Unpacking privilege in vegan education efforts

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In a world of food deserts and many other inequalities, Professor Corey Wrenn gives tips on how vegan outreach can be made more inclusive for all walks of life.

According to sociological research, ‘ethical vegan mobilization’ is, statistically speaking, primarily a Western, white, and affluent phenomenon. Veganism tends to be perceived as a "white thing." It's something for the well-to-do. Elitist even. If this is the case, this could have serious implications for effectiveness in vegan outreach efforts.
Dr. Breeze Harper of the Sistah Vegan Project argues that ethical eating is unjustly bound to class and race privilege. It is a privilege often denied to those with a history of colonialism and oppression. I conducted a content analysis of two leading magazines in the vegan movement published between 2000 and 2012 to test her theory and found that, indeed, veganism is presented as a “white thing.” Books, websites, educational literature, and even podcasts overwhelmingly feature whites and reflect white culture. In other words, a movement has been constructed that welcomes some, but alienates others. This is not to say that people of color aren’t vegan or active for other animals, but their presence is made invisible in mainstream channels.

However, it is also true that race is intimately connected with socioeconomic status. A legacy of colonialism, slavery, and discrimination (which continues to this day) has ensured that entire groups of people are systematically stripped of life chances and denied quality of life. Food justice activist and cookbook author Bryant Terry explains that this history of oppression has given rise to high-calorie comfort foods that increasingly imperil the physical health of the African American community. These foods reflect a rich culture and foster family togetherness, but, ultimately, they do not reflect traditional plant-based diets. Indeed, Harper argues that soul food is a colonized diet—it is based on leftover undesirables from the slaveholder’s meals. This colonized diet, Terry and Harper argue, maintains oppression into the modern day. This is exacerbated by the ill-effects of food deserts, where people of color are more likely to live. Food deserts are areas where fresh foods are inaccessible, but fast food and processed food options proliferate. Food racism, then, continues unabated and poses a unique challenge to vegan outreach.

Because socioeconomic status and physical health are highly correlated, low income whites also tend to be ignored by vegan education efforts. People who can afford to eat better will live longer and more healthfully. The fact of the matter is that fresh fruits and vegetables (and even water) can be more expensive than their processed counterparts: particularly in the US.
Access is a problem as well. Food deserts not only affect inner cities, but also rural regions, both of which are disproportionately populated by poor people. Vegan communities, however, tend to congregate in large cities in gentrified neighborhoods, which can further polarize vegans and non-vegans across class lines. Veganism becomes something from “the big city,” and ethical eating, associated with affluence and cultural capital, can inflame class barriers.

**Cultural and educational barriers**

Culture will also influence a community's receptiveness to veganism. If veganism is consistently portrayed as a “white thing,” white-centric approaches to outreach have the potential to repel people who have experienced a history of white oppression. Food culture, which is strongly related to socioeconomic status, can complicate this. In college, I worked in the produce section of the grocery store in my small, low income hometown in Appalachia. Corn and tomatoes sold as fast as I could stock them, but higher priced organic foods and tofu were met with suspicion and expired on the shelves. Some foods are familiar and affordable; others are not. How willing would you be to buy something strange and untasted if it was also expensive?

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Compounding this unfamiliarity is the reality that sometimes those institutions we trust to inform us about healthy and ethical eating can deceive. Nutrition and lunch programmes in schools are oftentimes inadequate and are sometimes influenced by “meat” and dairy industries that supply the educational materials. Given the low priority nutrition education is given in the school system, knowledge about healthful and ethical eating may be a privilege reserved for those with more cultural capital. Those with the ability to obtain higher education and have the leisure time to research nutrition will have a leg up in life.

Literacy interferes with our ability to safely navigate the food system as well. The National Center for Education Statistics in the United States, for instance, reports that in 2003, approximately 15% of Americans lacked basic prose literacy skills. Meanwhile, a 2011 study
conducted by the Humane Research Council (now Faunalytics) found that, while almost half of Americans read below the 8th grade level, all of the vegan literature it analyzed read at the 11th grade or college level. Educational systems that fail to equip citizens with adequate reading skills also disproportionately disadvantage lower class peoples. Therefore, higher reading levels exclude the poor and they exclude many people of color.

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Deconstructing white, affluent veganism

I propose that vegan advocates adopt more inclusive goals in their outreach efforts. Advocates should step outside their comfort zones, peer outside their bubble of privilege, question the worldviews they take for granted as “normal,” and pay attention to the voices around them. They should pay attention to historical experiences, practice sensitivity, and recognize that their personal background does not represent the background of everyone else. Activists should develop a plan to combat the effects of food deserts, reach beyond metropolitan areas to rural regions, and make literature more accessible.

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Some concrete ways to improve vegan outreach include choosing language and concepts that are appropriate for the audience in mind (could an 8th grader make sense of it?) and recipes that utilise easy to source and afford ingredients (think beans and canned vegetables, not tofu or Daiya cheese). Always keep in mind the many environmental and cultural barriers that face underprivileged communities. For instance, the Food Empowerment Project regularly frames its outreach in relation to the struggles of Hispanic communities, particularly those working in agriculture.
The key to effective and inclusive advocacy, I believe, is to remain sensitive to a diversity of experiences. When leaflets are written, talks are given, and campaigns are designed, consider the cultural background of those who will be interpreting it. For instance, maybe racism doesn't directly impact many vegan organizers, but it will be impacting much of their audience, and it should be acknowledged. Perhaps a stirring philosophical discussion of speciesism appeals to well-educated campaigners, but much of the audience is not going to relate to college-level ethics discourse. Finally, communities that are excluded are perhaps the most valuable resource. Organizers can glean the most useful insights by opening themselves up to the voices of the marginalized themselves.

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