves vegan. The definition of the Vegan Society covers all of their approaches to veganism, however, as the wording “as far as possible and practicable” (The Vegan Society, 2018) leaves room for a more flexible attitude towards the criteria. In this way, this thesis explores and tells the stories of four different people who have chosen to be vegan despite the fact that it may, on the one hand, be impractical to practice, and on the other hand, at least in general terms, it is more socially accepted in most Danish contexts to eat and use animals and their products than it is not to do so. The use of these interviews will be thoroughly explained and analysed in the ‘Method’ and ‘Analysis’ sections.

## Framing veganism

It is only in recent years that veganism and the beliefs and practices associated with it have become the subject of empirical research but the field of study is expanding rapidly. Especially, differences in worldviews, attitudes and values of omnivores, vegetarians and vegans have been examined. Still, a broader investigation of vegetarianism and veganism is called for (Ruby, 2012). The recent studies have predominantly focussed on quantitative research into the phenomenon and statistics on how many people choose to become vegan and the basic motivations of large groups is available. Few studies, however, have explored in depth the development individuals go through when practicing veganism or how they tackle it when they either stick or fail to stick to their new lifestyle decision. This thesis is a qualitative study, investigating not statistics but the personal narratives of four individuals and explores the different nuances of their stories of being vegan and how they developed. A brief overview of the topics in recent literature on the subject will be given below.

Many studies have looked into what people have stated as being the reasons to become vegetarians and vegans and the most common motivation reported in recent literature is an ethical objection against farming and killing living beings (Ruby, 2012; Beardworth and Keil, 1991; Fox and Ward, 2008; Jabs et al., 1998). Subsequently, personal health is a major motivating factor followed by concerns for the environment, religious ideas about spiritual purity or simply not liking the taste of



meat or dairy (Ruby, 2012; Beardworth and Keil, 1991; Fox and Ward, 2008; Jabs et al., 1998). Other findings indicate that these motivations are not static but will often change over time. The motivations behind choosing this lifestyle mean a lot for how the process will unfold and when it comes to sustaining this new lifestyle as a vegan, the most important factors for most people seem to be personal factors. These include personal beliefs and convictions about what is the right thing to do for both animal welfare and the environment. The likelihood of remaining vegan is further increased by improved personal health factors and knowledge about vegan cooking and where to find vegan groceries and vegan meals being on the menu in restaurants. This is followed by social factors such as close friends also being vegan, a supportive family or being part of a social vegan network. In spite of many research articles on the motivations of vegans, little is known about vegetarians and vegans who have given up this lifestyle as there is extremely little research into this population (Ruby, 2012).

As an ethical obligation towards animal welfare seems to be the main driving force to become a vegan and also to sustain a vegan lifestyle, this subject needs to be looked further into when trying to understand veganism. Although, when looking into the discourses between vegans, it becomes clear that the differences in ethical standpoints carry some weight in addition to the decision to abstain from animal products. According to Ruby (2012), vegans motivated by ethics criticise those motivated by health for being selfish as their main concern is themselves rather than animals or the environment (Ruby, 2012). According to Hansen (2016), the moral value that people attribute to animals has been changeable for thousands of years and it has generally been characterised by moral inconsistency. These findings strengthen the point that different points in time and different cultures influence how we feel about animals – in this case, which ones to pet and which to eat. In this context, morality is understood in an intuitive and affective sense rather than rational and conscience-driven. Morality then is suggested as something that happens in-the-moment in an intuitive manner (Hansen, 2016).

Even though ethical concerns are often the main motivational driver for becoming and staying vegan, how this ethical standpoint is reached has not been explored to a great extent. Studies have investigated and questioned variants of morality with re-

gard to veganism, yet morality is often understood from a philosophical perspective, seeing morals in the light of dilemmas and hypothetical situations (Ruby, 2012). How people actually act and come up with rationalisations, excuses and justifications in everyday situations when practicing veganism is not available in the existing research on veganism. Although this perspective is interesting, it does not necessarily make sense to simply ask vegans and omnivores about their attitude to eating meat or animal products, as the moral discrepancy is clearly there. For this reason, the assumption in this thesis is that there is a moral standpoint behind the decision and it does not question this per se. Instead of looking into how often or to which degree the participants are motivated for veganism by ethical concerns, this thesis attempts to look behind this ethical standpoint by investigating how the participants create a vegan identity through narratives about being vegan with the underlying assumption that this is the right thing to do.

## Problem statement

An exploration of vegan identity through narrative

## Purpose and aim

As explained above, the recent research into the subject of veganism is dominated by quantitative research, and it only looks at qualitative notions within a very broad scale of general motivations for becoming vegan. This in-depth qualitative study is therefore relevant as an extension of the current understanding of the field of study, on a smaller scale. When investigating how vegan identities are formed, develop and are sustained, the knowledge of general information of population percentages in certain categories of motivations is insufficient. The subject will be approached from a cultural psychology school of thought, which provides a sociocultural perspective on development.

The theoretical framework adopted in this thesis is Tania Zittoun's (2009) work on ruptures and transitions within a sociocultural perspective. Narratives on veganism shed light on the transition an individual goes through by facing challenges in everyday life and interactions when trying to live up to this goal that they have set for one

reason or the other. In this sense, narratives are regarded as one type of semiotic tool, through which sense and meaning-making processes happen in a mutually dependent interaction with identity and knowledge, in ruptures and transitions (Zittoun, 2009). From a sociocultural viewpoint, these narratives are the result of internalised larger-scale narratives within a culture. These larger-scale narratives convey the rules, structures and values that are present in a culture (Bruner, 1990 et seq. Zittoun, 2009).

Vegan narratives of this study's participants will be analysed individually in line with Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) small stories perspective to narrative and identity analysis. This perspective is interesting as it focuses on the social function that narratives have in everyday lives. This approach assumes that individuals create and negotiate their own sense of who they are and explain themselves to others through small stories. Identities, or parts of them, can therefore be interpreted by looking at discourses and the way people position themselves and others and are positioned by themselves and others through narratives in conversations. In this context, identity is not to be understood as a static phenomenon but rather as dynamic and continuously changing with all conversations, when there is a rupture and a transition. As identity and self are negotiated through the narrative and can be observed in these situations, it makes sense in this qualitative study of vegan identity to investigate identities through narrative interviews.

As identities are seen as constantly changing, the aim of this thesis is to investigate the participants' narratives of being or not being able to live up to their vegan goals, and thereby create vegan identities, whether the motivation is moral, health related or something else. The aim here is not, therefore, to examine the motivation for choosing a vegan lifestyle, which would be within the realm of motivational psychology and belong in a different paper. I have chosen to use an approach to narrative theory, which relates to discourses and how we use them to create identities. This, of course, is not the only existing narrative approach (see e.g. McAdams, 2006) but it was specifically chosen as a foundation for this thesis as it correlates with my perspective on how narratives play an important role in forming identities and allows for qualitative research into the topic of vegan identities.

## Disposition of the thesis

The disposition of this paper will be to begin by explaining the theoretical framework and how it relates to the topic, starting with the meta-theoretical frame of cultural psychology, followed by the sociocultural approach to development adopted in the study and the theory of ruptures and transitions. After this, a discursive approach to the concept of identity and identity dilemmas will be outlined. Narrative theory will then be described as well as the small stories approach in relation to identity. The method employed in this study will then be outlined, presenting the case studies and going through the proceedings for the narrative interviews. This will include ethical considerations, how the interviews were conducted, transcribed and an explanation of how they are analysed, using analytical tools, such as levels of positioning. Subsequently, the analysis will be presented using the tools described in proceedings, looking at each case individually, followed by an analysis summary.

The discussion will consist of three parts. Firstly, the findings will be discussed in light of the sociocultural perspective on development. Secondly, the methodological approach of analysing on the basis of ruptures and transitions and interpreting developments in sense, knowledge and identity will be discussed. Lastly, other relevant perspectives, touched upon throughout the paper, will be discussed in relation to the topic. The thesis will be summed up by concluding remarks.

# Theoretical framework

## Meta-theoretical reflections

This thesis is placed in a social constructivist paradigm, which assumes that internal and external phenomena constitute the components that shape identities by constantly negotiating and acting interdependently. Internal phenomena are to be understood as the processes that occur inside individuals, such as feelings, whereas external phenomena are outside influences, such as other people or the surrounding environment. Identities, in this perspective are essentially viewed as constructs formed by these components. The sense of self emerges from the negotiations between the two and the discourses involved in these negotiations both affect and expose identities. In the social constructionist perspective, identities can therefore be observed and studied as they are negotiated through the analysis of discourse in conversations.

This project lies within the realm of cultural psychology, a subfield of psychology that has been growing over the past 30 years (Cole, 1996). Cultural psychology in a sense has the same intention as the cognitive revolution – bringing meaning to studying the mind (Bruner, 1990). The goal of cultural psychology is to attempt to apprehend and explore higher mental functions – something that many areas of psychology have avoided by focusing on lower psychological functions such as perception, attention or problem solving (Valsiner, 2014). These higher mental functions involve phenomena such as flexibility, intentionality and goal-directedness in influencing the world – and being influenced by it (ibid.), or as Shweder puts it:

“Cultural psychology aims to develop a principle of intentionality by which culturally constituted realities and reality-constituting psyches continually and continuously make each other up, perturbing and disturbing each other, interpenetrating each other’s identity, reciprocally conditioning each other’s existence” (Shweder, 1995, p. 71).

In this way, and in short, cultural psychology is interested in psychological functions that allows for a focus on human beings’ intentional construction of meaning. Intentionality is something that can be observed in all kinds of everyday ordinary actions,

and in contrast to much traditional psychological research where the goal has often been to observe ‘pure’, context-free phenomena by eliminating other factors – noise – a core assumption of cultural psychology is that human beings are, on the one hand, products of culture and on the other hand, co-creators of that same culture. This means that it does not make sense to talk of human psyche without of its sociocultural context and it is therefore exactly this noise that becomes a subject of interest. In order to gain insight into humans’ intentionality and meaning-making processes, therefore, research must consider the context in which their actions take place (Zittoun, 2012; Valsiner 2014). Within a cultural psychology framework, one possible way to achieve this is through a sociocultural perspective on development that has a particular focus on the context and this will frame the theoretical approach in this thesis.

## A sociocultural perspective on development

A sociocultural approach to life-course is an approach to studying development within a cultural psychology framework that focuses on the interaction between culture and development. The core issue within this approach is to account for the life of individuals as meaning-making beings. While this particular approach to development through the exploration of life-trajectories is to be understood within a cultural psychology frame, it also belongs to a certain positioning within developmental psychology (Zittoun, 2009).

