

Bear, Matt  
matt.bear@Colorado.edu  
SOCY 5031, Research Methods  
Research Proposal, Complete  
Due: May 4, 2009

## **CONSUMER DISSONANCE: Exploring Why Ethical Consumers Ignore Their Own Ethics**

### **Abstract of Proposal**

*What makes a “conscious consumer” conscious? Why do some consumers make consumer choices consistent with their self-defined social values while others do not? This proposal draws on theories of cognitive dissonance and the construction of self to qualitatively explore the social and/or social psychological mechanisms by which “conscious consumers” repress knowledge, ignore consequences, justify their actions, or overcome these barriers to change.*

### **Consumer Dissonance**

The founders of sociology were motivated by moral concern. Faced with the growing problems of an increasingly complex world, they dedicated their lives to better understanding society so that through this understanding they might ease the burden and suffering of their fellow human beings.

The tradition of activist sociology continues. Many sociologists today are drawn to sociology and dedicate their lives to the field in order to make the world a better place. While sociologists work to hone their science and make sociology a sharper, more effective tool, other scientific discoveries of the natural sciences have provided solutions to heretofore overwhelming social problems. We've advanced agricultural techniques so that we now have global food surpluses and more than enough to feed the world. And we've found cures for diseases that in the past brought death and suffering to millions.

Many of these discoveries have moved from the status of scientific breakthrough and profound humanitarian contribution to simple common knowledge. And some of the most far-reaching solutions are not only within reach of the typical Western consumer, but are dependent

upon them. Through simple consumer choices like the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, and the ways in which we build, travel, and shop we can help feed ourselves and every hungry person on the planet, end deforestation – replenish the deep woods of the North and save our disappearing rainforests, revitalize our rural landscapes and save family farms, return our oceans to thriving underwater worlds, make cancer and heart disease a rarity instead of a common occurrence, ensure living wages for workers, end industrialized cruelty to animals, and return vast expanses of wild lands back to nature and the wild animals who used to call them home. If human rights, environmental justice, and kindness to others including kindness to animals are social principles we value, if we want to build a better world, we must consider the implications of consumer choices and the kind of world we create when consumers dissociate themselves from their choices and from the consequences of those choices.

The urgent problems facing life on earth sometimes feel overwhelming, but we don't have to wait for the next breakthrough from the natural sciences. The solutions are all around us. What we desperately need are social solutions -- a breakthrough from the social sciences. The question is not, "What are we going to do?" The question is, "How are we going to motivate people to do it?"

This study proposes an exploration into the mechanism that allows people who understand social problems and their solutions to continue to make choices that are harmful to themselves and to others. In order to activate existing social solutions, we need to better understand what I'm calling "consumer dissonance." Why do people repress undesirable or uncomfortable knowledge and cling to habits unaligned with their own values?

### **Implications of This Study**

Exploring "consumer dissonance" and identifying the process by which "uncomfortable knowledge" is repressed may provide profound and far-reaching advances in all areas of social justice. Every area of social justice, from animal rights to veterans' rights, struggles to align potential allies to their self-defined values of compassion and understanding. This research will

also create a new understanding for the advancement of ethical consumerism and provide insights for those invested in growing a “green economy.” The new “green economy” relies heavily on “conscious consumers” overcoming repression of painful information and making new consumer choices consistent with their values.

### **Hypotheses and Rationale**

When we acknowledge that many of the most pressing issues concerning human rights, environmental justice, and animal advocacy are driven by human consumption, we realize that the state of the world is not something being done *to* us; it is being done *by* us. Still many of us when faced with overwhelming global problems tend to look beyond our own roles in the problem – we convince ourselves that our own actions are somehow disconnected from the greater problems and their solutions. As poet Stanislaw J. Lec metaphorically posed, “Each snowflake in an avalanche pleads not guilty.”

More and more consumers are becoming conscious of the impacts of their consumer choices; (and more and more sellers are scrambling to capitalize on these “conscious consumers”). Still, many of these same “conscious consumers” continue to avoid a reconciliation of their habits to their values. They may cry, “No war for oil!” while continuing to drive their oil-consuming, gasoline-powered vehicles. They may sincerely feel upset about the perpetuation of slave labor, but still purchase clothing produced with slave labor, with prison labor, or in sweatshops. They may even declare, with a mouthful of hamburger washed down with a milk shake, that they “love animals” and that no one should harm them unnecessarily.

It is important to distinguish that I am studying the “conscious consumer” as opposed to an “unknowing consumer.” Conscious consumers are not unaware -- they know the source of their products, they proclaim they care about the effects of consumption, and still they repress or dismiss that knowledge and/or act incongruously with their values.

While this study is qualitative in nature and while it is difficult to hypothesize specific causal relationships when it is not entirely clear what I will find and compare, I have drawn cues about

possible patterns and mechanisms from the extensive body of social psychological research done on “cognitive dissonance,” sociological theories of the “development of self,” and the environmental theory of “millenarianism.” I will address each of these in turn.

