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Young adults' transition to a plant-based diet as a psychosomatic process: A psychoanalytically informed perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examined transition to a plant-based diet by young adults and the challenges and conflicts this brings. Interviews were conducted with nine young adults in Sweden and the answers were analysed guided by a psychological method from descriptive phenomenology. The results indicate that the transition to a plant-based diet is a process comprising five dimensions: 1) *Exploring new ways of living based on health anxieties*, 2) *regulating conflicting emotions through differentiation*, 3) *transforming traditional models into new alternatives*, 4) *confirming new skills and abilities* and 5) *integrating experiences and emotions into a whole.* These five dimensions reflect how transition to a plant-based diet is experienced physically and emotionally. The results also indicate that plant-based meals and ingredients used in the new diet are loaded with symbols and conflicting emotions. Psychoanalytically informed theory, especially object relation theory, was used in discussing what can happen to the mind during the transition. In a wider perspective, this study provides insights into how a dietary transition can bring stability to the life of young adults and help them endure and master their situation. More research is needed to assess the role of mental health in transitioning to a plant-based diet and to draw more general conclusions, an area where psychodynamic theory can provide insights.

1. Introduction

There has been much discussion on how meals can be used to strengthen an individual's resilience, increase wellbeing and contribute to healthy psychological development (Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 2010; NNR, 2012; O'Neil et al., 2014; von Essen, 2015). Cooking has become a symbol of long-term survival, social interaction and activity (Fischler, 1988; Kaufmann, 2010). Special diets, e.g. based on Mediterranean-like ingredients, are believed to contribute to a healthier lifestyle and to positive results in treatment of e.g. Alzheimer's disease and depressive conditions (Jacka et al., 2017; Lopresti & Jacka, 2015; Opie et al., 2015). Emotional food memories from childhood are used as a safe base to create stability during development into adulthood (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017). Alternative dietary choices can form part of new strategies in everyday life to provide 'a second chance', turning life in a new direction and breaking with negative influences (Rönkä, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; von Essen, 2015). Eating special dishes can be used to regulate emotional states and internal conflicts (Canetti, Bachar, & Berry, 2002; Evers, Marijn Stok, & de Ridder, 2010; Fischer, 1989) and to make moral statements (Coveney, 2016).

In recent years, a plant-based diet has become an increasingly important choice for young people (Larson, Perry, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Larsson, Rönnlund, Johansson, & Dahlgren, 2003), as an alternative to traditional Swedish food which involves transforming ingredients according to certain rules and standards (Cargill, 2007; Mäkelä, 2000). In the traditional model, one of the most important ingredients to achieve satiation is meat, sometimes prepared together with vegetables (Ekström, 1990). Meat is seen as an symbol of power and masculinity (Ljung, Riley, & Ericsson, 2015; J.; Ogden, 2010; Ruby & Heine, 2011) but also as a way of showing care and love (Sidenvall, Nydahl, & Fjellström, 2000).

However, recent studies have shown that meat can generate negative emotions (Rosenfeld, 2018b; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2019), have deleterious effects on physical health (Fields, Millstine, Agrwal, & Marks, 2016) and contribute to premature death (Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997). Red meat has thus become a food that young people increasingly see as posing risks to their own safety and survival (Forestell, Spaeth, & Kane, 2012; von Essen & Englander, 2013). It is now a food that is often avoided (Mullee et al., 2017), primarily for moral reasons or because of emotional identification with the suffering of other beings.

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An alternative dietary option is to eat mainly plant-based ingredients, e.g. fruits, vegetables, tubers, legumes, seeds and whole grains, while excluding ingredients such as meat, dairy and eggs (Aarnio & Lindeman, 2004; Craig, 2009; Johansson, 2016). In the literature, a plant-based diet is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and cancer (Dinu, Abbate, Gensini, Casini, & Sofi, 2017; Lanou & Svenson, 2011), enhanced self-mastery and ethical subjectivity (Halkier, 2001; Marcus, 2008) and better animal welfare and environmental health (Lynch, Johnston, & Wharton, 2018).

