



'I've Got Nothing Against Vegans... But': To Divulge, Dissemble or Divert Positionality in Rural Research Settings

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Abstract

Changes in diet and related purchasing habits at a societal level have become a significant source of stress for farmers in recent years. The rise of vegetarianism and veganism means that the use of these dietary terms, and those who identify with them, may act as potential triggers for those working with livestock. This paper considers the specific methodological issue of how to position oneself within the research process in rural domains, with regards to personal identity related to diet. Focussing on non-meat eaters conducting research with livestock farmers, it explores the moral implications and appropriateness of how and whether authors choose to truthfully present their own diet-related identities in research settings. Using ethnographic descriptions of personal experience as well as secondary source material, the authors conclude that three possible response behaviours at the farmer-researcher interface are available when it comes to potentially 'exposing' one's dietary identity – to divulge, to dissemble, or to divert, and that each comes with its own ethical and moral challenges. We argue that the research field and the researcher's personal world are separate, though blurred, realms and, while the collection of quality data is important to any study, behavioural decisions should always be undertaken with boundaries of safety, and emotional and moral comfort in mind.

Keywords Positionality · Reflexivity · Qualitative research · Farming · Veganism · Vegetarianism · Methodological decision-making · Diet

Introduction

This article examines the positionality¹ of non-meat eating researchers engaged in studies involving livestock farming and farmers. It reflects on both the interface at which researcher and farmer interact, as well as the emotional and moral implications of decisions made in relation to livestock-related projects. More specifically, it questions the

¹ We use the term positionality to refer to the ways in which our personal identities, views and experiences variously influence the ways in which we understand our research topics and engage with our participants, in recognition that this has implications for the production and interpretation of research findings.

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appropriateness of divulging, dissembling or diverting dietary preferences during the research process. Both authors are female, from non-farming backgrounds, and are under the age of 45. Both authors are non-meat eaters but neither is a vegan. The idea for this paper arose following informal discussions between researchers regarding a number of rural social scientists known to the authors who work with livestock farmers *professionally* by conducting research which often results in support or outcomes which may benefit them economically or emotionally, yet whom they have made a moral decision not to support *personally* through purchasing and consumption-related behaviours (a point we expand on in the section below). As far as we are aware, this is not an issue that has hitherto been considered in any depth, although other researchers have noted the positional ambiguities raised by their identities as vegans or vegetarians interviewing farmers (Fraser and Taylor 2022; Neal and Walters 2006).

The importance of informal discussions concerning reflexivity and positionality with other researchers is described by Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) as kitchen table reflexivity - a tool to interrogate positionalities, which allows for the potential 'to go beyond providing a 'shopping list' of positionality statements to develop deeper discussions about the fluidity of positionality across the research process' (Folkes 2022: 1). Focusing on our positions as non-meat eaters conducting research with farmers, we seek to highlight the implications of such research encounters in terms of experiences, ethics, physical and emotional safety, and moral comfort, and consider how to negotiate or justify decisions related to revealing our own personal choices through the lens of reflexivity and positionality. The focus of this paper is on experiences of interviews and focus groups, where there is direct interaction between the researcher and the researched. While positionality affects other forms of social studies, such as quantitative data collection through online surveys, due to limited to no face-to-face interaction occurring, dietary-related positionality may impact less at the researcher-participant interface because the participant is unable to ask direct questions of the researcher. However, this is not to imply that dietary decisions might not influence the design of quantitative surveys or other projects involving quantitative methods. The authors recognise that positionality extends beyond how one or more party regards the other at a surface level, and agree that 'questions about reflexivity are part of a broader debate about ontological, epistemological and axiological components of the self, intersubjectivity and the colonization of knowledge' (Berger 2015: 220) – i.e. the ways in which different forms of knowledge are interpreted and valued in research. They are also aware that questions relating to positionality, reflexivity and diet are not unique to research involving livestock farming or other more obvious areas such as hunting, but also to other research where the revelation of such a dietary preference may still be seen as contrary to the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of certain places or demographic groups (Ilavarasi 2017).

Qualitative research has moved away from strict attempts at objectivity and impersonality towards a more reflexive approach, recognising that 'the intersubjective nature of social life means that the researcher and the people being researched have shared meanings' that, rather than acting as a hindrance, can actually prove to be advantageous in the research process (England 1994:243). According to England (1994), 'reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions' (ibid.: 244). The consideration of positionality – i.e. who we are and what we believe – is a key part of this reflexive process through which we examine how our own personal characteristics, relationships and perspectives influence research outcomes (Rose 1997). In fact Reich (2021) argues that 'qualitative research is qualitative because of the explicit ways that it considers the positionality of both the researcher and the researched as core aspects of inquiry' (ibid.: 576).