### **Drawing from Cognitive Dissonance**

The theory of cognitive dissonance was put forth originally by social psychologist Leon Festinger in his book *When Prophecy Fails* (1957). He proposed that “if a person held two cognitions that were psychologically inconsistent, he or she would experience dissonance and would attempt to reduce dissonance much as one would attempt to reduce hunger, thirst, or any drive” (Aronson 1992: 304). In other words, cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling -- anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and/or other negative emotions -- we feel when we try to reconcile two contradictory ideas (or an idea with an incompatible action). And just as we physically move to avoid physical discomfort and pain, so too we try psychologically to move away from a painful cognitive paradox.

### **Overcoming Consumer Dissonance: Consumer Resonance**

This study explores cognitive dissonance in a new way -- specifically as it relates to consumptive habits and social ethics. Hence the term I've introduced in this study: “consumer dissonance.” The uncomfortable feelings associated with consumer dissonance arise when a consumer's choice contradicts what they proclaim to be a morally and/or socially responsible choice given their understood role as a member of a wider community.

Figure 1 (See Appendix) is a graphic representation of the mechanism I will explore. Figure 2 (See Appendix ) illustrates this mechanism in more detail including consumer dissonance, the repression of uncomfortable knowledge, and the potential to overcome dissonance leading to resonance – a synchronous relationship between ideas and/or actions (referred to within this study as “consumer *resonance*”).

One hypothesis is that consumers overcome dissonance in one of two distinct ways: 1) repressing one of their conflicting ideas in preference for the easier or more familiar idea (this

would include repressing values that conflict with actions); or 2) acknowledging the conflicting idea or value that requires change and opting to make new choices that resonate with their “conscious” ideas, values, or actions. This study seeks to reveal more about the process of repression of uncomfortable knowledge (perhaps through denial, distortion of the truth, seeking reinforcement from media or peers, or feigned ignorance) and to know more about how some consumers obtain consumer resonance by reconciling their choices with their values. This move toward resolution might be due to a feeling they can no longer ignore, a process related to exposure to dissonance over time, degrees of discomfort, or numbers of incidents of repression (akin to a ubiquitous marketers’ claim that a consumer must see an advertisement seven times before she/he acts upon it) . Or perhaps there is a particular social or institutional narrative that influences the consumer. This study also seeks to identify the catalyst for this consumer transformation.

Of particular interest to me is whether or not there is some correlation of consumer dissonance to an intriguing dynamic of cognitive dissonance: justification of harm. Many of us believe that expressing anger by lashing out is the best way to release and reduce the anger and frustration we feel. If we hate our boss, for example, we can tape his/her face to a punching bag and go at it. Unfortunately, while this act may release tension, cognitive dissonance theory and its associated justification of harm holds that it does not reduce our negative feelings toward the boss. In fact, just the contrary – if we hurt someone (or pretend to hurt someone, or simply hate someone) we then try to justify our hurtful beliefs and actions by degrading the person we hurt or hate. When trying to overcome cognitive dissonance, our internal dialogue to justify harm may go something like, “I’m a good person (our dialogue often starts this way). If I’m a good person and I’m willing to hate or do harm to someone else, that person must be a bad person.” The more hurtful our actions, the more we rationalize our dislike of the other and our actions. And the cycle escalates. Since this study looks specifically at choices of vegan products, vegetarian products, and/or animal products as they relate to consumers’ feelings toward animals and the

environment (more on this in the methods section of this proposal), I may find that the more people know about how their actions negatively affect animals and the environment, the more they will rationalize their choices, and it follows, the less and less they will actually care about animals and the environment... unless, perhaps, they overcome this cycle of denigration to align with their true feelings of kindness, compassion, and environmental responsibility and achieve consumer resonance.

### **Sociological Foundations: Drawing from the Development of Self**

Sociologists view the development of “self” (an individual’s conception of herself or himself) as being dependent on social interaction. There are volumes of studies and theories on the development of self written by luminaries in sociology – Mead, Goffman, Hewitt, Mead, etc. – the list is long and impressive. I will not cover these authors or concepts here. What I am interested in is the idea that the development of self is a continuous process. What happens when an idea or action is introduced that violates a consumer’s conception of self? Preservation of self is also a key component of struggling with cognitive dissonance (Aronson, 1992).

My hypothesis is that most people think of themselves as relatively “good” people with “good” moral values. When a dissonant idea or choice becomes a part of their identity and/or narrative, they will have to repress or rationalize the idea or make new choices in order to “1. Preserve a consistent, stable, predictable sense of self, 2... preserve a competent sense of self, [and/or] 3... preserve a morally good sense of self” (Aronson, 305).

