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# Food for Thought, Thought for Food: Consumption, Identity, and Ethnography

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## Abstract

Movements associated with lifestyle and consumption politics have gained increasing visibility in society and in sociological research, but scholars' methodological insights for studying these issues have lagged behind. How might the lifestyles and consumption practices of researchers themselves shape data collection, and how might these movements affect researchers? The authors offer a collaborative, reflexive analysis of their experiences conducting fieldwork on three different consumption movements centered on food production. Building on feminist and symbolic interactionist methodological literature, they show how their own "consumption identities" affected their data collection, analyses, and written work. The authors also discuss how conducting research on consumption and lifestyle movements may also affect researchers' own identities and practices. They conclude by discussing how their process of "collaborative reflexivity" brings new insight into feminist methodological concerns for reflexivity.

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Alongside recent scholarly attention to the components and impacts of new social movements is greater consideration of identity—that of researchers and participants. Scholars of new social movements herald the importance of activists' identity politics in movements such as gay and lesbian rights and the environmental movement (Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; Melucci 1988; Polletta 2008; Taylor and Whittier 1992) and have acknowledged how researchers' identities play a part in such research (Taylor and Rupp 1991). A more recent trend in new social movement scholarship focuses less on identity politics and more on the personal and market-based politics of lifestyle and consumption choices (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Schor and Taylor 2002). Similarly, feminist methodologists have shown how researchers' identities affect the practices of fieldwork and relationships with participants (Kirsch 1999). Here, we use these scholarly arenas as foundations to consider the researcher's practice of consumption choices, as they reflect consumption identities in conducting fieldwork.

The study of lifestyle and consumption politics is part of a larger pattern of scholarly work that accounts for new forms of collective action that more expansively define social movements as “ideologically structured action” (Dalton 1994; Zald 2000), or as “challengers to or defenders of existing institutional authority or patterns of cultural authority” (Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004, 9). Conceptions of social movements extend beyond purely political and legislative realms, and they encompass personal practices as well as “collective challenges within or to other institutional and cultural domains,” including “efforts to effect change at various levels of social life” (Snow 2004). Such activity is frequently less publicly disruptive, occurs through extrainstitutional tactics (such as boycotts; King 2008), and relies upon individual action. This is in part due to a lack of institutional or state-oriented solutions for the problems and demands for rights these movements introduce. Furthermore, as adherents of such movements today often seek information and communicate in the anonymous space of the Internet (Maratea 2008), they rely on less centralized communities and do not have formal meetings or membership lists (Haenfler 2004). The cultural challenges for movement organizers and proponents, then, primarily lie in influencing others' belief structures, behaviors, and individual actions (Tilly 2008).

Consumption practices associated with these diffuse, culturally oriented movements range from personal shopping habits, to modes of transportation

and energy use, to the substances put in one's body—including the food put in one's mouth. For example, the contemporary “voluntary simplicity” and “social responsibility” movements, which gained in popularity in the 1980s, advocate “simple living” through reduced and thoughtful consumption and promote forms of consumption like fair trade (Elgin 1993; Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2008; Vogel 2005). Other movements such as straight edge (Haenfler 2004) and veganism (Cherry 2006) focus even more explicitly on material consumption, advocating the avoidance of drugs and animal products, respectively. For these movements, what one *does* or *does not* consume is central to group membership. From this, we use the term *consumption identities* to designate the ways material consumption practices proclaim a person's values and commitment to a given cultural movement.

Our methodological insights concerning these new movement processes, however, have lagged behind the existence, strategies, and goals of these movements. Moreover, the material nature of consumption identities, especially when those identities prove contentious, poses special obstacles for researchers. How might our own lifestyles, consumption practices, and identities affect fieldwork? And, flipping the direction of inquiry, how might lifestyle- and consumption-based movements affect us as researchers?

We address these questions by offering a collaborative, reflexive analysis of our individual experiences in conducting fieldwork on groups organized in promoting or opposing certain types of food production and consumption. This collaborative reflexivity allows us to compare fieldwork experiences in ways that generate theoretical insight into the role and significance of material practice in identity work. Topically, the politics of food, culture, and society is an increasingly important area for social inquiry and an ideal arena in which to explore the reflexive role of consumption identities. Food viscerally connects individuals and social bodies (Belasco 2008). Eating—or not eating—certain foods reveals, a priori, a researcher's position on the issues pertinent to their participants' politics and can thus prove problematic for the acts of research, interpretation of data, analysis, and reporting findings.

We further specify our analysis to the oppositional domains of producers and adherents of meat and animal products—including cattle ranchers, foie gras producers, and chefs—as well as animal rights activists who oppose such practices. Our goal of collaborative reflexivity is sharpened through our differing research experiences with similar groups of respondents and by our studies of related topics. Here, we particularly focus on the methodological themes of access and data reporting as reflective of, and based in, the material practice of consumption identities for issues of contentious politics.

Elizabeth Cherry's current work compares animal rights activists in the United States and France. Cherry is herself a ten-year vegan and animal rights activist. Colter Ellis's research examines human–animal interaction in ranching and beef production. Although Ellis's research is not concerned with social movements, his consumption identity transformed from that of a heavy meat eater to near vegan as a result of his work with this population. Michaela DeSoucey's current research focuses on the cultural and moral politics surrounding foie gras in United States and France. DeSoucey is a long-time supporter of the local food movement and eats animal products, including foie gras. These studies are in part informed by our previous research experiences, which focused on vegans, those who advocate a vegetarian diet that avoids meat, dairy, eggs, and other animal products (Cherry 2006); "locavores," who privilege eating foods produced and distributed locally (DeSoucey and Téchoueyres 2009); the creation of the nascent market for grass-fed beef and dairy in the United States (Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey 2008); and young people in 4-H who raise individual animals for prizes and food (Ellis and Irvine 2010).