In order to study development, one should focus on the processes where change happens – but in order to describe this development, it is necessary to explain both change *and* continuity (Erikson, 1968; James 1890 if. Zittoun, 2009). The individual is constantly and continuously interacting with the environment and other people and is therefore always negotiating the meaning of all of these situations (Bruner, 1990) and a core assumption of the sociocultural perspective, in line with cultural psychology, is that meaning-making can only be observed and explored through these processes of change. As interactions with other people and the environment and the negotiation with them are continuous processes, all individuals are, in any specific time and context, completely unique (Zittoun, 2012). From this it follows that a person's identity is in a continuous state of change and development. The development of a

person is very complex as it involves biological and psychological processes that happen at both an interpersonal and a social level, and from this theoretical approach, the cultural and social nature of human action and meaning-making is central to understanding this development (Zittoun, 2012). The consequence of these constant changes is that people need to create their own meaning with life and construct symbolic understandings of the world, in order to uphold their identities and make sense of the world. This view draws on dynamic system theory by distinguishing between different kinds of change, namely transitive and intransitive changes. Some changes are, in a circular way, part of daily interactions between individuals and their surroundings - these are referred to as transitive changes. Intransitive changes, however, are connected to more explicit changes (ibid.). This means that not all changes that happen to an individual will have consequences in the long run but according to Zittoun (2012), there is more life transition today than previously in history and understanding the processes of meaning-making is thus extremely relevant at this point in time. In instances of intransitive changes, the concepts of *ruptures* and *transitions* come into play.

The person's embodied experience is also relevant when exploring meaning-making as the individual's experience is understood through processes of perceiving. In this way, experience and meaning-making processes are both enabled and limited by bodily senses - but the capacities of these senses are, at the same time, mediated by meaning-making processes. An example of this given by Zittoun (2012) is that people have a tendency to ignore or pretend not to hear advice that they disagree with or for some other reason dislike. From this, the body is important when talking about sense-making as it is with our bodies that we experience situations. Our bodies are, on the one hand, shaped by society and culture, for example through technological or medical progress, but on the other hand, shapes the environment, as it is our bodily senses that act and thus create technology. This is to be understood in a dialogical way (ibid.), meaning that they can only ever be seen in relation to one another, not as dichotomic opposites.

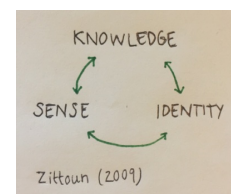
Within a sociocultural framework, certain assumptions outline the view on how the social and the individual environment interact and these will be explained below. Since individuals internalise discourses, or at least parts of them, it can be stated that

both the social and the cultural spheres are constantly present in their mind-sets from the time of birth. They become present through interactions with the surrounding world that in turn contributes to the development of both cognitive functions and meaning-making processes which constitute the mind. The experience of existing in certain cultures involves social structures and organised rules, rights and positions. These structures and rules vary in all aspects of life and in all possible interactions and physical places. In subtle ways, culturally defined values and beliefs fill the human consciousness. People then, to varying degrees, internalise them, reflect on them and then revise their understandings and the meanings they contribute to life. As individuals provide meaning to their own lives and understandings, yet base this meaning on social, cultural and physical environments, they are simultaneously emancipated and restricted by it, semiotically giving meaning to both real and imagined realities (Zittoun, 2012).

## Transitions and ruptures

Tania Zittoun (2012) proposes that in order to understand how development is mediated by culture, one can focus on the individual's changes through the life-course. The life-course is not only characterised by the constant meaning-making and revisions of this, as explained above but in fact even more by moments of interruptions, reorientations and challenges of this continuity. In this way, development happens when the person is confronted with points of bifurcation (ibid.). In these moments in life, the individual is required to adapt and adjust in collaboration with the environment (ibid.). These processes are called *ruptures* and *transitions* and are suggested as a way of conceptualising the development through a life-course, as they are points in time that can be defined as initiating or accelerating personal change.

A transition caused by a rupture results in changes concerning three areas: Knowledge, identity and sense-making as sketched in the model.





These three categories of changes are all mutually related and dependent. The decision to become vegan is based on an individual's sense of the world, knowledge from experiences and identity, all at the point of making the decision. Information on the category of sense, i.e. the meaning-making process will in this thesis be gathered by looking into the narratives of the vegan participants in the study as the narrative is one of many possible semiotic tools as a means for creating meaning about the world and one's own identity.

## A discursive approach to identity

This project takes a discursive approach to the examination of identity. When doing this, a focus on discourses and construction is needed (Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin, 2011). Within a constructionist framework, phenomena that are typically understood as either internal, such as intentions and emotions, or external, such as society or the physical world, are interdependent, constantly negotiating, and form identities. The types of discourses used in these negotiations are of great importance to the identity. In essence, identity as seen through this approach is a construct formed by internal and external components from which a sense of self emerges whereas more traditional essentialist frameworks view it as one thing and question what it is. This means that there is a shift from considering identity as something one *has* and in that way viewing the individual as independent towards focusing on the processes in which identity is *created* and shaped by discursive interactions. Identities as seen from a constructionist point of view, can be observed and studied as they are negotiated through discourse, in all conversations (Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin, 2011). Bamberg et al. (2011) places a division between different types of discourses, namely those with a capital D and those with a small d. Discourses with a capital D are defined as existing societal discourses and these are thought to contribute to the construction of identities as described above. In those with a small d, the identity-creating individual is described as being an active agent, consciously playing a role in the construction of who they are. Categorical identity variables, such as ethnicity and gender, do not follow any one of these divisions but are negotiated in all discourses.

## Positioning theory

Positioning is a discursive process where the way in which the speaker describes himself or others constitute the creation of identity (Harré et al., 2009; Davies and Harré, 1990; Bamberg et al. 2011) The focus in positioning theory is on normative interactions where people act according to cultural norms of correctness (Harré et al., 2009). As described above, the narratives of people are observable in discourses and can be used as semiotic tools to study the negotiation of identities. In positioning theory, the correlation between interactions and dialogues exist both on a small scale and as master narratives, the latter describing the broader cultural frame (Bamberg et al., 2011). Positioning can be either interactive, where one person's narrative positions another person or reflexive, where one person positions himself. This is not necessarily done either consciously or intentionally and positions are constantly constructed and renegotiated (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 48). When an individual assumes a certain discourse, this person will inevitably hold a subjective perspective on the world and express this in particular images, metaphors and courses of actions, relevant to the specific interaction. Given these constant renegotiations and the subjectivity aspect, identities are varying and dependent on the different discourses people are involved in. In narrative theory, people give meaning to life and explain themselves through the narratives given in these interactions, which will be further outlined in the 'Narrative and identity' section.

## Identity dilemmas

The process of identity creation can be conceptualised as moving in between and dealing with different dilemmas (Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin, 2011). According to Bamberg et al. (2011), the dilemmatic positions are presented as follows:

1. Agency vs. passivity: The dilemma here can be presented as whether a person constructs a culture actively, being given the term of the *I-as-subject* or is constructed by a culture, being *me-as-undergoer*. Interpreting the position is done on a case-to-case basis.
2. Difference and sameness: Here, the question of whether the sense of self is set apart from others or assimilates with them and how we navigate between them in specific situations.

3. Constancy and change: This is a dilemma of how a person can remain the same, giving the constantly changing positions, as described above, and at the same time how a person can go through change while remaining the same individual. Moreover it is dilemmatic how consistent or changing a person has to be to conserve and develop while keeping a sense of unitary self.

In line with a discursive and constructionist approach, these three questions/dilemmas should be understood as empirical questions, which will be further explained in the 'Method' section. When individuals speak, they are confronted with all sorts of choices and ambiguities and through language it is possible for them to express themselves in a variety of ways by saying things differently (Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin, 2011). Even though discourse and identity are not necessarily the exact same thing, through the exploration of the very close proximity between them, it is possible to show how powerful discourses can be (ibid.).

## A narrative approach

In line with the cultural psychology and social constructionist frameworks, this research takes a dynamic understanding of narrative and identity. Narrative and identity are two interrelated concepts that are embedded in social practices. The way this study approaches case studies is through narrative interviews and analysis of them. Arguably, case studies often include a large amount of narratives and some of these will address the dilemmas and complexities of living (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In a narrative interview, the focus is on the participant's story as it is told. The dynamics of a narrative interview resemble a conversation in everyday life as stories often appear when people interact. This supports the idea that telling stories is, as regards both language and cognition, a natural way for human beings to interact and to organise and express their knowledge and their meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 209).

When wanting to explore the individual's meaning-making processes, therefore, a narrative interview is a good way to do it. There are many advantages to be gained from a narrative approach to understanding people's meaning-making processes. When telling stories, people tend to have a compulsion for completing a story and a compulsion for telling it in detail (Schütze, 1977) and therefore, when people are

given the opportunity to freely narrate rather than answer specific, direct questions about a subject, important content will often appear as the story-telling process evokes thoughts and memories that could otherwise be lost (Hopf, 2004). In this way, a narrative approach is a strong method to gain access to important meaning-making processes of the narrator. From this line of thinking, the narrative interview is not to be understood as a method that gives access to simple monologues taken directly from the narrator's memory but is, on the contrary, created in interplay between the interviewer and the interviewee. Therefore, the setting in which the narratives are created and the discourses that are in play are taken into account when analysing the narratives.

Bamberg (2011) argues that relations play an important role for the narrative if the goal is to understand how the narrator reflects upon himself, as narratives-in-action are constantly being negotiated through interaction. The content of the stories told in the interviews and the way the stories are told are not independent of who the story is told to and therefore, the interviewer can be understood as a co-creator of the narratives, even when attempting to undertake an inactive role in asking the questions (Lucious-Hoene & Deppermann, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1996). Behaviour such as eye contact, nodding and approving remarks show the narrator that the interviewer pays attention, accepts and understands the interviewee and the ways in which questions are formulated positions the narrator in spite of attempting to avoid or minimise this effect. At the same time, the narrator's explicit and implicit assumptions about how the interviewer is, positions himself, while the narrator's goals play an important role in the interview (ibid.). A narrative can be viewed as a tool for passing on observations to others so that they can be mutually understood (Schmidt, 2004). A narrative approach is not a guarantee for getting access to 'reality' and it is not immune to the subjectivity of interpretations. This is the case even if, in the interview, we agree through communication on a mutual understanding that we both accept – as another observational perspective or at another point in time it can be rejected as 'not real' (ibid.).