### **It’s the End of the World... And I Feel Fine<sup>1</sup>**

Lastly, I hypothesize that there may be some consumers who simply cannot cope with any more uncomfortable knowledge. Knowledge and choice served us well in smaller communities when causes for change and adaptation were infrequent. But now the entire world is our community and continuous streams of information call conscious consumers to constantly adapt to new uncomfortable knowledge. Some may choose to ignore more and more uncomfortable

---

<sup>1</sup> Credit given to rock band R.E.M.’s song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” from their 1987 album *Document*.

knowledge simply for sanity's sake. This problem of choice also relates to the conception of self in modernity (Gagnon 1992). Too many choices can be debilitating. Couple this with an ever more complicated society with a growingly deregulated morality (what Emile Durkheim called "anomie") and many people no longer know which way to turn -- especially given that they are looking for direction from outside themselves and their own choices. And still others may be disciples of "millenarianism," the conviction that things are so bad, the end of the world may come at any time. Environmentalist philosopher and author John O'Neill points out that those who focus on the negative in this way – the doomsayers – rather than being motivated to change, may actually become even more disconnected from obligations to future generations. After all, if there is no future generation, there is no obligation (O'Neill, 1993: 42-43). Validation of the presence of millenarianism will most likely lead to a better understanding of the mechanism of repression more than of the catalyst by which consumers overcome dissonance in favor of resonance.

### **Background and Review of Existing Research**

The study of consumer ethics has become more popular in recent years as more and more businesses vie for position in the emerging conscious consumer marketplace (Auger et al. 2004). Green building, renewable energy, organics, recycled products, fair labor and fair trade goods, cruelty-free and vegan specialty products, and opportunities for eco-tourism – more and more socially responsible products and services are available today than ever before. Because consumer choices like these are still part of relatively small market and partly because they do not yet glean the same degree of government tax subsidies as do their established "conventional" competitors, they often come with a higher price tag. These products and services are then reliant on consumers who put their own ethics ahead of the widespread desire for the lowest possible price (Hechter et al. 1997; Brinkman and Peattie 2008).

While capitalists are banking on conscious consumers for the growth of the new "green economy," social justice activists are also showing their interest in understanding conscious

consumers (Walsh 2008). Activists and activist organizations are recognizing the shared responsibility consumers and businesses play in determining the direction of the market economy and the consequences the market has on other people, the planet, and animals (Brinkmann 2004).

Still, even with the growing interest in consumer behavior in the conscious consumer marketplace, scant research has been done on *why* conscious consumers behave the way they do, *what* causes them to change, and *how* an “unconscious” consumer becomes a “conscious” consumer. Even less qualitative research has been done in this area. Most research instead has focused on consumer surveys in which consumers rank the aspects of products and services important to them – from functionality to price to ethical considerations (Auger et al. 2004). But the ranking does not necessarily translate into *if*, *how*, and *why* consumers act upon their theoretical ranking.

Understanding the complexity of the “how” and “why” of consumer choices when they are coupled with ethical considerations would benefit from qualitative research. As Giana Eckhardt et al. (2006) point out, “The relevant question is no longer ‘Do Consumers Care?’ but rather ‘Why do consumers care, and why doesn’t behavior match beliefs?’” (23).

“Why doesn’t behavior match beliefs?” There seems to be some agreement that we need deeper exploration of this phenomenon of dissonance (Eckhardt et al. 2004; MacDonald 2000; Wicks 2004). The theory of cognitive dissonance, introduced by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, lent itself to the investigation of dissonant beliefs and choices for over fifty years (Aronson 1992). But less has been done to frame the study of dissonant beliefs and choices from a sociological perspective and still less has been done specifically from the perspective of the development of the self. George Goethals (1992) credits and then questions the framing of the cognitive dissonance research of Leon Festinger and the subsequent work of Elliot Aronson and others claiming, “... that actually self-justification, not inconsistency, is the core notion of the theory, and that it is interesting to speculate on how dissonance theory and dissonance research

might have been different if Festinger had decided that the fundamental issue was self-justification rather than cognitive consistency” (328).

What is interesting here is the idea of tapping into the decades of strong research of cognitive dissonance, but now with a specific focus on consumer dissonance as it relates to the development of self. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Robert Zussman (1996) noted that, “Because an inner identity involves something internally felt as well as socially enacted, it cannot be constructed out of material the actor himself or herself believes to be untrue” (233). If this is true, what does it say about conscious consumers’ construction of self? Who do they think they are? What image of self do they hold? Are they lying to themselves or are they conveniently “forgetting” as wondered George Goethals (1972:328). And how does the construction of self play into the emergence of conscious consumers from “unconscious” consumers? While these are complicated questions, this study hopes to find clues to their answers both in how they might be asked and answered in relation to food choices (specific to this study) as well as in relation to the broader issues of conscious consumerism.

As mentioned in the “Methods” section of this study, I have chosen to use vegetarianism and veganism as a bar by which to categorize conscious consumers. My reasoning is that while these categories are self-reported like other consumer trends, they are also more easily observable and provide consistent criteria for categorization.

Consumer dissonance along with its compartmentalization and repression of uncomfortable knowledge are particularly pertinent to the consumer trend of vegetarianism and veganism. “Why do thoughtful people continue to be carnivores (or more accurately omnivores)?” (Fox 1999:39). This question seems to be asked more and more frequently given the growing amount of information available about the conditions under which farmed animals are raised and killed -- for those concerned for animal cruelty (Torres 2007), and the far-reaching, detrimental environmental impacts of a diet based on animal products -- for those concerned about the environment (Steinfeld et al. 2006), as well as sociological insights into the

relationship of the production and consumption of animal products to racism, and sexism (Adams 1990). Diedre Wicks (2004) calls the disconnection between the consumption of animal products and the implications of that consumption the “sociology of denial.” “Through their analyses of the interconnectedness of abuses of power through speciesism, sexism, and racism, sociologists have provided us with ways to understand why individuals have made conscious decisions to become vegetarians. The real question is this: Given the evidence presented above, why are there so few vegetarians? Here also, sociology provides us with tools to assist our understanding” (271).