Our reliance on feminist and symbolic interactionist methodological literatures lays crucial groundwork for exploring how a focus on *practices* complements a focus on *identity* when studying lifestyle and consumption movements (Haenfler 2004; Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2008; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Our collaborative analysis shows that identity claims were often not enough in the process of fieldwork—we needed to show that we could walk the walk, not just talk the talk. By highlighting the importance of the *researcher's* consumption identity in gaining access to, conducting, and analyzing research—yet also striving to avoid what Geertz (1988) called "diary disease"—we illustrate how our own consumption identities and practices affected our participants' perception of our trustworthiness and credibility, which, in turn, affected our data collection, analysis, and written work. We conclude by discussing how our process of collaborative reflexivity brings new insight into feminist methodological concerns for reflexivity.

## Activism, Identity, and Reflexivity

Increased scholarly attention to processes of collective identity formation and maintenance in social movements (Snow 2004) has heightened the need for methodologies concerned with reflexivity. Reflexivity extends beyond mere reflection upon fieldwork; "to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self scrutiny" (Chiseri-Strater 1996, 130). In reflexive feminist research, the researcher does not erase differences

but instead analyzes how identity, experience, training, and theoretical framework shape the research agenda, data analysis, and findings (Kirsch 1999; Shope 2006). Typically, researchers accomplish this through detachment (from oneself, not from the informants), internal dialogue, and constant scrutiny of “what I know” and “how I know it” (Hertz 1997). Reflexivity requires interrogating how personal and professional identities affect what one chooses to study and how one goes about interpreting and presenting data. It requires understanding how the researcher’s attributes become meaningful in the course of the fieldwork (Reinharz 1997).

Reflexivity benefits from collaborative analysis because it provides variations in perspective and experience. One of the reasons we three authors entered into this collaborative project was to further this process of reflexivity. How can we know which aspects of our identity proved meaningful and which were catalysts for changing the dynamics of our fields? How might our identities have affected our access and the types and qualities of data we gathered? Most importantly for this collaboration, because we were all studying groups concerned with the politics of consumption, how did our own personal consumption practices play a role in these processes?

Feminist methodologists and social movement scholars alike recognize that fieldwork interactions will differ if the researcher is a movement insider or outsider, an activist or not (Atkinson et al. 2001; Blee and Taylor 2002). As we studied different sides of various movements, we all experienced varying positions in this insider–outsider dichotomization (Naples 1997), weighing possibilities for multiple interpretations (Shope 2006). We sometimes encountered, for example, activists responding to our questions with ideological statements designed to convince us to agree with them (Blee 1991, 1998). But all three of us have varying, multifaceted identities and practices (e.g., student, researcher, activist, American, woman/man, vegan, meat eater). Thus, we turned to social psychological theories of identity and interaction to better understand how different aspects of our identities shaped our fieldwork and our research findings.

In particular, we use Harrington’s (2003) four postulates on identity and fieldwork, based on symbolic interactionist theories of social identity and presentation of self. We further these postulates to show that not only the identities of ethnographers but also their everyday lifestyle and consumption practices influence the fieldwork. Harrington’s first postulate is that participants define ethnographers in terms of the social identity categories they view as salient. Indeed, we found that sometimes our identities as former residents of a particular locale or as restaurant servers were more salient than our student or researcher statuses.

Harrington's (2003, 609) second postulate is that "ethnographers gain access to information to the extent that they are categorized as sharing a valued social identity with participants or as enhancing that identity through their research." Participants often define researchers in terms that enhance, or at least do not threaten, the participants' group identity (also see DeVault 1995). Participants typically accomplish this by validating the researcher's identity claims of being a group insider or being seen as a "sympathetic outsider" (Harrington 2003, 610). Harrington's third postulate claims this validation to be key for gaining access to information. The fourth postulate declares "the more that ethnographers' social identities differ from those of participants, the more likely that access will involve the use of insider informants or deception as self-presentation strategies" (Harrington 2003, 612).

When studying lifestyle and consumption movements, however, deception may not be a feasible option for researchers unwilling or unable to deviate from their own consumption identities. As we show, negotiating our identities to gain access meant that we needed to validate our identities by physically consuming certain items—or not—in front of our participants. Furthermore, our consumption identities affected more than access to participants—they also influenced the types of data we obtained and how we interpreted them. Thus, through our collaborative analysis, we consider the different interactions that our multifaceted identities brought forward and compare the types and qualities of data produced from those interactions.

## **Background to Our Collaboration**

Although each of our consumption identities differs, we three also share significant identity-oriented similarities, making comparison on the variable of consumption practices apt. At the time of our fieldwork, we were all sociology doctoral students and occupied a number of additional privileged statuses. We are all white and present ourselves as heterosexual and middle class, as did most of our informants. This general similarity is important and clearly facilitated our access and rapport building, but these were not the only identities important to our research. One of our common chosen identities is our shared commitment to animals and the environment. We all care deeply about the lives and welfare of animals and pay special attention to our consumption of animal-based goods. While our ideas and consumption practices regarding eating animals differ strongly, our identities as consumers had important implications for our research.<sup>1</sup>

As a long-time vegan, Elizabeth Cherry does not consume or wear animal-based products, such as meat, dairy, eggs, or leather. She has worked with

animal rights organizations for the past decade and volunteers with her local natural foods co-op. Building on her activism, Cherry's doctoral research sought to explain the differential outcomes of the animal rights movements in France and the United States. She conducted over two years of ethnographic fieldwork and seventy-two in-depth interviews with activists in both countries. By examining movement success through the interaction of culture and strategy in each country, and by committing to feminist research practices, she hoped to produce research that would help her participants in their activism.

In contrast to Cherry, Michaela DeSoucey is a proud meat eater, yet one whose consumption identity centers on supporting local, small-scale, and sustainable food systems. For the past six years, she has conducted research on the dynamics of markets for organic, local, and artisanal foods. DeSoucey supports local food through volunteering at a weekly farmer's market selling locally raised organic vegetables and through her own consumption choices. Her doctoral research topic sprung from a controversy in Chicago over some elite restaurants choosing to stop serving foie gras (the fattened liver of a goose or duck) and the ensuing legislative debates and resistance that followed. Animal rights groups often cite foie gras alongside veal as one of the most inhumane modes of food production due to the use of tube feeding to manage the fattening process. DeSoucey's dissertation examines the construction of social problems around food and how interactions among social movements, markets, and state institutions influence foie gras's cultural and moral politics in the United States and France. She did ethnographic fieldwork and interviews and collected archival, legislative, and historical materials in both countries, with members of both sides of the debates.

