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# Inclusive or Elitist?: North Minneapolis as a Case Study to Examine How Plant-Based Diet Advocacy can be Respectful and Effective in the Face of Obstacles

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Inclusive or Elitist?:

North Minneapolis as a Case Study to Examine How Plant-Based Diet Advocacy can be  
Respectful and Effective in the Face of Obstacles

by

Samantha Lorentz

A Senior Project in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Honors Program

ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

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## Introduction

The challenges facing our world are often clear to us. Unfortunately, how we can be involved in change making is often not as clear. However, compassion, when actively utilized, can be an incredible tool to create the world we want to live in. It is a common trait that serves as motivator of action.

Here I will be analyzing one active method of engaging compassion gaining popularity: purposeful plant-based eating. An increasing minority are finding plant-based eating is effective and allows them to live more gently in a way which aligns with their values. They use it to support positive change in themselves, their community, and the larger world. I have also found this diet to be a fulfilling personal choice. I am looking to dig beyond the common dialogue to more critically examine how ethical and effective the diet really is on a larger scale for significant, global change.

To do this, I will first describe this form of activism and the major reasons why it is supported. I will then examine its major criticism, which is that the diet is elitist, requiring the resources and privilege of those with a higher socioeconomic status (SES). The elitism claim says that the diet is unavailable to the majority, especially those with a low SES, and so it is not a feasible method of significant change.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> Finally, I will respond to the critique with an argument based off of personal experience with the low SES populations in North Minneapolis, Minnesota and the community health projects in that area. This functions as a case study, which I will further support with literature around plant-based diets, low SES populations, and activism.

The purpose is to show the current dialogue on plant-based diets and to connect arguments together to provide a fuller, more complete, and more useful view of plant-based eating. Ultimately, I argue that the common discussions of plant-based diets both in support and

in criticism are incomplete in that they do not effectively address the barriers nor the resources and abilities to overcome those barriers. Therefore in its current practice by activists, the diet is elitist. However, I show that it is not elitist by nature. There are ways to support the diet in an inclusive manner, which more completely address ways to engage even in the face of barriers. By searching beyond the common stopping points in the current dialogue, I find that plant-based diets are not only a compassionate, sustainable, and effective method for positive and significant change, but that it is a viable option for the majority of people in the United States.

Finally, I will make suggestions to supporters of the diet on more effective and respectful forms of advocacy, which can make the diet more inclusive in practice. I argue that these changes are necessary as we work to create a more compassionate, engaged, sustainable, and just society.

### **Plant-Based Background**

Before jumping in too far, let us define some terms. Firstly, the term activist will simply be used to describe a person who actively engages in promoting social, political, economic, and/or environmental change. Activism may take on many forms from small lifestyle choices such as recycling to professional choices such as working at a political nonprofit. Advocacy is the action of the activist, but is more simply the support of a cause.

Socioeconomic status is a measure of one's social and economic status.<sup>5</sup> It includes indicators such as a person's income, education, and health. I'm often referencing those with a low socioeconomic status, so these are people with low income, generally less quality education, and a lower quality of health. From here on out, I will be using the shorthand SES to represent socioeconomic status.

I will be referring to the mainstream diet of frequent animal product consumption as omnivorism or meat-eating, even though this diet obviously includes more than eating meat.

Vegetarianism is a common term. Though it often means eating a meatless diet, it can also refer to the overall spectrum of abstaining from various types of animal products.<sup>6</sup> At one end there are semi-vegetarians or “flexitarians,” which are people who eat all animal products but reduce their amounts of meat.<sup>7</sup> Near the middle are lacto-ovo vegetarians who don’t eat any form of meat, but do consume eggs and dairy products.<sup>6</sup> This is what many people think of when they hear the word “vegetarian.” Because this is how the word is often used in the literature, I will also be using “vegetarian” to mean lacto-ovo vegetarian, eating a meatless diet. Finally, at the other end, there are vegans who eat no animal products of any kind.<sup>6</sup>

The difference between these terms and using the term “plant-based” is mostly in the connotation. “Plant-based” is most simply defined as eating mostly food coming from plants which includes vegetables, fruits, whole grains, soy products, legumes such as beans and lentils, and seeds.<sup>8</sup> This also means little to no animal products of any kind. It includes little to no red meat, poultry, seafood, milk, cheese, eggs, or honey. With words like “mostly” and “little to no,” it is clear that plant-based diets exist on a spectrum. This flexibility on restriction of animal products in general is one of the major things that separates it from more common terms such as vegetarian and vegan, which are more clear and strict in which animal products they do or do not eat. The other difference is that plant-based implies more of a focus on whole foods instead of processed foods. A good example are Oreo cookies which are technically vegan. Though Oreo cookies could still be eaten in a plant-based diet, the implication is that one eats mostly whole plant foods. Vegetarian and vegan terms generally do not have such an implication, though these terms are similar.

Vegetarian, Vegan, and Plant-based diets are gaining a lot of support in recent decades and there are numerous and powerful reasons people are standing behind this seemingly simple concept. The biggest of which include human health, human hunger, animal justice, and the environment. Each relate to the others as I will discuss, and most people who have a plant-based diet have multiple reasons for their diet choice.

### Human health

Every person in the US is aware of at least some of the health issues we face not only as individuals, but as a nation. Obesity is perhaps the first thing that comes to mind and is a risk factor for heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes. These diseases are the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th leading cause of death in the US<sup>9</sup> respectively and have all been on the rise despite wonderful advances in modern medical science and technology. Oddly enough, or perhaps logically enough, all of these relate to lifestyle choices such as what and how much we eat and how often we are physically active. Though genetics play a role, all of these diseases are largely preventable.<sup>9</sup>

More frequently, prevention is being called upon as the most effective, ethical, and economically sound route to combat these terrible illnesses. While this idea is supported by healthcare professionals and nonprofessionals alike, prevention and health promotion only makes up 9% of the Center for Disease Control's national budget.<sup>9</sup> The same budget report pointed out that poor nutrition and a lack of physical activity contributes to 1 in 3 premature deaths in the US while funding for the CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity receives less than half of 1% of the CDC's total budget.

Governmental systems and health care as a whole might have a harder time addressing prevention because this is the messy business of all of the tiny and innumerable actions that

happen to and from an individual outside of a hospital setting. What you decide to put into your body has a big effect on what you get out of it. We all know that what you eat or don't eat affects your health in a general sense, but still only about 10% of US Americans are eating a diet with proper nutrition.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, most are eating too much saturated fat, sugar, and salt while also eating too few fruits, vegetables, fiber, calcium, and whole grain.

We all have been told that “eating your vegetables” is part of a healthy diet, but only in the past few decades have plant-based diets been strongly supported by science as a way to combat serious disease.<sup>10</sup> Eating more fruits and vegetables is associated with a lower risk of chronic disease while eating animal products, especially red meat, is associated with an increased risk of chronic disease.<sup>10</sup> Simply put, a plant-based diet provides more of what we need and less of what we don't, resulting in an overall better health status. Numerous studies, showing both correlation and causation, have been done on plant-based, vegetarian, or vegan diets and their positive effect on health as prevention and treatment.<sup>6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17)</sup>

Though the results of these studies are varied and sometimes contradictory, across the board it has been consistently shown that eating a plant-based diet results in less cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and colon cancer. Similarly, it results in lower BMI, blood lipids, and blood pressure.<sup>12</sup> The reason behind the benefits aren't completely understood, but are likely supported by the fact that a plant-based diet tends to be lower in saturated fat and cholesterol and at the same time higher in potassium, magnesium, dietary fiber, folate, vitamin C, vitamin E, carotenoids, flavonoids, and various other phytochemicals.<sup>11</sup>

These results show up in different amounts for wherever someone is on the spectrum of plant-based even to semi-vegetarianism, just in lesser degrees. They also are consistent even when taking into account smoking, exercise, health consciousness, and socioeconomic status.<sup>6, 8,</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Because of these findings, healthcare professionals are being recommended to advocate for a more plant-based diet for their patients as a preventative measure as well as for part of treatment.

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This does not mean that similar benefits could not also be seen in a well-planned and well-balanced omnivorous diet. The healthy omnivorous diet is similar in many ways to a healthy plant-based diet in that they both focus on whole grains and a variety of vegetables among other things. This also does not mean that a plant-based diet is always healthy even when it is not a well-planned and well-balanced one. Plant-based, vegetarian, and vegan diets are not the miracle method for optimal health. The more you limit animal products, the more one needs to take a little more time to plan and keep in mind their nutrition simply because they are no longer getting as dense amounts nutrients that you see often in animal products. Compared to the general public, there are no significant differences in iron and protein for plant-based eaters.<sup>11</sup> Some vegetarians have lower amounts of B-12, vitamin D, omega 3, and calcium, but it's not a very consistent finding. Vegans, however, are much more likely to get less of these nutrients.<sup>11</sup>

Common sense and scientific research supports the idea that with proper planning, plant-based eating is a healthy choice. Overall, those who eat plant-based tend to be healthier particularly when compared to the average diet. One can eat plant-based to benefit their own health as well as to advocate for a diet, which aids in the prevention of illnesses and suffering that is commonplace in our society.

A note on this is that I believe the other ethical reasons behind eating plant-based are stronger and more important. The most important thing about the health reasoning is to show that the diet is safe and perfectly healthy. It might even serve as a motivator for a wider group of people such as those interested in nutrition, disease, and preventative lifestyles to involve

themselves in supporting the diet. While the health perspective is important, other main ethical reasons are more compelling and significant when we are looking for social change. The health reasoning is, however, a popular reason to get into plant-based eating and can act as the initial spark of interest for many people.