Reflexivity requires a consideration of how research encounters might be influenced by the ways in which researchers present their identities to informants, as well as how informants perceive the multiple and intersecting identities of the researcher, including aspects such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexual identity and class (Plowman 1995: 20). Knowledge production throughout the rural research process must be understood with both of these facets in mind. Pini (2004) adds that ‘we need to be aware of the limits of any reflexive journey we may take, and seek to incorporate into our reflexive process some of the ambiguities of identity work in the process of research’ (ibid.: 170). In her study of gender relations in the Australian sugar industry, Pini applies Stanley and Wise’s concept of one’s own ‘intellectual autobiography’ (2004: 47) to her fieldwork. She recognises that the various different identities she inhabited outside of that of an academic proved important to her informants, such as that of being a farmer’s daughter, an Italian-Australian, ‘a nice country girl’ and a woman. However, her feminist identity was not brought to the fore during the research, assuming that it would create negative connotations amongst her participants and detract from the positive relationship that had been built up via the other, less ‘otherly’ identities. On later reflection, Pini remarks that this possible deception (by omission) regarding the feminist aspect of her identity means that her ‘reflexive journey on this issue is not complete’ (Pini 2004: 175), inferring that her lack of experience may have prevented her from challenging participants, herself, or her research outcomes, by divulging her position as a feminist. Nonetheless, we argue that it is sometimes necessary to present a dissembled position (i.e. disguising or concealing a certain aspect of our identity) to a research participant for the purpose of both building rapport and to ensure researcher, and in some cases, participant, security.

Gender relations, for example, call for a consideration of researcher safety. Chiswell and Wheeler 2016 consider the difference between acceptable and intolerable behaviours exhibited by interviewees in the rural interview research process and how factors such as the isolated nature of rural locations, the blurred line between work and public space on a farm holding, and the social demographics and cultural characteristics of farming communities can all contribute to ‘certain risks, biases and subjectivities’ (ibid.: 230). They examine the ethical implications of accepting unwelcome comments from farmers based on the age and gender of the researcher but admit that the ‘need to secure interviews left us disinclined to challenge such comments from otherwise obliging farmers – a decision which arguably compromised our own feminist values’ (ibid.: 232). They also mention how their age and gender meant that their ‘role in the interview was largely defined by the subordinate position constructed’ for them by the, generally older, male participants (ibid.: 232). However, their ‘unthreatening’ position also allowed a less formal dynamic that may not have been offered to older, male colleagues. Their experiences were mirrored in research conducted by other females working in rural research (Clements 2022; Nye 2017).

Such behaviours on the part of the male participant are reported to often be either ignored or dismissed by the female researcher in order to preserve her professional continuum. Furthermore, due to the snowball sampling method incorporated to recruit new respondents, as well as the infamous gossip networks that operate within the agricultural community, the decision not to respond or react is considered a pragmatic one, despite it contradicting personal feminist views.

Gender is not the only stressor which might place a researcher at risk, contradict their values, or impact upon the quality of the data collected. According to Knox and Burkard (2009), it is important to conduct interviews in an incisive way that ‘yields rich and meaningful data while simultaneously helping participants feel safe enough to explore in depth often difficult experiences with a relative stranger’ (ibid.: 566). Such safety is believed to be achieved through the following: building of rapport, developing trust,

and establishing likeness (MacDonald and Struthers Montford 2014). The latter is often framed in terms of whether the researcher is an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’, with likeness and ‘insider-ness’ viewed as helpful in establishing trust and understanding with the participant (Atkinson et al. 2003). On the other hand, insider/outsider relations are continually in flux (Adu-ampomg and Adams 2020; Folkes 2022) and researchers are always negotiating multiple positionalities and associated power relations (Tarrant 2013). Furthermore, Neal and Walters (2006) describe how retaining a certain amount of “liminality and inbetweenness” in terms of insider/outsider can be helpful for facilitating a relationship where participants feel able to be open and confide in someone who they perceive to be a relatively neutral, but trusted and informed, outsider. This is certainly something that we have observed in our research, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as mental health, with participants often expressing their gratitude at having the opportunity to talk to someone outside their usual social circle. Openly declaring a dietary choice that we know to be contested by many farmers may threaten this perceived neutrality and trustworthiness.

In the admission of being a vegetarian or vegan, rapport built through ‘likeness’ might be inhibited due to it being a ‘marker of difference’ (MacDonald and Struthers Montford 2014: 738). During fieldwork several years prior to the writing of this paper, it was the experience of the authors that the most common question posed by farmers seeking likeness with the researcher was ‘are you from a farming background’? Even if the first author was not asked, she often felt the need to tell them her history of working on farms in order to validate herself, whilst the second author would sometimes emphasise her personal identity as a ‘country girl’, raised in a remote rural area. As Neal and Walters (2006) describe, we too were thus ‘able to selectively draw on biography and related resources to provide performances of rurality’ (ibid: 185) that we believed would help build rapport through a sense of ‘likeness’ with participants. However, as dietary preferences have changed and vegan movements have grown rapidly over the last few years, non-likeness questions are becoming more frequent either before or during interviews, and must be planned for and considered carefully in terms of both methodological decisions and reflexivity, due to the risk of identities becoming politicised and the additional potential for creating tensions. Political and, as we shall show in this paper, consumption identities can present an ‘ally or opponent’ dilemma (Cherry et al. 2011) in an arena where participants already feel that they operate within an ally versus opponent world.