There are many reasons why young adults become vegetarian or vegan (Faber, Castellanos-Feijoó, Van de Sompel, Davydova, & Perez-Cueto, 2020). For example, psychological factors are important in the decision to switch to a plant-based diet (Larsson et al., 2003; Rosenfeld, 2018a; Shapiro, 2015). These factors can make it possible to develop resources that lead to a better life (Fredrickson, 2001; von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017), reduce barriers and obstacles or facilitate adoption of a more plant-based diet (Reipurth, Hørby, Gregersen, Bonke, & Perez Cueto, 2019). Other psychological states of mind may also develop when meal choices and eating habits become important statements about an individual's mental health or symbols of survival, wellbeing and identity (Marcus, 2008). These include affective symptoms such as anxiety and stress (Beezhold, Radnitz, Rinne, & Di Matteo, 2015) and bodily symptoms and sensations (Leijssen, 2006; Rothschild, 2000; von Essen & Englander, 2013; von Essen & Mårtensson, 2014). There may also be psychosomatic processes where different qualities are projected onto the body (Bollas, 1979). Such factors, themes and conditions can be interesting to investigate and discuss in relation to young adults' transition to a plant-based diet, based on a deeper psychological understanding such as psychodynamic theory.

Few studies have used psychodynamic theory, and its focus on emotions, imaginings and internal conflicts, when describing what it means to change to a plant-based diet (Friedman, 1975; Marcus, 2008). Studies about eating and food in an psychodynamic context mainly focus on pathological eating behaviours and food-related syndromes (Bowler, 2009; Kadish, 2012; Savelle-Rocklin, 2017), e.g. anorexia nervosa (anorexia), bulimia nervosa (bulimia) or binge eating. In the literature, anorexia has been linked to difficulties with separation-individuation and deficiencies in the empathic relationship between mother and child (Bruch, 1982). Bulimia is discussed as a disorder in the individual's early development (Rozen, 1993). In binge eating, the body is used as a transitional object to replace lack of development of an integrated self (Sloate, 2008). Food is then used in an exaggerated way as a regressive defence to loss of relationships, in an attempt to "take in" and preserve the "lost" object and transform loneliness into relationship (Barrett, 2008). Insecure attachment is another risk factor for the development of pathological eating behaviours during adolescence, grounded in lack of mentalisation and difficulties in recognising emotions (Jewell et al., 2016).

The overall aim of this study was to investigate young adults' transition to a plant-based diet, what it means to them and challenges, mental states and experiences that individuals associate with the transition. The intention was to shed light on the transition itself and relevant processes and conflicts. In a wider perspective, such knowledge can help understand what young adults are trying to endure and master when choosing to deviate from the traditional diet.

Psychoanalytically informed research has become more popular in qualitative studies (Archard, 2020; Brenner & Brenner, 2019; Hollway, 2009; Knight, 2019). It has proven to be significant in studies on e.g. mental health (Yakeley, 2018) and mental and eating disorders (Leichsenring, Klein, & Salzer, 2014; Skårderud & Fonagy, 2012), and in neuro-psychoanalysis (Solms & Turnbull, 2016) and treatments for generalised anxiety disorder (Lilliengren, Johansson, Lindqvist, Mechler, & Andersson, 2016).

When examining young adults' transition to a plant-based diet from a dynamic perspective, it may be fruitful to apply a psychoanalytically informed perspective (Sutherland, 1980) to describe what happens to the individual's development in the meeting between the inner world and the external world. Previous studies have discussed how representations connected to food and psychoanalytic theories, especially object relation theory, can help determine why such representations arise (Bowler, 2009; Clinton, 2006) and how young adults see themselves and their relationships with others. Psychoanalytically informed theory can help understand the underlying reasons for the transition, and what happens in both mind and action. Psychoanalysis is often used in this way to translate into words what the body expresses, such as fears, desires, defences and conflicts (Savelle-Rocklin, 2017).