### Human hunger and malnutrition

With so much attention on things like obesity, it is easy to overlook the shamefully high amount of human hunger experienced in every part of the world, even right next door here in the United States. Hunger has decreased over the years, but still 1 out of 7 people in the United States face hunger, meaning they do not consistently have access to enough food and so are considered food insecure.<sup>16</sup> Beyond not having enough protein and energy from food, 2 in 7 people in the United States are undernourished, that is they do not get the nutrients they need on a regular basis.<sup>16</sup>

According to a recent study on global food production and sustainability, we currently produce enough food to meet the energy needs of the population.<sup>16</sup> The issue is in policy and practice which creates a system where food is not made accessible and so hunger persists despite the resources. On the other hand, we do not produce enough of the types of foods needed to reach the nutrient requirements for all people. A study on global health needs in 2014 found that we do not produce enough fruits and vegetables to meet basic nutritional requirements of the population.<sup>19</sup> In a sense, the global food system supports adequate calories, but not adequate nutrition.

It is becoming larger issue now as the global population is predicted to quickly reach 9 billion by 2050.<sup>16</sup> People from all over are now calling attention to an inevitable food crisis as

the population and subsequent need rises. To meet the need of the near future, we will need more food produced from the same or less land.

The limitation on food production is, of course, resources; namely land, water, and energy. The general rule of thumb is that to produce the same amount of energy and protein from an animal source takes a lot more land, water, and energy than if it were from a plant source.<sup>16</sup>  
<sup>20, 21</sup> The argument that follows is that our diet trends are not compatible with our present and future needs.

Animals need more land space, more food energy, and more water than plants do.<sup>16, 20, 21</sup> Even processing the animal product takes more oil than processing plant products. Industrial agriculture has been incredible at making animal products as efficiently grown and processed as possible, which means using the least amount of resources to get the most amount of usable product. With this business model, industrial agriculture has been a huge contributor of abuse towards animals, workers, the environment, and human health. I will talk more about these later on, but even overlooking the negative side effects of this type of process, it is still not efficient enough to produce what humans will need in the fast approaching future. If we need to produce more but are already experiencing problems with limited resources, then we must change our food system.

Following food energy in the food chain is another way to look at availability of resources. Plants take in sunlight as energy. Most of that energy is lost because it is used by the plant to grow and survive, but a fraction of it remains available as food energy and is used by a cow who eats the plant. That energy in the cow is mostly used up just as it was in the plant and so again, only a small amount of that is useable as food energy. When humans eat the cow, they get only a fraction of the fraction of food energy that the cow ate from the plant because so much

food energy was lost in each level of the food chain. Thus, the lower down we eat in the food chain, the more amount of food energy is available. In fact, if the United States took the land used to grow plant food for their livestock into land to feed humans directly, there would be an estimated 49% more food energy available.<sup>16</sup>

Other methods to reduce the prevalence of human hunger such as policy changes, advancements in technology, and reducing food waste are all effective, but not enough on their own without also a shift in diet around the world towards plant-based eating. Converting land and production efforts to support a plant-based diet could produce more food energy with enough of the nutrients we need without soaking up what is left of land and other limited resources. Additionally, relying on animal products requires a net loss of food energy, versus eating the plants directly ourselves. As we face worldwide hunger and malnutrition, this is a loss we cannot afford. By focusing more on plant production, we will be able to produce enough food to meet the caloric and nutritional needs now and in the future.

### Animals in agriculture

Humans love animals. Most people find that they can love to care for some animals and love to eat others. This mix of relationships with animals is common. The average family of four in the US eats four turkeys, seventy chickens, one and a third of a pig, and three fourths of a cow each year.<sup>22</sup> Still, even the most devoted meat eaters tend to agree that animals should be cared for and that no animal should be made to suffer if it can be avoided. Though we don't often think about the experiences of animals before they become our meals, we tend to agree on this general principle because all humans have huge capacities for compassion. A wonderful exercise of our human compassion might be to look deeper into the experience of the estimated 53 billion animals slaughtered for consumption per year.<sup>22</sup>

All of the animals used in factory farming in the United States experience similar types of suffering. They are confined in varying degrees their whole lives, deprived of their natural behaviors, environments, and relationships. The males bred for meat are grown at ridiculous rates and then slaughtered at a young age. Males who will likely not grow enough to produce an optimal amount of meat are killed as babies. Females are exploited for their reproductive organs and most are kept in a constant cycle of being impregnated, giving birth, and being separated from their young long before they would be in nature. Once they begin to slow down their reproductively rates, they are no longer as economically valuable and so are quickly sent to slaughter. Slaughter for all of these animals is hopefully quick, but all too often, the animal is not killed instantly and so suffers additional panic and pain from an unsuccessful throat slight, stun, or cattle gun shot. This is life and death on factory farms, though there are some experiences unique to each animal.<sup>22</sup>

In nature, chickens are communicative, social, and curious. They spend their time dustbathing, foraging, sharing food, perching, and nesting. On factory farms, three to eight chickens are stuffed into small battery cages so that they spend their lives virtually unable to move.<sup>22</sup> Their highly-sensitive beaks are cut which can cause such severe pain and deformity that it impairs their ability to eat and drink. Any male chicks hatched in the egg industry will never reach an optimal weight for meat production. To avoid this inefficacy, these chicks are killed by gas, by a vacuum with a kill plate at the end, or by high speed grinders.<sup>23</sup>

Pigs are remarkably social and intelligent animals in degrees that can even compare to great apes, elephants, and dolphins.<sup>22</sup> Ordinarily, they live in small groups lead by a matriarch where they have distinct personalities and strong relationships, and they can live upwards of 15 years. In the industry, they are denied their natural behaviors, mental stimulation, and social

relationships. Their tails are painfully docked and males are castrated without any numbing. Sows spend their lives in cycles of reproduction in small gestation crates which only provide enough space to stand in one position and lay down. She is slaughtered after about three or four years.<sup>22</sup>

Dairy cows are often made to produce more milk than the calories they take in and so have to resort to metabolizing their own muscle to keep up with the production.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the machines that milk them can cause painful inflammation and infection. To make sure that enough milk is being saved for humans to use, calves are taken from their mothers within a day of being born. If the calf is male it might go to beef production, but it might go to the veal industry. To make veal, calves are kept within a crate with their necks chained so that they are unable to move. They are immobile and fed a liquid diet which is how they exist indefinitely until about twenty weeks when they, too, are slaughtered.

Scientific findings on animal behavior and neurology add to the already tragic tale. As it turns out, animals of all kinds have more complex and significant emotional lives, intelligence, and ability to experience suffering than we had previously thought possible. Because these animals have less complex brains, we might take comfort in thinking of the animals we eat as generally unaware and unfeeling, but this is far from true. In fact, it is theorized that animals with less complex brains might even suffer more than those with higher functioning brains because they are less able to process and reason through the pain and what is happening to them and so experience pain in an unfiltered form.<sup>24</sup> These levels of suffering experienced by animals at the hands of humans seriously calls into question the ethics of eating animal products when other options are available even if they might not be an initial preference.

Buying animal product with labels like “cage-free,” “free-range,” “humane,” etc. can mean slightly better conditions and so are a common practice by those who are moved by the animal issues discussed. Unfortunately, these labels are poorly defined so that they are open-ended and up to the interpretation of the industry and of the buyer.<sup>22, 25</sup> They are even more poorly enforced. Often times the producer themselves does their own verification.<sup>25</sup> The result is that these labels do not mean a significant improvement in animal welfare and do not even address many of the poor practices discussed. There is no option in animal agriculture for widely sustainable practices which do not involve many of the practices discussed and so companies have little choice to go along with the methods.

Industrial agriculture is aware of how outrageous and shocking their practices are because they, like anyone else, can recognize suffering in another being. This is why the industry goes to great lengths to keep its practices out of the sight and mind of consumers. Consumers, in turn, might go to great lengths to avoid digging too deep. Many good and moral people continue to support actions such as these, which go against their core values. It is not that those who eat plant-based diets are more moral and that those who eat animals are less moral. It is simply that most people are exposed to the influences of big agricultural businesses and social conditioning throughout their entire lifetime without seeing enough reasons to ask questions.

Critically analyzing how animals are treated within the food system can open up the space for choice. Plant-based eating recognizes that non-human animals deserve compassion and that this suffering in our mainstream culture is unacceptable. To be meaningful, this includes the recognition of both ability and responsibility to act to make a difference in the experiences of animals.