Woman, Townie, Young, Non-Meat Eaters – the Positional Layers That Separate Us

Both authors are white, cisgender, heterosexual females in their early forties. Author one became vegetarian at the age of nine. She grew up in an urban area in Devon but has subsequently lived rurally in various parts of the world and has been employed as a worker on a number of farms. Author two, who has been vegetarian since her early twenties, grew up (and continues to reside) in rural Devon but has no claim to a farming background.

Currently, the personal choice of both authors not to eat meat is influenced by a variety of views and concerns, including considerations around human health and environmental sustainability, but is driven perhaps most strongly by beliefs regarding animals’ rights and a sense that since they would be emotionally incapable of personally killing an animal (unless perhaps under the direst of circumstances), it would not be right for them to eat it. In a broader sense, neither author necessarily objects to all meat-eating per se and accept that historically it has comprised an important part of the human diet, and continues to form an essential part of subsistence farming in many parts of the world today. We also

recognise the potential benefits of incorporating livestock into a mixed farming system in terms of soil health and sustainability (although appreciate that this is a contested area of debate), as well as the cultural importance of livestock farming to national pastoral landscapes, rural communities and farmers themselves. Such appreciations have been built partly through our research work with farmers and other agricultural stakeholders, exemplifying the fluid nature of positionality and the need for continual reflection regarding this. Given these considerations, neither author would necessarily advocate eliminating animals entirely from farming systems, but both strongly support sustainable methods of production and an emphasis on high animal welfare standards, alongside reduced meat consumption among the general population. These debates aside, we do frequently carry out research that will potentially benefit the livestock (and wider) farming community (for example, in relation to improving access to agri-environment schemes and other forms of public support), approaching this with a genuine respect for what they do, and a personal desire to help improve personal wellbeing, farm business viability, and wider farming practices within agriculture. We can acknowledge elements of cognitive dissonance in our views about meat-eating and livestock farming, and recognise the irony in our (context-specific) support of livestock farming making us professionally complicit in the killing of the animals we seek to save, but stand by both our vegetarianism and career pathways as personal choices.

Conducting fieldwork with farmers, especially face-to-face, can be a challenge for even the most experienced of researchers. The farming community is recognised as being a particularly hard-to-reach cohort for research purposes, for a variety of reasons stemming from limited time availability to a lack of trust (Hurley et al. 2022). Research often relies upon gatekeepers to provide access to farmers (who can be farmers or members of the farming industry for example), or snowball sampling, where farmers or related stakeholders recommend other potential participants for a study. This is usually based upon positive interactions and a certain level of trust, wherein the farmer feels understood by the researcher and assured about the value, quality and independence of the study. A long history of feeling constrained by bureaucratic regulations and inspections and, more recently, feeling marginalised by rural ‘incomers’ and criticised by the media, has led to some members of the agricultural community feeling isolated (see Wheeler et al. 2023) and understandably suspicious of unfamiliar researchers, particularly if the research is funded by, or connected to, ‘official’ bodies. In our experience, many are also fatigued by the sheer number of invitations to participate in research studies that they receive, making recruitment increasingly challenging (Clark 2008; Saxby 2020). Our experience has shown that it is easier to develop interest in a project, and acquire access to farming populations, if you work for an independent, reputable body and if you have a pre-existing network upon which to draw.

Once the hurdle of access has been overcome, and an interview or focus group has been set up, the development of rapport with the subject becomes paramount. We conduct sociological research on rural issues and, while many of our studies require few personal details, some investigate sensitive topics such as mental health, suicide, personal perceptions, life experiences, and fears. Topics around environmental management, sustainable intensification, and changing agricultural policies can also arouse strong emotional responses from participants who feel frustrated or passionate about a particular issue. By introducing one’s own positionality into the discussion, one is openly politicising the fieldwork process beyond the original focus (assuming that positionality is not a focus), and possibly jeopardising the quality of data collection. Expressing a potentially controversial personal dietary choice can create an immediate barrier and disturb any rapport that may have already been established, as ‘an individual’s consumption directly affects how they are perceived’

(Calvert 2014: 17). Certain positions (e.g. race) need no introducing and the process of ‘othering’ is already in action on part of the farmer being interviewed. The individuals we have engaged with through our research have held diverse identities, but it is perhaps most common for us to be interviewing a white, male farmer over the age of fifty. Although alike to this ‘typical interviewee’ in terms of ethnicity, we are female, from a non-farming background, and relatively young. Thus in these contexts, our ‘otherness’ is already multi-layered with each level potentially distancing us one step away from establishing a bond with the participant. We might negotiate this situation by demonstrating an acceptable level of knowledge and understanding of farming, gathered from our experience ‘in the field’, and by being open about aspects of the industry where we lack expertise.

