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Article

Feelings of Guilt as Experienced by Vegans – A Large-Scale Qualitative Study

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Abstract: As ethically motivated vegans (EMV) frequently feel responsible for suffering caused by the consumption of animal products, feelings of guilt are therefore an important issue for many of them. To date, studies on the experience and handling of guilt in vegans have rarely been identified. Therefore, we investigated this topic using a qualitative design. N=64 interviews with N=57 EMV were analyzed using content analysis. Key results are that they perceive guilt as a psychological and sometimes even as a physical influencing factor. They describe how feelings of guilt arise in combination with anger, revulsion and pity thereby affecting their thinking and behavior. Some experience even corporal strain, a physical heaviness. Others helped the transition to a vegan diet to get rid of guilt and to feel emotional and partially also physical relieve. In contrast, others were faced with new problems: no dissociation from other people's guilt, heightened awareness of one's own perception, more compassion, and a stronger sense of responsibility. Some even registered an increased tendency to depression and self-destructive thoughts. Beyond its limitations, our study is one of the first illustrating the possible impact of feelings of guilt on mental and physical well-being EMV may sense and suffer from.

Keywords: vegan diet; guilt; feelings of guilt; ethical vegans; qualitative study; mental health; embodiment

1. Introduction

One of many possible contributions in helping to solve the current problematic climate, health, poverty, and nutrition shortage on earth is a plant-based diet (e.g., [1]). This is marked by the abstinence from the consumption of food or products of animal origin such as fish, meat, milk, eggs, or honey [2]. Although a plant-based diet appears to be a promising solution for many of these global challenges, research should also focus on psychological consequences for individuals with plant-based nutrition given the reasons becoming vegan are mostly of an ethical nature. They refer to the suffering of animals (89.7%) and to climate change (46.8%) [3]. However, especially ethically motivated vegans – in contrast to health motivated vegans – feel responsible for the suffering and harm to animals and their environments due to the consumption of animal-based products and therefore live vegan [3,4]. As a result, guilt and feelings of guilt may be “side effects”, i.e., a negative psychological consequence and an important issue for many vegans, especially ethically motivated

ones. Therefore, the present study investigates this topic with a focus on subjective perceptions and coping strategies using a qualitative design. However, at first, we give an overview of the theoretical background of guilt and feelings of guilt.

1.1. *Guilt as a Feeling*

There are many facets to the term of guilt, e.g., existential guilt (basic feelings of guilt for being alive, self-negation), guilt in the legal sense, or collective guilt. In the context of this study, the term “feeling of guilt” refers to the emotional reaction to perceived moral guilt. It is important to distinguish between guilt and feelings of guilt. In contrast, guilt refers to an individual’s factual proportionate responsibility for participation in an act according to law. Feelings of guilt describe a person’s unpleasant emotional state with reference to that person’s actions, failures to act, circumstances or intentions [5]. Everybody experiences this emotion (pathological exceptions are possible, see chapter 1.2), with individual variations in strength and intensity [6].

Emotions, and feelings of guilt among them, are with us all the time. They define our subjective perceptions and have a strong impact on our behavior [7]. Feelings of guilt are very profound and useful emotions. They induce us, e.g., to be more honest, accept responsibility and apologize [8]. Feelings of guilt arise when we violate our own moral concepts and values [9], as well as in human interactions where suffering is caused, and we feel responsible for the other person’s situation [10]. We must have a concept of morality to feel guilt, i.e., an idea of what is good and what is evil, so that we can recognize wrongdoing as such [11]. In addition, individuals must have the freedom of making decisions to be able to feel guilty for these decisions, due to an existing moral concept referred to as conscience [12]. The feeling of guilt often has negative connotations since guilt (e.g., combined with tension, shame, and remorse) is perceived as aversive [8]. It is nevertheless a useful emotion, causing a constant alignment of actions and moral concepts and empowering us to live with a sense of satisfaction and in harmony with personal values [8]. Feelings of guilt also have a social function in that they serve to build, maintain, and strengthen interpersonal relations via reparative actions [8]. Such relational reparative actions – e.g., when we say “*I am sorry*” – contribute greatly to reducing negative feelings like guilt [13]. This can lead to emotional relief for affected persons and helps them to forgive others and themselves [13].

1.2. *Pathologizing Guilt*

Reparative actions form part of an appropriate process of regulating guilt [14]. However, in the absence of effective emotional regulation, feelings of guilt may become pathological and result in mental illness such as drug use, eating disorders and somatoform disorders [15]. Many other psychopathological symptoms may follow such as depression, anxiety, shyness, and seclusion [16]. Moreover, persistent guilt may also favor the occurrence of depression [17]. Chronic or pathological guilt may have severe implications for mental health [18] and result for example in self-punishment [19]. It is therefore of clinical and therapeutic relevance to explore feelings of guilt and appropriate coping strategies, also in the context of vegan diet.

1.3. *Repression of Feelings of Guilt*

Feelings of guilt are perceived as an aversive emotion. Individuals may therefore be tempted to avoid the perception of and confrontation with this emotion. This will however only serve to subconsciously perpetuate guilt and increase the probability of pathologizing [20]. In this manner, a guilty conscience for consuming animal products can be suppressed [21]. Some people try to ignore inconsistencies between what they believe and what they do, so that they can go on enjoying products of animal origin without remorse. This behavior may disagree with their moral attitude yet create feelings of pleasure and satisfaction [21]. The phenomenon has been termed the “meat paradox”: cultural environment and appetite involved in a cognitive and motivational process result in meat consumption becoming a habit. Therefore, it is often difficult in social situations to opt for vegan food; notwithstanding a firm moral attitude [22]. Confronted with the information that animals also

experience emotional states and are exploited, tormented, and killed for consumption and in this process feel emotional and physical pain, people react with cognitive dissonance and experience negative emotions such as guilt [22]. They adopt strategies of suppression or change to cope with this dissonance. A subconscious “lowering” of defensive mechanism can help to reduce suppression. In this manner, it is possible to reconnect with one’s moral beliefs, increasing the possibility to change [23]. Behavior can thus be aligned with moral values and those values can be adapted to include actions that do not actually correspond to one’s moral concept [22].