Colter Ellis's doctoral research with beef producers provides a nuanced contrast because his consumption identity transformed significantly as a result of his research. Ellis grew up in Idaho, has extended family involved in animal agriculture, and, before he started his work, used to eat meat on a daily basis. During his fieldwork, he visited cattle ranches, feedlots, and slaughterhouses, assisted with calving cattle, and participated in bovine artificial insemination. As a consequence of his research, Ellis is now hyperaware of the pain of animals in agriculture and is unsure about the ethics of eating meat. Ellis is not an activist, and his work is not social movement oriented. During data collection, his consumption identity shifted from meat eater to vegetarian to vegan. Having left the field, Ellis now consumes some animal-based goods but is constantly aware of the consequences of this action.

Our collaboration began almost by chance. In the fall of 2006, Cherry was collecting data in France. During an interview with the head of France's anti-foie gras activist group, he remarked, "Isn't it funny? You are the second

American sociologist to interview me this year!” Cherry asked if he could share with whom else he had spoken, and he gave her DeSoucey’s email address and information. Thus began an email correspondence regarding data collection issues, foie gras activism in France, a television documentary being filmed in Chicago on the subject, differences between American and French sociology, and media reports of anti-foie gras events in both countries. Cherry and DeSoucey first met in person in the summer of 2007 at the Collective Behavior and Social Movements American Sociological Association (ASA) section conference at Hofstra University and at that point discussed a possible collaborative piece. Cherry met Ellis the following summer at the Animals and Society Institute’s Summer Research Fellowship at Michigan State University and invited him to join the collaboration, as we all recognized connections between our own consumption habits and our fieldwork. We three met at the 2008 ASA meeting in Boston and mapped out questions and topics (including subjectivity, presentation of self, and emotion management) for a joint piece on collaborative reflexivity.

Over the next year, we wrote memos regarding our topics, access to participants, and interpretation of data. Given that we are located in three different parts of the country, we shared information via email and scheduled conference calls on Skype. We chose theories and literature to structure our inquiry. After Cherry pulled our memos together into a full draft, we took turns editing and adding material to better our argument. We presented a version of the manuscript at the 2009 ASA meeting in San Francisco, and we used audience feedback from the talk to better our narrative.

At the beginning of our collaboration, we three were at different stages of dissertation completion. Cherry had finished data collection, DeSoucey was mostly finished, and Ellis was preparing his prospectus. We decided to collaborate *because of* our varied experiences and surprises in the field. We have discussed our own analyses of data on an ongoing basis and, reflexively, have opened new analytic insights due to our collaborative work.

## Entering the Field and Gaining Access

For each of us, *practices*, rather than claims of identities alone, were necessary to gain access. Following Harrington’s (2003) framework, we differentiate among the terms *entry*, how we first entered the field, met our participants, and gained permission from them to begin the study; *access*, how we negotiated obtaining the data we collected once we entered the field; and *rapport*, our relationships with our participants and how our identities and material practices played a role in maintaining these relationships. Because we studied groups

engaged in contentious practices, it was both our purported *identities* as well as our material *practices* that helped us gain access and build rapport with potential respondents. Our participants validated our identity claims by “testing” us, or having us engage in practices that would prove our consumption identities.

### *Initial Entry and Presentation of Self*

While researchers necessarily bring certain identities to the field (Reinharz 1997), “researcher” may not always be the most salient self in participants’ eyes. Our consumption identities played a more important role than presentation-of-self work in our initial entries into the field. For example, ranchers and beef producers are notoriously skeptical of nonagriculturalists. Recent successes of the animal rights and vegetarian movements amplify difficulties in studying them. A researcher at a nearby university who was familiar with area producers even told Ellis that cattlemen were simply never going to agree to be in his study. Fortunately, this was not the case. In fact, while Ellis found beef producers to be cautious about being interviewed, most of the people he contacted for interviews welcomed him, and he successfully built a broad contact base. Central to this success was being able to note that he was from Idaho and that his uncle raises cattle. This presentation of self framed Ellis as someone familiar with animal agriculture and sympathetic to ranching culture. After hearing these personal characteristics, beef producers made assumptions about his consumption identity, namely that he ate meat and was not an animal rights activist, allowing them to define him as nonthreatening and possibly as an advocate.

DeSoucey’s presentation of self varied significantly from Ellis’s, in that she sought access to opposing sides of her topic. For access and rapport with people involved in Chicago-based food establishments and businesses, her association with the farm for which she works at the farmer’s market proved more important than her family background or identity as a sociology graduate student. Identifying this tie permitted DeSoucey quicker access and gave respondents what she sensed to be a more immediate level of comfort in discussing their views with her. This is not to say that her student identity was not important; yet another identity—based on lifestyle and work—often took precedence. This association provided DeSoucey’s chef respondents, many of whom had attended culinary school rather than college, a way to link to her experiences, and her to theirs.

However, when interviewing animal rights activists, local officials, industry consultants, and journalists, DeSoucey emphasized her graduate student identity. Activists often assumed she opposed foie gras production and meat

consumption, yet still granted her interviews even upon finding out her non-vegetarian status. Like Ellis, DeSoucey's presentation of self framed her identities in a way that made her appear a nonthreatening, and even potentially advantageous, person to talk with about the topic.

Cherry's presentation of self had quite the opposite result. Much of her initial access to multiple sites and types of participants was contingent upon her previous experience in, and sympathy with, the animal rights movement. Cherry's veganism and activism became key components of presenting herself to potential participants, especially because she studies tactics. The U.S. government and animal rights opponents increasingly frame animal rights activists as terrorists, based on their tactics (even though activists often dissociated themselves from any so-called terrorist activity in her interviews).

