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Awakening to the politics of food: Politicized diet as social identity

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the process of developing a politicized identity around diet was explored through a social psychological lens. Applying one of the most influential models of group identity development proposed by Cross (1978) in which an “encounter” experience spurs an awakening into a politicized identity, we asked 36 participants who followed alternative diets due to political reasons to describe their unique encounter experiences that brought them to their politicized awakening. Their self-identified diets included pescetarian, vegetarian, vegan, raw, non-GMO/organic, and reduced meat consumption. Participants described the rationale for their diets, their “encounter” or awakening to their politicized diets, and whether they viewed their diet as a part of their identity. Using thematic analysis, we identified four key types of encounters that sparked their politicization: a series of integrated events, exposure to educational materials, a direct visceral emotional experience, and guidance from a role model. We discuss the results with regard to the politics of food, the nature of the politicized dieter's identity as part of a minority food culture, and the difficulties of engaging in

dieter's identity as part of a minority food culture, and the difficulties of engaging in political action through one's diet. The underexplored benefits of applying social psychological theories of identity to research on dietary subcultures is also discussed.



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Keywords

Food politics; Minority food culture; Alternative diets; Food and identity; Social psychology; Vegetarianism; Veganism; Diet

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