1.4. Bodily correlates of Guilt

Several studies have also identified distinct physiological signatures of guilt. Neural correlates of guilt are for instance associated with brain areas, which process moral emotions and cognitive control [24–26]. Furthermore, guilt is also linked to certain signatures on a bodily level including changes in thermal signature [27] and cardiac activity [28]. In a study, which mapped bodily sensations of a diverse range of emotions, guilt was specifically related to bodily sensations in the head and in the upper body [29]. Interestingly, in a large-scale research project on the “embodiment of emotions”, Day and Bobocel [8] discuss embodied cognition and describe how emotions can have a coupling physical component. In four sequential sub-studies, they confirm their hypothesis that the metaphor “weight on one’s conscience” may originate from the actual physical experience in connection with feelings of guilt. In the first of three sub-studies, the authors found that immoral actions are followed by a physical sense of increased heaviness, in contrast to other emotions perceived as negative, such as revulsion, pride or sadness. The fourth sub-study demonstrated that the same manipulation used in the first three parts also affects the severity of the judgement. These findings suggest that emotional experience of guilt can be based on a subjective physical perception. The authors describe how the experience of physical weight can serve to understand and intensify a sense of immorality, and that guilt can be seen as partly responsible for this effect. Results of the study go in line with the findings of Kouchaki and colleagues [30] illustrating that guilt may lead to physical strain and vice versa, e.g., heavy luggage leading to a higher perception of guilt.

1.5. Study Objective

The described phenomenon of guilt about one’s diet is specific to persons following a vegan and vegetarian diet [22]. The potential mental and physical consequences of guilt mentioned above, clearly underline the importance of research on feelings of guilt experienced by vegans and appropriate coping strategies. A literature research did not identify any studies on the experience and handling of feelings of guilt with reference to a vegan diet. The only research focused on a correlation between veganism and guilt was found in studies on the meat paradox by [21–23]. The fact that persons feel guilty because they are aware of the negative implications of animal product consumption has already been confirmed, as described above [22]. However, individual effects of feelings of guilt on vegans have not been previously studied. Therefore, we chose a qualitative study design to gain in-depth understanding and highlight interpersonal differences in the experience of guilt from the subjective perspective of ethically motivated vegans as they are especially vulnerable for this emotion [23].

The authors of this paper are following the SRQR guidelines (Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research) [31].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This qualitative study provides a profound understanding and overview of interpersonal differences in intrapersonal feelings of guilt and the management of such feelings. Moreover, a qualitative study is particularly appropriate given the research topic has been scarcely researched. We chose a phenomenological research perspective for an appropriate consideration of subjective meanings, individual interpretations and the context of actions and opinions as described by

participants. In accordance with this approach, it was decided to conduct semi-structured interviews based on Witzel and Reiter [32] and to apply the deductive Qualitative Content Analysis according to Mayring [33,34].

2.2. Data Collection and Interview Guideline

A request for this qualitative study was submitted to, and approved by, the University of Witten/Herdecke, Germany, Ethics Committee (application no. 208/2019). Prior to the interviews, participants signed declarations of informed consent to participate in the research project. The study has been also registered in the German Clinical Trials Register DRKS under the number DRKS00020285.

Interviews were conducted by qualitatively trained psychology students at the University of Witten/Herdecke, Germany, in the context of a research project. Data collection took place in the period from winter 2017 to spring 2018. The primary and initial focus in this qualitative study was on effects of a plant-based diet on the physical and mental well-being from the subjective perspective of vegans. A student team together with the first author drafted the questions for the semi-structured interview (see complete interview guideline in Appendix B) based on the recommendations of Helfferich [35], with subsequent pretests requiring minor amendments only. Under the title "*What has been my experience with vegan diet?*" the semi-structured interview comprised the following key questions:

- How did it come about that you opted for a vegan diet?
- What did you eat before?
- How exactly does that work: living a vegan lifestyle?
- Do you sometimes make exceptions? In which way?
- Did you change other aspects of your life, parallel to practicing a vegan diet?
- How did your environment react to your vegan diet?
- Which physical effects of a vegan diet did you experience?
- Which psychological effects of the vegan diet did you notice?
- Has something changed for you, after you managed to turn vegan?

It is obvious that these questions did not explicitly address, nor allude to, guilt or feelings of guilt nor did the interviewers directly address this topic in any of the interviews. However, the topic of guilt was raised in N=49 of N=64 interviews and commented during the interviews by the participants themselves (compare Table A1 in Appendix A).