Cherry's full participation in a local animal rights group, alongside her activist identity, helped her to gain access to national-level activists. At the same time, her academic identity helped open national-level doors and legitimate her presence in the field. The necessity of having this dual identity was perhaps best exemplified when entering the field of animal rights activists in France. It was the inextricable combination of both activist and academic identities that proved meaningful there. When Cherry sent letters of introduction to French activists, she enclosed links to her local animal rights group's Web site—where she was documented as having participated as a main organizer—and offered to send publications of her research on veganism. This presentation of self inferred, and would not have been possible without, a distinct vegan consumption identity.

In her analysis of researchers' "brought" and "created" selves, Reinharz (1997) asserts that researchers need to pay more attention to their own identities, not just their research roles. We found that our research roles were necessarily influenced by our consumption identities and embodied practices. The practices we brought to, and those we created in, the field had to match in order to be deemed credible. We could not simply claim to enjoy foie gras or to be a vegan—we often had to prove this through material performance or demonstrations. As a result, each of us found our consumption identities tested in the field, as illustrated in the following section. Passing these tests was critical to maintaining access and showing that we were worthy of respondents' time and energy.

### *Testing Our Identity Claims*

Many researchers seem to equate a rapport with participants of similar identities to trustworthiness and, thus, to gaining access (Adler and Adler 1987;

Blee 1991; Daniels 1983). While sharing some aspects of our identities with our participants may have helped our initial entry into the field, none of us could have gained access to the type of information we did from our initial presentations of self alone.

Harrington (2003, 610) cites Goffman's (1956) "chain of ceremony," in which a person's claim to a given identity is subject to approval by the audience. Once in the field, our participants tested our consumption identity claims by having us engage in particular activities to prove that our practices backed up our words. This testing, or "hazing," deemed us trustworthy to these individuals or groups, and we gained access to information based on our practices. In particular, Ellis and DeSoucey, unable to provide advance evidence such as documents validating their identity claims, had to physically prove they were willing to eat certain animal products or participate in activities with animals. Sometimes, a respondent would not begin an interview until he or she had eaten together with the researcher. In contrast, while Cherry had already been deemed trustworthy by virtue of her past actions working with an animal rights group, she still had to prove herself to her participants by engaging in clandestine activities.

Ranchers sometimes validated Ellis's trustworthiness through light hazing. For example, after a morning of participant observation toward the beginning of his fieldwork, the ranchers invited Ellis to one of their homes for a lunch of hamburgers. During the meal, one of the ranchers began reminiscing about removing the "cancer eye" from the animal they were eating.<sup>2</sup> Although he was talking to his neighbor who was there to help with the work, he looked for Ellis's reaction, giving him a smirk. The comment was lighthearted but carried with it an important message. It was a form of hazing, highlighting Ellis's lack of knowledge about the food they served him and testing his meat-eating resolve. In response, Ellis indicated that he had seen the procedure done, gave the rancher a smirk in return, and continued to eat his hamburger. Ellis's reaction was crucial. Even though Ellis has become primarily vegan since this incident (though not as a direct result), flinching at the story or spitting out the burger would have compromised his access and rapport.

Chefs and managers also tested DeSoucey throughout her fieldwork in both France and the United States in regard to her own consumption politics. While interviewing a Michelin-starred chef in Bordeaux, France, she was put to the test of being "an American interested in foie gras." This chef was reticent in opening up to her during the first part of their interview. After thirty minutes of questions that garnered her little information, he asked if she would join him for lunch. She was tested over this lunch through the chef's ordering of dishes that a "typical American" might consider unpalatable—fried

tripe, runny foie gras, and a meat patty that turned out to be made of congealed chicken blood. She ate it all with a forced smile. After watching these foods go from the plate to her mouth, the chef became (almost instantly) verbal and forthcoming with information and his opinions. As a second example, one of the producers at a small-scale foie gras farm offered her a taste of raw foie gras, removed from a duck that had been butchered not ten minutes before. She ate it and was given a big smile and a literal pat on the back. Both had been wary of DeSoucey's presence and intentions until her physical consumption of the controversial foods demonstrated that she was "trustworthy."

Back in the United States, the head of one of the main distribution companies for foie gras and other gourmet food products replied to a long, detailed email describing DeSoucey's project with a brusque, "Hi Michaela, Do you enjoy eating foie gras?" DeSoucey responded that she did. Her informant then responded, "OK. Please tell me your schedule in April. I will be very happy to talk with you about foie gras (my favorite subject)." When they conducted their interview over lunch at a New York City restaurant, DeSoucey asked her about her initial response. She responded, "Well, you could lie. Maybe, for what I know, I'm not sure. You ordered something with chicken. At least you're not vegetarian. I didn't know. We've been had, several times. So now I'm very cautious. But you were convincing enough, because to say 'yes, I like foie gras' is not proof. Unless I see you eat it."

As her informant noted, simply saying she liked foie gras was not enough; DeSoucey had to physically and visibly eat it. Likewise, Ellis could not have continued his participant observation and interviews with cattle ranchers had he refused to eat meat or stopped eating the meat they served him. Cherry never could have gained similar access to these people or groups because she could not (and would not) eat meat—after ten years without eating meat, it would have made her physically ill. However, by virtue of her proven practices as an animal rights activist, she gained access to information that activists would have sheltered from nonactivists.

Activists tested Cherry by inviting her to participate in clandestine actions, such as gluing animal rights posters on buildings in Paris and attending a hunt sabotage (direct action with a purpose of interfering with hunting activities). She participated in these actions after months of fieldwork, after she had already proven herself to her participants and had gained their trust. Cherry gained so much trust that after one such poster-gluing session, some of the activists started discussing, in front of her, their plans to escalate their actions—they wanted to engage in direct action to sabotage animal businesses. While she saw this as a sign of acceptance, Cherry told them that she did not want to participate and did not want to know their plans for purposes

of maintaining their confidentiality. They told her they understood and would discuss it only when she was not around.