According to Bamberg, identity is constantly being practiced, tested and negotiated by the use of small stories. Within the narrative approach, small stories constitute parts of whole narratives through which the narrator constantly negotiate his own

identity. Analysing the discourses and positioning in small stories are therefore very relevant to the subject of forming and developing vegan identities and have thus been chosen for this thesis as the methodological approach to analysing the interviews conducted. These will therefore be further outlined in the section below.

## Small stories

This study uses small stories as presented by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) as a departure point within a narrative approach. ‘Small stories’ is an umbrella term that covers some of the narrative activities that are often overlooked within conventional narrative research. Small stories are proposed as an alternative to classical canonical approaches where narratives are most of the time understood as a consecutive temporal chain of events containing a beginning, a middle and an end, often told in the past tense. With small stories, it is possible to also explore stories of ongoing, future or hypothetical events together with references or hints to earlier stories (ibid.). Small stories can thus concern events that have happened recently or that are ongoing at the moment of narration and also cover episodes that are used in order to elaborate on something or support argumentation in a conversation. This approach is a more functional perspective on narratives and discourses as interpretation tools than the conventional narrative approach (Bamberg et al. 2011). The interest here is in the social actions and functions that narratives have in people's lives by looking into how people actually use stories in everyday, mundane situations in order to create and uphold a sense of who they are. The focus is then small stories within narratives as being constructive means in the creation of identities. By working with small stories, it is possible to explore how individuals as active agents use narrative practices in order to construct a sense of who they are. From this understanding, the narrator is actively engaged through interaction in shaping her own identity (ibid.). This means that rather than focusing on what is presented and reflected upon in the stories, the focus is on why these stories are told here and now and how this shows in which ways the narrator creates a sense of self and identity through positioning (ibid.).

# Method

As this thesis adopts a qualitative approach to psychology from a cultural psychology perspective as explained in the ‘meta-theoretical reflections’ section, the intent is to study the higher mental functions of four individuals who identify themselves with being vegans. What is investigated, more specifically, is the intentional construction of meaning that leads to developing a vegan identity. The cultural psychology perspective assumes that people simultaneously shape and are shaped by culture, which makes the sociocultural context immensely important when examining identities. The focus on contexts is reached through a sociocultural approach to development, which includes both internal and external components as negotiating and thereby shaping identity. These negotiations occur through discourses and positioning that can be observed and studied. The method employed in this thesis is to conduct and analyse narrative interviews, since, as previously mentioned, narratives can be used as semiotic tools to study the negotiations of identities. Prior to this, an evaluation of the use of case studies will be given below, followed by an outline of the interview proceedings.

## Case studies

The use of case studies allows for empirical exploration of contemporary phenomena in their natural context and is an excellent way to gain detailed knowledge about a phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this way, a huge benefit from single cases is that they make it possible to show the uniqueness of each individual case. Using case studies gives rise to telling the narrator’s stories – their narratives – with all their diversity and in this way permitting the narratives to unfold from the complex, many-sided and sometimes even conflicting stories that the narrators in the specific cases tell. According to Zittoun (2009), it is not possible to construct an “average” case as this would result in losing exactly what makes a single case interesting. The aim is not to aspire for some ‘truth’, but rather allowing the reader to discover the case and in this way, “the case story is itself the result” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238). This allows for the exploration of a phenomenon first-hand instead of reading or creating maps of it. At the same time, when wanting to understand an actual practice in its entirety it would be unsatisfactory to learn only about specific parts of it (ibid.). From this line

of thought, the goal with this study is to gain in-depth and nuanced knowledge from real life rather than focusing on numbers or general rules. Using case studies allows for the exploration of possible ways people shape their identity, through narratives, by the use of positioning and discourse.

A discussed topic regarding case studies is whether it is possible to extract general knowledge from single cases and according to Flyvbjerg (2006), it is a common misconception that this is not possible. Often, the argument used in this context is that case studies are best – or only – suited for hypothesis generation. According to Demuth (2018), a person's actions are unique and thereby all psychological occurrences are as well. This seems to be a bit of a stretch. While uniqueness and generalisations are contradictory terms and both unique and general information cannot be obtained in one case study, it can, however, be argued that it is possible to generalise theoretically from a single case study (Demuth, 2018; Zittoun, 2000 & Flyvbjerg, 2006) and this is the stance taken in this case study. The aim here is not to make generalisations about the whole vegan population but to explore the theoretical understanding of veganism within my frame while, at the same time, trying to understand the way these narratives are created in depth. The purpose of this approach is not to interpret specific aspects of behaviour based on narrated occurrences or processes but to infer on the logic involved with them (Demuth, 2018). The process of developing identity through narrative happens in a specific context and it may be transferable to another, similar context. The responsibility of describing the context in which interviews take place lies with the interviewer and after this it is the responsibility of the person using it to interpret the comparability to other situations (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The choice of cases is important for the quality of the case study and to be able to generalise in some way. The goal when choosing the specific cases is that it should add as much meaningfulness to the phenomenon as possible (Demuth, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this regard, contrast is just as important as similarity as this gives me a unique possibility for falsification of my hypotheses (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and therefore it is also interesting to speak to someone who has been a vegan but has dropped it. Another contrast is sampling a case where the veganism is very new for the person. The choice of cases in a qualitative study should be based on the compatibility with the conceptual, social and cultural characteristics relating to the research

question (Demuth, 2018). Of course, the reasons for choosing the participants for a study is of tremendous importance, based on the above. It must be kept in mind, however, that no matter how much planning and reflection has been put into the sampling process, each case is a person with all his or her complexities and nuances. Therefore, one can realise late in the process that the case is something completely different than what appeared to be the case in the first place (Flyvbjerg, 2006), a point which I will return to in the discussion.

The thought processes that went into choosing the participants for this study were, firstly, that it would be interesting to obtain the narratives of people who called themselves vegans and thereby identified themselves with being vegans. Secondly, in order to investigate different nuances of vegan identities, the idea was to find people, who were thought to practise veganism in different ways or have different approaches to vegan lifestyles. The participants included in the study, therefore, ended up being the following: One person had very recently changed her lifestyle to a vegan one, whereas the others had been familiar with it for years. Another participant was older than the rest and was thought to be more experienced in life. One was assumed to be an extreme case of a person who lived by very strict vegan ideals and rules. Finally, a participant was chosen who identified herself with being a vegan in the past and used to lead a vegan lifestyle but had moved away from it. This final case was included to provide a narrative that was contradictory to the others. Initially, the idea was to find participants by using vegan groups online using social networks, as this would have resulted in easily finding enough participants. However, this could result in a bias towards getting only one type of vegan that typically signs up for studies like this and one that may have a strong ideological and political agenda. The approach was instead to find them by referral from my network.

## Proceedings

### Participants

The participants described above were four women aged 24-53, living in three different regions of Denmark, these being small towns in Western Jutland, Northern Zealand and Northern Jutland.



## The interviews – collection of data

The interviews were conducted in different locations when and where it suited the participants best. All of them happened in undisturbed places in order to get a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere where the participants could be comfortable and talkative. Two of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and two in mine. Extra time preparing coffee and small-talking was spent before beginning if the participants were nervous. Before the interviews were started, the purpose and method of the project were explained in order to prepare the participants to answer the questions as I, for example, explicitly asked them to tell stories. Also, the declaration of consent was explained and filled out before beginning. All of the conversations were audio recorded and none of them were filmed. The interviews lasted between 25 and 40 minutes.

## Design of interview

This project arose from a general wondering about veganism. It was initially theoretically and empirically driven in the sense that the initial interview guide was based on my existing knowledge about veganism together with empirical research on the topic. Therefore, I had some theoretical and empirical assumptions before collecting data. Some of the questions asked related to the knowledge aspect of Zittoun's (2012) model as described in the 'transitions and ruptures' that changes when identity and the sense-making change and causes these aspects to change when it develops. Some questions are designed to position the participants in certain ways, for example as finding it difficult to lead vegan lifestyles to some extent, in order to observe whether or not they would allow themselves to be positioned in this way or not. This perspective is relevant to discursive and positioning approaches, as outlined in the theory section, as identities, in these views, are negotiated through positioning and discourses. This project is, however, also inductive in the way that each individual participant from each case tells her own story. And with a narrative approach, the most important goal is to get the participants to tell stories from their lives rather than to gain answers for specific questions (Hopf, 2004). Even though the design of this study has been theoretically driven, the specific cases have shown me that my

hypotheses were not necessarily right. In this way, I have moved back and forth between hypotheses and the collected data, gaining more and more insight for each single case.

Each interview started with a narrative-generating question as an invitation to narrate. This question was open enough not to spoon-feed the participants but at the same time specific enough to help them mobilise their memories and therefore be able to narrate freely within the topic. This resulted in most of the cases in an independently produced narrative. Here, I allowed the interviewee to be fully free to narrate, even if they had another style of telling stories than I had imagined, e.g. argumentations and reports, and I carefully listened and did not interrupt but showed the narrator that I listened through eye contact, smiling and nodding when appropriate. The initial narrative was followed by questions that seemed relevant for their story. These served the purpose of helping the narrators to clarify themselves and allowed for a cautious testing of my assumptions by being open enough both, as mentioned before, not to spoon-feed in order to gain a specific answer, and for allowing the narrators to put their foot down in cases where I was wrong.

A general presumption that I tried to relay by the questions was an understanding of the participants as experts or theoreticians of their own lives and, in this way, also asking them about how they generalise or self-interpret at an abstract level. This also serves the purpose of attempting to “even out” an imbalanced power relation where I could be positioned as the expert on veganism. Moreover, I asked about self-interpretations that had been described in their narratives. This could provide insight into the situational and contextual meanings, the participants’ motives for particular actions, their everyday rationalisations and self-interpretations in an open way. At the same time, it should provide discursive understanding through their interpretations of everyday lives and thus empirically apply the theoretical approaches adopted in this study to their narratives (Hopf, 2004).

- **Do you remember the period when you first began to consider being a vegan and can you tell me about it?**
- **Can you tell me about the period when you first became a vegan?**

- **Can you tell me about a specific episode where it was really difficult being a vegan?**
- **Try to describe a situation where being a vegan has been difficult because of a social situation.**
- **Questions relating to the individual's knowledge and experiences with a vegan lifestyle**

## Transcription

When translating speech into written text, a lot of information gets lost in translation. The attempt was to tell the story as it was told in the interview situation in order to give the sense of narrative. Note that I translate the excerpts but a reference to the Danish transcripts is provided. All participants in the interviews are anonymous and they have been given false names.