The information about the consequences of consuming animal products seems to be available and even acknowledged, but still ignored, repressed, or “forgotten.” An impromptu online survey conducted by the Rainforest Action Network posed the question to its base of environmentalist supporters. Nearly 77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that animal agriculture is a leading cause of climate change and 77% agreed or strongly agreed that “because it takes more land to grow animals and provide pasture for grazing, a meat-based diet leads to deforestation” (Rainforest Action Network 2008). If these consumer opinions were to come even close to translating into consumer action, it seems there would be tens of millions of U.S. residents refusing to consume animal products. Yet by most accounts, only 3% to 7% of U.S. residents define themselves as vegetarian (Wicks 2004). And this does not necessarily mean that these self-defined “vegetarians” actually refrain from eating animals or animal products.

A small handful of studies have surveyed the reasons people say they became vegetarian or vegan – including concerns for one’s own health, world hunger, the environment, animal welfare, or distaste for animal products (Herzog et al. 2008; Lea et al. 2002; MacNair 1998; Rozin et al. 1997). And at least one study qualitatively explored the learning process of becoming vegan and the social implications of doing so (McDonald 2000). In this study, McDonald found that the subjects seemed to follow a similar path to veganism – many shared a

prior affinity toward animals; most had a “catalytic experience” that introduced them to animal cruelty; only two subjects (out of 13 total) acknowledged repressing uncomfortable information; then began the process of orientation, learning, and the decision to go vegan; and finally vegans in the study developed a new world view that they were more connected to animals and to nature. But I have been unable to find research that has explored in detail why those who are aware of social issues and the negative consequences of their consumer choices on the social issues that matter to them continue to repress uncomfortable knowledge and act contrary to their own values. McDonald pointed to the need for this detailed research, “... We need a better understanding of why people repress undesirable or uncomfortable knowledge, as well as why it may resurface at a later time” (McDonald 2000:Summary).

## **Sampling Design and Data Production**

### **Sampling Design**

#### *Special considerations*

I propose to study a specific subset of people who make consumer choices out of ethical concerns. These groups of people include:

1. “Ethical Vegans” -- those who have made a transition from consuming animal products to not consuming animal products (including dairy and eggs) for ethical reasons (concern for human rights, concern for the environment, and/or concern for animals) as distinguished from those who do not consume animal products due to health concerns, custom, distaste for animal products, or religious observance.
2. “Ethical Vegetarians” -- those who are within a transition or have made a transition between consuming animal meat (including fishes) and not consuming animal meat (including fishes) for ethical reasons.
3. “Conscious Meat Eaters” -- those who have some understanding of the consequences of their consumer choices (they may recycle, conserve energy, use alternative transportation) and also understand some of the consequences of their

choosing to consume animal products (environmental impacts and/or cruelty to animals). These subjects are committed to helping the environment and/or ending animal cruelty, understand some of the consequences of their consumption of animal products, and yet continue their consumptive habits.

4. Former “Ethical Vegetarians” and former “Ethical Vegans” – those who were once “Ethical Vegetarians” or “Ethical Vegans” but resumed eating animal products.

There are several reasons why I've chosen this subset of conscious consumers:

1. The consumer transition points are easily defined. It is much easier to define when someone is vegetarian, for example, than the degrees by which someone consumes organic foods, uses renewable energy, or recycles.
2. The meat-eating to vegetarian and vegetarian to vegan transition set provides for an interesting comparison of the different transition points that are not easily defined within other consumer choices.
3. The decision to consume a diet free of animal products has far-reaching direct ethical consequences. The ethical reasons people make vegetarian and vegan choices may be based on a wide range or on a selective subset of troubling knowledge. This diversity and sometimes lack of overlap in ethical reasoning provides for a comparison of different ways by which people process uncomfortable information as it relates to why the person makes the ethical choices – whether for human rights, animal welfare, or environmental reasons.
4. Much of the undesirable and uncomfortable information associated with consuming animal products has become widely available and is becoming more well-known even to the general public (Humane Research Council 2009). This growing awareness makes collection and analysis of information easier than it would be for other ethical consumer choices that are not yet as widely understood by many consumers. For example, many consumers do not think beyond concern for their own health or the

health of their immediate families when they purchase non-organic foods; they tend not to consider the environmental and human rights implications of spraying chemicals on crops when they purchase inorganic foods and other products. However, the implications of consuming animal products are more obvious to the average consumer.

5. My own activism over many years involved educating people about how their consumer choices impact other people, the planet, and animals. This experience gives me some understanding of the motivations for change, a deep understanding of the language involved, a clear understanding of food choices, and an awareness of social challenges faced by those making these transitions.
6. My years in conscious consumer, vegetarian, and vegan communities provide me broad access to potential subjects/respondents.