While researchers have demonstrated the importance of trust in gaining access to information from their participants (Adler and Adler 2008; Burawoy 1991; Feldman 1995), much of this trust is conceptualized through shared identities, not shared practices. Many scholars interested in identity often fail to disentangle what identity means beyond saying one *is* or *is not* something. Consumption identities build on this by adding what one *does* to the discussion. We seek to posit chosen practices as part of identity based on lived experience.

## Outcomes of Practice-Based Access

What are the outcomes of gaining access due to practices rather than solely identities? We found we had to continually negotiate practice-based trust, since we were working with people who viewed us as allies, opponents, or potential converts. Our material practices also led us to gain differential data from the same groups. Finally, while we had the typical researchers' worry of maintaining our methodological trustworthiness—telling our participants' stories fairly, for example—we also had to negotiate what our participants expected from us politically (Van Maanen 1988). One unexpected outcome—yet one we believe to be endemic to research on consumption and lifestyle-based movements—was that our identities and practices changed as a result of conducting such research.

### *Allies and Opponents*

Since we each studied groups with various positions on materially contentious issues, participants viewed us as (potential or actual) allies or opponents; we constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated our varying statuses in the field. Our level of proximity, or our degree of insider- or outsidership (Naples 1997), fluctuated according to our particular context and audience (Hodkinson 2005). We continually had to negotiate these relationships to prevent alienating participants or ourselves. Such negotiations have proven typical of researchers studying social movements and contentious groups. Unlike researchers studying extreme groups like racist activists, however, our participants saw us as potentially recruitable. This situation differs from the context faced by Kathleen Blee (1998, 386), who felt she had to tell her racist activist interviewees in advance that there was no hope of convincing her of their views.

Since we had more potential for recruitment to the groups we studied, we have more room to examine how respondents treated us as allies or opponents. Ellis, studying cattle ranchers, had to prove he was not an opponent, even if he was not a beef producer himself. DeSoucey had to “work both sides.” Animal rights activists saw Cherry as an insider, but she needed to deal with the movements’ internal factions. As we demonstrate in this section, to deal with these negotiations, we all utilized performative practices, not just identities.

Ellis started his research as an ally. His project originated because he cared about family farms and small-scale animal agriculture, and he was interested in beef producers’ environmental perceptions. This allowed for an initial research design with little deception. But as the project progressed, Ellis began to see the cattle differently. The narratives of the ranchers he interviewed incited this change, as they included convincing stories of cattle’s “different personalities” and ranchers’ “emotional ties” to cattle. These stories elicited questions for Ellis regarding the ethics of killing cattle for food. Ellis found that the ranchers could not provide a satisfactory answer to his questions. As a result, he stopped eating meat midway through his data collection.

This change brought a number of ethical issues into the field for Ellis. As Harrington’s (2003) fourth postulate indicates, the more researchers’ identities differ from their participants, the more the role of deception increases. Since many ranchers seemed worried that he was not on their side, despite his new vegetarian/vegan diet, Ellis continued to eat meat when he saw the situation unavoidable, such as during interviews conducted at restaurants.

For Ellis, being on the right “side” was more difficult than simply eating meat. His participant observation included participating in actions that directly caused cattle pain. Through his research, he had come to see these actions as ethically questionable. On several occasions, he helped inject cattle with hormones, operated steel chutes used to physically restrain them, and helped push cattle through tight chutes using a controversial tool known as either a “hot shot” or a “cattle prod” (which gives a significant electric shock and motivates the animals to move where the handler wants them to go). On one occasion, he also helped “pull” a calf during the birthing process, which involves chaining the front legs of the calf to a tool that forcefully pulls it out of its mother. Pulling a calf is necessary when a calf is too big for the mother cow to deliver on her own, yet the procedure is clearly very painful to the mother cow.<sup>3</sup> He also participated in a beginner class on bovine artificial insemination, where students practiced techniques on live cows.

All of these activities are standard in cattle production and are legal. However, these activities were especially problematic for Ellis to perform because they clearly were painful to the animals. Producers rarely asked Ellis what he thought of these activities and procedures, even though he routinely asked them what they thought. Like eating meat, his participation in these actions allowed ranchers to trust his presence. Likewise, being able to tell other potential participants that he had artificially inseminated a cow or pulled a calf went a long way in marking him as trustworthy.

DeSoucey's consumption identity sometimes caused conflict in the field. Throughout her French fieldwork, respondents expressed unease at her presence as an American, assuming that her "side" was not theirs. She was often introduced as "an American doing her thesis on foie gras," or simply "the American." At an initial meeting, one French participant told her, "You came with the category of American. And, some Americans are against the production of foie gras. So, I didn't want to invite one of them. Because I didn't want to meet someone who doesn't like foie gras." After this comment, DeSoucey showed her a photograph of herself volunteering at a foie gras booth at a Parisian food exposition held several weeks prior. Upon seeing this photo, the next words out of the respondent's mouth were an invitation to visit her home in the country that weekend and to meet her seventy-six-year-old mother, who "has made foie gras since she was very young" using traditional techniques.

While DeSoucey's eating of animal products was advantageous for some, it was contentious and obstructive to her research with others. For example, at an anti-foie gras protest one cold Chicago night, outside a French restaurant hosting a fund-raising dinner for an organization created to challenge the city's recently instituted ban on foie gras, DeSoucey talked with individual protesters about their beliefs and took a few photographs of them holding signage. While conversing with one activist, who kept telling her that foie gras production was "innately cruel," a leader in the Chicago anti-foie gras movement joined the conversation and provoked a debate with DeSoucey about the treatment of the birds, challenging her on how she could "even claim to care about animals." DeSoucey was attacked with the words, "If you recognize the sentient qualities of animals, why would you not feel compassion or empathy? This is the major ill of our society. Your desire to intellectualize cruelty is disturbing and disgraceful."

Later that evening, the French chef-owner of the restaurant came outside and spotted her talking with a different activist. He came over and said, "Bonsoir, Michaela. Ça va?" and gave her *bises* (greeting kisses on each

cheek) before moving on to talk with the police who were monitoring the protest. The activist turned to DeSoucey and said, “Ah! Fraternalizing with the bad guys, are we?” DeSoucey’s fieldwork goal that night, however, was to follow the protesters and not the people inside the restaurant. Especially after this remark, she felt that simply entering the restaurant could have had negative repercussions in following up with these activists for longer interviews.