### Transcription conventions

- (-) Short pause (1-2 seconds)
- (---) Longer pause (2+ seconds)
- [] Interviewer's comments
- / New sentence replacing another
- bold** Underlined words

## Analytical tools

The narratives were analysed by looking at positioning in the small story events in the interviews. The narratives can be understood, as mentioned earlier, as a way of making sense of one's identity as a vegan and can be used as a semiotic tool. As identities are assumed to be negotiated by the use of positioning and discourses, an attempt will be made to observe these negotiations to gain an understanding of the participants' vegan identities. The three-step model, presented in the 'positioning theory' section and provided by Bamberg & Georgakopoulou (2008), will be employed in the analysis as that allows access to different but interrelated processes of positioning that happen in the narratives. The three identity dilemmas, described in the 'identity dilemmas' section and provided by Bamberg et al. (2011) will also be employed in this analysis.

# Analysis

In the following section, the four cases of this study are analysed. Each case is presented and analysed separately with the purpose of being able to shed light on the uniqueness and nuances of each of the participants' stories of veganism. This analysis looks at how individuals create their own identity through positioning themselves and others, drawing on different discourses in their narratives. Afterwards, it is discussed how they individually make sense of their personal life trajectory, rupture and transition through their narrative in light of this analysis.

First, the small stories will be analysed with regards to the three levels of positioning: 1. How the characters are positioned in the stories in relation to each other and in time and space, 2. how the narrator positions herself and is positioned in the specific interview situation together with how the stories are narrated in interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and 3. the ways in which the narrator positions a sense of identity and self in relation to dominant discourses through the small stories. This is on an ongoing basis related to the three identity dilemmas: agency vs. passivity, uniqueness versus belonging and sameness versus difference.

## Anne: The new vegan

Anne is 24 years old and moved to Copenhagen from a small town in Western Jutland three years ago. Anne is the “newest” vegan among the participants in this study with less than two years of practicing veganism.

I: Do you remember the very first time you began to consider veganism?

A: Hmm, yes. It was when I was at Danish Vegetarian Day and they had a vegan chocolate cake. I was already a vegetarian then. I was a vegetarian because I had received some brochures in my mailbox about being a vegetarian

I: Okay. And it was just around then when you also took the plunge to actually become a vegan?

A: Mmm, yes.

I: How long did it take from (---)

A: Erm (-) I think two months passed maybe. And for those two months, I completely stopped eating animal products when I was home and then I ate it if I was visiting people. So it wasn't before those two months I completely stopped"

(Anne, lines 1-18)

As illustrated from the above excerpt, Anne's explanation for becoming a vegetarian is that she received some brochures about the vegetarian lifestyle and her reasoning for choosing to become a vegan happened when she attended a vegetarian event where they had chocolate cake (lines 4-6). Anne does not seem to have the need to rationalise the reasons behind these particular decisions with regard to vegetarianism or veganism and does not feel the need to explain why this is the right way for her to live her life. From what she says, there does not appear to be any other underlying, deeper reasons – she just does it with no further explanation than the fact that information about the possibility of doing it suddenly came into her life. Here, the concept of agency (or lack thereof) comes into focus as both vegetarianism and veganism appear to have just arbitrarily come into Anne's life, and in this way, her navigation of agency appears to be directed from world to person. Veganism happens to her, or is introduced to her by the world, making Anne the receiver of trends rather than the instigator of changes into the world.

## Level 1. Characters' positions

When Anne is asked about her initial period as a vegan, the first focus she chooses to bring to light is how the people closest to her reacted and how supportive or unsupportive they were of her new decision:

"A: Well (-) It was very difficult, I thought, with regard to my family. It is a Jutlandic family so they are very devoted to eating meat, or meat has to be the main ingredient of a meal. I don't know (-) it's been a while. My boyfriend back then was very supportive about it but his family was also very much against it. They are Faroese so they are also really big meat-eaters and it was actually one of the factors contributing to it not working out between me and my boyfriend, it was simply his family".

- I: Okay, but not your veganism?  
A: It was (-) well, what they had against me. So (---) yeah”  
(Anne, lines 27-38)

From this excerpt and throughout most of the interview, Anne focuses on the social aspect of veganism – namely finding support in her close network. She creates a distinction between the people in her life who are “against” her and the ones who support her in the way she has decided to live her life and thus positions them in opposition to each other. In fact, Anne positions most of the characters in her stories as people who obviously do not understand veganism since they are Jutlandic or Faroese (lines 28 and 31). She supports this position by drawing on discourses about how people from Jutland or the Faroe Islands are natural advocates of meat as part of their cultural traditions and in this way also a part of their identity, any polarisation to their worldview might thus seem threatening. What is particularly interesting here is that Anne herself comes from a small town in Jutland and should thus also fit under this label that she has created.

By positioning the people against her in this way, instead of focusing on the fact that Anne’s family *does not want to* support her, she focuses on why they *cannot*. The same argument can be made about the broken relationship she refers to (lines 30-38). Here, despite the fact that her then boyfriend was very supportive of her veganism, his family were Faroese and therefore, owing to traditions and culture, they naturally had something against Anne being vegan, and this was one of the reasons for them finally breaking up. In doing this, she actively removes their agency, by focusing on the fact that they are unable to accept other traditions or lifestyle changes, rather than simply not wanting to. The lack of agency can thus be seen as something she does to all characters in her story. This could perhaps be understood as a defence against taking it personally when the people closest to her neither understand nor accept the way she has chosen to live her life. In light of this speculation, removing the agency from the different characters in her story enables Anne to create a narrative where she does not have to place blame on other people but instead where veganism in itself is the natural reason why people positioned as “not understanding” do not support her. If this line of thought is taken even further, an argument can be made that she supports this position that she has given herself by drawing on discourses about

choosing a lifestyle that is not in concordance with the lifestyle of the majority, therefore expecting a broader spectrum of people to distance themselves from her, owing to her new lifestyle choices. However, despite the fact that Anne does not seem to hold any of the characters in her story responsible for the way they treat her, frustrations still come into focus when she is asked to talk about specific episodes where the people in her life have been unsympathetic towards her lifestyle:

“A: Er, yeah. Erm (---) we were kind of invited for a (-) yes, for dinner at my then boyfriend’s sister’s and she said we were having burgers and she knew perfectly well that I was, yeah, a vegan. Erm (-) but then I thought well, then I will just take some vegan, those ready-made vegan hamburgers with me. And (-) well, it went okay, I mean I thought it went okay but then she apparently (-) erm, what is it called (-) yeah, talked about me to my boyfriend behind my back about how she didn’t think it was okay that I had brought my own food.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah. And there I would maybe have preferred that she had told me directly instead (...) so from there on I kind of avoided going there to eat (...)

A: My birthday, it was in November and then I was home to eat at my parents’ in Jutland and I thought it was really difficult to persuade them into making a sauce on Soya Cuisine instead of cream. (...) So yeah, it has actually resulted in the fact that I would rather have my birthday over here in Copenhagen instead without my family (...)

I: Can you try and tell me a bit more what actually happened?

A: Erm, yes. It is mostly my stepmother that is kind of against it. She is also a qualified butcher. But er, it’s like, I just tried to suggest that maybe we could make like a mustard sauce on Soya Cuisine from Naturli, erm (-) and then she was very, yeah, against it to begin with, and then she said that we could make one like that and then another with regular cream. And yeah (-) it just annoyed me a little, well it just (-) well, now I knew that they wanted, well they had meat, erm (-) so that they couldn’t find a compromise there where they could have vegan sauce. Yeah”.

(Anne, lines 193-204; 208; 55-57; 59-60; 214-224)

Again, Anne explains the lack of understanding from her stepmom by positioning her as someone who cannot understand because she is a butcher (lines 217-218).

From these excerpts, however, frustration about not being understood or met comes to light and there is a slight shift in the way she positions the boyfriend's sister. First, when Anne explains how her boyfriend's sister knew perfectly well that she was a vegan but did not meet or respect this need (lines 193-199). By using the words "perfectly well", she insinuates that the sister understands the situation and should then be able to act based on this knowledge, but chooses not to. Secondly when her family, even though they had their meat, did not want to make the compromise of eating a vegan sauce (lines 222-224) despite the fact that she herself tries to meet them halfway. It seems that Anne is aware of the fact that she is the one who has to make the greatest compromises by bringing her own vegan food and accepting that people want to eat meat on her birthday and that she does not mind making these compromises – but then the frustration surfaces when they do not want to meet her halfway. What is interesting in these two different but related situations is that her conclusion is the same in both instances: To simply avoid these kinds of situations in the future even though this means not being able to spend time with her boyfriend's family or celebrating birthdays with her family.

## Level 2. Positioning in the interview setting

When Anne is asked about the struggles and challenges she meets in everyday life, a few things happen that are worth mentioning:

I: (...) have you been in a situation, been very hungry at lunch but haven't had any lunch with you and had to make the choice between not eating or eating something that wasn't vegan?

A: Yes, I have tried that.

I: How did you tackle it?

A: Erm (---) well, I didn't eat any animal products but I was very close to making that decision. Not meat specifically but other things. Yeah, how did I tackle it? Actually, I am **incredibly** good at not eating for very long periods of time, so (---)

I: Yes, that of course helps.

A: Yes, at least I have become."

(Anne, lines 90-104)



Firstly, it is clear from this passage that the conversation and small stories emerging from it are at least as influenced by me as interviewer as they are by Anne. I deliberately take my time framing my interview question in quite specific terms. This has the effect that I make it easier for Anne to accept this position that I am offering her - for example by making explicit that in the episode, these are extraordinary circumstances, so if she has done it, it is okay (lines 90-92). She does not accept this possible position, however, saying that she was very close (lines 98-99) but she offers the idea that she perhaps *could* make this decision in the future if the situation was bad enough. Instead, she positions herself as someone who has the appropriate qualities for being vegan as she concludes the entire small story by saying that she is **incredibly** good at not eating and is thus “good” at being vegan. Secondly, Anne on the one hand describes herself as a person who does not eat much in general terms but on the other hand, she presents it as something that she has developed through veganism. Thus, she both says that she *is* and that she *has become* good at not eating at the same time. Here, the dilemma of sameness versus difference comes into play as she determines how she has changed throughout her current vegan lifestyle or more accurately, how her new lifestyle change has in fact changed her.

Another time where Anne more directly refuses the position I offer her is when I try to get her to talk about some of the difficulties associated with veganism. Anne does not appear to position herself as a victim who had to sacrifice herself and her close relationships in order to stay true to being vegan – on the contrary, she describes the shift to veganism as something positive and exciting:

“I: Do you remember when you had just become a vegan and you were out buying groceries, you wanted to make something but perhaps didn’t know anything about where you could find it. Do you remember it as being difficult?”