Environmental degradation

. Environmental concerns are, perhaps, the greatest unifying topic as it is our home as well as what provides all of our resources. We all live here therefore we all have a shared interest in a healthy environment. However impossibly powerful the natural world is, there is a range of environmental issues taking place under human hands. These include climate change, pollution, and overuse of limited resources such as water, land and habitat, and oil. World-wide, governmental reports are now citing climate change as the most important issue of our time and that it must be addressed urgently from a multitude of perspectives.<sup>26</sup>

The web of influences on the environment are incredibly complex, but agriculture is a great place to look at due to its large impact on all of the major environmental issues. Factory farming specifically is cited as a major influencer of climate change, biodiversity loss, and freshwater depletion.<sup>27</sup>

Climate change is a hot topic that the scientific community is being unshakably vocal about, calling upon all citizens and governments to recognize the urgency and take action. Climate change comes about by the greenhouse effect due to excessive greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, being released into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is a waste product of the machines and animals used in the industry. Methane is also produced by animals, especially cows, and has four times the greenhouse gas effect than carbon dioxide.<sup>16</sup> Because of the additional machinery used for animals as well as the animals themselves, animal agriculture produces significantly more greenhouse gases than nutritionally equivalent amounts of plants. Agriculture contributes to 19%<sup>20</sup> to 24%<sup>16</sup> of global greenhouse gas emissions and meat and dairy are responsibly for over 80% of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>16</sup> A 2010 UN report stated, “lesser consumption of meat and dairy is necessary to save the world from the worst impacts of climate change.”<sup>20</sup>

Animal agriculture uses resources in excess. Earlier, we looked at plant food being used

up by the industry. Similarly, the amounts of fossil fuels, land space, and freshwater to support animal agriculture significantly outweighs what is needed for plant agriculture. On average, producing animal protein takes about 11 times more fossil energy than producing the same amount of plant protein.<sup>16</sup> Producing meat uses between 6 and 17 times more land than producing equivalent amounts of plants. Furthermore, the same 2010 UN report said, “agriculture, particularly meat and dairy products, accounts for 70% of global freshwater consumption [and] 38% of the total land use.”<sup>20</sup> Animal agriculture also pollutes existing resources. Most of the 1.4 billion tons of animal waste is untreated and carries high amounts of antibiotics as well as pathogens which get into soil, water, and food which also poses a threat to public health.<sup>16, 27</sup>

These are the common reasons people are compelled to take up a plant-based diet. The choice of what we eat is a unique form of activism because it is a choice that comes up multiple times a day, every day of our lives. We already chose food to eat, so we are all already involved. Those choosing this diet are not only aware of their choices, but they are aware of the power of their choices.

Learning about and utilizing these alternative food choices are becoming more popular in recent decades in the US. The American Dietetics Association in 2003 officially supported vegetarian diets to be a healthy alternative for all age groups.<sup>28</sup> Only twenty years before that, the professional perspective was that it could not be nutritionally equal to an average diet including animal product. Since then, more research and attention has been given to vegetarian and vegan diets and it is now more widely accepted by professionals in health care.<sup>17, 18</sup>

This shift is also present in stores and restaurants. The majority of chefs now recognize that vegan and vegetarian plates are popular and important to have as options in the menu.<sup>11</sup> The

US market for vegetarian foods in stores grew by about \$1.6 billion from 2006 to 2011.<sup>11</sup> More fortified foods are now available to increase nutritional intake for vegans and vegetarians. There are more books and cookbooks on the topic being sold, more websites, and even more college classes being offered on animal rights and vegetarian nutrition.

Though these types of diets and lifestyles are becoming more and more common, only about 2.3% of people in the US are vegetarian and 1.4% are vegan.<sup>11</sup> Though this still means millions of people looking for and putting financial support towards food without animal products, there is something else pushing these significant shifts in the diet trends of the US.

One significant group that is driving this shift towards vegan, vegetarian, and plant-based foods is not vegans, vegetarians, or strictly plant-based eaters, but omnivores. They might also consider themselves semi-vegetarian or “flexitarian.”<sup>7</sup> More and more of the general population, while not looking to completely change their diets, are turning to a reduction in animal products. Of those surveyed in the US in 2006, 22% said they frequently had meatless or meat substitute meals.<sup>11</sup> This 22% along with the original, more strict 2.3% of vegetarians and 1.4% vegans now adds up to a powerful group putting demands upon the supply and the change this has been making is significant.

Benefits of and tips on plant-based eating are heavily discussed and for good reason. Though people argue over the specifics on the benefits, there will always be significant and viable reasons for support. However, with the growing support, there is also a growing criticism.

## **Criticism**

The conversation about plant-based is primarily around why plant-based is useful, important, even necessary. The major criticism does not argue this, but instead takes a stab at the accessibility of the diet. The critique is that the diet is elitist. That is to say that these diets are

only attractive to and available to a small group of people, usually thought of as urban, white Americans of privileged socioeconomic status.<sup>1</sup> Because it is out of the reach of the majority of people, the diet is written off as an unrealistic method of real change.

It can be broken down into two specific critiques. The first is that the diet is elitist in practice. The claim is that the common dialogue ignores the people outside of the small, stereotypical plant-based eaters.<sup>1</sup> The narrative on plant-based diets ignore diverse experiences and backgrounds as well as the barriers they might face when adopting this diet. Critics calling out this overlook might point to insensitivity to the challenge of others especially for those living on a low income.

The second aspect of the elitism critique is that the diet is elitist by nature. This means that even if more groups of people were recognized, the barriers some of them face are still too great to overcome that plant-based eating will remain elitist no matter how advocacy practices are changed. The barriers might be focused on and cited as being the reasons why this diet is unattainable. The idea that there are simply too many barriers for some groups comes both from who are against the diet and those who practice it themselves.

Whether or not these diets are actually elitist, there certain is an image of the plant-based eater which, as stated above, is the urban, white American with a relatively high socioeconomic status. The image can even be more specific to being largely young and female.<sup>29</sup> The stereotypes makes a lot of sense as the average person in these categories likely experiences less financial barriers and are in environments which make them more open to these types of changes. This image assumes college-age people who would have access to a lot of new information and might be more used to and open to new lifestyle ideas. I, for one, certainly fall

into these demographic categories, which has made it especially important for me to question my experience with plant-based eating.

There are reasons for the stereotypical image because those in the mentioned categories do make up the majority of vegans and vegetarians in America.<sup>29</sup> However, advocates do exist outside of this image. If we look at the percentages of various populations by gender, income, education level, and ethnicity, who consider themselves vegan or vegetarian, they are almost all the same.<sup>29</sup> The differences are only slight. In fact, Hispanic and African Americans are more likely to be vegan or vegetarian than Caucasian Americans. It is mostly when we look at those who are semi-vegetarians that we see more significant percentages which favor the stereotypical image - white people of higher socioeconomic status

Another way to break the “one image” idea comes about when we look to religion. A large number of Hindus, for example, practice vegetarianism.<sup>30</sup> In her book, “Animals and World Religions,” Kemmerer explains that Hinduism is one of many religions which holds that it is healthiest for the body, mind, and spirit and is an extension of the nonviolent path. She also suggests that abstaining from animal products is a value that can be seen throughout many religions and cultures all over the world. This value extends to placing humans with the responsibility to actively protect animals from violence like what is seen in animal agriculture.

Though diversity exists, the perception is still that it is an elitist and one-sided sort of dietary change. Perception matters and the single images that is commonly believed makes it seem extreme, undesirable, or unattainable. It seems like a very unwelcoming group to be apart of, so who would want to? The idea is projected that not only is it not for everyone, it isn't even for many. It also might be seen as more of a fad if only one small group is participating

especially if it is done out of preference which is a luxury and not need. This connotation takes away from the credibility and importance.

If we believe all of the reasons to adopt a plant-based diet, there is also a sense of urgency to all of them. A dramatic shift needs to happen. To attain that needed shift, we cannot ignore other diverse groups of people with diverse backgrounds, situations, and needs. We need to pay attention to the diversity which already exist and work to open the doors and break the image of only one type of plant-based supporter.

The claim of elitism in practice recognizes the importance of this. If this claim is legitimate, the way advocacy is practiced needs to change and expand. The larger criticism that the diet is elitist by nature asks if change is even possible or if it will do any good at all when considering the barriers to plant-based diets. In order to come to an understanding of the claims, we have to look into the barriers that are being discussed. We have to look to those people and communities that are said to be beyond the reach of plant-based action to see if it is possible for them to be ethically engaged despite the barriers, and if so, how can supporters and activists make the diet more easily inclusive and inviting. Because of personal experience and access, I will be using North Minneapolis as a case study to explore the argument.

North Minneapolis is in Hennepin County and includes 15 neighborhoods: Shingle Creek, Humbolt, Lind-Somanon, Victory, Weber-Camden, Camden Industrial Area, Cleveland, Folwell, McKinley, Jordan, Hawthorne, Willard-Hay, Near-North, Harrison, and Sumner Glenwood.<sup>31</sup> Each neighborhood is unique and complex, hosting a variety of ethnicities and cultures. There are larger populations of black, hispanic, and Asian Americans as well as immigrants than in most other areas of Minnesota. In several neighborhoods, up to 25% of

residents speak little to no English.<sup>31</sup> Most neighborhoods are made more complex by the high amount of families experiencing poverty along with all of the added difficulties associated.<sup>31</sup>

The assumption is that North Minneapolis is not an area where plant-based diets could or even should be promoted because the barriers faced are too great. From the characteristics of communities of low SES, North Minneapolis can serve as a reasonable case study to look at severe barriers that so many others face. To better assess these barriers, I will be using literature on North Minneapolis and other similar communities, as well as personal experience with the North Minneapolis community.

I spent a year and half volunteering at NorthPoint, which has a clinic as well as a human resources center to provide a “one-stop shop” of health care, information, food, and other forms of aid.<sup>32</sup> I later interned in the clinic for the summer of 2014 where I assisted physicians and dietitians in a varied of jobs. Most of my time was helping in a the Fruit and Veggie Rx program.<sup>17</sup> Adults with diabetes and a lower SES were invited into this pilot study which was trying to see if increased fruits and vegetables would affect their disease and weight. The participants added a class which I aided to learn and discuss nutrition, cooking, and any questions in a casual and open format. The physician would write a “prescription” for fruits and vegetables at the partnering farmers market, West Broadway Farmers Market,<sup>33</sup> which could be used as a voucher for free produce. To follow up, during my internship, I went to the market to assist our participants and helped interpret between English and Spanish where I could. Additionally, outside of the program, NorthPoint held bimonthly produce events were a dietitian and I did cooking demonstrations and tabled to give out information and discuss food with those who attended the event.