With regards to dietary identity, eating meat can be considered a gendered process of consumption, meaning our vegetarianism can further accentuate our (female) ‘otherness’ (Calvert 2014). So how do we deal with this additional level of ‘otherness’, being one which is the most likely to either be met with negativity or stimulate discomfort among some participants? Below we explore three behavioural responses we are faced with choosing, either prior to a project’s inception or in the moment of fieldwork where a decision regarding whether to disclose our dietary preferences must be rapidly made.

To Divulge, Dissemble or Divert? Negotiating the Question of ‘What Do You Eat’?

In our experience, the likelihood of farmers asking us whether we consume meat or other animal products is partly dependent upon both the topic of research and the situational context of the research encounter. Research interviews or focus groups held over mealtimes or in places where food is being served are perhaps the most likely to prompt questions about our dietary choices, but the topic can arise at any time, particularly if we are discussing topics such as climate change (where debates around the contribution of livestock farming to greenhouse gas emissions are pertinent). The subject may also arise during Veganuary (an annual campaign where consumers are encouraged to consume a vegan diet for the duration of January) or following a recent high profile programme or article in the media. Veganism has also frequently arisen in our research on mental health in farming communities, due to concerns around how the public perceive farming and the stress this causes to farmers. As a topical issue featured regularly in mainstream and social media, we are finding such discussions are becoming more common in our research and questions such as ‘you’re not a vegan, are you?’ are recurring more frequently.

When participants are drawn to the topic, either spontaneously or through research questions, we have found they often reveal a position of being the judge, the persecuted, or the consensor. We demonstrate this below with reference to comments made by farmers during a variety of research projects we have been involved in.

The Judge

The response of ‘the judge’ is to dismiss vegan and non-meat eating diets entirely, labelling them as a ‘fad’, or associating related decisions as misinformed or ignorant.

“Not enough is being done to combat veganism. It is being promoted in schools as a way to save the planet and climate change. Milk and meat alternatives need to be

shown for what they are - profit making commodities. Someone should challenge the statements made in TV adverts” (Study participant - Farmer)
“Vegans need educating on diets” (Study participant - Farmer)
“People being vegetarian and vegan, if we can perhaps teach them it is actually, it is the quality of food, not what you are kind of eating because actually growing food for vegans is still harmful to the environment” (Study participant - Farmer)

Within ‘the judge’ position, there appears to be a tendency to project blame on to one or more individuals or organisations, perpetuating a ‘them and us’ narrative which is shared among peers to produce commonality.

“Chris Packham and other vegans cause stress to farmers that produce best quality meat and dairy that should demand better prices. Food is too cheap” (Study participant - Farmer)
“This attitude is promoted and endorsed by societies such as the Vegan Society and the likes of David Attenborough. Truly depressing” (Study participant - Farmer)

In our experience, those who position themselves as the judge often speak more aggressively or angrily when discussing non-meat diets. One of the authors has experienced more than one participant rising from their seat and thumping their fist on a table or wall during conversations, where before they had been calm and relaxed.

The Persecuted

A more common position taken by participants is that of the persecuted, expressing frustration, sadness or hopelessness at being the victim of what one farmer called a ‘vegan witch hunt against anyone who’s producing food conventionally’.

“Many British people think food comes from supermarkets and farmers are a bunch of smelly, polluting, subsidy grabbing, animal cruelty, egotistical individuals, and we are worse in nature than serial killers!” (Study participant - Farmer)
“And farmers [...] tend to feel that they’re constantly criticised. They’re criticised for adopting modern farming techniques. They’re criticised for using too much nitrogen. They’re criticised for causing the decline in farmland birds. And then they’re now being criticised for growing livestock, or rearing livestock, when... with veganism. You know, some of this stuff gets quite nasty” (Study participant - Industry stakeholder)

The Consenter

A third position is one of acceptance and prospect. Some farmers view veganism as an opportunity and have adapted their business model to cater for shifts in dietary preferences away from meat, or may even have made such a choice themselves:

“Although we are a farming family my son and I are interested in the challenges of climate change and as farmers feel we have the opportunities to make a difference and contrary to many farmers, our entire family are vegan” (Study participant - Farmer)

Others take a more nuanced view on the matter, qualifying their opinion with statements such as:

“They can eat vegan diets, so long as that vegan meal is produced in the UK” (Study participant - Farmer)

Such instances of ‘consenter’ viewpoints appear, however, to still be relatively scarce, at least in our experiences.

