

### Case Study: Being Vegetarian

In the UK, three million people (about 5% of the adult population) define themselves as vegetarians. This generally means that they exclude meat and fish from their diets, for ethical, political or religious reasons. The umbrella term 'vegetarianism' encompasses a wide range of values and lifestyles: *lacto-ovo-vegetarians* will eat milk and eggs but not meat or fish, *vegans* eschew all products derived from animals, including non-food items, and *fruitarians* eat only raw fruits and seeds. Within the vegetarian community, there is some degree of resentment felt towards *pescetarians*, who continue to eat fish. Some vegetarians are politically active in campaigning for animal rights and protest against the way in which meat is manufactured, while others focus on education, for example promoting the ecological advantages of farming crops as opposed to cattle. The Vegetarian Society is a leading organization that aims to raise awareness amongst health professionals and the general public about the implications of vegetarianism for individuals, society and the natural environment. It liaises with the mass media to promote events such as National Vegetarian Week, which in 2002 was sponsored by the supermarket chain Sainsbury's. Around 2000 people turn to vegetarianism each week, and the number of new vegetarians in the UK has practically doubled over the last ten years. Becoming a vegetarian can be a life-changing event that happens very quickly, or it can be a gradual process through which one is socialised into the norms and values of vegetarian friends or family. In any case, it provides the individual with a new way of seeing the world and their place within it, and may become an important part of their self-identity.

Source: The Vegetarian Society <http://www.vegsoc.org>

#### Questions

1. To what extent is vegetarianism a social issue, as opposed to an individual one?
2. How do vegetarians organize themselves as a minority group (or groups) in the context of the wider society?
3. How do you think becoming vegetarian might shape a person's view of themselves and the world around them?
4. How might sociologists study the process of becoming a vegetarian?
5. How would our interpretation of the relevant information be shaped by the values of campaigners, industry representatives and the mass media?