### **Data Production**

For reasons of which there is some understanding and for other reasons which I plan to explore, questioning consumptive habits of individuals may provoke emotional responses. Self-examination can often be difficult. And when self-examination includes alluding to how one's consumptive habits are connected to social justice issues about which one might feel strongly, subjects may come to feel "judged." The cognitive dissonance, repression of uncomfortable knowledge, and the construction of self, as discussed previously in this proposal, involve complicated personal and cultural suppression of information, dismissal, denial, selective "forgetting," and justifications. Questions may cause dissonance; dissonance involves uncomfortable knowledge; and uncomfortable knowledge by its very definition creates discomfort -- something most people try to avoid.

When discomfort is engaged, it is quite natural to blame the messenger as a provocateur or to make justifications for one's own behavior and feelings. Therefore, keeping in mind the potential for emotive responses and so that I may gather rich and accurate data, the interview

questions must be written and ordered in such a way as to solicit as much information as possible without triggering feelings of discomfort and judgment. It is also important that I, as the interviewer, be able to recognize 1) if emotional responses may have been provoked, 2) what triggered the emotional reaction, and 3) how to mitigate an emotionally charged situation to continue a constructive interview. Interview questions are included in the Appendix.

I also recognize and admit that because I am a social justice activist and because the issues associated with “conscious consumption” including human rights, the environment, and kindness to animals are important to me, it will be key to keep my own emotions monitored and in check during the interview process to ensure 1) that I maintain objectivity and don’t provoke my own emotional response, 2) that I don’t provoke a subject’s emotional response, 3) that I am able to mitigate emotional responses effectively should they arise.

To the benefit of this study, I have 20 years of experience as a social justice activist and over 10 years as an activist trainer; I have an in-depth understanding of how, when, and why issues of “conscious consumption” (in particular eating animal products) can become emotionally charged; and I have a long history (over 12 years) of working professionally in personnel issues and interpersonal issues that required diplomacy, interpersonal skills, and mitigation skills.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

To recruit subjects, I will incorporate convenience sampling. I will begin by working through my existing networks of self-defined “environmentalists,” “vegetarians,” “vegans,” and “conscious consumers.” To expand the sample, I will solicit referrals from these initial contacts. I would also like to replicate the success of Adler and Adler (2008) in creating a large and data-rich sample by using the internet for recruitment. This method will involve visiting topic-specific websites, joining online communities, lists, and chat rooms to solicit subjects. I will recruit 15-20 subjects for each interview category: Ethical Vegans, Ethical Vegetarians, Conscious Meat Eaters, and Former Ethical Vegans or Vegetarians. The subjects will not necessarily consider themselves “activists,” but will be making consumer choices based on ethical concerns.

As part of the recruiting process, a project-specific website will provide information on this research project and will deliver a short prescreening survey to ensure a closer-match of qualified interview subjects for the study. The project information will be worded in such a way as to reduce reactions to dissonance. For example, phrasing may be more vague such as, “consumer choices” rather than “conscious consumerism.” Questions will be asked using specific language and in a specific sequence in order to reduce feelings of judgment that may otherwise arise in subjects when presented with questions about their consumer choices as they relate to issues important to them. Prescreening questions are included in the Appendix.

An informed consent form will also be made available on the project website along with the complete range of interview topics. Potential subjects will be limited to those over 18 years of age to eliminate the need for assent forms, parental consent, and more complicated Human Research Committee approval. Those who agree to be interviewed will print, sign, and email, fax, or mail their consent form along with proof of age. Most interviews will be conducted via telephone and/or via online telecommunication (audio/video) technology like “Skype.” If subjects are available in close proximity to me, some interviews may be performed face-to-face. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Field notes and transcripts will be electronically cataloged on a computer for coding and analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Because I am working toward a theory rather than from a theory, much of the coding guidelines will be developed from field observations and during analysis (Singleton and Straits 2005:338). Besides categorization between those who eat meat (including fish), vegetarians, vegans, and former vegetarians and former vegans, I do anticipate organizing responses into different “management” methods for dealing with consumer dissonance including repression, denial, “forgetting,” and others that may become apparent during interviews and analyses. I also expect to stratify data for purposes of current and future analysis of conscious consumer attitudes, trajectories (as in identifying the “deviance careers” of vegans and vegetarians), social

movement involvement, degrees of caring about social issues, categories of social issues (human rights, environment, animal advocacy), and others areas that may become more obvious to me during interviews and analyses.

Of course, this is a qualitative study which involves a relatively small sample. I recognize the possible limited transferability. Still, I hope to increase the generalizability of the data and findings by securing a relatively large, diverse, and unrelated group of subjects.

### **References:**

Adams, Carol J. 1990. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York. Continuum International.

Adler, Patti and Adler, Peter. 2008. "The Cyber Worlds of Self-Injurers: Deviant Communities, Relationships, and Selves." *Symbolic Interactionism*. Vol. 31, No. 1.

Aronson, Elliot. 1992. "The Return of the Repressed: Dissonance Theory Makes a Comeback." *Psychological Inquiry* 3:303-311.