Cherry’s consumption practices allowed her quick and easy rapport with participants. While engaging with these activists on their own turf smoothed access with them and the many groups they represented for the rest of her fieldwork, Cherry still had to negotiate being seen as an ally or an opponent within the movements’ internal factions, much like Fantasia (1988) or Taylor (1996). The main question activists asked Cherry in France, where the movement is factionalized along philosophical orientations of animal welfare, animal rights, and antispeciesism, was one about her allegiance with a particular philosopher of animal rights: “Do you prefer Singer, Regan, or Francione?”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, our consumption identities, material practices, and sorts of “deception,” following Harrington (2003), allowed participants to place us in categories of allies and opponents. As we show in what follows, they also had significant consequences for the type and quality data we gathered.

### *Differential Data*

One of the benefits of our collaborative analysis is that we can contrast the data we collected while working with the same types of groups. DeSoucey and Cherry received vastly different responses from animal rights activists based upon their differential consumption identities. Activists continually attempted to persuade DeSoucey to become vegetarian or vegan, whereas they did not attempt to do so with Cherry—once they learned she was vegan. Indeed, James Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin (1992, 7), in *The Animal Rights Crusade*, described the animal rights movement as a “moral crusade” and its adherents as “missionaries” who “act upon explicit moral beliefs and values to pursue a social order consistent with their principles.” This is not necessarily surprising—sociologists of religion have long dealt with their participants’ attempts at conversion. When researchers exhibit knowledge of the subject at hand, activists or religious followers assume that knowledge necessitates, or is worthy of, conversion, and they intensify their efforts. As Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis (1973, 256, emphasis original) wrote of their research experiences with a member of the “Jesus Freak” sect, “She can’t understand how anyone can understand it and not *become* it.” What distinguishes our

project is that we have the opportunity to compare fieldwork experiences among researchers with different consumption identities and practices.

Every one of the anti-foie gras activists DeSoucey encountered verbally engaged her lifestyle and consumption choices with language typical of recruitment. One activist, for example, questioned why she could eat a pig or cow but not her dog. All of these activists had chosen vegan lifestyles and viewed animal rights, more broadly, as a crucial social issue of our time. In May 2008, at a protest at City Hall the week that the Chicago foie gras ban was repealed (Caro 2009), one of the women activists recognized DeSoucey from an earlier protest, calling out to her, "I remember you're writing your dissertation on this. Have you formed an opinion yet?" DeSoucey responded that she still saw the issue as complex and having many nuances. "How is it complicated?" the activist responded. "It's so cut and dry. Don't you have an opinion? How can you not have an opinion?"

DeSoucey found, like Blee (1998), that when she disagreed with the activists' beliefs, they frequently promoted their group's ideology rather than giving in-depth answers to specific questions. Cherry, too, found this to be the case in her interview with "Brian," an activist with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Cherry thought the people she interviewed knew she was a vegan beforehand and thus did not mention it when she began the interview with Brian. Cherry thought something was amiss when Brian began responding to her questions about strategic and tactical choices with graphic descriptions of the horrors of factory farming rather than answering the questions at hand. This response was similar to DeSoucey's experiences. After about half of the interview continued like this, Cherry began interspersing personal information about herself being a member of PETA, being vegan, and recently attending a PETA-sponsored KFC demonstration. After sharing this information, Brian stopped describing the plight of farm animals and began answering the questions Cherry asked him.

Unlike fieldwork memoirs where researchers reflect upon their singular experiences and how their identities may have influenced their fieldwork (Coffey 1999), here we have a clear example of how differential subjectivities—here, consumption identities—can affect the qualities of one's data. DeSoucey received ideological statements and framing techniques that activists attempt to use on their targets, whereas Cherry did not, once her participants knew she was vegan. While we do not wish to make a claim to one person's fieldwork having more "objective" knowledge in some positivist sense, these counterexamples have serious implications for researchers studying contentious groups. The differential data gathered in this example should serve as a

stark reminder for researchers to acknowledge how their proximity to their participants affects the type and quality of data they gather.

### *Negotiating Trust in Analysis and Writing*

As with all qualitative researchers, our concerns with negotiating trust continued postfieldwork in analyzing and writing up data. Feminist ethnographers claim responsibility to represent informants in a manner that does not betray trust, and none of us wished to do so. While participants coproduce the information gained through interviews (Heyl 2001), ultimately the researchers are the ones accountable for their representations (Skeggs 2001). Since we all studied groups involved in contentious animal production or consumption practices, and since our participants viewed us as allies or opponents, our participants also all expected certain things from us, politically. Our consumption identities and practices further complicated the identity politics of fieldwork in this regard.

Some of DeSoucey's participants asked her to write her findings in particular ways, and others stressed not wanting to "look stupid," a difficult task to accomplish without "taking sides." Cherry designed her project with an "action orientation" (Fonow and Cook 1991) to benefit animal rights activists; they likewise expected her to "promote" animal rights through her research. Ellis gained entry into the field by virtue of being seen as a potential ally, but throughout the course of his research he realized he was becoming more of an opponent. Since none of us wanted to be a spokesperson for a movement, we had to negotiate the trust we earned from our respondents with our need to analyze and complete our research projects.

DeSoucey began her research project knowing very little about foie gras production or animal rights politics. In some ways, DeSoucey initially thought she would possess greater empathy for the animal rights activists working to challenge foie gras's legal status and production. But "like" can also develop over time (Becker 1967). As she collected and gathered information, she began to view the issue as more nuanced and rooted in macro politics than she had previously understood. Her time with foie gras producers and chefs, in both France and the United States, showed her that they are not the villains or antagonists that animal rights groups decry. In fact, the more information she gathered from both sides, the more unjustified she felt the level and targets of anti-foie gras attacks to be, especially compared to other social problems regarding animals in the food system.