A: I thought it was more exciting to buy groceries in fact. I remember when I was going to make this Fifty Shades of Greens where it was just all different kinds of green vegetables. And then I actually thought that it was incredibly funny and I thought it became easier, really, to cook because you don’t have to think that much about microbial (-) well, the heating of meat and so on (...)”

(Anne, lines 71-81)

In this part of the interview, again I frame the question so as to allow her to take on the position that she is ‘struggling’ with veganism. However, she clearly refuses this - even though she uses the word ‘actually’ perhaps with the purpose of showing me that the shift has been very simple and that she aligns herself with her newly chosen lifestyle. This is even more accentuated in her emphatic use of the word ‘incredibly’ (line 78). Perhaps this choice is made in order to seem convincing in terms of being truthful in her feelings towards her stories and furthermore that she might want me to believe her perception of the truth.

### Level 3. Positioning a sense of identity from dominant discourses

“A: Well (-) there are periods where I think I am like (-) I am a bit depressed because I feel that sometimes I am the only one who knows, you know all the misery or what you can call it that happens in the industry and so on. But at the same time, I feel, I don’t know, more enlightened and (---) erm, happier about myself. Yes. I don’t know (-)”

I: (...) before that, you hadn’t considered anything about the industry or animal welfare or (---)

A: No. Not at all”

(Anne, lines 110-114; 124-127)

It could be argued that Anne draws on a discourse (among vegans or in society, on a broader scale) about the fact that one should seek enlightenment rather than remain ignorant about the world’s suffering and that this is a goal in itself. There is a paradox in the fact that Anne becomes happier about herself while still being depressed when realising that everyone else is wrong and torturing animals etc. And it is interesting that she positions herself as both someone who is happy and depressed for the same reason in the same sentence. Looking closer at the discourse within the consumption of animals, the predominant discourse focuses on how the fact that animals suffer in the industry is a fairly important reason why one should not eat meat or animal products. If this is the case, there is a paradox in the sense that she says somewhere else that if things were different, it would be another question (even though she admits her ambivalence – perhaps she does this because she is on the one hand

influenced by this discourse but at the same time she thinks in general that eating meat is wrong). Below, her statement about how eating meat would be okay in a better world is challenged:

“A: It’s a bit hard because in a way I can (-) I have, yeah I don’t know, I am a bit ambivalent but I think it is better for example to hunt animals than I think it is to farm them just for eating them. I mean, I can enter into the line of thinking that (---) it is something we as humans can do, eating animals, I mean I think in some way it’s okay with the food chain and so on but I just think the way we do it is wrong and now when we are so many people on Earth then there is just not enough for everyone which will make you, I mean you need these big agricultural farms where the animals aren’t treated well

I: Mmm

A: So I (---) yeah.

I: And where do you think this puts you?

A: I mean, I would never eat animals again. Or animal products (---)

I: Not even in a better world?

A: Hmm (-) No, actually I don’t think so, no. If we had gone back a couple of years and it was better, then yes maybe.

(Anne, lines 136-158)

“A: I am not, I mean it doesn’t affect me very much emotionally when I see other people eating meat really, as I hear others (-) but it is more when people go into discussions about it. I am not very good at dealing with conflicts like that, so it’s mostly there”

I: Okay, because it is a rather extreme place to put yourself into when not liking conflicts, right?

A: Mmm, yes, exactly.

I: It’s not (-) It’s kind of a controversial topic (---)

A: Mmm. But there it helps for me to have been a member of these vegan groups on Facebook where people kind of give you some arguments that you can use if you get into (-) yes, some discussions.

(Anne, lines 166-181)

Why does Anne need these arguments? One possibility is that the rest of the world may position vegans in ways that force them to position themselves in this way. Having to defend living like this even though one is clearly convinced that it is the rest of the world that is wrong (and that being vegan is the right thing) could be one explanation. So simply put the differing scale we see between the majority and the minority, and how we must, in this case, look at the vegan lifestyle as belonging to the minority end of the scale. Another possibility is that she simply, as she clearly states, doesn't like conflicts (line 169) which is consistent with how she tackles dilemmas concerning the people, she has close to her in her life, who do not want to support her in eating vegan food, and her tendencies to avoid these people and certain situations. An example of one of these arguments you "get" from the vegan groups:

"It's actually not that much (-) I am actually not at all vegan because of nutrition because, yeah I don't know, I eat very little so it would actually be better for me if I had a lot of fat and (---) the only places you can get that as a vegan is like nuts and avocado and oils and things like that and you get a little tired from that. So yeah, nutrition has actually not at all been a part of it"

(Anne, lines 238-243)

Is she drawing on a prevalent discourse on what the right motivation behind veganism is?

## Karen: The 98% vegan

Karen became a vegan after five years as a vegetarian and is, with her ten years, the vegan in this study with the longest vegan career:

"Hmm, yeah, I had already been a vegetarian for five years and that was actually just because I didn't like meat because it was a lot easier to say that I was just a vegetarian instead of saying that I only liked (-) er, I actually only liked minced meat or I only liked things that didn't taste like meat. Anything that had texture as something with animals, I didn't want to eat. And then I just started to say that I was a vegetarian and then I avoided that whole explanation"

(Karen, lines 3-9)

## Level 1. Characters' positions

From this excerpt, Karen explains her initial state of vegetarianism by stating that it was merely a practical thing – that it was too much of a hassle to explain to people that she did not like the taste of meat and that drawing on the term “vegetarian” was a way of avoiding this. In this way, she implies that originally, there was no deeper reason for choosing vegetarianism other than taste preferences. Here, she positions herself as a vegetarian who did not do this for the label and thus perhaps taps into a more socially acceptable, or at least socially recognised, label, drawing on the discourse that someone who does label herself a vegetarian for ideological reasons should expect judgment and demands for explanations and discussions as to the reasons.

”(...) I lived with two other girls when I was in high school and one of them was a bit crazy and then she found an ad in the local paper about how the local agricultural college was looking for someone to milk their cows at night. And apparently, she had decided that we, as flatmates should do that. I thought it sounded really boring but it was actually quite funny but it was also really harsh to see, I thought, with those cows. (...) Then they could have been standing all still and all squeezed together in such a tiny place for six hours. And it wouldn't have taken more than two minutes to move the cow in the front and just get them out to the stable where they had a little freedom of movement again but nobody did anything. And they also had these (-) quite a lot of them had infected warts on their udder and things like that. And there was some ointment and I asked if you were supposed to do something and then he said that we were paid 200 kroner for the time we spent, no matter how much time we spent so if I bothered to spend time on it then I could just do it. But there wasn't any attitude in general towards if you should make it less painful for the cows and things like that. (...) I think it was after that that I gave up, it was (...) and you just couldn't do anything. Or you could if you had all the time in the world, but (...) And after that, I could (-) well, I didn't eat a lot of dairy in the first place but after that I couldn't eat a pizza with regular cheese either because it just tasted like cow and gross and infected udder and things like that”

(Karen, lines 9-37)

In this rather long excerpt about an experience with milking cows, Karen tells the story of when she decided to become a vegan. Here, she focuses much on the fact

that creating a good environment for the cows was not a priority. By arguing, for instance, that it would only have taken two minutes to move the cows and thus make room for the other cows so that they would not be uncomfortable (line 22), she insinuates that this would be the least and the only proper thing to do. In doing this, she positions the other people involved with milking the cows as passive onlookers who stand idly by and watch the cows suffer despite the fact that it would have been easy to do something. Karen ends up positioning herself as powerless to do anything as she would have been the only one making an effort and would thus be a drop in the ocean. Up until this point, she has not positioned herself as a vegan yet, even though she has not been able to eat any sort of dairy without being reminded of the milking experience and thus, is in fact a vegan.

“I remember I was in a kitchen team at some national conferences in SUF at the time where we always made fun of vegans and they had to have rolls without milk and eggs and that was ridiculous and things like that”

(Karen, lines 55-58)

Here, Karen goes back in time and positions vegans as these ridiculous people who are too extreme and are therefore easy to make fun of. By telling this story, she is perhaps distancing herself from this position as someone who is extreme and ridiculous herself. However, there is a shift or a development in how Karen presents vegans and non-vegans in the small stories she tells before and after her own shift to veganism.

”Yes (---) There were really, well the canteen in high school, they couldn’t understand it. It was just a little bit of yoghurt in the rolls and things like that, I was like but can’t you just not do it if it’s just a little bit of yoghurt, why does it even have to be in the rolls? So we had to discuss that and then generally the province more than 10 years ago, there were quite a lot of bacon jokes and I also remember one time someone hid a piece of bacon in my friend’s food to see if she would find out and things like that. And if you don’t think of bacon as food but think of it as dead animals, then it’s, well meat eaters would also be upset if someone had put a piece of dead cat in their food presumably (...) yeah. There were many kinds of teasing like that (---) yeah (---) and people just had a difficult time understanding it”

(Karen, lines 86-96; 100-101)

Karen here creates a distinction between people who see animals as food (meat-eaters who do not understand) and people who do not think of meat as just meat but as dead animals and thus positions herself as being a vegan as this entails the latter understanding. Karen has thus developed from thinking that veganism is an extreme and ridiculous thing to realising the misery of the animals in the industry and therefore becoming a vegan herself out of necessity. As she puts it herself: "I really thought they were extreme until I saw it myself" (line 66). In this way, there is a progression in how she presents herself developing from the one who used to make fun of vegans to now being a vegan who is made fun of herself. Here, the identity dilemma of continuity versus change becomes apparent as she juggles with these different conceptions about who she is in relation to veganism through time at different points in her small stories.

## Level 2. Positioning in the interview setting

Despite the fact that Karen now has established a pretty "firm" position as a vegan or at least as a vegetarian through the course of the interview, she still has ways of justifying when she can "cheat the system" and thus resists when I attempt to position her as a "strict" vegan who follows the rules:

I: Mmm. Okay. And what you are saying about the canteen (-) and recently it has become easier to find vegan things, also in canteens, but I can imagine (-) I mean, it probably doesn't happen to you because maybe you are that well-established? But still, can you recall an episode from the beginning of your (---)

K: "But it still happens, I mean, it depends on how hungry I am. When I am drunk then I forget pretty much. I would never dream of eating meat but I could potentially eat things when I (-) and I think birthdays when people bring cake and things like that, that it's really difficult. Yeah, so there I also cheat or slip up sometimes. But I would say that I have become fairly good at having a fruit snack in my backpack and so on to take the top off but it happens that I slip up. I think I am more 98% vegan even though you can't really be it like that. I never buy anything myself, I could never dream of paying for it. Because I won't support it (...) Oh, I don't know. I think if

there were no list of ingredients, then I could forget to ask, in their rolls for instance.