Auger, Pat, Timothy M. Devinney, and Jordan Louviere. 2004. "Consumer Assessment of Social Product Features: An Empirical Investigation Using Choice Experiments." Unpublished working paper.

Brinkmann, Johannes, and Peattie Ken. 2008. "Consumer Ethics Research: Reframing the Debate about Consumption for Good." *Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organization Studies* 13:22-31.

Eckhardt, Giana, Timothy M. Devinney, and Russell Belk. 2006, "Why don't Consumers Behave Ethically?" Unpublished working paper.

Festinger, Leon. 1956. *When Prophecy Fails*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A Theory Of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Fox, Michael Allen. 1999. *Deep Vegetarianism*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Temple University Press.

Gagnon, John H. 1992. "The Self, Its Voices, and Their Discord." Pp. 221-243 in *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*. Edited by Carolyn Ellis, Michael C. Flaherty. Newbury Park, CA, USA: Sage Publications.

Goethals, George R. 1992. "Dissonance and Self-Justification." *Psychological Inquiry* 3:327-329.

Hechter, Michael and Satoshi Kanazawa. 1997. "Sociological Rational Choice Theory." *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 191-214.

Herzog, Harold and Lauren Golden. 2008. *Visceral Disgust Motivates Concern for Animals*. Cullowhee, NC, USA. Western Carolina University.

Humane Research Council. 2009. "Animal Tracker – Wave 2." HumaneSpot.org. Retrieved April 16, 2009 (<http://www.humanespot.org/system/files/Citation1026.pdf>).

Lea, Emma and Anthony Worsley. 2002. "Benefits and Barriers to the Consumption of a Vegetarian Diet in Australia." *Public Health Nutrition* 6:505–511.

McDonald, Barbara. 2000. "Once You Know Something, You Can't Not Know It: An Empirical Look at Becoming Vegan." *Society and Animals* 8:1-23.

MacNair, Rachel. 1998. "The Psychology of Becoming a Vegetarian." *Vegetarian Nutrition: An International Journal* 2:96-102.

O'Neill, John. 1993. *Ecology, Policy and Politics: Human Well-Being and the Natural World*. New York: Routledge.

Rainforest Action Network. 2008. "Why don't the environmental & animal rights movements work together?" Retrieved March 27, 2009 (<http://understory.ran.org/2008/08/18/why-dont-the-environmental-animal-rights-movements-work-together/>).

Rozin, Paul, Maureen Markwith, and Caryn Stoess. 1997. "Moralization and becoming a vegetarian: the transformation of preferences into values and the recruitment of disgust." *Psychological Science* 8:67-73.

Singleton, Royce and Bruce Straits. 2005. *Approaches to Social Research*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Ewart E. 1961. "The Power of Dissonance Techniques to Change Attitudes." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 24:626-639.

Steinfeld, Henning, et al. 2006. *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Torres, Bob. 2007. *Making a Killing: The Political Economy of Animal Rights*. Oakland, CA, USA. AK Press.

Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered and Robert Zussman. 1996. "High School Reunions and the Management of Identity." *Symbolic Interaction* 19: 225-239

Walsh, Brian. 2008. "Despite the Economy, Obama Vows to Press Green Agenda." Time Inc. Retrieved March 28, 2009 (<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1860431,00.html>).

Wicks, Diedre. 2004. "Humans, Food, and Other Animals: The Vegetarian Option." Pp. 263-287 in *Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite, Second Edition*, edited by John Germov and Lauren Williams. Oxford University Press, USA.

## Appendix: Interview Guide

### I. Prescreening Survey Questions

1. Which of the following do you consider when buying products?  
(Please check all that apply)
  - a. The Environment (for example: recycled, eco-friendly, sustainable, energy efficient, organic, etc.)
  - b. Human Rights (for example: fair trade or fair labor, etc.)
  - c. Animals (for example: cruelty-free, humane, vegetarian, vegan, etc.)
  - d. None of the above
  
2. Besides what you buy, of which of the following do you consider yourself a supporter?  
(Please check all that apply)
  - a. Environment
  - b. Human Rights
  - c. Animal Advocacy
  - d. None of the above
  
3. Which of the following most closely describes what you include in your diet?
  - a. I eat meat (which may include fish), I don't necessarily read food labels
  - b. I eat meat (which may include fish), but I make sure to buy only "free range" and/or "organic" meats/fish because I care about the animals and/or the environment
  - c. Vegetarian. I don't eat meat (or fish). I do eat dairy and/or eggs.
  - d. Vegan. I don't eat meat, fish, dairy, or eggs.
  - e. Former Vegetarian, now I eat meat (or fish)
  - f. Former Vegan, now I eat some animal products
  - g. Other. Please explain \_\_\_\_\_

Subjects who answer "None of the above" to any of the answers above will not continue.

If the subjects indicate either "I eat meat" answer in Prescreening Question 3, this is the end of prescreening survey (I've gathered enough prescreening information).