In advance, student interviewers received intensive training on conducting Problem-centered Interviews according to Witzel and Reiter [32]. The concept of Problem-centered Interviews allows for further inquiries and for interviewers to deviate from the guideline questions in the pursuit of gaining more detailed answers. Each student (N=38) conducted two interviews. Participants were located all over Germany and were recruited from students' immediate environment, circle of acquaintances and/or the internet platform Facebook. Interviews were recorded on an audio device and conducted separately in different settings under comparable conditions either at the university or the test person's or interviewer's home. Students generated a total of N=74 interviews with 30 male and 34 female participants, i.e., a gender-balanced test population. However, we excluded N=10 interviews as they did not reach full quality criteria (e.g., not all questions asked, quality of in-depth asking, interview length). Full transcriptions of all interviews were made pursuant to simple rules of transcription according to Dresing and Pehl [36]. Of the N=64 test persons in our sample only those who claimed to be ethically motivated as being especially vulnerable for feeling guilty were extracted for investigating this research question. At the end, the present analysis is based on N=57 qualitative interviews with ethically motivated vegans (compare Table A1, Appendix A). This number is composed of those who were primarily ethically motivated when starting their plant-based diet and of those who were motivated by other reasons (e.g., health, ecological, spiritual) in the beginning but then successively became more and more aware of the ethical problems, which was almost always the case in our sample.

2.3. Sample description

Inclusion criteria comprised written consent to participation in the interview and a recording of the same as well as practicing a plant-based diet of at least four months. Permitted minor exceptions are described in more detail in Table A1 (Appendix A).

As can be seen from Table A1 (Appendix A), the underlying sample of N=64 vegans consisted of N=35 female and N=29 male test participants aged 18 to 63 years with an average age of m=26.1. N=40 participants were students and N=24 stated to be working (we do not provide detailed information on job status to preserve anonymity). The reported average duration of the participants' vegan diet was m=3.1 years, with 4 months as the shortest and 10 years as the longest period.

As mentioned above, the topic of guilt was raised in N=49, whereby N=7 participants of N=64 interviews were not ethically motivated vegans and not included in our analysis.

2.4. Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis Method inductively according to Mayring [33] was performed to investigate this large-scale qualitative dataset. The second and third authors (CH, MM) began by identifying text passages relating to the topic that were subsequently summarized and paraphrased to reduce data material to a practicable proportion without altering the main content. Main categories and sub-categories were created successively and filled with quotations from transcripts. The category system drawn up in this way was then applied to the entire data set to ensure a coherence of results. The first author (MN) conducted the same analyzing steps as the second author and the two other authors (FE & ALL) independently reviewed the first and second authors' analyses and conclusions. This involved careful review of the transcripts, themes, and results to ensure accurate formulation of conclusions from the individual interview data (investigators triangulation, [37]). All disagreements over conclusions were intensively discussed in a group setting of all authors and adequately resolved. All authors were trained and experienced in qualitative data analysis as well as conducting and publishing qualitative research. The analysis software "MAXQDA" 2020 [38] was used for the creation of categories.

Research informed by a qualitative methodology, recognizes the importance of locating and highlighting the central opinions informing the research process according to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research [31]. This paper has been heavily informed by the standpoint of the first author (MN) and the second (CH) who identify as vegetarians-vegans and the last author (FE) who is not vegan but gained interest through listening to the first (MN) and second author's (CH) accounts. The third author (MM) was vegetarian before analysis of the data and after became vegan. The fourth author (ALL) is vegetarian but eats a predominantly plant-based diet.

3. Results

Three main categories or themes were defined during qualitative data analysis: "Process of becoming conscious of subjective perceived guilt" (see 3.1) (comment: as eating and therefore killing animals for consumption is not restricted by law in Germany, guilt can only be perceived through the violation of one's own subjective ethical concept; it is therefore called "subjective perceived guilt" in the following), "Experience of the feeling of guilt" (see 3.2) and "Effects of vegan diet on feelings of guilt" (see 3.3). Chapter 3.4 adds some complementary findings. Key quotations below do not include information on the interviewed persons' age, gender or other data to preserve their anonymity. Additional information on each study participant concerning their feelings of guilt with exemplifying quotes are documented in Table A1 in Appendix A.

3.1. Process of Becoming Conscious of Subjective Perceived Guilt

A growing awareness of subjective perceived guilt amongst ethically motivated vegans can produce feelings of guilt with various possible consequences. This awareness can develop in two different modes: either in a confrontative and overwhelming way, triggered by an eye-opening experience (see 3.1.1), or in a gradual process over time, with many minor events (see 3.1.2). In

addition, it is also described that personal resources are necessary to develop an awareness of feelings of guilt (see 3.1.3).

3.1.1. Personal or emotional experiences in the growing awareness of subjective perceived guilt

So called “eye-opening events” played a decisive part in many participants gradual awareness of subjective perceived guilt. They described an emotional experience or a specific situation where participants felt so aware of their subjective perceived guilt that they were no longer able to turn away from it. This involves on the one hand a cognitive component of realizing and becoming fully aware on one’s own subjective perceived guilt and on the other hand, the eye-opening event coupled with an emotional component. Many participants reported feelings of guilt after a strong emotional encounter with an eye-opening experience. They spoke of having a bad conscience, compassion, revulsion, and anger. Due to the confrontative nature of this event with its emotional component, participants felt they were no longer capable of turning away from things that made them feel guilty. They were not – or are no longer – able to suppress their guilty feelings. Watching, for example, a documentary film on violence against animals can create an emotional attachment. A participant commented:

“This was when I watched a video on Facebook where they were cruel to animals, and well, I told myself I don’t want that anymore. I don’t want to have anything to do with that. And then from one day to the next I just stopped eating [animal products].”

Another test person impressively reports her emotional awareness of subjective perceived guilt when she killed an insect:

“(…) and then I crushed the mosquito against the wall and I started to cry, I must have been twelve or somewhere around that. And then I thought, if crushing a gnat against the wall makes me weep, then I cannot eat baby pigs or baby cows. I just can’t bring myself to do that (…).”