(Karen, lines 103-118)

I try to position Karen by using the phrase “it probably doesn’t happen to you because maybe you are that well-established?” but she quickly refuses to take on this label as a perfect vegan by quickly responding that it still happens. Perhaps this is an attempt to further resist the label of being extreme and thereby showing that she is, in fact, relaxed about it even though she does not approve of using animals for their products. In this context, she uses arguments on reasonability to justify why she cannot live up to practicing veganism 100% all the time. Again, a new development in the way Karen positions herself is beginning to show.

”But I also think it depends (-) on Mondays we have eight hours, so if there isn’t anything completely vegan, then I take it usually but for those days where we only have four hours, then I don’t need food. So there, I am probably more consistent (...) I think I have been more so-called extreme in the beginning and also participated in several demonstrations against fur and things like that but I think I have become a bit more relaxed after (-) erm, it’s both good and bad, I mean I really think everything should be vegan and that the animals shouldn’t suffer but I have probably also become a bit more pragmatic and don’t want to fight that much with my family and things like that”.

(Karen, lines 202-205; 209-214)

From this excerpt, Karen refers to a period where she has been “so-called extreme” (line 209) despite the fact that she still has not taken on this position before she is ready to let go of it in favour of a more relaxed and pragmatic position (lines 210-211). This further illustrates the developmental aspect of Karen’s life as a vegan. She started as someone who did not want to be too extreme but had to become a vegan after realising what was happening in the industry in order to go back to a more relaxed and pragmatic way of living. Again, it is striking how she battles with the many different vegan positions as she focuses on how she has in one way changed through time but at the same time remained the same.



### Level 3. Positioning a sense of identity from dominant discourses

This short piece of interaction between me and Karen below is an example of how her vegan identity is negotiated through her narrative.

- K: (...) but if you had a small pet piglet, then perhaps it would be more difficult (...) if you sat with it in your arms and looked at it and said “I will have to kill you in order to get bacon” and you would still do it(-)
- I: Then would it be okay?
- K: Well, I don’t think so (-) but in a way more, I mean I have more respect for people who know what they are doing than those that (-) no, actually I don’t know if I have”.

Here, Karen first presents a narrative of how people might eat less bacon if they had a pet piglet and that if they would be willing to look this little pig in the eye and kill it, it would be more okay to do so. When stating this, she draws on the discourse that ignorance and not taking responsibility for the animals that people eat makes eating meat much worse. However, when I enter the discussion and ask Karen directly if this would be okay, hence challenging this narrative, she catches herself buying into this discourse without thinking it through. In this way, her position on this particular situation develops through the course of the conversation and in this way, her other standpoint, another dominant discourse she draws on, the fact that killing animals in order to eat them is fundamentally wrong, comes into force.

### Marie: The failed vegan

Marie was a pescetarian (a vegetarian who also consumes fish and other seafood) in high school when she first decided to become a vegan. This happened when her boyfriend broke up with her and she was free to pursue a vegan lifestyle for the first time:

- ”And back then I was a pescetarian (...) as it is called with a fancy word (...) So when I became vegan, that was in 2010 the first time, and I had just left my boyfriend or he had dumped me and then (---) I thought that now I was free to do it

more and he was a real meat-eater, really gross (...) Anyway, then it was when I got an apartment in Copenhagen, a room, and there I think I was a vegan for a month or maybe two. It wasn't for very long because I couldn't make it work. And then I sort of dropped it (---) Then I was a vegetarian after that and then (...) And then I have tried it multiple times and then it was some years later, so the first time vegan in 2010, first time I thought about it was probably in 2008 or something and then I have tried to become a vegan again for like (-) it has probably been for, yes, like once a year, I think, since from 2010 to 2016".

(Marie, lines 10; 14; 17-20; 25-28; 33-37)

## Level 1. Characters' positions

Initially, Marie positions herself as a "pescetarian" but as soon as she does it, she distances herself from the label she has just given herself by saying "as it is called with a fancy word" (lines 11-14). In this way, she positions herself as a pescetarian but at the same time as someone who is not too posh to use ordinary language and she does not really like fancy labels. As with the two other previous cases, Marie creates a distinction between herself as a vegan and her then boyfriend by referring to him as a "real meat-eater" and distances herself from his position by adding "really gross" (line 20). Despite this distinction and concomitant distance, Marie is neither a vegan nor a vegetarian today:

"But I'm not a vegetarian anymore, and the reason is that I have grown old and tired. And I'm only 27, but I sometimes feel like 80. And I'm so tired of the whole being a political consumer. I think it's very tiring and I really would like to be but people around me are not and I get so annoyed over having to make an effort all the time when other people don't have to (...) And I (-) yeah, all that about not only do you make an effort for others than yourself, because it is not for your own sake or it wasn't for my own sake that I was a vegetarian, it wasn't for my own sake that I was a vegan. It was only for the sake of others, right? It was only for the sake of the animals, for the sake of the planet and erm, it was just tiring that not only do you do all this, you also have to defend all sorts of things that people want to talk about and ask all the time, if you get enough protein or not, and was I tired. Well, I couldn't bother anymore".

(Marie, lines 53-60; 70-77)

Marie has many reasons for not being a vegan or vegetarian anymore, most of which are related to other people. She presents how she has developed from a person who used to be conscious about how to influence society in the best possible way by being a political consumer. Here, she positions herself as the only one who cares about making a change for the better and thus, she grows tired of being the only one who had to make sacrifices and make an effort all the time when other people do not have to do this (lines 58-60). In particular, she emphasises how this effort has not been for her own sake, but for others and thereby strengthens her argument that the vegan lifestyle is truly a sacrifice. In this way, she also positions herself as the martyr who alone, against all the ignorant people, must not only save the animals all by herself but also defend this position while doing it.

”At least I am happier now than I was when I was a vegan and it’s probably because I close my eyes to a good deal of suffering but it is also about surviving yourself. When I was younger and when I was a teenager and in the start of my 20s, I was really active and you know, a politically conscious world citizen. I thought a lot about how I was a good person, had a lot of ideals and principles and I tried to live up to it, and it was pretty difficult, you know? And I wasn’t very happy. And I don’t know if I am very happy today because I am also a feminist now and I think that makes me sad often because of many things (...)”

(Marie, lines 81-89)

Marie spends a lot of time describing herself the way she used to be when she was younger: As a “good” citizen with ideals and principles that could make the world a better place (lines 84-85) and uses arguments on survival and happiness in order to justify why she had to stop being like this. Despite the fact that Marie has dropped her vegan aspirations in order to become a happier person, it does not seem, however, to have had the result she describes, as feminism has now taken over as a new source of frustration and sadness. Here, the dilemma of being the same through time becomes relevant as Marie has a narrative about how things have changed - in this particular instance, her development into being a person who is no longer conscious about veganism. However, this consciousness seems to have, in fact, moved to a different subject, feminism, and her position has thus somewhat remained the same in this regard despite the way Marie presents it.

## Level 2. Positioning in the interview setting

Although Marie does not seem to have objections to being positioned in various ways during the interview, she hesitates when it is done in a direct and too obvious way:

- I: No. But then you have still chosen (-) I mean now you have gone through this long searching process and come to the conclusion, what is it all worth and things like that and concluded that it's just not worth it. It takes too much having to be a vegan as it is right now. Do you think it is better then to have looked at all these things, come to some solution that works for yourself rather than not taking a stance on it at all?
- M: Yes and no. I mean I wouldn't use the term 'not worth it' myself because that is not how I think about it but when you say it, I guess it makes sense because it is a weighing of your own feeling of happiness and then animals' feeling of happiness and (---) yeah, at least that is how it is for me
- I: As soon as you have considered it then there is some amount of cost/benefit analysis involved, right?
- M: But that's a bit (-) I am a bit divided about that one because (-) erm (-) in a way I think it's quite embarrassing that I have been enlightened and have now gone back to being ignorant. Do you follow? You've taken the path towards more enlightenment or like a higher state of knowledge and know that I am conscious about suffering and things like that and then you've taken a step down again. Why you choose this? That you do because (-) well, you become old and tired, right? Which is not a particularly good reason, especially not when you phrase it like that"

(Marie, lines 270-293)

From this excerpt, I attempt to do two things: First of all, I want to test if I understand her arguments and reflections on the topic so far by summarising her line of argumentation. Also, I test some of my hypotheses by gently pushing it to extremes in order to see how she reacts when her argumentation is made explicit. Here, for example, I put the discourse on ignorance to the test and rather directly ask Marie if it is then better to eat animals if you are at least not ignorant about it (lines 273-276). In doing this, Marie is then faced with her own narrative, formulated in more direct

and perhaps even a bit crude terms. When I do this, she is ambivalent about the positions I put her in. On the one hand, she wants to reject them because they are very direct and “rough” but on the other hand, because I sum up from the things she has said herself, she can’t really reject them totally without admitting that her entire narrative from before should be revised and therefore, she is forced to admit and face, embarrassing as it may be, that her arguments may in fact not be that well thought through.

### Level 3. Positioning a sense of identity from dominant discourses

Marie has another interesting narrative on why veganism did not work out for her.

”But (-) you know, for me it’s also about the fact that there shouldn’t be too many things that make me strange at a workplace because I am already kind of special. Well, now I am not that chubby anymore but I used to be like very, very overweight and that already makes some people ignore you and you are a little odd all the time and a little special, a little strange and you know (-) er (-) and (-) then that you don’t eat the same as the others in the canteen, I think that is something that has the effect that you stand out and you have to be careful not to stand out too much if you have like many, **many**, things, you know? And now I have a Venus symbol tattooed on my back, right? Then everyone can see that I am one of these feminists or lesbians if that is what they read into it, so it’s like (-) well, then that’s really all it takes so if I am also a vegan in the canteen, people see that and then I am like (-) “oh, but her, she is also a vegan and a feminist and now she fits pretty well in that box really” and then it’s those things that define me. I would rather just be a little normal”.

(Marie, lines 123-137)

As the above excerpt shows, she draws heavily on social reasons for not being able to be a vegan by arguing that she would not be able to fit in and be accepted by others at her workplace as she is already a little too special. Here, the identity dilemma of difference versus sameness comes into focus. Marie seems to be battling with two conflicting needs - on the one hand, she sees enlightenment about taking responsibility for other people, animals and the planet as the right thing to do – drawing on dominant discourses about this – but on the other hand, this is not what the majority

of people do in real life, so she “would rather just be a little normal” (line 137), fit in and be accepted without judgment.