If the subjects chose "vegetarian" "vegan," "former vegetarian," or "former vegan" in Prescreening Question 3, subjects will also answer the following qualifying questions:

4. Vegetarian.  
Why do you choose to be vegetarian?  
(Please choose the option that best describes your reasons)
  - a. Ethical reasons (environment, human rights, and/or animals)
  - b. Personal reasons (for my health, I don't like the taste, religious reasons)
  
- Vegan.  
Why do you choose to be vegan?  
(Please choose the option that best describes your reasons)
  - c. Ethical reasons (environment, human rights, and/or animals)
  - d. Personal reasons (for my health, I don't like the taste, religious reasons)

Former Vegetarian.

Why did you choose to be vegetarian?

(Please choose the option that best describes your reasons)

- e. Ethical reasons (environment, human rights, and/or animals)
- f. Personal reasons (for my health, I don't like the taste, religious reasons)

Former Vegan.

Why did you choose to be vegan?

(Please choose the option that best describes your reasons)

- g. Ethical reasons (environment, human rights, and/or animals)
- h. Personal reasons (for my health, I don't like the taste, religious reasons)

Those who do not answer "ethical reasons" will not be eligible for interviews.

## II. Interview Questions

Interviews will be semi-structured allowing specific questions to be asked, but also allowing for probing questions, variations, and improvisation in order to encourage detailed answers, to clarify answers, and/or to gather more data. However, the Interview Guide includes the questions likely to provoke rich data. Questions are listed in the order in which they will be asked.

Questions will be modified if necessary depending on answers to the screening questions. "Choose appropriate" will prompt the interviewer (me) for question modification.

Questions for those claiming to be "former vegetarians or former vegans" will be modified more completely (See "III. Interview Questions for Former Vegetarians/Vegans").

1. I understand you...

*Choose appropriate:*

"limit your meat/fish consumption to organic and/or free-range"

"are vegetarian"

"are vegan"

How long have you been a "conscious consumer" – making these choices?

2. Tell me about why you started making "conscious consumer" choices?
  - a. When did you first become aware of these issues?
  - b. When did you first become aware of how your choices affected those issues?
  - c. How did you feel before you started making "conscious" choices compared to how you feel now?

3. During your transition from...

*Choose appropriate:*

"eating non-organic or non-'free range' to eating organic or 'free-range'"

"eating meat/fish to not eating meat/fish"

"eating animal products to not eating animal products"

was there a time when you were aware of [the issues and consequences of your choices – *relate this back to what they answered in question 2*], but didn't make any changes?

4. Tell me about that transition period when you were aware but hadn't yet changed what you bought or ate?  
*If there is a need to probe...*
  - a. What actions did you take or what did you tell yourself during that period of time?
  - b. How did you feel during this period?

5. Do you ever make exceptions to your own food rules?
  - a. *If "No," ask,*  
What keeps you from making exceptions?
  - b. *If "Yes," ask,*  
Under what circumstances?  
What do you tell yourself about the temporary slips/choices?  
Do you ever regret your temporary slips/choices?

6. How do you feel your food choices make a difference in the world and for the causes important to you?

7. What other things besides your food choices do you do or buy to help...

*Choose appropriate:*

"the environment"

"human rights"

"animals"

8. Do you ever feel you can do more to help...

*Choose appropriate:*

"the environment"

"human rights"

"animals"

*If "No," move on or probe "why?"*

*If "Yes," probe "Tell me about that" and/or "What keeps you from doing more?"*

9. What do you think others think about your "conscious consumer" choices?
  - a. And how do you want them to think about you and your choices?

10. What do you think about or how do you view...
  - a. People who continue to eat meat/fish (*Skip for those who already eat meat/fish*).
  - b. Vegetarians
  - c. Vegans

11. Is there anything else that came to mind while we were talking that you'd like to share?

12. May I contact you in the future if I have questions and/or for follow-up questions?

### III. Interview Questions for Former Vegetarians/Vegans

1. I understand you used to be...

*Choose appropriate:*

“vegetarian”

“vegan”

How long were you vegetarian or vegan?

2. Tell me about why you went vegetarian or vegan?

a. When did you first become aware of these issues?

b. When did you first become aware of how your choices affected those issues?

c. How did you feel before you started making “conscious” choices compared to how you feel now?

3. During your transition to being...

*Choose appropriate:*

“vegetarian”

“vegan”

was there a time when you were aware of the issues and consequences of your choices, but didn't make any changes?

4. Tell me about that transition period when you were aware but hadn't yet changed what you bought or ate?

a. What did you do or tell yourself during that period of time that allowed you to not make changes?

b. How did you feel during this period?

5. Did you ever “slip” or make exceptions to your own food rules?

a. *If “No,” ask,*  
What kept you from making exceptions?

b. *If “Yes,” ask,*  
Under what circumstances?  
What did you tell yourself about the temporary slips/choices?  
Did you ever regret your temporary slips/choices?

6. When did you decide to go back to eating animal products? (Get specific timeline).

7. What prompted that decision?

8. Have your ideas about the issues that were important to you when you were vegetarian or vegan changed?

a. *If “No,” move on.*

b. *If “Yes,” ask*  
When did they change?

9. How did your life or circle of friends change when you decided to no longer be vegetarian or vegan, if at all?

- a. What do you think others think about your food choices?
10. And how do you want them to think about you and your choices?
11. Do you think you'll ever be vegetarian or vegan again?
- a. Why or why not?
12. Do you feel your food choices make a difference in the world and for the causes important to you?