The point of departure for this reasoning is that the individual's transition to a plant-based diet is a result of the surrounding environment (traditions, external events, interpersonal relationships) and the world within an individual (what happens between the parts creating the inner environment). An intermediate area, which bridges the individual's inner and external emotional worlds, is known as the "potential space" (Winnicott, 1971). The more secure this space is perceived to be from intrusions by external threats, the more the individual can be creative and shape their own needs.

Another perspective that can be used to assess young adults' transition to a plant-based diet starts with the infant and how it perceives objects as a process, and not as a thing, and people in its life (or aspects of them) as parts of objects (Bollas, 1979). These perceptions are internalised as inner experiences, but also as internal images of their actions. These are then gathered together into reference objects or patterns that can be used by the individual to relate to other objects or people and to the world. The representational world consists of both the individual images and the understanding of self, objects and interpersonal interactions. Preconditions to forming representations are sufficiently good holding (T. H. Ogden, 2004) and physical care from important people in the close environment during development (Winnicott, 1960) and presence in the environment of good objects to which the individual can relate. In the diet-related context, this means the presence of people who provide care, meals and a positive atmosphere as a basis for developing a good meal relationship. These together form an inner meal representation (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017), as a safe base (Bowlby, 1988) to use or return to when feelings of frustration and anxiety arise.

When physical objects such as food or meals interact with important others, specific patterns arise. They can be transformed in a process similar to how interpersonal representations are formed (Clinton, 2006). The individual's desire or longing for a good object, represented by important others who have adapted or tuned in to the individual's needs, can contribute psychological and relational knowledge of life. This can create good memories or, when there are deficiencies in care and in having one's desires and needs met, less good memories (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017).

In reasoning about good and bad objects and how they can affect dietary transition, it can be useful to apply the original theory described by Klein (1975), Bronstein (2001) and others (e.g. Spillius, Milton, Garvey, Couve, & Steiner, 2011). Klein speaks of the mother's breast (Klein, 1975, p. 2) as the important object (part object) in the child's early world of experience, which the child fantasises about and divides into bad or good. The good breast is available to satisfy hunger and desire, while the bad breast is coupled with absence and a destructive force based on the death instinct. A healthy division means that good objects are related to good parts, which in turn are kept separate from bad objects related to bad parts of the self. In situations where this separation fails to achieve equilibrium, the individual can employ the good object and good parts to fight the bad object and bad parts.

This dualistic conflict described by Klein (1975) explains how love and hate can be directed at the same object. Dualism refers to the conflict between life and death, between the inner desire to live, connect with others and flourish, and the innate fear of being dissolved, not being involved and not existing, which creates anxiety. One way to deal with this anxiety is by using splitting and projection, as a way of

attributing parts of self or mental states, such as anger, hatred or bad feelings, to an object (Spillius et al., 2011). The individual then acts out the conflict or internal relationship and projects it onto the external world and other objects. This process can take complex forms, and qualities may be projected not only onto external objects, but also onto the individual's own body (Bronstein, 2010).

Based on the above reasoning, it can be argued that the inner world of young adults is populated by representations of good and bad objects, while the outer world is represented by an environment that assists with models, atmosphere and the contexts and relationships created by society, family, friends and more.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and data collection