I also had the privilege of talking with and attending the events of other organizations. One was Appetite for Change which is a community-based organization which uses food as the focus to promote positive change.<sup>34</sup> The group is small, but works holistically by hosting cooking classes, inviting community discussion, connecting urban farmers with ways to sell, working in community gardens, putting pressure on grocery stores to change their practices, and even planning to open up a healthy and affordable restaurant. They are a very active group which looks at multiple levels of involvement to enact real change. I went to two meetings and worked with their organizers at the West Broadway Farmers Market.

The other was CHAT, a monthly event located near NorthPoint. It hosts speakers who highlight social justice issues related to health and medicine. These events attract health, education, or social service professionals, but is open to the public. CHAT encourages informed discussion to increase awareness of the area, the needs, and the resources.

My experience and research shaped my assessment of barriers. The barriers most talked about can be thought of broadly as barriers of access, knowledge, and social background. Though I'll mention many aspects of all of these, I will be focusing on only the most relevant pieces and working through those.

### Access

Plant-based foods are seen as inaccessible because of a lack of resources which include money, the food itself, and time. The lack of sufficient financial resources come to mind immediately as a barrier for a low SES communities such as those in North Minneapolis. Minnesota has significantly less people living in poverty than the national average, 11% as opposed to 23%.<sup>35</sup> However, throughout the majority of North Minneapolis, well over 50% of

residents live in poverty. In over half of North Minneapolis, most residents are 200% below the federal poverty level.<sup>35</sup>

It is well known that fresh fruits and vegetables are significantly more expensive than junk foods, making it hard for people to change their diet to be more whole plant foods heavy. For low-income families, it makes more sense to look for the foods with the highest amount of calories for the smallest amount of money. Expensive, low calorie foods are not appealing in such a circumstance. Healthy diets are on average about \$1.50 more expensive per day than unhealthy diets.<sup>36</sup> A study done with women with a low SES showed that they knew that the foods they were eating were unhealthy and negatively affecting their bodies, but that healthy foods were too expensive and therefore inaccessible.<sup>37</sup>

There is also an issue of physical inaccessibility. North Minneapolis is an urban food desert which means that it is an area with a lack of healthy food sources which also has high income inequality and racial segregation.<sup>38</sup> Instead of plentiful grocery stores like we see in suburban areas, there are more convenience stores and fast food restaurants.<sup>38</sup> Multiple studies have linked access to grocery stores and supermarkets with healthier eating habits as well as access to more convenient stores and fast food restaurants to poor eating habits.<sup>39</sup>

Though there are some grocery stores there with nutritious food options, there are still problems. The layout in grocery stores in low SES, urban areas tend to display junk foods more prominently than the same store in a high SES area. Counterintuitively, the same type of grocery store in a low SES area is more expensive than it is in a high SES area. Those in poverty have to go more out of their way and pay more for the same foods than those who are wealthy.

Another challenge is that many people have little to no access to a car. People have to rely on carpooling or buses which can also make shopping trips more of an inconvenience and

lead the buyer to just stop at the nearby gas station or fast food place instead. These are not uncommon experiences. Patients I worked with at North Point would often remark about difficulties with transportation or missing important appointments because of missing a bus. Workers there were well aware of this added challenge. Though none of these completely cut off people from healthy food, it does seem to make a difference in what people decide to eat.

The last access issue is a lack of time. We have all experienced the stressful lack of this precious resource, but for individuals of low SES, it can be particularly difficult to find time. Studies have found a lack of time to prepare food as a major barrier to making healthier, plant-based foods at home.<sup>10</sup> North Minneapolis has a particularly high number of families with children which certainly soaks up most of a parent's time along with other resources such as income.<sup>31</sup> On top of possibly working multiple jobs and taking public transport, looking up information on nutrition and recipes, shopping, and preparing meals all take up more time than just grabbing a non-plant-based pre-prepared meal. In Minnesota specifically, more than half of low SES people surveyed said that time was a major barrier to improving their diet.<sup>40</sup>

Another factor is that fruits and vegetables might go bad quickly, thus taking up more time and money to take more shopping trips. Higher protein foods such as beans, quinoa, and rice can take a lot of time to cook. Even if information and resources are out there, there are time strains which can make adopting a new diet inaccessible.

Each of these work off of one another which is why the access is such a complex barrier as a whole and especially to plant-based foods. Individuals will have varying experiences with access, but in general, previous research indicates that the largest access issue is financial because with more financial stability, it is far easier to overcome the other access barriers. This is the barrier most frequently identified by researchers and survey participants.<sup>41</sup>

## Knowledge

Lacking knowledge about nutrition and health serves as another barrier. This is generally information about nutrition, about getting food items, and preparing them. These tend to be overlooked in discussions around plant-based diets, but a lack of any of these can serve as a heavy barrier to eating plant-based.

A concern that inevitably pops up is whether or not the diet is nutritious enough to be considered healthy. The worry surrounds a lack of high protein sources as well as vitamins and minerals such as B<sub>12</sub> and iron. The lack of nutritional awareness leads people to believe that vegetarian and especially vegan diets are inherently unhealthy and so no matter the reasons to switch, that it is undesirable.

A similar concern could be that someone who doesn't know a lot about nutrition wouldn't have the knowledge to get the nutrition they needed and so for them, the diet lends itself to insufficient nutrition. Studies have shown that although those with a low-income generally have a basic understanding of what is healthy, they are less likely to know why something may or may not be healthy.<sup>42</sup> Not knowing why something is healthy or not could cause confusion and a lack of motivation to learn more or make dietary changes. Not only that, but this diet does require a more conscious effort to get the nutrition that the person was used to getting from more familiar sources. Because it now has to come from new food sources, the person must be more conscious of what they need as they work to establish their new diet. One has to be more aware of what he or she needs and from which foods. If you do not know much about what is needed, malnutrition is definitely a concern. Without more information to address the concern, people either don't ever start a dietary change or quickly abandon it and even discourage others from going on it because of their bad experience.

Another area is not being familiar with the foods themselves which includes a lack of knowledge in storing, preparing, and cooking. Many fruits and vegetables have tricks for storage to help them last longer so that you can get the most out of them especially if they were expensive. Waste makes the food seem unreasonably expensive even if they weren't. If the person is unfamiliar with the foods needed to be nutritional replacements for what they are used to, learning how to prepare or cook meals can make or break their momentum to change.

Patients at NorthPoint brought this up frequently. They would buy these foods but didn't want to keep getting them because of how quickly they would go bad and so how much easier it was to buy their other foods. A bigger problem yet was that they simply didn't know how to prepare the foods we talked about or what sort of meals you could do with them. Those who tried to change their diet in small ways expressed boredom in having the same meals over and over and didn't know of new meals to make.

The final knowledge barrier is not knowing the ethical reasons people choose to eat this way, and so not putting value to the diet. The argument is that people didn't grow up paying attention to or valuing animal rights or environmental degradation and so aren't going to connect well to the diet or be motivated enough to try to overcome the other barriers. A piece of this is the idea that advocates can't connect the importance in a way that matters and so there is no motivation to change. There are a number of reasons advocates are inefficient at conveying meaning. The biggest one being when the well intentioned advocate does not understand where the person is coming from and has a clear lack of familiarity with the real barriers they face. There attempts easily miss the mark at best, but at worst are disrespectful, judgmental, and off-putting and only further the negative, single image of elitism in plant-based eating.

For those with a low income, there are programs and groups available which focus on other issues of access such as WIC and SNAP, but there is under enrollment due to a lack of awareness on the programs and opportunities available. Even when enrolled, participants have to know what foods are covered and keep updated on coverage changes.

The knowledge issue boils down to how this lifestyle looks in a person's regular life. This means how to prepare the food items, why they are good, and how can programs and groups help make them more accessible. If a person don't know what a lifestyle could look like or how it could be obtained, he or she will not be able to see themselves in it and so will not be able to do it. The whole lifestyle and reasons why will remain under the radar.

### Social background

A person's social background can present multiple barriers to adopting a plant-based diet. Social background refers to the cultural background, personal upbringing, and social support of the individual and community. It is essentially the social resources a person has as well as what the person was brought up to be used to due to social norms. Psychological barriers from social norms and associations are deeply rooted and discourage people from accepting alternatives.

Upbringing and the overall culture a person has never seemed an important factor to me. As an analytical student with a science-heavy background, I put a lot of weight on hard evidence and logic and cultural influence seemed too intangible a subject to be given much significance. My work in North Minneapolis challenged me on this and served as a valuable teacher. Too often, my old mistake is made where the influence of a person's background is overlooked. A person's background influences their actions, what they do with their resources, and how they interpret the information they receive. People are moved by their values even more so than

logical reason. It is the values that they were brought up with and their social norms that shape how they view themselves and everything around them.

In North Minneapolis, as in other cities, people come from all over. Black families who have come from the south, and Hmong and Hispanic families with recent origins in another country all come with their own sets of foods and expectations they are accustomed to. In fact, everyone tends to prefer the types of foods they were used to eating growing up and won't stray much from these familiar tastes. In conversations with physicians and nutritionists at the NorthPoint clinic, it was stressed that family dynamic, religion, where you live, and family origin all plays a role on how the person might view foods. Because personal background is especially dynamic, activism and policy changes can be very challenging, incomplete, and dismissive the the importance of social background.

From our upbringing, we develop numerous positive and negative social associations with food and activism.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, we explored the single image and stereotypes of a plant-based eater which unintentionally but understandably act as a strong deterrent. The plant-based diet seems to be for those who are wealthier and unattainable, or at least undesirable, because it is so strongly associated with a group that people in different socioeconomic statuses don't connect with.