## Monica: The pragmatic vegan

For Monica, the shift to veganism has happened as a gradual transition. She and her husband chose to become vegans three years ago after consuming meat for more than 50 years.

”Yeah (-) and it’s (-) well, it’s lucky that it has been the both of us. The children had left home and then, well it is also about “what should we eat?” And then you start with the meat, right? Well, nobody ever says “I think it’s been a long time since we had broccoli”. No. And then I think it becomes more and more disgusting, those (-) to stand there and look into the cold counter and we were actually feeling really bad about it and we had kind of tried to toy with the thought many years ago when the children were also home, we had like a porridge day and a soup day, and, but it kind of faded out again and then we thought, but shouldn’t we try again? Shouldn’t we try it? Yes, we should”.

(Monica, lines 53-62)

### Level 1. Characters’ positions

Monica’s approach to vegetarianism and veganism is at first glance a very practical one. Of course, social relations play a role in Monica’s narrative in the sense that she quickly in her narrative presentation of when she decided to become vegan comes to the conclusion that she is happy not to have done it alone but together with her husband (line 53). However, it is still practical in the sense that she presents her veganism as something that made perfect sense to try after her children had left home.

“M: Yeah (-) our family and our friends have received it extremely well/ I mean, we had really thought that we were about to, I mean wow, right? They have received it **so** well, you know? But I could feel that my family at some point, then they said “now, stop that nonsense, now you have done it, come back, right?” I mean, now they thought we should stop it, right?

I: Yeah, now you have gone off the rails?

M: Ha ha ha, yes, now we have gone off the rails (...)

(Monica, lines 157-166)

Monica presents a somewhat positive narrative about veganism with a focus on how well-received this lifestyle change has been with her family and friends despite expectations that family members would have given her a hard time about it. In this way, Monica positions her friends and family in her small stories as positively understanding despite the fact that they are, in fact, not that understanding. Monica does not seem to be frustrated about the fact that other people do not understand or embrace veganism, but instead focuses on explaining what their rationale might be at times of conflict:

”[passage is yelled rather loudly] “Ugh, then she sits there and doesn’t eat meat and doesn’t want that cow’s milk and actually we do know that she is right but it’s just provocative when we sit here at this great buffet and you are sitting right there now and haven’t taken any of these seven different kinds of meat, gosh you are **irritating**”, right?”

(Monica, lines 476-480)

From this quote, it is clear that Monica has constructed her own ideas about why people may react negatively when she practices veganism in social situations.

## Level 2. Positioning in the interview setting

Monica refuses to take on the positioning of someone who struggles with veganism and the discourse that veganism is difficult in terms of practical aspects despite my attempts:

I: Okay, cool. Now you were very briefly touching on the fact that it is not particularly easy to be a vegan necessarily, at least not if you are going out to eat for instance

M: But it is **so** much easier after three years where we have been it, I mean wow!

I: You can go out and eat and things like that?

M: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

I: Okay. When was the last time you did it?

M: Erm (---) two months ago we went to a real restaurant and then we have been to Green Burgers as well and then (-) but yes, but in terms of restaurants, that was two months ago.

I: Okay, okay, that is also possible here in Northern Jutland

M: It is. I mean, there is the one up at Vesterbro, that new restaurant up there, they make vegan food (-) then we sort of found out that the first course we had, the others had that as well, they just had lobster as well (-) yeah, but it was vegan and yeah, so that has become so much easier also with regard to convenience food and spreads and sliced products and so on, today you can buy all sorts of things, you couldn't back then".

(Monica, lines 68-92)

Monica insists on portraying a vegan lifestyle as something that is not difficult. Instead of claiming this directly, she contrasts it with how much more difficult it was in the beginning and thus uses the time dimension as an argument. Contrary to my attempts to get Monica to discuss impractical or difficult aspects of veganism, she presents vegetarianism and veganism as exclusively positive things, for example in this passage where she explains how food becomes more interesting and enjoyable:

"But (-) when you become a vegetarian and a vegan then you also get that joy and pleasure from cooking again because it quickly becomes like, if it's meat balls and so on (-) well, it's like starting all over again, then it's all kinds of things so it is, I **love** cookbooks, one could ask why, you can just find them online. **No**, I have, I mean I probably have most of the ones published in Danish and then I get inspiration from them and then I of course don't follow them to the letter, but I get inspired from them so it's very much like that (---) so it's not like, it's rarely the same we cook, I mean then it's something new almost every time, right?"

(Monica, lines 96-104)

Monica becomes really excited when she wants to persuade me of how interesting, enjoyable and positive it is for her to cook vegan food, drawing on how interesting it is. It is clear from this that Monica is determined to keep this narrative that veganism is neither difficult in practical or social terms.



### Level 3. Positioning a sense of identity from dominant discourses

When I express that it comes as a bit of a surprise to me that veganism can be *this* easy, it seems that Monica takes a very pragmatic position on veganism:

“But it also depends on what you are like because if you think that **everyone** should know about it and that you should sit and influence (-) well, I mean, I am not an activist either. I mean (-) but I participate in some things, you know? And spreading the word, but it’s also that thing about then they want to save the world and then they want to sit “**eww, eww, they eat meat**” (...) and we have decided that this is how it is going to be for **us**, and then others can do what **they** would like.

(Monica, 208-12; 217-218)

Here, Monica’s position really comes to the foreground as she explains that she has in fact chosen to be this pragmatic person who... She draws on the discourse that everyone should just mind their own business and not focus so much on what other people choose to do. It could be argued that Monica takes this approach to veganism in order to still be able to fit in and be as normal as other people. The principle of ‘who do you think you are’ becomes central as she does not want to stand out too much from the rest. And this is her way of achieving that. In this way, Monica does not in a particularly visible way use positioning and discourse in order to present her own vegan identity but rather, she draws on a pragmatic position and thus turns veganism and the way she chooses to live her life into something more private - something that she does not want to defend or explain why this is so.

### Picking up

After analysing the four different cases one by one according to the four categories (three levels of positioning and identity dilemmas), a short summary of the findings will now be sketched. These findings will afterwards be discussed in light of the sociocultural theoretical frame.

In general terms, the four different analyses presented offer very different positions on veganism, each focusing and going in depth on the nuances of what seems to be

relevant for their narrative and their identity. Each case, in particular the first three cases (Anne, Karen and Marie) set the scene for a discussion about the three identity dilemmas as presented in the theoretical section of this thesis, whereas the last case, titled “the pragmatic vegan” does not seem to revolve around the creation of a vegan identity at the same level – a finding that will also be discussed in the next section.

While some themes and discourses a common feature of the different cases – for instance, the frustration of having to defend a vegan lifestyle despite the fact that one is convinced this is the right thing to do or the discourse on enlightenment versus ignorance – the individual focus in each case is very different.

As mentioned earlier, the point is not to be able to generalise from the four cases in this study to all vegans. However, one thing happens in all four cases that could be interesting. Veganism seems to be the next step from some variant of vegetarianism. This is at least the first thing that is mentioned in the beginning of every narrative even though they have not been asked about this but have simply just been asked when they considered to become vegans for the first time. As also mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, studies looking into the differences between vegetarianism and veganism could be useful to better understand this phenomenon.

In the case of Anne, “the new vegan”, the focus is on support and close relationships. Anne draws on different discourses to position the people in her life as either with her or against her and uses discourses to explain behaviour in cases where she does not feel supported. Anne positions herself as a “good vegan” who does not break the rules and has the right motivations, even under extreme circumstances. The identity dilemma of agency is a theme throughout the case, as Anne presents all characters, including herself, as passive “under-goers” that are subject to external circumstances such as nationality. Throughout the narrative, she draws on different discourses within vegan communities and thus creates her vegan identity.

In the case of Karen, “the 98% vegan”, another identity dilemma functions as a theme throughout the analysis. Here, it is the dilemmatic position of changing through time versus remaining the same. Karen positions herself in various ways, implicitly and explicitly, throughout the case. Especially, she is hesitant about taking

on the label as an “extreme fanatic”, despite the fact that she has been rather extreme in the past, and in this way, juggles with the ambivalence of which kind of vegan identity she has through time and space.

“The failed vegan”, Marie, has many narratives on why veganism did not work out for her. In particular, she focuses on how it is important for her to be able to fit in and be normal, despite the fact that “normal” is not a position she takes on. Where Marie’s explanations for not fitting in used to be that she was overweight and a vegan, it is now due to the fact that she is a feminist. Here, the identity dilemma of uniqueness versus belonging comes into focus.

In the last case titled “The pragmatic vegan”, Monica focuses mainly on practical aspects of veganism. Monica strongly refuses any idea that veganism could be impractical or difficult and thus positions herself as a pragmatist who makes it work.

# Discussion

This discussion consists of two parts. Firstly, the results from the analysis are discussed in light of the theoretical framework and in light of other relevant perspectives. Following this, methodical and methodological aspects will be discussed.

## Discussion of findings

### Anne

When relating the findings of the analysis of Anne to Zittoun's model on change, the knowledge aspect becomes interesting. Knowledge seems to be the trigger that changes other aspects in the development of the way Anne positions a sense of identity and in this case, it appears that this knowledge, arbitrary as it may seem, is the whole reason that Anne has chosen this developmental path instead of another. This, however, does not mean that being a vegan is arbitrary for Anne – on the contrary, despite the fact that the initial knowledge about veganism came to her rather than her seeking it out, this knowledge was merely the rupture point that took her on the transition pathway towards a vegan identity. When relating narrative and sociocultural theory, then this change in knowledge has led to changes in both identity and the way Anne makes sense of the world, resulting in a stronger position as a vegan – which has led to Anne seeking more knowledge in vegan forums and Facebook groups which has, in turn, further influenced her knowledge and vegan position and thus her vegan identity and so on and so forth. This could also be an explanation why Anne seems to be under the influence of dominant discourses within vegan communities, for example the discourse on what the right motivations for a vegan should be.

This does not, however, shed light on why Anne throughout her narrative does not seem to have a sense of agency – or at least does not position herself as an agentic person. One could speculate how Anne positioned herself before she received the information about veganism. Who was she before veganism? Drawing again on Zittoun's model, an explanation could be that she did not have a lot of knowledge available before and therefore did not have the trigger she needed for change – an explanation that fits the contradiction Anne makes when she positions her entire family as “Jutlanders”. In this way, it could be that Anne has escaped the position of a

Jutlander by moving to Copenhagen and has thus started the cycle. What is particularly interesting from this is the fact that Anne, compared to the other vegans in this study, is the one who is most consistent in not consuming any kinds of animal products while at the same time being the vegan with the fewest explanations for why she has chosen to become a vegan in the first place.