Potential Researcher Responses

The growing strength and prevalence of less positive comments regarding non-meat eating suggests that how we respond to questions about our dietary choices, and the various issues and implications associated with different approaches, deserves deeper scrutiny and consideration, both on a practical level and as part of a reflexive endeavour. We seek to do this below with regards to three potential options: to divulge, dissemble or divert our dietary choices.

Before we proceed, we feel it necessary to clarify our own positions and past responses to farmers’ questions regarding our vegetarianism. We rarely make a specific methodological decision concerning how to respond to this question prior to going out in the field. In general, however, we avoid having discussions with farmers about our dietary choices where possible because we are aware of the sensitivities and issues the topic can raise. Neither do we particularly wish to bring our personal views into the research encounter, although we recognise that a certain amount of ‘autobiographical bleed’ (Neal and Walters 2006) is inevitable through both spoken and unspoken elements of our positionalities. We therefore tend to employ ‘dissembling’ tactics should the topic arise, although we have also ‘divulged’ our vegetarianism to farmers where the situation has demanded it.

To Divulge

Some researchers, rather than make intuitive decisions based upon their rapport with the participant, make the decision prior to interview that, should they be asked, they *will* disclose their dietary preferences (Fraser and Taylor 2022) although it is ‘not an easy position to occupy’ (ibid.: 7). Sutton (1997) used their difference as a vegetarian to stimulate debate and create data as part of their research process. Divulging personal dietary preferences in the presence of farmers has been associated with feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment on the part of the researcher (Hurn 2013) and unless a particular bond has already been established with the participant, it may highlight ‘otherness’, compromise rapport and pose a risk to the entire research process.

We believe that while the potential for discomfort to the researcher should not be actively avoided in fieldwork planning, it should be regarded in terms of gradations. Mild discomfort may be tolerable in the interests of data collection but more extreme discomfort that puts researcher safety at risk should not be accepted. Veganism is widely recognised as a polarising issue and anti-vegan discourses can be derogatory and marginalising (Cole and Morgan 2011; Aguilera-Carnerero and Carretero-González 2021; Gregson et al. 2022). Our own research experiences show that the subject can certainly raise emotive responses from some farmers, who may perceive veganism as a threat to their livelihoods and antithetical to

their role in society. A respondent to one of our surveys on mental health and wellbeing wrote that:

“Veganism and new fad diets all in favour of saving the planet are the biggest challenge to UK agriculture at the present moment” (Study participant - Farmer)

Another simply stated: “I hate vegans”. Negative exchanges with vegan activists in the past can also influence farmer perceptions and engender sentiments of anger and hostility. For instance, one respondent said that “I have problems with vegans who try to tell me to how to farm my land: If they keep after me, I do tell them which way to go home via a nearby mineshaft.”

In our experience, such sentiments are not necessarily expressed with such strong language in face-to-face interviews and are often softened by expressions like “I’ve got nothing against vegans but...” For instance, one farmer said:

“I have got nothing against people wanting to do that, I like vegetarian food myself, but, they have got so much influence nowadays and, in the real world if you are really up against it, where would we be if everything was that way?”

Nevertheless, as a ‘politically and emotionally charged topic’ (Paterson et al. 1999: 263), conversations around veganism have the potential to raise tempers and elicit aggressive behaviours, presenting a ‘high-risk situation’ (ibid.: 263) for researcher safety. Any decision on the part of the researcher to divulge their non-meat eating status must therefore bear such safety risk in mind and, we would argue, should not necessarily be made in advance. Rather, the researcher should be sensitive to the particular context of the research encounter and responsive to their own intuition regarding the response it may trigger. It is not uncommon for the news that the researcher does not eat meat to be met with humour, teasing, or in some cases, support (Hurn 2013). However, this behaviour can border upon ‘shaming’ as one of the authors experienced when, having divulged her dietary preferences to a significant gatekeeper within a community, at lunch time when many farmers (and potential study participants) arrived at the lunch place, it was publicly announced that she was a vegetarian and many people laughed, with some turning their backs to her. Divulging to a group of farmers, as a result, now makes that author feel less safe, as compared to divulging to an individual.