On the other hand, some think that diets without meat are diets for the poor because meat is often the more expensive and special part of the meal. Having meat gives an idea that the family is well off. Therefore having meatless meals appear to indicate the opposite. For those who are used to eating meat and other animal products, there are also associations of family, togetherness, abundance, etc. Many people told me about meals which were not plant-based that their parents or grandparents would cook and how important those meals were to them. When

they thought of their family or other important social groups and social gatherings, they thought about food. Because large amounts of animal products are eaten in the mainstream, those thoughts are likely to only include meals which have animal products in them. These associations can be conscious or subconscious.

Even if the other barriers discussed are addressed, the worry is that people simply do not prefer the taste of the new foods over the taste of meat and other animal products which they are accustomed to. People who are used to eating a lot of meat and cheese will prefer these types of foods and will not choose to eat new foods even if they are accessible to them and promoted. The foods common in one area are very different from the ones most available across the nation or across the world. The ones commonly used and talked about in Minneapolis might be very different from the ones from someone's origin. Fast food and convenience stores shape what people are used to eating as well. Preferences for certain types of foods have been reinforced throughout a person's entire life and are not easily changed. I certainly experienced people saying that they simply could not give meat up because of the taste preference for it. Some couldn't even imagine reducing it.

Influence of associations might seem like a relatively trivial barrier, but because people often act do to values and emotions, it is a major hurdle. It is also very closely tied to the knowledge barriers. No matter how many resources you have open to you, if you have not had experiences with plant-based eating, then you will not be able to see it as a possibility for yourself and will be unlikely to use those resources. If you believe that the only people eating that way are people not like you, then you will think it is not for you.

These barriers are real. They are complicated, they are challenging, and they are deeply rooted. At their core, they are completely entangled in classism, racism, and separation. They are

political as well as social, and they are all interconnected. None of these aspects should not be ignored or shied away from if we want real change. The biggest part of these arguments that I agree with is that the movement surrounding plant-based diets have not addressed these barriers sufficiently. In the current environment and advocacy methods, each one of these barriers excludes those experiencing them from plant-based eating. In this way, the criticism is on point. However, the issues raised are not the full story.

### **Response**

Nigerian author, Chimamanda Adichie gave a very influential talk about the danger of a “single story.”<sup>43</sup> While there is one story you could tell which paints a picture about a person, an idea, a situation, it is only one story. There are always many more to tell which each paint different pictures. The danger of one single story is not that it is a lie, but that it is an incomplete truth which can lead to inappropriate judgement and action towards the subject of the story.

The popular criticism is the perfect example of what happens when we hear this single story. The critique only presents one story of marginalized groups with a low SES. That very true story is based in the barriers they face. This story leads to assumptions about how they can't and shouldn't be considered as part of the personal action of plant-based eating for change. However, North Minneapolis, like anywhere else, is not comprised of a population of only lacking, need, weaknesses, and woes. They are also a population of skills, connections, goals, and voice. There are plenty of reasons why these groups specifically can and *should* be involved.

Communities with a low SES, and here I'm more specifically referring to those in North Minneapolis, have a lot to gain from participating. Though the assumption is that people there are generally not involved with working on positive change for the issues addressed by plant-

based diet, they are undoubtedly affected by them. In fact, they are more affected than populations with a higher SES, the ones who fit the stereotypical elitism group involved.

Health disparities are a grave, well-documented trait of communities with low SES. There are countless disparities in pathogenic disease as well as diseases linked to lifestyle such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancers.<sup>44</sup> To change the disparity, change must happen “upstream” and “downstream;”<sup>44</sup> upstream for the roots of the problems and long term, wide reaching change, and downstream for immediate help. Downstream determinants of illness include a lack of available healthy food, a lack of adequate and available health care. Even poor living environments can be a determinant of illness such as one which appear unsafe to residence or are polluted or unmaintained. Upstream determinants of illness include racism and classism. Most neighborhoods in North Minneapolis exhibit worse overall reports of health than suburban areas near the city. Life expectancy is 83 or more years in wealthier communities such as Minnetonka, Chanhassen, and Edina, but is only around 70 in the poorest neighborhoods of North Minneapolis.<sup>44</sup> Oddly enough, health is not just associated with a person’s own income, but also the median income in their area. Health is strongly related to wealth and community.

Within these poor neighborhoods, mortality rate is highest for Native Americans and blacks.<sup>44</sup> Mortality rates for whites, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans are in the middle. It is lowest for Hispanic and black immigrants, which is thought to be due to better diet and more physical activity. Once people acclimate to US culture, especially the environment in poorer areas, second and third generation immigrants increasingly experience the health problems seen by other Americans in the area and the benefit from their culture of origin is lost.

The disparities stretch pass health and into environmental racism as well. The pattern is that marginalized groups have and receive less resources than other groups which includes less

quality foods. Therefore, the area is a good desert. There is also less quality professional care and so the area is also labeled an underserved community in health care and other professional resources. The region experiences less neighborhood and community support and less environmental resources. The last one is particularly compelling because of the decreasing environmental resources discussed earlier. The lack of environmental resources is sure to first fall upon vulnerable areas.

Although low income populations face multiple constraints to actively participating in environmental activism, they also have the greatest at stake in terms of changes in the climate. All of these issues are systemic and cultural with many levels of cause and effect and no easy solution. It isn't that plant-based eating is the superhero that can save the day, it is simply another way to be involved proactively in a way that could affect multiple levels of health at once, both upstream and down.

Taking part in the movement means that a group is involved actively with the solution instead of passively having injustice unfairly acting upon them. It is a mode of utilizing one's voice, strength, ability, and control. There is a lot to be gained from involving low income population's voices and action because of the group's unique perspective and experience with these various issues.

There are plenty of assets and resources available to become involved. National programs exist such as WIC and SNAP. WIC is a health and nutrition program for women and children which provides vouchers for food as well as other types of assistance. There is one WIC clinic in the North Minneapolis area<sup>31</sup> and fifteen stores which accept WIC.<sup>45</sup> As of 2009, changes were made so that they no longer cover the cost of meats, but have increased their coverage of beans and soy products such as tofu and soymilk. Coverage for other animal products as milk, eggs,

and cheese have decreased. Those on WIC might be particularly open to and able to make dietary changes towards more plant-based diets.

SNAP, the Supplemental nutrition assistance program is as available for those 165% under the poverty line in Hennepin County.<sup>46</sup> Those using SNAP get an EBT card which can be used at grocery stores and even local farmers markets. Studies have shown that those on SNAP do not have better quality diets, but do have better access to healthier and plant-based foods.<sup>46</sup>

The community itself has resources available to support residents. Currently the area has four farmers markets, five food shelves, three neighborhood clinics, one WIC clinic, and one hospital.<sup>47</sup> There are numerous community-based organizations doing incredible work for change.

The ones I've worked with such as NorthPoint are all great resources. NorthPoint is a resource for food, classes, information, and other types of aid. They host healthy events for the community and partner with various local groups such as Appetite for Change and farmer's markets. Their clinic is well connected to the events and resources available in the community.

Appetite for Change does work with animal products, but they are a great source to help people interested in plant-based foods to learn how to prepare them, how to get them locally and affordably, or even grow them at home. They also provide a community of people interested in health and change with lots of knowledge and opportunity to share and learn.

A strong faith community is another powerful resource. In North Minneapolis, churches in particular have been active in social justice related to the area. Appetite for Change hosts events at a church, for example. Connections with churches have been positive, far-reaching, and empowering.

Each of these local organizations are well-received. Though none of them look specifically at plant-based diets, each addresses many barriers to eating plant-based and certainly are great partners should those interested in plant-based eating seek them out. There are strong opportunities for more connections between local organizations like those mentioned and others inside and outside of the metro area who also work with food, health, environment, or animal advocacy.

Though, of course, not true for everyone in North Minneapolis, there are individual assets which might make some people particularly open to this sort of change and activism. We already discussed the desire to use one's voice and ability to act instead of be acted upon. Another thing that I've heard again and again is the distrust of the mainstream system, the government, and corporations. Because of the disparities and injustice they have experienced, there is a greater desire for community and personal reliance. This easily translate into receptivity to alternative eating which challenges injustice. Because whole plants are easy for communities to grow together, the greater potential to provide for one's self and community might also be attractive. Many people at Appetite for Change and through my work at NorthPoint came up with these conclusions and found themselves proud of eating or growing plants as it was a symbol for strength to them.

Individual desire is not the only motivator. North Minneapolis has a higher concentration of families than other areas of Minneapolis. Family is a priority. it is a heavy-set value, it is a huge motivator. Children are a motivator to change diet and lifestyle and increase access to healthy foods. The importance of teaching children healthier choices came up often with the Diabetic group I saw at NorthPoint. Thinking in this way, parents felt pushed to make meals,

shop for the new foods they learned about, and take to heart what was being shared and offered during the nutrition program.

With all of these resources, motivators, and assets in mind, there is a more positive view of the strength of this community to overcome the barriers they are faced with. What does overcoming these barriers look like in practice? Let's look again at the barriers addressed earlier, but this time with a more complete view of the story.

### Access

As mentioned, the Fruit and Veggie Rx class, FVRx, was part of a study hosted by Blue Cross and Blue Shield where vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables were written by doctors to low-income patients with diabetes.<sup>17</sup> Participants had to attend monthly classes on nutrition and food preparation. In this study, the issue of financial inaccessibility of healthy foods was taken out of the equation because participants could get fruits and vegetables for their whole family for free. The class focused on meals which were both healthy and affordable so that when it was over, participants would still be able to keep up with the lifestyle changes.