One participant, for example, felt queasiness and revulsion after consuming meat at a barbecue party abroad. He was shocked to see the vast range of meat products people consume there and decided to no longer eat meat. He reports:

“(…) having that smell of asado in my nose, well, that makes me feel really queasy even now. Anyway, it was just (…) so much meat, and then I really felt like vomiting at a party with asado. And then I kept thinking, leave me alone with your stupid meat. I don’t plan to eat much of that stuff anyway from now on.”

Another example is the association with emotionally charged issues. Many participants describe emotional memories of their own pets at the moment of confrontation with his subjective perceived guilt:

“(…) what makes the life of that dog more important than that of a battery hen? That is what I no longer understood. With that one look in that instant, well, I knew I couldn’t carry on as before. You know how it is; I cannot unsee this.”

Test persons perceived their feelings of guilt emotionally (see chapter 3.2.4) and their conclusion is to opt for a vegan diet.

3.1.2. Gradual recognition of personal sense of subjective perceived guilt

A sense of one’s own subjective perceived guilt may also develop step by step, e.g., through an external confrontation, through a load of information, and then gradually linked to an emotional component. Information may have been obtained accidentally or by deliberate search, conveyed via (social) media or passed on by family, friends, and acquaintances. In some participants’ awareness of

personal subjective perceived guilt did not immediately involve an emotional component. They were not spontaneously convinced and prepared to switch over to a vegan lifestyle. Rather, it is the accumulation of many different moments that successively introduce a sense of subjective perceived guilt combined with an emotional component, as one of the participants put it:

Interviewer: "So there was no single eye-opening event where you said, well from then on, ... it happened ..."

Participant: "Exactly, step by step."

But not all test persons were able to be aware of their feelings of guilt directly. Some realized retrospectively that they suppressed their feelings. One of them reported for example:

"You do not really think about these things, do you? This is just something that gets imposed on you by others, by your parents, or at school. (...) I remember very well when I was a child and my grandma used to make that beef soup, (...) which I always found absolutely revolting."

3.1.3. Necessary resources to develop an awareness of feelings of guilt

Many participants described how and when they allowed feelings of guilt under certain conditions or circumstances. These conditions we describe as personal resources and are specifically highlighted below. The resources named by participants varied individually. Admitting subjective perceived guilt and accepting the emotions resulting therefrom required adequate resources. Participants described such resources as acquired mental/psychological ability of awareness and the ability to enable themselves to better understand their own inner state. One participant described his personal experience as follows:

"(...) as a student, when I was 23, I lived vegan for half a year, but I did not keep it up, perhaps because I did not really have the proper understanding or empathy (...). And I got to a point when I said: Okay, I can do without all that. I was reading more and more about what is done to animals and how they are exploited, and I just could not go along with that any more, you know."

Several participants reported first needing to cope with all other private problems before they were able to concentrate on the problem of guilt. They spoke of situational problems and family-related difficulties that were so serious that they required a lot of attention and at that time were more important than feelings of guilt. One test person said:

"But if at least we no longer had all that factory farming, if that could be reduced, then I might do more to support that someday. But not just yet, I can't deal with that just now (...)."

Moreover, resources to manage feelings of guilt were also described as external factors, which helped participants to address their personal inner processes and live according to their own ethical standards. They are, for example, defined as cultural elements of a person's living environment that made it either easier or harder to follow one's own principles of moral behavior:

"(...) my experience of life abroad was in 2016 when I was away for one year. It made vegan diet rather difficult because milk plays an important role in that cultural context, and also in specific dishes. This is why I did not even try. When I was back early in 2017, I had developed a critical consciousness – or learned to pay attention - and these reasons did not exist in Germany. I had tried vegan food before, and the step to be taken was not too big. And then I just did it because somehow it seemed like the logical thing to do."

An important factor reported by some participants in allowing feelings of guilt to manifest themselves was religious and spiritual practice, where the consumption of meat and other animal products is often part of the family tradition to celebrate religious holidays:

"(...) you come from the Asian part yourself, right? Your parents eat meat, and this is a religious thing for Muslims. Once per year there is Ramadan. Ramadan starts tomorrow, 30 days fasting, and then comes the Feast of Sacrifice which means that animals are slaughtered (...)."

Independence from the parental home and parents' acceptance of the participant's dietary preferences were further supportive factors for many test persons. While graduation from school is the beginning of a new independent stage in life and a time for change for an individual, their parents perceive this process as their child's dissociation and emancipation. A participant reported positive feedback:

"(...) the reaction of my parents was very positive. They have always been very open-minded about cooking together and being attuned. They liked that and joined in."

3.2. Experience of Feelings of Guilt

For a better understanding of the emotional impact of guilty feelings, the following part illustrates "experience of feeling of guilt." It describes ways in which participants perceived their feelings of guilt as well as interindividual differences through this perception.

3.2.1. Occurrence of feelings of guilt

Feelings of guilt had a particular impact on individuals who live vegan for ethical reasons. Although they were not explicitly asked about guilt, many participants mentioned strain due to feelings of guilt. Not all chose the term "feelings of guilt" to describe the negative emotion they experienced due to the consumption of animal products. A very frequently used synonym was having "[a] bad conscience (...)", and referencing a violation of one's own moral standards understood from the following quotation:

"(...) because I don't want to support meat consumption with my money. For me, this is just as wrong as consuming meat myself."

3.2.2. Feelings of guilt as an emotional burden

Feelings of guilt are often referred to as having a "bad conscience" and seen because of a violation of one's moral beliefs. They are perceived as a negative basic frame of mind and daily companion, as an underlying sensation of stress represented in the following quotation:

"(...) now if I (...) still eat something from animals, some chocolate, I am aware that I feel guilty. And [if] I realize that this has been completely deleted from my basic diet, that feels really good."