Equally, the risk to the participant must be considered. Consumption and dietary choices of the researcher that are counter to the business, ideology and lifestyle of the participant have the potential to add to or trigger existing discomfort already being experienced by participants in relation to this issue. Research has found that veganism is a common source of stress for farmers. For example, one survey of the agricultural community in England and Wales found that 20% of respondents were stressed by the ‘impacts of dietary changes (e.g. veganism)’ and 14% saw ‘changes in dietary preferences’ as a major challenge (a further 53% saw this as a minor challenge) (Wheeler and Lobley 2022). An admission of vegetarianism or veganism by the researcher may thus draw the conversation into a topic area that raises participants’ stress levels, as well as potentially creating tension and jeopardising trust within the interviewing relationship.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that not all farmers will respond negatively to the decision to divulge, as described earlier. To not recognise these more supportive and nuanced viewpoints among participants, or to assume that they could not accommodate alternative views to their own, would be to do them a disservice. A researcher’s decision to divulge their veganism/vegetarianism arguably, therefore, respects the participants’ ability to respond with equanimity and affords them the opportunity to both express and reflect on their own views. Indeed, where we have divulged our vegetarianism

to farmers the response has sometimes been understanding or conciliatory. We do, however, wonder whether the distinction between veganism and vegetarianism has pertinence here since we have received responses such as “oh but you’re not vegan, are you?” on more than one occasion. It is also difficult to say how such admissions may have influenced the way the participant perceived and interacted with us during the remainder of the research process.

To Dissemble

We now turn to considering the appropriateness and efficacy of dissembling in order to avoid any of the risks so far mentioned. To dissemble is to ‘to hide your real intentions and feelings or the facts’ (McIntosh 2021). In the case of this paper it relates to adopting a temporary assumed identity related to one aspect of one’s overall positionality for the duration of a research encounter. The rapid decision to dissemble in a research setting will result from recognising or intuiting that the introduction of identity politics into the research experience for both researcher and participant is making, or might make one or both parties, feel uncomfortable or defensive. In the most extreme (and minority) of cases, it may result in anger and threat, as no shared identity exists and the researcher becomes a representative of a significant cohort which sits, somewhat threateningly, outside of the participant’s network.

The decision to dissemble in relation to one’s dietary preferences may take the form of avoiding a question, playing down a response, creating a backstory which might lead to false assumptions being made about one’s consumption identity (Cherry et al. 2011), adapting a truth (e.g. I sometimes eat meat) or lying (e.g. no, I’m not a vegetarian or vegan).

A light touch example may include the informal advice relayed to a research team prior to commencing fieldwork:

“Try not to reveal any dietary preferences that may create tension between you and a farmer” (researcher to other researchers in a pre-research meeting)

Another mild example would be the shaking of one’s head when queried directly as to whether you eat meat or not, but not making a verbal commitment to divulging that you do, or do not eat meat.

Both authors have felt the need to invent circumstances to explain why, in that moment, they are refusing to accept meat dishes offered to them, with one claiming that she was on a special diet for health reasons and so was temporarily unable to eat meat, and the other claiming that pasties ‘disagreed with me’ so she would not have to eat it. One author, when served meat as part of set menu at an event, whilst she did not eat it, she did not feel comfortable enough sending it back or requesting a vegetarian dish, which would have drawn attention to her vegetarianism. Instead, she just cut the meat up and pushed it around her plate to make it look like she had eaten some but was now full. The more overt example of dissembling is to answer ‘no’, to the question, ‘are you a vegetarian or a vegan’.

As soon as the decision has been made to dissemble, various ethical and moral implications are at play. For example, are we potentially breaking the participant’s trust, or betraying confidence, by essentially positioning ourselves as a confidante, while covertly maintaining our personal belief system regarding the consumption of meat? Or might our interaction become a ‘suspension of belief’ instance where the outcome of the research has a value higher, in that moment, than that presented by the ethical dilemma of lying, thus preserving the integrity of the research process itself? As Amundsen and Msoroka (2021) point out, while there exists a universal ethic based on an ethical judgement that ‘lying is

wrong' (ibid.: 3), in 'certain contexts "lying" is considered to be ethical, especially if it is seen to be preventing harm' (ibid.: 3). What requires consideration in the moment of decision-making is whether lying perpetuates the imbalance of power between researcher and researched and undermines the principle of autonomy or, instead, protects the researcher from putting either themselves or the participant into a potentially vulnerable situation. Dissembling one's dietary preferences also avoids turning the questions upon ourselves, e.g. 'why don't you eat meat?', which would ultimately move the focus away from the original enquiry and potentially lose data, (or conversely, create new unexpected data in some circumstances). Dissembling helps to avoid feelings of judgement for both parties participating, the benefits of which are likely to contribute to greater wellbeing during the research experience. Therefore, can the moral issue associated with a lie be balanced or weighted by the knowledge that the aim of the research being conducted is to benefit the participant on some level (e.g. improved policy, greater support, enhanced public knowledge regarding their life experience or wellbeing requirements)?