The informants in this study were young adults who for various reasons (physical or psychological wellbeing, medical or ethical) had recently changed or wanted to change their lifestyle and eating habits by switching to eating mainly plant-based ingredients (not meat) in their diet. Recruitment took place through strategic selection via various groups on social media expressing interest in a plant-based diet. Selection was based on gender, age 18–35 years (Arnett, 2006; Young et al., 2011) and living in cities of different sizes and rural areas, in order to vary living conditions significant for access to different foods and arenas for alternative eating in everyday life. Eighteen young adults in Sweden showed interest in participating, but only nine young adults completed the study since it involved repeated commitment, as semi-structured interviews were conducted on three different occasions during a six-month period in spring-summer 2017. The first interview was the starting point in terms of conditions and documenting basic data about family relationships, motives for the change, thoughts and feelings about the relationship to food and expectations about the change. While the informants were being informed about the project and its structure, information and an offer of contact with professional support, such as a dietician, were also provided. The second interview was conducted after about three months and focused on the informants' relationship to food, but also documented motives, feelings and thoughts about the course of the change. These related to the challenges raised by the practical and social implications of the transmission in everyday life, as well as psychological and bodily experiences/reactions to the transmission according to a previously prepared strategy (von Essen, 2015). The third interview was conducted after six months, and dealt mainly with how the informants experienced the process and what they gained as a result of participation. Specific thoughts and feelings about the relationship to food, the course of the change and the challenges in everyday life were also documented. Finally, a summarising reflective and forward-looking conversation was held about the role of food in everyday life, based on the period as a whole.

The interviews were conducted in the informants' home and each lasted approximately 1 h. An interview guide was used, with themes and open questions (see also ethical statements below), so that participants could largely describe their own experiences of transition to a plant-based diet.

There have been some objections to qualitative studies using limited numbers of interviewees, because they are perceived not to give transferable results between people and situations. However, such studies can contribute deep knowledge and help to identify phenomena (Dibsdall, Lambert, & Frewer, 2002; Englander, 2012; Wilde & Murray, 2009; Williams, McManus, Muse, & Williams, 2011). Addressing transferability in descriptive phenomenological psychological research is about the depth and richness of interview material. According to Giorgi (2009, p. 108), at least three (3) interviews with real people are needed in every phenomenological study for the raw data to supply the necessary variation within the material. The more an individual interview can contribute to the richness of the content and the nuances in the descriptions, the fewer interviews need to be analysed (ibid., p. 99).

2.2. Data compilation and analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed following the steps of a psychological method from descriptive phenomenology that offers a systematic approach for analysis when studying everyday experiences (Giorgi, 2009). Analysis according to the descriptive phenomenological psychological method devised by Giorgi (2009) generally involves four steps. Steps one and two provide guidance on familiarising oneself with the material, by reading it repeatedly, and on facilitating sorting by dividing the data into units of meaning. The third step involves imaginative variations, which contribute depth to the psychological aspect. Using imaginative variations also gives the informant's narrative a clearer description, while at the same time making it possible to broaden the meaning-bearing in statements. The fourth step culminates in discovering the psychological meaning structure of the phenomenon and the relationship between the constituents, and the constituents and their empirical variations (Giorgi, 2009).

Although the data analysis in the present study was guided by the steps of Giorgi (2009) method, the overall aim was not to discover the structure of a phenomenon. Thus, the data analysis in this study followed the descriptive method (Giorgi, 2009) up to step four:

Step 1 *Gain an overall view of the interview material.* The interview transcripts were read to get an overall idea of the interview material and how useful it was in studying transition to a plant-based diet.

Step 2 *Divide the interview material into blocks of meanings.* Division and delimitation of data were performed by dividing the interview material into blocks. Classification was done by looking at how different aspects, intentions, feelings and thoughts were expressed. Each block indicated something new in the content, distinguishing it from the previous block. At each change in description, a mark was made to separate the meanings.