Many test persons said that for them vegan diet is a means to absolve oneself of feelings of guilt and accept responsibility. It is notable how often the phrase "don't want to be a part of it any longer" was used to deny the responsibility involved in the consumption of animal products, and to get rid of their bad conscience. A participant described the frame of mind with these words:

"This exploitation of environment and nature and also of other parts of the world in some respects, and the suffering of other people, not wanting to be a part of that anymore."

Participants want to get rid of this feeling they perceived as aversive and follow a vegan diet to dissociate themselves from actions they classified as unethical. They described such actions as undeniably wrong and defined them as offences, as recorded in the following statement:

"But basically, if someone tells me you can be a good person without living vegan, then I say you are wrong. (...) there are crimes or moral offences the public believes to be worse than eating meat. But not in my view."

Several participants felt it was not always easy to act according to one's morals. However, the urge to get rid of the feelings of guilt was stronger than the temptation to consume products of animal origin. Compliance with one's own moral concept and vegan diet was frequently described as a "struggle with oneself". Products that were consumed with relish in the past were now banned from the menu, yet the majority of participants did not perceive the exclusion of animal products from their diet as negative or as a sacrifice. Instead, the focus was on the highly satisfactory awareness of having given up such food and as a result being at peace with their conscience. As one test person put it:

"I had been absolutely addicted to cheese. But I somehow just do not need it at all. I do not miss the taste, and I don't need anything to replace it. The term 'substitute products' does not really fit. (...) because I do not try to find a substitute for anything. What I do is I discover alternative food stuffs."

3.2.3. Sensations that are Used to Describe Feelings of Guilt

The content analysis revealed further similarities in how test persons described the experience of guilt. Primarily they reported sensations of revulsion, anger, empathy, compassion as well as addiction to illustrate deeper emotions and express their attitude towards animal production and the consequences involved.

Some test persons used the term "revulsion" to describe what they felt about the – in their view – unethical actions involved in the farming and slaughtering of animals. Others felt disgusted by activities related to the slaughtering, and even by the meat eaters themselves. Moreover, a few participants could not even imagine having a partner who eats meat. Some felt nauseated by animal products because they associate them with unethical behavior. One participant described his experience as follows:

"(...) sorry, in my case, I feel (...) disgusted by people who primarily eat meat, and then (...) you are outside McDonalds with your partner or with friends and they want to eat something. And then I feel bad just for ordering chips, because in my opinion they are nothing but criminals. (...) I don't want to support meat consumption with my money. For me, this is just as wrong as consuming meat myself."

Some test persons reported feelings of rage about the behavior of others which, in their opinion, is wrong. One described rage whenever she sees people wearing real fur. Another test person expressed rage whenever the ethical issues involved in veganism were ridiculed or not taken seriously. Other interviewees even register a generalized rage against people who consume animal products:

"(...) in the beginning I was just so furious with all people eating meat (...)"

It is obvious from the above statement that anger played a significant role in the feelings of ethically motivated vegans which has some impact on their actions and reactions. For example, they confront others with what they perceive as misconduct or make derogatory comments. A participant described his anger at a baker for incorrect product labelling and his reaction on it:

"Things like that can make me start a five-to-ten-minute monologue, a furious monologue in a loud voice, where I question that baker's qualifications and sometimes, well, I make any number of really insulting remarks."

Test persons also feel anger in connection with the farming and slaughtering of animals and the suffering involved. One participant reported rage in view of inappropriate animal husbandry:

“And I have watched lots of documentaries on the topic (...). I am getting fed up about that really bad. And about animal farming, I mean production for humans, or for the entertainment of humans, that should not be done at all.”

Another interviewee, for example, said he was furious to see that products that are advertised as vegan are more expensive than animal products. Some participants quote empathy to express that they understand and sympathize with the suffering of animals. They no longer wanted to share responsibility for this suffering and therefore live a vegan lifestyle. Some even report a heightened degree of empathy that stresses them and causes them suffer:

“It was a mixture (of emotions), like commiserating but not looking down on them, more in the real sense of the word: you share the misery.”

For some participants, the change of consciousness and the resulting empathy had further implications. It was hard for them to ignore the suffering of others. Some even reported depressive symptoms in this context. One of the interviewees had to fight against destructive thoughts:

“If I compare this with the time before I started living vegan, I believe I think a great deal more about everything in all areas. And it doesn’t end with not eating meat. You take an interest not only in animals; all things are connected somehow. This applies to all areas of life, to the job, to your private life.”

Some reported that the change in consciousness had altered their worldview and that *“there is no way back”*. They reported that the compassion they feel had become strong and they were permanently aware of the suffering of others. In the words of one participant:

“Yes, unfortunately there are just as many negative as positive emotions. (...) Negative feelings about them and, yes, about everything. How things happen in our world. About vegan life and about all this, yes, what normal people do not even notice what is going on in the world. (...) Only when I started living vegan did I realize that unfortunately profits and capital occupy so much of our world, and that most people in the world are bent on material things and nothing else (...).”

Addiction was mentioned to illustrate how hard it is to overcome longstanding habits and the craving for tasty food, with the aim of living according to one’s ideas of morality and with a good conscience. The term addiction in this context underlines the deep cultural embeddedness of animal products in our society and the resulting difficulties to take a different stance:

“I do not really miss cheese now; I used to love cheese; I was absolutely addicted to cheese. But I somehow just don’t need it at all (...).”

A bad conscience caused by the consumption of animal products and the accompanying sense of addiction - because they are an integral part of daily eating habits for many - is obvious from the choice of words of a test person who fears a relapse:

“... and therefore I am (...) disappointed when I see that it is so hard for me, or I am afraid I have a relapse. As I said before, the pleasure in dining out is not quite the same thing as before.”