## Karen

In the case of Karen, the developmental aspect is extremely visible. When looking at the analysis of Karen's case in light of a sociocultural perspective on development, her knowledge has developed by her experiencing first-hand what eating dairy entails. Through her making sense of this experience, her position as a vegan and thereby her vegan identity develops through the meaning-making process of narrative. Thereby, all aspects of the model on change are in play in a dynamic way. Looking at Karen's narrative from this angle also helps explain the various positions that she juggles with and her dilemmatic position with regard to developing through time while also remaining the same. Initially, she has the position of a normal, non-vegan human being who makes fun of vegans and who simply does not like the taste of meat. Following this, she takes on the position of the extreme vegan based on unpleasant experiences and has hereby become a vegan who is politically engaged in spreading the word. Lastly, she has taken on the position of a more pragmatic vegan who also wants to be relaxed about it. The developmental aspect is, as mentioned, interesting here because Karen goes back and forth in time when telling these stories and is able to position herself as all of the above, sometimes in the present and sometimes in the past tense. In this case, the provoking factor seems to be more related to identity than knowledge as was the case with Anne but again, this seems to be merely the trigger point as this prompts new meaning-making processes that influence all the other factors. From this, when Karen's identity develops through her sense-making, the way she makes sense of veganism also develops and thereby, the way she positions vegans including herself in her narrative develops as well – this is a possible explanation for how Karen during the course of a thirty-minute interview is able to take on positions as the bully who teased the vegans, as a vegan who was teased by bullies and a person who is reflecting upon and making sense of these positions while being in a third position.

## Marie

Knowledge, as was the case with Anne and Karen, seems to be an important aspect of Marie's position as a vegan. She positions herself as having been a vegan ("not vegan anymore") after having tried five or six times despite the fact that she has not been able to make it work for more than two months in total. What seems to have gone wrong for Marie is the transitioning into veganism which very quickly in her narrative results in her finally positioning herself as a "failed vegan" who simply could not make it work. What is really interesting in this case is that Marie presents two conflicting positions – one that is enlightened and one that is ignorant – and knowledge as something that can on the one hand be reached but that can on the other hand also be let go of as well. This is a possible explanation for how she is able to move back and forth between the positions of being and not being a vegan. This may at first glance seem like a paradoxical thing to do – when she decides to become a vegan in the first place, she opens her eyes to some knowledge that one should not be able to unlearn in the way she presents it. However, she uses her different positions as a means to navigate and manipulate the amount of knowledge she has (or chooses to see) in order to shape her identity in another direction that fits her needs and desires better than the vegan identity could. She does this through meaning-making processes – in this case, a narrative on all the reasons why being a vegan does not make sense for her even though she in fact knows – and admits – that this would be the "right" thing to be. In this connection, the dilemma of happiness emerges. On the one hand, Marie positions herself as an unhappy and lonely martyr during her vegan quest and implies that without veganism, happiness would be achievable. But on the other hand, she still does not achieve this as she is now unhappy because of another position – feminism. If this dynamic is put in the model on change, it is noteworthy how Marie attempts to manipulate her identity by taking on different positions in order to reach her goals.

## Monica

The case of Monica is in many ways very different from the rest of the cases as Monica does not make use of positioning and discourse with regard to veganism to the same extent as the other three. Instead, she draws on a pragmatic position and refuses

any positioning into someone who struggles the least. It could be of relevance that Monica is not practicing veganism alone, as opposed to the other vegans in this study, but is doing it with her husband. In this way, she has support in practical terms and finds acceptance from a close relationship. At the same time, Monica differs from the rest of the vegans in that she is well-established in life. Whereas Anne, Karen and Marie are all single and in their 20s, and probably still searching for things in life, Monica is happily married and living in a house in the country. An explanation could be that she does not feel the same pressure from the surrounding world and this is the reason why every aspect of veganism is easy for her. This is not to suggest that there is a direct connection between age and how easy or difficult veganism is but compared to the other cases, Monica does not seem to struggle with the same problems with regard to close relationships, social contexts and so on. Another explanation could be that Monica is not in need of a vegan identity simply because she already has a firm and well-established identity as something else. This account would explain why she is not in need of establishing a vegan identity through narrative by the use of positioning. If these speculations are taken to the next level, all of the above could, in fact, also explain why Monica does not seem to struggle with identity dilemmas and, in general, seems happier than Anne, Karen and Marie, despite the fact that she is the only one who does not claim to be a happier person in relation to veganism.

These explanations do not, however, explain why Monica totally rejects the positioning I try to ascribe to her on several occasions with regard to whether veganism is difficult. The degree of difficulty when practicing veganism across narratives is very different, which punctures the assumption that being a vegan in our society is a challenge. One explanation for this is, of course, that I have been the creator or at least the co-creator in the other cases of the narrative that veganism is difficult because of my wrongful assumption that veganism is impractical and difficult to practice and that Monica simply does not want to buy into this narrative as it is in strong opposition to her identity and the philosophy that “it’s about how you see it” . Following the discussion on the degree of difficulty concerning veganism, one more point is worth discussing. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, it is often easier to go through a normative transition where there is a general acceptance that this change is truly a rupture. The reason for this is that one will find more support and acceptance. Ve-

ganism is a transition that is not normative and this could then be an explanation. This might also explain the discourse about how one is oneself to blame for choosing a lifestyle that is not in concordance with the majority that Anne draws on in her narrative. Is the difficult thing about veganism that it is atypical? If one has a need to be typical, then veganism does not work. Unless you have some tools to position yourself in ways where it gets possible again. Anne does this by removing agency and drawing on discourses but Marie does not succeed in doing this. Or unless you have someone supporting you as is the case with Monica.

## Methodical and methodological discussions

### A discussion on case studies

When I initially approached Anne after being referred by a colleague, she was a bit hesitant about taking part in this study because she was concerned that she might be too inexperienced as a vegan to give me useful information about it. Of course, I explained that this was not an issue at all as I simply wanted to know about her life and her experiences with veganism. This was particularly interesting because I had an assumption that she would provide fruitful and nuanced information about the early stages of transitioning into veganism as she would still be adapting to her new lifestyle and would therefore not have to go back in time in remembering. After conducting the rest of the interviews, however, it turned out that this case was in many ways the most extreme of all the cases as she turned out to be the only one who strictly avoids all kinds of meat and dairy. The same conclusion can be made about Karen. I knew that she had been a vegan for many years and has through her vegan life been politically active in vegan communities. After the interview with Anne, I had learned that cases are not necessarily what they seem to be and was therefore careful not to have too many presumptions about Karen based on the little information I had about her before the interview. Despite of this learning experience, the assumption that Karen was a very “serious” vegan did not seem too presumptuous. However, even though Karen in many ways lived up to my expectations, she turned out to be the least strict vegan apart from Marie. As it turns out, the case I chose because the informant was very new with veganism and the case I chose because the informant sounded very serious turned out to be complete opposites. Two conclusions can be made about this. First of all, it strengthens the point that cases are not



always what they seem – and secondly, the opportunity to go in depth with single case studies can prove extremely fruitful.

## Limitations

Despite the fact that many considerations were made when finding participants for this study – and despite good arguments for the fact that demographic characteristics are not always as important as the compatibility with the conceptual, social and cultural characteristics relating to the research question, as explained earlier in the ‘Method’ section, it turned out that the one case that really stands out from the rest is the participant who is twenty to thirty years older than the rest. This could, of course, be irrelevant but it still should be noted that the rest of the participants are women in their 20s. This was a compromise owing to time constraints and availability of willing participants.

One limitation of a narrative approach – in particular, when the researcher is not experienced with this type of interviewing, is that interviewing is a craft that requires practice. This means that the quality of the interviews improved tremendously as they progressed as each of them was a learning experience. For example, when listening to the interview with Anne, it became clear that many positions could have been challenged which could have given another picture – in this specific example, Anne might have shown a greater tendency towards agency, had this been a broader focus throughout the interview rather than a focus in the analysis. This, of course, does not mean that the interview with Anne is compromised in any way as the point of this social constructivist approach is that we negotiated the conversation as it went along – Anne might even have positioned me in such a way that I was not able to challenge her more than I already did. Another point here is that recording the interviews on video could have made it possible to include more aspects of *how* the small stories were told. Another limitation of a narrative approach – or, at least something that is worthy of a discussion, is the fact that entering a research context for a narrative interview requires stepping out of time and place – which comes at a risk of compromising the capturing of the time dimension. The time dimension can, of course, be explored through narratives and as the goal of this study is to explore the processual nature of veganism, it is plain sailing. However, another way of getting

insight into the time dimension could be by applying a longitudinal aspect to the study. For example, it could have been interesting to follow vegans in the making by, for instance, going to the supermarket with them for the first time or having them write daily diaries about their transition into veganism – as this would both provide deep insight into the case and it would provide other contexts to explore. Also, following a vegan during a period of time could enable them to reflect explicitly on the more mundane everyday aspects of veganism – the aspects that are so ordinary and familiar that they are difficult to verbalise.

## Conclusion

My goal with this thesis was to explore the vegan identity of four individuals. This was done by adopting a qualitative approach from a cultural psychology perspective where meaning-making processes is the center of focus. How the intentional construction of meaning leads to developing a vegan identity was explored by analysing small stories obtained from narrative interviews by the use of Bamberg's three levels of positioning and identity dilemmas. Generally, the four case studies offered different ways of positioning with regard to veganism, each focusing and going in depth on the nuances of what was relevant for the specific narrative and identity. Three out of four cases seemed to revolve around one of the three identity dilemmas, whereas the last case was less willing to fit under these categories. In the light of Zittoun's sociocultural work on ruptures, transitions and model on change, the narratives were discussed as semiotic tools that can be used to study negotiations of identities. When the findings were related to the sociocultural theory, a general discussion revolved around how the three different kinds of change – sense, identity and knowledge – were, in fact, connected in the sense that when one of the components changed, it had consequences for the others. Lastly, methodical and methodological subjects and the limitations of this thesis were discussed. Here, I concluded that cases are not always what they seem and that despite many reflections on selection of cases, more information about the phenomenon is still out there.

Some areas of veganism are still not explored. Especially research on veganism in non-Western countries is called for (Ruby, 2012) together with the differences between veganism and other variants of vegetarianism.

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