At first, there was a perspective that healthy and plant-based foods were more expensive, but it became clear very quickly that this didn't have to be the case. Vegetarian and vegan specialty items can be more expensive, but sticking to more common plant proteins are not. Beans and other protein sources are cheaper than getting your protein from meats. Buying dry lentils and beans especially can save a lot of money, if you have some extra time to prepare them later on. Soy and almond milk are often slightly more expensive than cow's milk, though there are more coupons available for vegan milks than cow milk. Though some plant-based items can seem expensive, it is most clear that the products eating up most of the grocery bill are animal products, especially meats. "Low-income households spend up to 50% of their food budget on

meat.”<sup>10</sup> Families that decreased their animal protein and increased their plant protein were able to get more nutritional foods for less cost.<sup>10</sup>

Participants at FVRx discussed how junk foods were easily accessible, but quality whole foods were not. They wanted to see more grocery stores with quality foods, however the more immediate issue was a lack of time. Meal planning, sometimes having to wait for a ride or a bus, shopping, and preparing a meal for a family all took so much time that they were not used to. It was especially hard sometimes because the farmer’s market had a small window that they were open after normal work hours.

Just looking at access issues overall, a lack of money is seemingly the largest hardship. Oddly enough, though, time constraint seems to be the most important area to look at as an access barrier. It is a barrier that is overlooked by activists, researchers, and policy makers. It’s so important because of how it affects other strategies to overcome other challenges. Most of these issues can be overcome if a person is able to carve out time. When an individual takes more time to plan and prepare, the endeavor can be significantly cheaper, for example.

Finding time is a significant barrier but increased knowledge can help lessen the burden and make time management much easier. Knowing about preparation, resources available, and savvy shopping can help the diet be affordable and doable with a tight and chaotic schedule.

Motivation and support from social circles can also make this easier.

I want to stress the importance of work done by local organizations and policy changes in addressing these barriers and supporting solutions. In the current environment, fresh produce has barriers of access as do some protein items such as quinoa and tofu. Making policy and structural changes to address issues of access take time. The good news is that while changes happen slowly on a political level, barriers can be overcome even in the current environment.

## Knowledge

Misunderstandings of health and nutrition for plant-based eating can turn people away before ever starting or put people off after doing it in an unhealthy way. Opening up the conversation during the class sessions at the clinic were helpful in uncovering what people's understandings were. A lot of general information was known, but there were also some knowledge gaps regarding plant-based diets. People were concerned that it was unhealthy and that they wouldn't get enough protein or feel full. One person said that she had been vegetarian, but felt unhealthy after a while and thought that it was not a good option for her.

Other participants offered up their suggestions about plant foods that had a lot of protein such as beans. A younger person suggested peanut butter. The dietician then was able to work off of those suggestions and experiences and talk through other foods and meals which would be high in protein, but with no animal product. The whole session was devoted to looking at ingredients lists, protein and other nutrition basics, and how much protein various whole foods had. People seemed much more comfortable with the health aspect and helped each other think creatively how to have balance in their diets. It was a quick change in perspective and openness to the diet. The flyers with notes on plant protein were surprisingly popular as were the papers with vegetarian meal ideas.

Recent studies showed similar trends. Low-income African American women knew healthy types of foods, but didn't know specifics about what made them healthy.<sup>42</sup> In a study where lean and overweight people were compared, the leaner ones consistently had deeper nutritional knowledge.<sup>48</sup> The hope is that better understandings of health will encourage and support a diet change.

Information about preparing, storing, and cooking has also made a difference. No matter where I was, working in the farmer's market, at the clinic, or around the Appetite for Change group, there were many questions on how to prepare foods. It was a frustration for people after they had bought food items, so all really wanted to learn. When there was space for discussion, people were quick to share experiences and tips between each other. Doctors, nutritionists, programs, organizations, volunteers, parents, brochures, and websites all are filled with information and support. All of these have been sought after and well-received by the majority of people, even if they were initially frustrated or uninterested.

A study very similar to the FVRx study was done in Rhode Island to look at informational cooking classes for clients at a food pantry to see how it might affect buying behavior and intake of fruits and vegetables.<sup>10</sup> The cooking classes were very simple so that all skill levels could prepare the healthy, affordable meals in 10-15 minutes. The classes demonstrated how to cook plant-based, mostly vegan meals from food they had at the food pantry. They also discussed the nutritional value behind the food they were cooking.

The researchers knew that low SES families had very low fruit and vegetable intakes. They also knew that this budget-conscious families spent most - up to 50% - of their grocery money on meat and dairy so that there was much less money available to spend on fruits and vegetables. When these families had a sudden increase in income, they increased their spending on beef and frozen prepared foods with no increase of fruits and vegetables.

The instructors for the cooking class explained that fruits, vegetables, and whole grains decrease chronic disease. Meat does not have this effect and in fact is associated with increased risk of a number of serious chronic disease. They wanted to stress that meat was not a necessary part of a healthy diet so that participants might see their most expensive food item as being a

luxury, not a necessity. Participants were surprised how much more affordable the plant-based meals were, which averaged \$1.10 per serving.

The result was that not only did they spend less money on their properties, but they were able to buy more food and get higher quality nutrition. They bought less nutrient-poor foods, made the plant-based meals about 3 times per week and about half the participants lost weight, although that wasn't the intended goal. A study like this one is rare in that it directly addressed access and knowledge barriers, but also by providing an open group of participants, addressed the social barrier.

Part of the Rhode Island study, the FVRx study I was a part of, and others all include meal preparation and meal planning. One study found that over half of low SES families looked at don't regularly plan meals before going shopping.<sup>41</sup> Those who do plan meals beforehand make healthy suppers from scratch more often, about five nights a week or more. After learning about the meal planning, they planned their meals 55% more often before going shopping.<sup>41</sup> As seen in the above Rhode Island study, even a change in two or three meals a week can significantly impact health which makes informed meal planning all the more important.<sup>10</sup>

Going off of these findings on making meals at home, even before any meal planning intervention about eight in ten low SES families make dinner at home at least five nights a week.<sup>41</sup> Though it might not be healthy or plant-based, there are willing and able cooks in the families which are an important base for healthy plant-based eating. With information and motivation, it isn't hard to see how that could translate to home cooked plant-based meals. Time is still a huge barrier, but this suggests that with knowledge and motivation being addressed, it can be overcome.

Families with low incomes use less soy products than those at any other income levels. When surveyed, 45% said they didn't use them because they are unavailable. 55% said it was because of the cost. 83% said it was because they didn't know how to use them. 88% said that education would be most helpful in increasing their use of soy products.<sup>49</sup> This surveyed group as well as others have pointed out what is becoming clear. Although barriers of access are significant, increased education and information sharing can overcome them.

We talked earlier about the assumption that those of low SES do not place importance on the subject of food, nutrition, and food justice issues. While certainly there are people like this, I have found many people with low SES *are* interested and *do* value these things. Everyone I have spoken with in North Minneapolis has found all of these things important and highly-valued. For those who seem on the surface to not value them, it was not the lack of importance, but rather the presence of barriers which made attaining enough high quality food, proper nutrition, and the opportunity to participate in justice issues out of reach. Also, the connection is not clear to the general public between plant-based diets and the values they already have on nutrition, food justice, family, community wellbeing, etc. However, again, all of those same values exist so connections can easily be made.

I want to pause to point out that I'm discussing a lot of personal observations and that I have a biased perspective. I am not a native of North Minneapolis and I am no expert in their experience. Most of the places where I spoke with to people have been places which would attract more health-minded and involved people, such as those participating in a nutrition study. I have also been primarily interacting at venues where many people have already been diagnosed with a chronic illness, which serves as a motivator to be mindful of food and nutrition issues.

Appetite for Change also would tend to attract those in the community with preexisting interest in food, nutrition, food justice, community building, etc. Though they are a new group, they are rapidly growing and diversifying their activities which attracts many types of people.

It is wonderful that there are so many organizations around these related topics, but it does present a bias in my observations as they were not from random samples of the average population in the area. However, I was able to talk to people from a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and interests. There were many experiences of conversations which took place in fairly neutral settings, by which I mean there was no obvious draw towards people particularly active in food justice. People talked to me in the social services building and even at the local grocery store. Every single person without fail was quite content to talk with me about food. I didn't mention animal products, but also didn't say that I was interested in plant-based diets. Consistently they would be interested in new recipes, sharing stories and tips, and asking lots of questions. I had hoped that people would be open to talking, but I was pleasantly surprised with how well received these conversations were.

This was especially true for when I was helping a nutritionist table at a bimonthly produce event. The nutritionist I was helping for the day had prepared foods to sample from items that were available at the event for free, and were also cheap at the nearby grocery store. They were all healthy, quick and easy to make, and vegan. They were also surprisingly popular. Not only did an incredible amount of people take recipes and ask questions about preparation, I was amazed how well giving samples away worked to open up conversation.

People talked about what foods they were growing in their garden or what sorts of things they grew up eating. They talked about their interest in food, their families, and being healthier.

They talked about enjoying being involved and the pride they had growing or preparing a meal with whole foods.

It was normal to hear comments about how people couldn't stop eating their favorite animal product like cheese or pork or a certain meal that their spouse makes. However, overall the conversations were very exciting as it was easy to see their interest being revitalized throughout the conversation as if they were being reminded of their interest and connection to the topic. Parents were especially interested, but amongst others, too, there was a want for information and an openness especially if the right sort of language and attitude was used. I will describe language and attitude of advocates later on.

The people with whom I interacted in North Minneapolis know basics and have access to more information about food and nutrition. The biggest thing is getting more ideas and opportunities to engage out there. This can be done by people and organizations in the community, but a lot of it comes from ease of access to knowledge and the social motivation to seek things out and practice them.

### Social background

There is a great opportunity to connect to people through shared values and experiences around food, health, animals, and nature. Connecting in these ways creates a strong and supportive structure which can then be used to help connect them to plant-based eating and the activist goals along with that.