3.2.4. Physical stress and relief caused by feelings of guilt

Many participants reported physical stress as a result of feelings of guilt. These emotions had such a strong and overwhelming effect on some of them that they were perceived as physical sensations. Stress was then perceived as, for example, pressure on the shoulder:

“(...) it was something like a damper. (...) It felt as if somebody had pressed down on my shoulder for a moment.”

Some described the bodily sensation triggered by the guilty feelings as a physical heaviness reflecting the embodiment of feelings of guilt:

"(...) after eating meat or drinking milk, eating milk products, there was always that sensation of something heavy about me, physically and mentally heavy. Some kind of sluggishness of the body and the mind, and that's actually gone."

Some test persons successfully resolved the problem of coping with guilty feelings and the burden involved. The resulting emotional relief also had a component of physical well-being such as e.g.:

"There has been a certain physical lightness for about a year now (...)."

3.3. Changes in the feeling of guilt due to vegan diet

This section presents the impact of a vegan diet on feelings of guilt. There were large similarities in the way participants perceived these feelings yet notable differences in the way they went about such feelings and, in their perceptions, after they had changed to a vegan lifestyle.

3.3.1. Emotional relief from feelings of guilt

Many participants in our study reported that the vegan diet makes them feel emotionally relieved from feelings of guilt:

"But I think it became clear very quickly how good that was for me, that I somehow felt that everything I eat is okay, because I had a clean conscience doing that."

Another group of participants described at least one notable alleviation of guilty feelings in connection with the consumption of animal products:

"(...) that this can influence the way you perceive yourself and that you begin feeling somehow guilty about such things. And I would say my feelings of guilt are minimized. Yes."

They described a load being taken off their shoulders and no longer consider themselves accountable for the suffering. They reported that a diet in accordance with their own moral standards made them happier and more satisfied:

"(...) and it makes me proud too to know that in these two and a half years I spared so many animals' live. That makes me really happy. Most of all, when I am somewhere and see a cow in the meadow or something, I am so glad, because I know. And this must sound real stupid, but the cow is still alive because I have not eaten it."

When asked about their self-image, participants reported feeling better compared to the time prior to living a vegan lifestyle and that their attitude towards themselves had changed for the better. One participant, for example, said she could look at herself in the mirror again. In other words, she could face herself with a clean conscience:

"Well, I believe one objective would be that you can look at yourself in the mirror and have a clean conscience in some respects. And in that sense, this is what I have."

3.3.2. Increased sensitivity and the subjective perceived guilt of others

Some participants experience a mere alleviation of yet no complete relief from their guilty feelings. A gradual emotional awareness of subjective perceived guilt in combination with the transition to a vegan diet created new problems for them. The phenomenon does not apply however to those who relate to subjective perceived guilt exclusively at the cognitive level. A gradual awareness of suffering and subjective perceived guilt lead to increased sensitivity, compassion, and

a sense of responsibility for the suffering on earth. Although test persons use the vegan lifestyle to distance themselves from actions that cause suffering, their compassion and commiseration, their sensitivity and sense of responsibility became much stronger in general. Having developed an awareness of the suffering all around us, many participants said they could no longer turn a blind eye. Some described a heightened sensitivity in daily life, like this interviewee:

“Well, since then I just need far more peace and time for myself. And I enjoy sunshine more intensively and fiercely than before.”

Others felt overwhelmed by activities all over the world they perceived as unethical, beyond the production of animal products. They report for example desperation, helplessness, and proneness to depression. They said it is impossible to turn away from suffering because it is present even in moments of happiness. In the words of one participant:

“Yes, I believe I tend to get depressed far more often because I know what bad things are going on in the world. And I didn’t know that before, I used to be a happy person (...) I just can’t get that out of my head even at times when I am fine, that there are many creatures or even a majority of them whose living conditions are appalling. And I can’t do anything about that just now.”

One participant spoke of a time when his sense of responsibility was so intense that he neglected himself. He described this behavior and his thoughts as self-destructive:

“You could say it takes your breath away, you feel you are losing your mind. That is what I mean by empathy or sensitivity, I have been learning how to handle that myself, (...) sometimes you just have absolutely self-defeating ideas (...)”.

A few participants reported that their growing awareness makes it hard for them to cope with the subjective perceived guilt of others. They project their own feelings of guilt onto others and find it difficult to understand why they do not live a vegan lifestyle too. They described feelings of anger, desperation and incomprehension towards others who do not live vegan or wear clothing of animal origin. Some participants also reported that they confronted strangers with their subjective perceived guilt, such as this one:

“(...) it is so very bad. And I don’t know, it makes me so terribly furious. If I get a chance somehow, I challenge people. Like just in passing, with my usual comment, ‘oh excuse me, that is a dead animal you’ve got there.’ And some of them are shocked (...)”

These study participants found it hard to bear that not everyone is aware of their subjective perceived guilt and prepared to change his or her habits. They report showing little sympathy or tolerance for these people:

“Don’t these people care at all or – in other words - are these people so absolutely indifferent that they go to Lidl and buy the cheap packaged sausage for 50 Cent. I have no sympathy whatsoever; I take a negative view of that.”

3.4. Complementary Findings

Six study participants (interview numbers 2, 8, 19, 45, 50, 62; see Table A1 in Appendix A) suffer extremely from feelings of guilt in comparison to the others. Viewing their interviews in a bigger psychological context we can hypothesize probably mental disorder(s) (e.g., depression, trauma disorder) as a possible cause and/or effect for these strong feelings of guilt.