We propose that intuition should play an important part in decisions made in relation to how a researcher should present their position regarding eating meat, taking all of the aforementioned factors into account in the moment, bearing in mind at all times that the overall aim of the research should be to achieve findings based on scientifically rigorous data. Liong (2015) in their analysis of the presence of deception in ethnographic fieldwork, suggests that 'a fieldworker's self-reflexivity with regard to his or her position and subjectivity in the specific research context is ultimately the key' (ibid.: 69) and that that, in itself, is what allows the researcher to negotiate and construct the appropriate position which not only allows for the collection of quality data and build rapport but also resolves ethical dilemmas. Informed consent and protecting people from 'unreasonable exposure to research risks' (Rhodes and Miller 2012: 706) are essential means to the legitimisation of fieldwork, therefore deceit related to personal positionality may be considered less problematic than fieldwork which is designed using deceit and absence of consent, such as simulated patient research² in medical and pharmaceutical settings (Rhodes and Miller 2012). In the latter case, it has been argued that where deceitful methods conflict with the 'protection of the fundamental human rights of the subjects' (Baumrind 2013: 1), compromise should be made at the researcher's end rather than that of the participant, meaning deceptive methods be avoided. The authors argue that dissembling the consumption identity of the researcher does not compromise the rights of the participant. It is also key to evaluate why, in trying to achieve 'likeness', we might lie about our dietary choices, instead of choosing to lie about one of the other positionality factors that creates 'otherness', such as coming from a farming background. Would this lie be equal to, better than, or worse than one related to diet? The other varying layers of our position are less likely to be viewed as politicised identities unless our feminist stance were revealed, and yet even this is less likely to create a barrier or wedge in comparison to our choice not to eat meat.

The risk of dissembling one's own consumption identity, however, is that a situation could subsequently arise which tests these identities. This raises a final question, what are the ethical and moral implications of choosing to 'divert'?

² A method used in healthcare settings where a trained individual mimics a regular consumer without disclosing their identity to the participant of the study in order to examine behaviours, such as the sale of antibiotics without a prescription (Nye et al. 2020).

To Divert

We use the word divert here to describe the process of diverting from our usual dietary habits in order to enter into a deeper social contract between ourselves and the participant or community being studied. To divert requires not only the suspension of personal belief but also the ability to empathise with the participant. Some believe that this should go beyond simple ideological practice to actively choosing to consume meat as a strategic part of the research process (Sutton 1997). This might be related more to food offerings and cultural performance of commensality in some research cases, whereas in the case of the research conducted by the authors, to admit to the meat producer who is offering you their time that you do not personally appreciate the outcome of their livelihood, the potential for insult may be greater. Hurn (2013), during their research of hunters and farmers, admitted that although a vegan she had ‘resigned myself to the fact that I could not refuse all animal products without causing offence’ and therefore ate certain non-vegan products ‘if there was no other option’ (ibid.: 224). If an opportunity arose, instead of eating ‘offending items’, she would dispose of them surreptitiously. Similarly, Gibson (2014) describes how she became ‘suddenly non-vegetarian’ to avoid offending her hosts during fieldwork in Papua New Guinea.

Ellis (one of the authors of Cherry et al. 2011) also consciously chose to suspend his ‘consumption identity’ during research with cattle-ranchers, as he perceived his vegetarianism (which itself was prompted through his research) as potentially jeopardising access and rapport through depicting him an ‘opponent’ rather than ‘ally’. The decision to divert can be driven by a perceived imperative for researchers to ‘walk the walk not just talk the talk’ (Cherry et al. 2011: 234) and according to MacDonald and Struthers Montford (2014: 744) diverting is even ‘consistent with methodological literature that recommends that veg*n researchers consume nonhuman animals while in “the field”’. But to what extent does the inauthenticity involved in this deception negate the ethical and research benefits of doing so? Deciding to eat meat during the research process does clearly avoid some of the issues associated with a researcher divulging their vegetarianism that we discuss above. The moral implications concerned with dissembling, however, are replicated and arguably amplified in this scenario, since it ultimately entails deceiving the participant by misrepresenting a (potentially salient) aspect of the researcher’s identity. Furthermore, like dissembling, diverting forecloses the opportunity for the discussion and co-construction of unexpected data that can arise from disagreement (MacDonald and Struthers Montford 2014).

Another issue raised by the decision to divert relates to the moral sensibilities involved in eating an animal, or consuming animal products. Since personal principles about animal rights and welfare are often a driving factor in the decision to become a vegetarian or vegan in the first place, the idea and act of consuming meat – whatever the context – can create emotional and physical discomfort for the researcher, as it is fundamentally bound up with the killing of an animal. Concomitantly, MacDonald and Struthers Montford (2014) suggest that in querying the ethics of whether or not to eat meat for the purpose of research, that the non-human, in this case, the animal to be eaten, be included in ethical decision-making. They challenge the construal of meat-eating as necessary in order to build rapport and maintain an ethical relationship with the hosting participant, arguing that this framing ignores the consideration of ethical relationships with nonhuman animals. Instead, rethinking notions of humanist superiority, attending to the subjectivity of non-human animals, and including human-animal interactions

in conceptions of hospitality, legitimises the choice of a researcher to maintain their personal food politics whilst in the field (MacDonald and Struthers Montford 2014). With regards to animal products that do not stem from the direct killing of an animal, it is possible that the moral complexities of diverting from one's own consumption identity might be fewer.