Over and over again in all areas of activism and health care, I heard the phrase, "meet them where they are at," which meant that when you work with community members, you ought to consider where they grew up, what their families are like, what they know, where their values are, and everything else that makes up who the individual is in that moment. It was what everyone

would tell me when I asked them what was important to keep in mind or what the secret was to effective and ethical public care. Talking to each individual, this phrase reminded me to think about what a person is used to, how big of an influence that plays in their life now, and how he/she may interpret whatever I tell them due to that background. Because the weight of this concept was so new to me, I want to stress it here. It was not something I heard much about in activism in general or plant-based eating specifically.

Taste preferences are mostly a matter of what we are used to. Issues of taste preference was the argument I heard most for why certain populations would refuse to eliminate or reduce meat. It wasn't until people tried some meals without meat that they were much more open and interested. It worked this way because it suddenly wasn't about the meat that they couldn't have, it was about the foods they could.

During our plant protein themed month in the fruit and veggie Rx program, myself and the other staff prepared multiple vegan dishes for people to try as we discussed nutrition, access, preparation, and more. No one said the word vegan, but even a plant-based theme had never been done before at NorthPoint, so none of us knew what the response would be. I was delighted when everyone without fail had at least one dish that they liked and took recipes home. Some came back and said they tried this or that and really liked it. I was most inspired when they would share recipes and tips with one another. I think it was this open and equal type of dialogue that made the classes so successful and enjoyable to participants.

Research supports my observations. A study showed that values affect taste more than the actual taste of a food item does.<sup>50</sup> If a product seems to symbolize or relate to a value the person eating it shares, they will believe the product tastes better. For example, meat is strongly associated with masculinity and social power. Those who valued masculinity and social power

highly also rated what they thought was the meat-containing item as tasting better than the vegetarian alternative, even though both products were actually the same. The same results were found with different food items and different value associations. The results suggest that associations we have with foods drive preferences and that changes in associations can lead to change in preference and diet.

A separate study of low-income African-American men showed the strong influence social circles had on diet.<sup>51</sup> It concluded that to change diet, social environment such as friends, family, and work environment had to be addressed. Each of these things have a large impact on a person's health as they make up the social norms and social resources a person has. Social norms and lifestyles are not set in stone, but fluctuate with the changing environment.

Taboo and stereotypes involving the single image of those who eat plant-based is something we talked about in the very beginning as being a barrier. Looking at it from a solutions standpoint, encouraging many types of people to engage in the diet could break the one image mentality and make it even easier for others in the future. This can be as simple as involving someone in a social event with plant-based food so that they can see themselves engaged in a new social norm.

Another way is to highlight those from different ethnic or economic backgrounds who are already engaged in the diet. Though a plant-based diet is primarily prevalent in white, middle-class groups, some studies have found that people with a lower SES are more likely to eat a plant-based diet than those with a high SES.<sup>4,29</sup> Additionally, plant foods are much more a part of the average diet in most cultures outside of the US. Those with ties to these other cultures might also be more likely to eat primarily plant-based foods or at least be more familiar with them.<sup>29</sup> More diversity already exists related to this type of eating than is generally assumed.

Getting these voices heard would be a great next step. Two sources with a notable presence online are the Vegan of Color blog<sup>52</sup> and the Sistah Vegan Project<sup>53</sup>, both of which stress this same need of breaking the one image and encouraging wider diversity and acceptance within the vegan movement.

Stepping back to take a look at motivation highlights why breaking the one image of these diets is so important in thinking about effective advocacy. Firstly, there are a few incorrect assumptions about motivation that I see well-intentioned advocates making. In the first section of this paper, I discussed the common reasons why people choose to engage in a plant-based diet. The reasons are all backed very strongly by evidence. Advocates understandably talk about this when trying to get others to make the diet switch, which I agree with and think it is an important part of the discussion. However, the problem is when they rely solely on that information to change their audience's behavior. It is a method that is popular, but also ineffective.

Logical reasoning is not usually enough to break down a norm that has been established, built off of, and celebrated for a person's entire life.<sup>54</sup> It would be like explaining to someone who suffers from depression all the logical reasons they should become happy and then becoming frustrated when they do not suddenly shift into everlasting joy. Most people believe that logical reasoning motivates them, but this is actually incorrect.<sup>55</sup> This mistaken assumption leads to ineffective advocacy and can easily slip into negative judgement when the person does not shift their actions in the face of perfectly fine information. This is also true for oneself if you believe in the reasons for change, but can't get yourself to make the shift based off of this information, even though you might want to.

Logic isn't enough, but emotional and social connections are.<sup>54</sup> How well we emotional connect or what are social interactions are around a given topic or in a given situation effects are

actions more than logic. We pull conclusions about topics because of emotional and social connections and then use logic to support that conclusion.<sup>54</sup>

Connections like these are made through experience and engaging in behavior. It is well supported scientifically that attitudes follow behavior and not the other way around.<sup>55</sup> To be successful at motivating behavioral changes, the target person or group must be allowed to engage in the behavioral change. Similarly, seeing others making that change, or seeing them doing the action and thus setting up a certain social norm, is highly motivating.<sup>55</sup>

This is where breaking the one image of the plant-based eater comes into play. Seeing others and even oneself engaging in action is enough to break the image and thus the perception that a set of behaviors are non-inclusive, or not for you. Even if you consider yourself a hardcore meat lover, finding yourself in a positive setting, eating a vegan meal can change your attitude towards the whole lifestyle. It is important for someone new to the diet to not be discouraged by how the diet appears before trying a few meals or participating in outings. Perhaps they need to visit a rehab sanctuary for chickens. Perhaps they need to talk with passionate activists about the journey they took to work on human hunger. Experience, which leads to emotional and social connections, makes a much larger impact than any reading or information-heavy conversation could.

The second thing that helps motivate people are connecting to one's values. Conversations which connect to a person's values can get at the emotional shift where a logical conversation alone often has little to no effect at all.<sup>55</sup> Personally engaging in an action related to plant-based eating or community involvement can certainly get at the emotional shift, but sometimes it is challenging to set up the opportunity for an in-depth experience. An activist should then focus on connecting. The activist must work on making personal connections to the

person that the individual has the sense of being included into the plant-based diet group simply by connected positively to one person from within that group. Asking questions and connecting to someone's own set of values instead of imposing assumed values onto them is an effective and ethical strategy.

It comes down to whether or not a person can see that he/she and his/her personal values have a place in that new social norm. The behavior that is important for change is one that allows for an experience *and* a personal value connection.

Among all the areas discussed, the social aspect is the biggest area in need of growth and attention when looking at solutions and methods of engagement. Ignoring it could be one of the biggest reasons some other solutions don't do as well as hoped. The studies done which were particularly effective at changing a person's diet such as the Rhode Island study or the Fruit and Veggie Rx one of which I was a part all had the social element.

Discussion of social influence was largely absent across the board. Compared to access and knowledge, it rarely showed up in the literature or in my personal experiences. Even when studies included social support, it was a part of the methods, not a focus for finding solutions which is where, I believe, it belongs. In the past, social barriers and solutions might not have received the attention it deserved because it was not as tangible and straightforward as access and knowledge. Therefore it has been harder to analyze and change.

Properly addressing social influence is about finding ways to connect the individual to a new, more plant-based, social norm. "Meeting them where they are at" as well as supporting new norms are huge motivators and help to overcome access and knowledge barriers. Understanding, new norms, and social support builds off of who people are and what they value while also

widening the image of those who engage with plant-based advocacy so that the image is more inclusive of people of color and with low SES.

Instead of social influence being the most important factor, it is more so meant to work with and strengthen the access and knowledge elements. What we see as we take a step back is that addressing these barriers one at a time or incompletely has not worked. The most important thing is to see that the barriers overlap and so must all be addressed as pieces of a whole system.

Overlapping barriers require overlapping solutions. Just as it is dangerous to look at a “single story” with respect to a community, it is also dangerous to look at a “single solution.” When solutions do overlap and acknowledge the whole system of barriers and strengths, they *are* effective.

### **Active Conclusion**

Solutions to getting plant-based eating to be inclusive are necessary, attainable, and have already been effective in many contexts. If done respectfully and carefully, barriers can be overcome which shows that plant-based eating is not elitist by nature. It is elitist in practice which tells us that the solutions need to be better utilized, more clearly communicated, and more holistic. Changing methods of activism, support, and dialogue around plant-based eating is needed to make the diet more clearly inclusive.

The critics are most accurate, in that those who support do not actively recognize the need to open up the dialogue, address barriers, and offer relevant solutions. Supporters have the power to change the perspective and open the doors. Everyone has a part to play in this and there are many ways to be what I believe is a more respectful and effective advocate.

Firstly, we can be aware of challenges. We have to understand the difficulties individuals and communities face in order to clearly address concerns and provide resources and support in

helpful ways. Part of understanding the barriers is understanding that diet is not going to happen for everyone at any point in their lives. The diet tends to be a journey and an alignment of many good experiences and useful information. What fits a person's need to change is different for everyone and it might take a lot of time. We can't expect everyone to get involved, but we can make sure that everyone sees the open doors and is warmly welcomed.

Secondly, we can be aware of the abilities to overcome these challenges. Making connections between resources, abilities, and social background and relationships eases the journey of overcoming challenges. Being sure to connect personally and provide a positive social interaction is key. Understanding their social influences will also help to address access and knowledge barriers. Explore options on a community and individual level and support a variety of abilities to overcome challenges.

You can use this mentality in many areas no matter what you are called to do, when, or where. You don't even have to believe that this subject is your calling because every little thing adds to the momentum. Keeping in mind how you already interact with food might help shine light on the countless opportunities that are effortlessly already around you. You decide how to make use of them.