Furthermore, the boundary between DeSoucey's roles as informed and informer was a fuzzy one. While she primarily explained her role to all

respondents as information gathering, DeSoucey was often asked what she knew, what she had learned thus far, and what her opinions were on the cases. For example, some of her interviewees in France knew about the existence of bans in California and Chicago, without knowing the details, while others had not heard of the bans at all. Chefs who had never been to a foie gras farm wanted details. Problems can and easily did arise from this dual role—what information to withhold or share, and with whom, as well as negotiating friendship bonds that arose through the course of her fieldwork.

Cherry also shared information with her respondents, but she worried about the consequences of shaping their strategic and tactical decisions—precisely the focus of her project. While Cherry's ten years as a vegan and few years in the movement seemed paltry compared to the seasoned veterans she interviewed and observed in the United States, activists in France saw her as a source of information because of her experience in a longer running and more successful animal rights movement. Cherry had also been vegan longer than many of the French activists, who often used her as an example of vegan healthfulness in discussions with their targets for recruitment.

Activists also counseled Cherry on future research projects, saying that if she really wanted to help the movement, she should study their targets and not the activists themselves. Even so, when Cherry first introduced herself to Ivora, from the Collectif Antispéciste de Paris, Ivora asked, "So we are the *subjects* of your study?" with a disdainful emphasis on the word *subjects*. Cherry replied that was only somewhat true and that she wanted to make it known that she was vegan and she was an activist—they were why she wanted to do her project on animal rights and not on a movement with which she disagreed. Ivora replied that was a good idea because Cherry could then "promote the ideas" of the movement while doing her work. In this sense, Cherry explicitly geared her action orientation (Fonow and Cook 1991) toward changing the lives of animals through understanding the lives of animal rights activists.

Ellis entered the field intending to learn about the hardships people encounter in animal agriculture. He was a long-time meat eater and, like the people he interviewed, thought animal rights and vegetarianism were radical and unrealistic ideas. But, as mentioned above, through the course of his research, his opinion changed. This change shifted his research goals and represented an ethical dilemma, as it brought the producers for whom he originally intended to advocate into the field of critique. It also elevated the status of cattle in his research from commodities to beings that require ethical consideration of their own. By taking animals seriously, Ellis ended up critiquing the very people whose hardships he originally intended to document.

Importantly, it was the ranchers' compassion for cattle, not Ellis's own love for animals, that led him to this focus.

Like DeSoucey and Cherry, Ellis earned the trust of participants through his performative acts. But his experiences in the field changed his perspective and his personal behavior. Moreover, as his consumption identity moved further from that of the people he was interviewing, his trust-earning behavior became increasingly difficult. While continuing to participate in these activities, Ellis framed the difficulty he had working with and eating cattle as data. His discomfort heightened his appreciation for the emotion work done by producers. Seeing, participating, and talking with ranchers about their jobs allowed him to better understand how people are able to do this kind of difficult work.

Some of our participants expected us to return with our findings. Since Cherry was working with activist groups, they wanted her to share findings with them that might help improve the movement. For Cherry, activists (especially in France) wanted to know what she had found thus far and how they might be able to implement similar campaigns in their work. In France, Cherry offered to subtitle films and translate documents and Web pages, and did so on a number of occasions. Since completing her fieldwork, in keeping with her action orientation, she has shared her dissertation findings, presented on "how culture works in social movements" to a local animal rights group. She also plans to present them at an animal rights conference in France and is looking into presenting at conferences in the United States.

As described above, DeSoucey had to negotiate sharing her findings between opposing factions, as her respondents frequently asked her what the "other side" was doing. One of the larger foie gras companies in France also encouraged DeSoucey to share her writings with them (expecting results and perspectives skewed in their favor) that they could use in publicity materials; she plans to send them—and other respondents who made similar requests—a "findings report" once her dissertation is complete. DeSoucey also collaborated with Mark Caro (2009), a Chicago journalist who wrote *The Foie Gras Wars*, in conducting research and in writing up their respective findings.

Ellis is not an activist, and neither were the people he interviewed; social movement issues arose in his work only when discussing ranching opponents. Thus, Ellis did not begin or end his work intending to "help the movement" in some way, and his participants did not expect him to return with findings. That being said, Ellis did share some of his preliminary findings with his participants while he was in the field. When he told one rancher how he thought the human–animal relationship worked, the rancher gave Ellis an odd look and said, "Well, that's just obvious." Ellis found this reaction positive,

in the sense he had the story straight, but he did not share his sociological analyses of beef production.

While conducting analysis and writing, researchers generally need to consider audience and authorship, as well as the extent and nature of the authority accrued from the written word (Wolf 1992). Feminist researchers must take further responsibility for the creation and representation of “others” (Kirsch 1999), taking care in their writing to respectfully represent participants from even different worlds (Richardson 1992). Our representations of our participants are thus bound to our mutual participation in performative acts, whether that be inseminating cattle, eating congealed chicken blood, or participating in covert activism.

## Conclusions and Contributions

Consumption identities present important methodological considerations for qualitative researchers studying new social movements and issues associated with these movements. This includes both researchers’ and participants’ consumption identities and how those complement or contradict one another. We extend Harrington’s (2003) social-psychological approach to ethnographic methods by showing that our day-to-day consumption identities can impose significant, if not inescapable, limitations on our identity management. How researchers live *as consumers* affects their presentation of self, their ability to make certain identity claims, and thus their research.

All qualitative researchers make identity claims and present themselves in specific ways. As Harrington (2003) reminds us, participants have the power to reject researchers’ identity claims if they are not beneficial or could be harmful to themselves or their group. Consumption identities are meaningful in this regard because they are nonverbal yet directly infer a political stance. What we consume indicates and politicizes our social positions. Sometimes these consumption identities are not evident outside performative acts. As our research shows, participants commonly felt a need to verify our consumption identities during fieldwork, and our abilities to conduct research depended on our abilities to put our consumption identities into practice. The kinds of animal products we did or did not consume enhanced—or potentially jeopardized—rapport.