Moreover, study participants who are highly ethically motivated are making fewer exceptions from their vegan diet, seem to be more likely to condemn non-vegans (compare Table A1 in Appendix A) and due to it having more conflicts with their (non-vegan) social environment (these result could be confirmed in another analysis of our data on the question of “social exclusion in vegans”, which have not been published yet). On the other hand, test persons who are primarily health motivated

vegans and only later becoming ethically motivated, also seem to have less feelings of guilt or not so intense guilty emotions. Both, purely ecologically motivated and the N=7 study participants who are not ethically motivated at all actually feel no guilty emotions (compare Table A1, Appendix A).

4. Discussion

The present study showed that feelings of guilt play a meaningful and possibly motivating role in connection with vegan diet, especially in ethically motivated vegans. N=49 out of N=64 test persons expressed guilt in various ways without being explicitly asked about it. An important point to be made is that many participants perceived feelings of guilt in combination with anger, revulsion, and compassion as very unpleasant and strong influencing factors on their well-being. Some even registered physical symptoms such as corporal heaviness. These findings underline how overwhelming the sensation of guilt can be for the test persons in our sample, as well as how much this emotion can affect their thoughts, actions, and feelings. They described guilt as a negative influence on their daily lives. Some felt so dependent on animal products as if they were addicted, causing unbearable compunction. All this was so hard to endure that they started giving up animal-derived foods. The transition to a vegan diet helped a lot of them to get rid of feelings of guilt. Now they feel happier and more satisfied. The accompanying emotional relief had physical effects as well. Many participants said a vegan diet brought them fulfilment. Others reported that their feelings of guilt were alleviated but not resolved. Instead, they were faced with further, additional problems of comparable dimensions. These may be summed up in two categories. Some test persons found it hard to distance themselves from the actions of others. They felt obliged to make others aware of the behavior they believed to be unethical. Others experienced deep sorrow or rage over the grievances in the world and could not distance themselves from them while adhering to their own code of conduct. They showed no sympathy and no tolerance for other views on the issue nor for other forms of diet. Moreover, they reported new problems resulting from increasing compassion, heightened sensitivity, and responsibility. Some felt permanently confronted with all the misery in the world and perceived this state of mind as a huge problem. The consequences they described were self-neglect, depressive tendencies, and self-destructive thoughts. The latter aspect in particular illustrates the potentially enormous impact of feelings of guilt and the implications that ought not to be underestimated. Individual resources are among the factors that influence the development of coping strategies, implications of feelings of guilt and the emergence of new problems.

Results of the study indicate that certain conditions were necessary for participants to be able to confront their own feelings of guilt. The resources they described – apart from other major problems or stressors to be handled at that time - were the mental and emotional capacity to face feelings of guilt. Participants also mentioned cultural and situational factors, acceptance on the part of their parents and personal independence. All these factors have a moderating impact on the development of feelings of guilt and ways to handle it. They also influence the emergence of new problems and might have a moderating effect on a possible pathologizing of guilt.

Findings from this study also support earlier research results. Our conclusions concur with Baumeister and colleagues [5] that feelings of guilt are perceived as aversive. Results from the current study also coincide with Tangney's et al. [6] research revealing that feelings of guilt can vary in strength and intensity. In line with Junker [7], we found that feelings of guilt influence one's experience and have a strong impact on our behavior.

We were also able to confirm the assumption of Keller [9] as well as Zeelenberg and Breugelmans [10] that feelings of guilt occur when one's own subjective concept is violated and therefore feel responsible for something as a result.

Consistent with O'Conner et al. [18], persistent feelings of guilt can be associated with deterioration in mental health, which can in turn lead to depressive symptomatology mentioned by Warren et al. [16] and Li et al. [17]. Furthermore, we were also able to confirm the research of Wang [13] as well as Exline et al. [14] that reparative actions - in this case indirectly through the renunciation of animal products - can reduce feelings of guilt.

The present study confirms previous research in that we were able to show that people suppress feelings of guilt related to the consumption of animal products for a variety of reasons [21]. Our research findings that feelings of guilt can be generated by consumption also go along with other studies on this topic of the Meat Paradox, explained previously by Bastian et al. [22]. We were also able to support the further studies [23] that described the possibility to shut down the defense mechanisms of suppressing guilt that people unconsciously use to protect themselves from guilt. In addition, we showed that certain resources are necessary for this process. We could also confirm that cultural circumstances may encourage meat consumption, and that cultural and religious conditioning can lead to conflicts in the context of the respective culture or religion an individual gives up meat consumption [23].

Our results also support the assumption that a sense of responsibility for suffering caused by the consumption of animal-based products can become part of a person's identity and that switching to a vegan lifestyle is a likely result [22]. Additionally, the present study indicates that vegans frequently wish to get rid of the accountability for actions they see as immoral and therefore opt for a vegan lifestyle. An overly heightened sense of responsibility could also lead to maladaptive outcomes due to a shared processing of self-related and other-related information. It is well known that healthcare professionals with demands of high responsibility can lead to compassion fatigue [39]. Interestingly, compassion fatigue has also been observed in people who care for animals [40,41].

Moreover, the present study has confirmed an embodiment of emotion in the context of feelings of guilt and thus supported the findings of Day and Bobocel [8] and Kouchaki et al. [30]. Many test persons reported a physical sense of guilt, perceived as a heaviness and burden on one's shoulders. The relief of such symptoms made possible through a vegan diet as described by a sensation of physical lightness. Interestingly, guilt is associated with bodily sensations in the head and upper body as demonstrated in a large-scale study investigating on the relationships between bodily sensations and emotions [29].