Word usage is one thing to be aware of in everyday life. Talking about a *more* plant-based diet, or a more vegan diet leaves room for growth as we can all do a little bit more. Evaluate case by case if the person you're addressing would understand or be more comfortable with the words "vegetarian" "vegan", or "plant-based.". Vegan and vegetarian are most used, though often not fully understood. I use plant-based because it is a broad term and allows for more flexibility while also supporting the connection to whole plant foods and nature which has a positive connotation. Compassionate Action for Animals, or CAA, is one organization among

many, which often goes with this word for similar reasons.<sup>56</sup> Health professionals also are more likely to use it because of the connotation.<sup>18</sup>

As an individual in your personal or professional life, there are so many ways to be involved. Many advocate for steps such as for new meals to try, meatless Mondays, meatless weekdays, changing out animal milk for soy or almond milk, or simply trying new types of food. Steps like these already have begun to create new norms and have helped people see how these changes and goals look in their daily lives. The most important thing is for people to see that it's doable, positive, and enjoyable. Celebrating the little steps and discoveries individuals make is also important. Posting on Facebook or other media, celebrating a meatless Monday with a vegan dish you tried is also effective

Look up information about areas around you, where you go to school, and where you work so that you can be more sensitive to challenges. Know the resources and stores to be able to make helpful suggestions. Be creative when talking to others who face challenges. Be a resource and a supporter, not an intimidating pressure or a source of judgement. Help to support a more open and diverse "image" of what it means to be a supporter of a plant-based diet.

Ask people about their lives before making assumptions. Open up conversation, and don't shy away from those issues. This helps connect and support. Openly address and acknowledge challenges when speaking such as the many issues related to access, knowledge, and social barriers.

Talk to people to learn what they did, what they are interested in, how they connect, what moves them. Ask people about their background and how they grew up - especially how that relates to food, gardens, and cooking. Talk about foods and recipes. Look up recipes so that you can easily bring things up and share ideas. Post recipes. Read up on and practice plant-based

eating yourself so that you know what to say and can openly talk about how you've worked through various aspects of the diet change, especially challenges you've faced. Address assumptions people might have about the diet and change those assumptions by example. If an assumption is that vegans are negative, talk about the diet in a positive light. For example, instead of saying that you are vegan because the mainstream lifestyle is unethical, say you are vegan because you've found it to be a great way to be involved in positive change, or simply that it's a diet you feel most happy with.

Discuss values and beliefs around food. What does food mean for people? What values are important to others and how might those relate to your own values and plant-based eating? Family, independence, voice, connection to earth, compassion, responsibility, etc. Make others feel encouraged, connected, empowered.

There are also lots of ways to be involved as a member of a group such as club, a social group, a workplace, a school, an official organization, etc. Talk about who is being represented and who isn't in various scenarios. Talk about diversity. Why is it challenging, why is it important, how does it relate to what you're doing?

Share food, do taste testing. This can be an event or even very casually to create a new norm with plant-based foods. Allows space for them to talk about things they like and don't like about the things they have tried.

If you are part of a club or other organization, look up and connect to related groups in North Minneapolis or other areas which might be different than yours. Before contacting, read up on them. Invite them to an event of yours, to speak at your meeting. Ask if your group could join them for a meeting or volunteer at an event or project of theirs. If possible, meeting a different organization in person is the best way to establish connections even if the meeting or group is not

about plant-based foods. Collaborations can still be a great way to help each other out, ask questions, and extend your resources.

If you are looking at analyzing, supporting, or creating policy changes, make sure that it is taking into account this holistic aspect surrounding food. Think about how it might affect various groups. Talk about this. Ask questions.

Whether you are an active advocate, a shy supporter, or a curious questioner, there's a place for you. There are takeaways for those who interact with North Minneapolis or plan to work in this community or communities like it. The examples in North Minneapolis of challenges and ability relate to challenges and ability seen every else just in greater or lesser degrees. More respectful and effective activism benefits all of us as we shape our world.

To review, the criticism is essentially that the diet is elitist. Part of the criticism is that it is elitist in practice, that is to say elitist in the way it is advocated for. The other part is that it is elitist simply in its nature, or in the method itself outside of how it is promoted, due to the barriers that exist.

My response, based on my experience carrying out this research, to the initial criticism is not that that everyone can and should eat 100% plant-based right now. Instead my response is simply that this form of activism *can* be inclusive even to those facing economic and social obstacles as long as supporters and advocates are respectful and effective.

Therefore, I disagree with the second part of the criticism that it is elitist in nature because of the barriers. I do, however, agree for the most part that it is elitist in practice because of how exclusively it is advocated for. Though advocacy is improving in this way, much is left to be done.

For supporters to be most respectful and effective, we must address the barriers as well as the resources and abilities to overcome them. This helps to open up those doors more and more to make that choice easy for those who decide that it is best for them. My research into the literature as well as my own experience has shown that the door to plant-based eating both should ethically be open to all and is open to all. The only question that remains is how best to get more people to see the door and more importantly, what our own compassion leads us to do.

## Appendix A

The honors project allowed me the opportunity to bring together all of the disciplines I have studied in my undergrad. I was able to talk about health and science as a pre-med student, multiple cultures as a Spanish minor, and social justice and ethics as a Justice and Peace major. I knew I wanted to study something where I could use each one of these factors of my studies, but it was very challenging to narrow down my focus. My inclination when facing a question is to make many connections between details and broad topics, but this constant connecting of dots was the thing I had to battle most to focus in enough to write the type of paper I needed to.

The inclusiveness of plant-based diets ended up being my topic as it was the manifestation of my personal growth at the time. Years ago, I was introduced to how health, environmentalism, and hunger related to plant-based diets. Because of this, I stop eating red meat, but that was as far as I had gone for about six years. What I had learned changed my thoughts on plant-based eating, but it was not enough to change my actions in a satisfying way. As an analytical and compassionate person, this was very frustrating.

Much later, I had a class on kinship and responsibilities of humans towards animals. I learned a great deal of new information, but the first significant motivation for me to change my diet was an outing with the class to the Chicken Run Rescue, a sanctuary for chickens.

Zazu was a particularly curious, outgoing, and affectionate chicken. I picked her up with some hesitation, but was stunned how significant she seemed to me right away. Though I had known chickens had experiences and personalities, I had ever experienced it. She clearly had a personality, various interests, relationships, and an inner experience. Somewhere in the couple minutes I held her, I knew that from then on, I would practice a plant-based diet. If I could feel for a chicken, the animal I thought I was least likely to connect to, I knew I had to change. I was

shocked how an experience like that could make me instantly adopt the thing that I had intellectually valued for years. My actions, compassion, and logic were aligned and created a change that I believe is permanent.

My passion for plant-based diets did not waver, but I questioned its feasibility as a method for significant change as I became more familiar with the critique that it was elitist. The critique in various forms sat in the back of my mind and was never addressed in any classes or casual discussions on plant-based eating. I was never fully satisfied with any argument on plant-based diets because the unanswered question on elitism continued to grow.

As someone who wanted to work with low SES and underserved populations, I needed to understand the criticism better. Was it unethical for me to ever bring up plant-based eating in these populations even if I thought it was for the betterment of the community and individual? As a physician, would it be unethical to talk about plant-based diets to patients suffering from diseases like diabetes if they lived in one of these areas? Has the diet been appealing and viable to me simply because I am in the elitist group?

My internship the summer of 2014 at the NorthPoint clinic helped shape my understanding of barriers and assets of the population there. It was clear that nothing I had heard about plant-based diets had ever addressed a low SES population. It was unspoken, but the conversation was only ever by and for those with a higher SES. These incredible gaps in the literature and in personal communication, as well as my inner ethical conflict, led me to focus in on what became this paper. My time in North Minneapolis with NorthPoint and other organizations highlighted and filled out many of these gaps as I gained pieces of insight through experience that had not been available to me previously. I hoped that whatever I learned would be useful in filling out the dialogue for other advocates and supporters of the diet, but it was

mostly personal because I, as an advocate, needed to learn how to be inclusive and effective. This is how I decided who my audience would be in the paper.

The idea of filling out missing pieces of dialogue and my background as an advocate also made me want to make sure that my paper would lead up to action steps to encourage change. I decided to use more informal speech such as “we” in the paper for a similar reason. By addressing the audience as an advocate and equal, I hoped to better connect to them and encourage them in the action steps.

Lack of time and lack of experience with the topic limited what I looked into. I had intentions of doing surveys, but my specific topic came to me somewhat late, and so I relied only on experience and literature. If I had had more time, I would have done surveys before and after a class, open discussion, or event to see not only where people were at, but to see how effective various types of advocacy work was. Also, looking back at previous studies done through the lens of assets instead of barriers and weaknesses proved to be very useful to me in identifying solutions to increase inclusiveness, which I would highly recommend to other researchers.

Much more specific work is needed with the Minneapolis population and others with a low SES. Actual surveys and studies on plant-based diets did not exist for Minnesota. Everything I used on Minneapolis was not specifically related to plant-based diets, but only lent itself well to understanding barriers and resources. Future studies could also compare effectiveness of methods of advocacy related to plant-based diets in various populations. Broadly, more research needs to address assets of individuals and groups instead of challenges alone. Repeating surveys and studies done, but with more diverse populations, would be another good area of future work.

The project has given me a new lens, which keeps me always asking who is being included and represented, who is not, why that matters, and what could be done. Though it came

as part of my personal desire to understand plant-based diets for myself, this project became much more. I believe after almost a year and a half, I am a more competent researcher, advocate, Minnesota citizen, and future physician. This project has challenged me, taught me, and pushed me to continue to question and discover.

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