*If "No," move on.*

*If "Yes," ask*

*How so?*

13. What other things besides your food choices do you do or buy to help...

*Choose appropriate:*

*"the environment"*

*"human rights"*

*"animals"*

14. Do you ever feel you can do more to help...

*Choose appropriate:*

*"the environment"*

*"human rights"*

*"animals"*

*If "No," move on or probe, "why?"*

*If "Yes," probe "Tell me about that."*

13. What do you think about or how do you view...

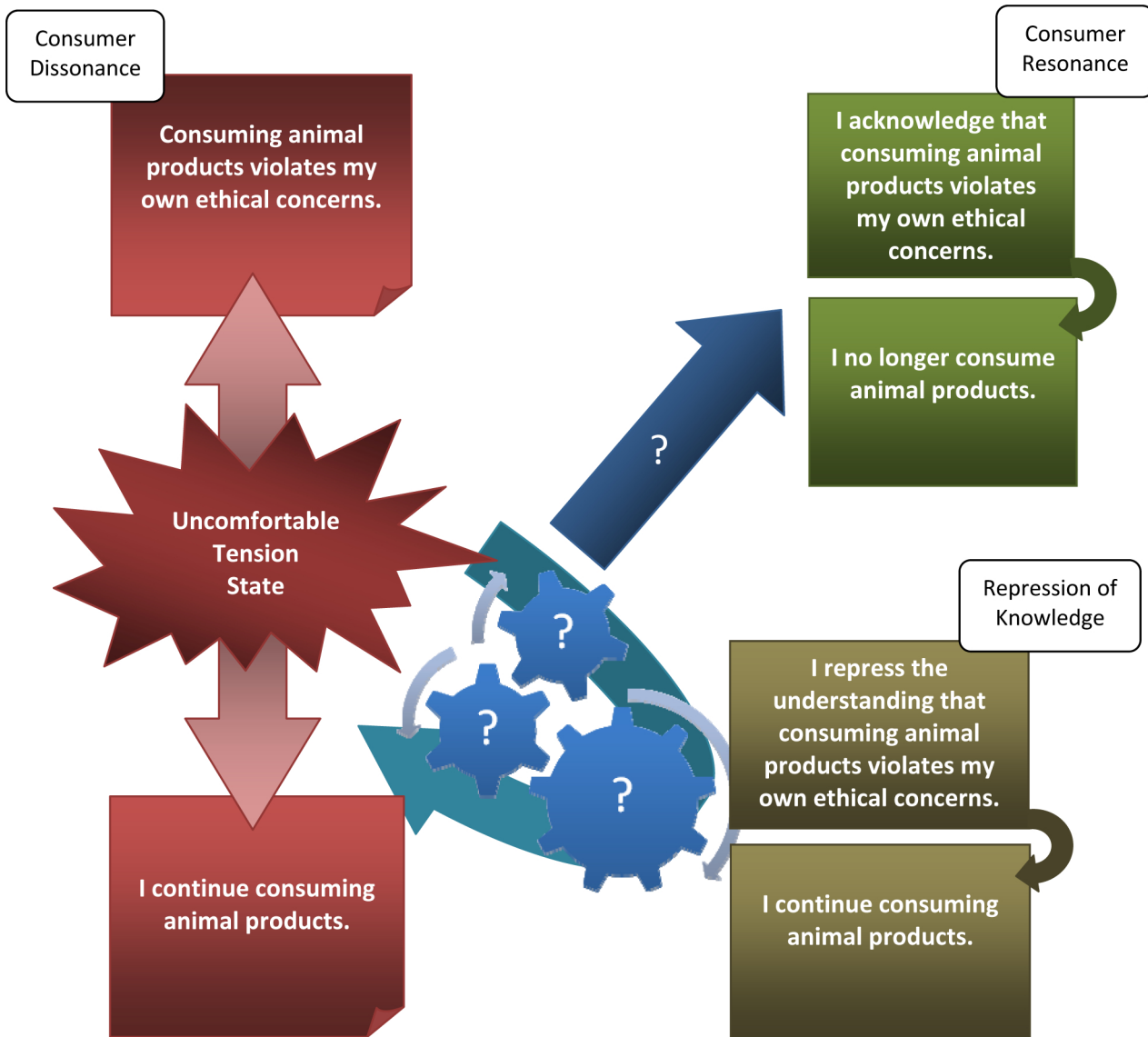
- a. Vegetarians

- b. Vegans

15. Is there anything else that came to mind while we were talking that you'd like to share?

16. May I contact you in the future if I have questions and/or for follow-up questions?

## Consumer Dissonance: Conceptual Model



**Figure 2.** A graphic conceptualization of the process of the cycle of repression of uncomfortable knowledge associated with Consumer Dissonance and the overcoming of Consumer Dissonance in favor of Consumer Resonance. The “question marks” (?) represent the explored mechanisms as described in Figure 1. The curved arrow amongst the gears suggests that the unresolved tension state is sustained for a period of time and perhaps indefinitely.