'Diverting' from our dietary choices (i.e. eating meat to disguise our vegetarianism) is not something that either of the authors has enacted, although we can understand why some researchers might choose to do so. We both feel that this is something we would only consider doing under very particular circumstances, for example (similarly to Hurn 2013 and Gibson 2014) if hosted by subsistence farmers in a cultural context where meat is highly valued and where refusing it would cause deep offence. We acknowledge that this standpoint comes with its own contradictions, dissonance and moral and ethical complications, including those discussed by MacDonald and Struthers Montford (2014) but meat-related cognitive dissonance (MRCD) has been identified as a potential experience of meat eaters themselves, negotiated via alternative mechanisms (avoidance, wilful ignorance and disassociation) (Rothgerber and Rosenfeld 2021) The ethical implications of diverting are therefore complex and multiple, and cannot be considered entirely apart from wider ethical and moral debates related to the eating of meat.

Final Thoughts and Conclusion

In refusing to eat meat, particularly that which is offered to us personally by a participant, it makes us 'one step removed from the network of relations' that culminates in consumption (Hurn 2013: 220). Strategising how to present one's dietary position in rural settings is, therefore, imperative to the management of personal and emotional risk at the researcher-farmer interface, even if that strategy is simply to rely on one's own intuition. It is equally important to ensure reflexivity post-fieldwork regardless of the behavioural response decided upon, as the likelihood is that, on some level, the research experience will have been affected by whichever response was chosen. Active reflexivity might occur in the use of field notes or journals, or through the sharing of experiences with other researchers. In instances where risks have not been effectively managed, it might be necessary to seek other, more specialist, forms of support. In a perfect world, challenging research experiences would be isolated to the interactions themselves, but emotions related to positionality frequently cross professional and personal boundaries, creating potential discomfort pre-, mid-, and post-field work. The necessity for reflexivity is not only due to the fact that a lack of critical awareness related to decisions made in the process of research 'might seriously hamper the knowledge claims made' (Råheim et al. 2016: 10), but also due to the forced negotiation of having potentially compromised one or more of one's own positions; either as a vegetarian, or as a researcher.

The complexity of the researcher-farmer interface with regards to dietary positionality reveals multiple moral and ethical threads which require negotiation in terms of both personal and professional integrity, as well as boundaries. It requires deeper consideration of how important it is to establish 'insider' linkages with participants with regards to the quality of data collection, and stimulates challenging questions regarding how non-meat eating researchers justify the contradictions between the personal and the professional. Do we seek to perpetuate livestock farming as an industry itself, or is the process driven

by intellectual curiosity related to investigation of issues while establishing empathy and recognition for individuals? Or is there a pragmatism at play in the acceptance that a large proportion of the population continue to consume meat and therefore our role is to ensure that the industry is as good as it can be by looking after those who work in it and seeking both profitability and sustainability that may subsequently enable good welfare practices? Does the cultural and aesthetic landscape play a role? Can we justify our professional role by compartmentalising the output of the human individual in question and concentrate solely on the individual or community itself? Rather than claim to be able to answer such questions, each researcher in a similar position will need to negotiate these questions and challenges through their own process of reflexivity.

Both authors have developed, perhaps unexpectedly, a strong connection to individuals in the livestock industry, particularly those working in primary production. We recognise the community as heterogenous and complex. We also recognise that British livestock farming is often misinterpreted by the media and many animal welfare groups and are able to acknowledge the intrinsic importance of the lifecycle of the animal to the identity of the farmer, individuals whose relationship with their animals often extends beyond that of commodification (Wilkie 2005; Riley 2011) or being simply 'meat machines' (Stassart and Whatmore 2003). It is, as Hurn (2013) describes it, 'an embodied livelihood' (ibid.: 230). We also acknowledge that most livestock farmers care deeply about their animals and can become emotionally attached, while still ultimately sending their animals to slaughter (Wilkie 2010). We are aware of the irony when being warned that we, vegetarians, might be targeted by animal activists for supporting livestock farmers through research. And finally, we recognise that much of the behavioural response chosen in any given moment will be based largely on assumptions made by the researcher, with underlying implications that participants are felt to be incapable of accepting difference, when often this is not the case. However, we believe that, in spite of our positionality, biases, assumptions, and related contradictions, we are able to successfully appreciate, represent and support those we meet at the researcher-farmer interface and that our ability to be 'open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in [...] and committed to accurately and adequately representing' (Dwyer and Buckle 2009: 59) the experiences of our participants is of prime importance to the process itself.

Data Availability Data available upon reasonable request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Declarations

All authors have agreed to the submission of this article and it is not under consideration for publication at any other journal.

Conflict of Interest None.

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