The effects of our consumption identities on the research process became evident through our use of collaborative reflexivity. While reflexivity’s primary task is to situate researchers’ knowledge claims and clarify research limitations (Shope 2006), we often consider reflexive accounts to be personal investigations of an individual researcher’s self. Each of us understood that

what we ate with our interviewees mattered, yet we did not understand *how* it mattered until we compared and contrasted our experiences. Through collaborative reflexivity, patterns emerged that allowed us to situate our researcher selves in ways that would not have been possible alone. This allowed us to locate common experiences that seemed novel or insignificant prior to our collaboration. For instance, our collaboration helped us understand how our consumption identities framed us as allies or opponents. Cherry and DeSoucey found that they gathered different data as a result of their different consumption identities, and we all noted the significant role of material consumption in building and negotiating trust.

Collaborative reflexivity also helped us understand how our projects affected our own selves. While sociologists frequently reflect on how they shaped the field studied (see Kleinman and Copp 1993), they less often explore the reverse. Cherry and DeSoucey entered the field with certain perspectives and left with those perspectives mostly, but not completely, intact. DeSoucey eats foie gras and remains a strong advocate of local, small-scale food systems, but her original belief that she would more easily “side” with the anti-foie gras groups proved mostly false. Cherry found herself pushed to present herself as “supervegan” during her research, feeling that she had to exaggerate her already profound commitment to animal rights. This pressure subsided with the completion of her research, though she is still a vegan animal rights activist. Ellis’s consumption identity and material practices changed the most substantially. During data collection, he became a vigilant vegan. Since leaving the field, Ellis occasionally consumes animal-based goods, although this consumption continues to be complicated by his research experiences. Through our collaboration, the significance of our research for our consumption habits and personal perspectives became evident in ways that would not have otherwise been possible.

Scholars have long encouraged each other to conduct research that directly relates to their own lives (Lofland and Lofland 1984). As social movements have become increasingly concerned with material consumption, and as consumer decisions have become increasingly associated with social movement rhetoric and ideologies, scholars have naturally begun researching issues associated with their personal consumption. Consumption identities clearly intersect with other aspects of identity politics. What we consume is classed, raced, and gendered and indicates a host of other social and symbolic identities (Cohen 2003). Qualitative researchers who study consumption behaviors need to understand how the researcher’s consumption identity affects research processes. This is because our own consumption identities, and performance of those identities, indicate our positions on current social issues while in the

field; they expose us for who we are and influence our ability to build respondent relationships and collect data.

Our process of collaborative reflexivity encourages qualitative and feminist researchers to step away from the notion that reflexivity is necessarily an individual task and to recognize the benefits of sharing experiences with other scholars as a way to more fully understand the researcher's influence on the setting and the setting's impact on the researcher. Our collaborative reflexivity followed standard qualitative data analysis practices. Once we realized we shared similar experiences, we developed preliminary themes and individually wrote notes on those themes. We then compared notes, found additional themes, and generated concepts that helped us explain common experiences. We began our collaboration when we were at different stages of fieldwork. It might be even more fruitful for researchers to begin the process of collaborative reflexivity before going into the field. Researchers studying the same site could especially employ this (e.g., May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000).

But collaborative reflexivity need not be so formal. At conferences and through the research process we often encounter researchers whose work broadens our own. We encourage scholars to consider these encounters potential opportunities for collaborative reflexivity. Discussing field experiences with others, even casual conversations in office hallways or at conferences, provides an opportunity for common experiences to arise that might go unrecognized by individual authors. By broadening our conception of what reflexivity can mean, these interactions become important parts of our research method.

In conclusion, consumption identities represent important limitations on impression management, yet they also provide researchers with significant tools for understanding the research process. As consumption behaviors become increasingly linked to activist identities, feminist and social movement researchers must also consider how their own consumption identities influence the research process: the kinds of access gained, the rapport built with participants, and the analysis and writing of findings. It is important and will be increasingly important for future studies to consider collaborative reflexivity as a methodological tool for ethnographic and social inquiry.

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### Notes

1. Clearly our race, class, and gender statuses are also important parts of our consumption choices and further situate us within our research setting, but we do not discuss them in more detail because this analysis falls beyond the scope of this article.
2. *Cancer eye* is the term commonly used for bovine ocular squamous cell carcinoma. This disease is the most commonly diagnosed cancerous tumor in bovine, although the tumor is often benign. There are several surgical treatments for the diseases, one of which is called cryosurgery. This method freezes off the tumor and commonly causes vision loss or blindness in the eye (Foster 1999).
3. This procedure is standard practice on cattle ranches, even organic and grass-fed operations. First-time mother animals, known as heifers, often need this kind of assistance. The only alternative is to have a Cesarean performed by a veterinarian. This alternative is cost-prohibitive, and producers deem it unnecessary.
4. Welfarists seek to improve the treatment of animals but are not necessarily vegetarian and do not seek the abolition of animal use, practices that are central to animal rights. Antispeciesists seek to counteract speciesism, or the oppression of animals based on species, seeing it as linked to sexism and racism.

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## Bios

**Elizabeth Cherry** is an assistant professor of sociology at Manhattanville College. Her research centers on cultural analyses of social movements and social movement analyses of contentious subcultures. In these areas, she has published on veganism as a cultural movement (*Social Movement Studies*, 2006) and on how animal rights activists shift symbolic human–animal boundaries (*Sociological Forum*, 2010). She is currently working on a book project that explores social movement strategies and success in the animal rights movements in France and the United States.

**Colter Ellis** is a PhD candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His research explores human–animal interactions in beef production and the 4-H youth program. His dissertation examines the relationships people build with the animals they raise for food, focusing on the emotional and physical labor used to produce bodies that are killed and consumed.

**Michaela DeSoucey** completed her PhD in the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University in 2010 and is now a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Organization at Princeton University. Her work uses food as a lens to examine markets as moral, cultural, and political projects. Her dissertation, “Gullet Politics,” explored the controversies surrounding foie gras in the United States and France and developed a model of movement–market–state systems as they work to shape the ecology of social problem construction and moral claims making around consumption practices.