Another point highlighted in the study is cognitive dissonance in a gradual process of awareness and a diminishing repression of guilt. This dissonance is triggered by the contradiction between moral concept and contrasting action, i.e., consumption of animal-based products [22]. These findings coincide with our results.

4.1. *Implications for Practice*

According to the current research in this field, prolonged feelings of guilt and impaired emotional regulation can have a considerable negative impact on well-being [15]. Our study suggests that participants perceive feelings of guilt in remarkably similar ways and as a negative psychological and physiological influence. However, our findings also reveal individual differences in the implications of feelings of guilt and in the development of new problems in the context of a vegan lifestyle. Individual resources were found to be potentially significant factors in the pathologizing of feelings of guilt. These results may be useful for developing private coping strategies as well as professional therapeutic methods.

Based on findings from this study, individuals who follow a vegan diet or plan to do so are recommended to proactively confront personal feelings of guilt when present and to develop appropriate strategies to cope with this emotion. It seems to be important to engage with this issue and the available information to achieve a change in attitude. Our findings also suggest that a permanent focus on grievances and suffering does not particularly help to distance oneself from feelings of guilt but rather lead to heightened sensitivity and even pathological symptoms. For individuals who plan to live vegan, it appears desirable to take note of their personal limits and to practice self-care in order to prevent mental disorders. Mind-body interventions with an emphasis on self-compassion [42] could be suitable for some people who plan to commit to a vegan diet. Prior studies could already show that interventions based on self-compassion can reduce symptoms of orthorexia in vegans [43] and that it could also increase resilience in professionals, who work with animals [44].

In cases where pursuing a vegan diet may lead to severe additional problems, the benefits of this lifestyle should be carefully considered. Persons who feel greatly stressed by feelings of guilt (compare chapter 3.4) or newly emerging problems should seek psychotherapeutic help.

Implications for specialist competences may also be deduced from the findings of this study. For medical experts, nutritional advisers, and psychologists it seems to be important to know that feelings of guilt can develop in the context of practicing a vegan diet and that the advice to live vegan must be considered against this background. A recommendation for a vegan diet should always take the affected person's resources into account such as one's mental capability, mental health history and/or further stressors that would hamper constructive engagement with one's own mental processes. Social and situational resources should also be examined more closely such as cultural and religious context, parents' acceptance, and individual independence. Therapists should pay attention to the fact that feelings of guilt are closely related to, and may encourage, depression. It is advisable to explore the issue from a therapist's perspective in order to identify dysfunctional thought patterns and help patients to handle feelings of guilt and other problems in an appropriate manner.

4.2. Implications for Future Research

Feelings of guilt constitute an essential factor in vegan diet for ethical motivated individuals. It is therefore necessary to explore the correlations involved in more detail. With regard to connections between feelings of guilt experienced by ethically-motivated vegans and the consequences thereof, more in-depth research is needed to understand the exact causes of the problems mentioned in this study. Possible hypotheses would be that an affected individual's coping capacities are insufficient, or that feelings of guilt had existed before, triggered e.g., by biographical experiences or mental disorders. Apart from the resources mentioned above, further factors need to be identified that help some people get rid of feelings of guilt and manage their problems, whereas others experience stress through newly arising problems as a consequence of vegan diet. It would be just as important to find key factors that would prevent a pathologization of feelings, emotional states and thought patterns. This might be highly relevant not only with reference to a vegan diet but also in clinical practice. Qualitative methods were applied as a first step in investigating the research questions and hypotheses outlined above, to gain a better understanding of the inner psyche, biographical and potentially complex processes involved. Qualitative studies with a pre-post design and in a second step as well as prospective quantitative studies would be particularly appropriate to achieve reliable results. A final hypothesis to investigate in future research would be whether or not German vegans are more susceptible to feelings of guilt due to the German history compared to vegans from other countries with lower historical collective guilt.

4.3. Strengths and limitations of the study

Several limitations must be mentioned in evaluating this study. Students conducted the interviews from an explorative perspective and did not explicitly inquire about possible feelings of guilt. An exhaustive description of feelings of guilt, the issues and problems involved can therefore not be assumed. From a different viewpoint however, this limitation may be interpreted as a strength in that it ensures participants were not steered towards a mutual issue via suggestive questions while excluding unintentional influencing. All participants brought up feelings of guilt in the interviews themselves. Social desirability bias is to be thus low in our study.

Another aspect to be noted is that test persons reported retrospectively, making their statements prone to retrospective bias.

With regard to the interview design, it must be pointed out that students received pertinent instruction, however with less practical experience compared to experts in qualitative research and were therefore more prone to have made mistakes. On the other hand, their lack of experience and diversity of perspectives may have induced them to ask a greater variety and wider range of questions for clarification purposes and gaining a better personal understanding.

A creditable aspect of the present study is that it constitutes one of the first qualitative investigation into vegans' perception and management of feelings of guilt and thus opens up an

additional field for research. One considerable advantage is the large and the qualitative nature of the dataset permitting special insights into the experiences and conscious states of vegans that of which a quantitative approach would not have been able to render profoundly or comprehensively.

5. Conclusions

Beyond its several limitations, our large-scale qualitative study is one of the first illustrating the possible impact of feelings of guilt on mental and physical well-being ethically motivated vegans may sense and suffer from. Nevertheless, unresolved feelings of guilt which - despite a vegan diet - continue to affect the individual, can possibly limit the positive healthy benefits of a plant-based diet. Our study offers some first prevention strategies to minimize these risks of feeling guilty while applying vegan diet.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the study participants to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement: We did not include sensitive transcripts of the qualitative interviews, because we must preserve the anonymity of our study participants according to the German and European Data Protection Law.

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Appendix A

Table A1, sample description.

Appendix B

Interview guideline

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