Step 3 *Clarify the meaning.* Data from the natural setting (raw material from the interviews) were transformed to the abstract phenomenological level (psychological) (Giorgi, 2009). During the transformation, a third-person perspective was used, with each sentence beginning with e.g. "Interviewer" (I) or "They experienced", "They remembered," "They felt" etc. The main instrument used to find the essence was imaginative variations, which involved varying and clarifying each statement or sentence until the meaning could no longer be varied without speculation. The use of imaginative variations meant giving the participants' everyday stories a clearer description, while at the same time expanding the meaning of the story. This type of psychological experimentation involves trusting in associated thinking in order to discover the essence (Giorgi, 2009, p. 93). The transition to a more reflective state demands a special mental presence. When one finds oneself in this mental state, it is possible to be intuitive enough or unaffected enough to carry out imaginative variations (Giorgi, 2009). This means that the analysis takes a long time. Meanings are identified by raising the empirical material to an eidetic phenomenological level. The process is about varying the meanings in a person's experiences through free imagination, without either adding to or subtracting from a person's statement. This procedure makes it possible to raise real everyday narratives to a more abstract level (Giorgi, 2009). In the present study, this was done by defining and repeating each sentence that was pronounced in different variations, until all the nuances were exhausted (Polkinghorne, 1989). In concrete terms, it was about trying to change from an automatic way of thinking to a more open and reflective attitude to how experiences were described in the interviews. It was also important to be able to

relate both descriptively and interpretively to the material in the sense given to the terms by Giorgi (1992).

Step 4 *Reveal the general structure.* Instead of revealing a network of relational descriptions (the general structure) in step four, the analysis took on a more thematic approach. Giorgi (1979) refers to identifying typologies or themes in order to both vary and deepen the significance of the phenomenon. These themes differ from the components of the structure, in that they are perceived as deviations within the same intra-structural variation. At the same time, they are parts of the same overall phenomenon but are on a different structural level that reveals more about individual experiences than about the phenomenon itself (Giorgi, 2009, p. 103). This was done by reading through the analyses in step 3 and asking: What is this about? and How can this be described? In the end, similar experiences came together into a whole, which was summarised by formulating elements/themes that described its significance. Together, they gave the phenomenon meaning, by describing the empirical results (raw data) not at the detailed level, but at a thematic level. The themes formulated revealed aspects of the phenomenon and none could be excluded without the phenomenon collapsing (Giorgi, 2009). The strategy was to search for clusters of experiences with psychological meanings related to the transition to a plant-based diet. These experiences were based on the same "acting" (Giorgi, 1979, p. 85), but had a varying focus in the different stories, which meant that they harmonised around the same theme. Once the themes were constituted (formed) the empirical material was studied again, to get further stories of situations that could deepen and thus enrich and clarify the "themes" by including examples of individual stories. The assumption was that all participants had the same basis for participation, even though they emphasised different things. In this way, the five different themes or dimensions presented in the results sections emerged. The quotations provided enrich each dimension by describing empirical variations of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). This method has been used to analyse similar data in previous studies of food and meal choices and to identify the essence of the research object (von Essen, 2015; von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017).

2.3. Method discussion

Although a psychoanalytically informed perspective was applied above and in the discussion, the raw data obtained in this study were analysed guided by a psychological method from descriptive phenomenology, namely bracketing. This means staying close to the original wordings of the participants throughout the data analysis. Finding psychological aspects in phenomenology does not mean basing the analysis of the raw data on theory. The approach devised by Giorgi (2009) involves leaving aside preconceived ideas about the phenomenon during analysis by bracketing, meaning that outcomes from the analysis should be unaffected by earlier psychological experiences and knowledge (ibid., p. 91–93).

Clarification is needed on how the phenomenological way of looking at the object was balanced with the psychoanalytical use of the object in the present study. In phenomenology, man is an experiential subject with an intentionality. An object is something the subject is always aware of: "there is always an object of consciousness, whether it is another person or an idea" (Langdridge, 2008, p. 1127). In psychoanalysis, the object is connected to beliefs and fantasies about both inner ideas and outer things and people, e.g. something one loves, desires or hates. In object relation theory in particular, the object is emphasised as grounded in both interpersonal relationships that arise between individuals in the surrounding world and created by the intrapersonal relationships that exist in the internal world of subjective experiences (Clinton, 2006; Winnicott, 1969).

2.4. Ethical considerations

The entire study underwent ethical review at the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in Lund, Sweden, and was conducted with the guidance of ethical guidelines published by the Swedish Research Council (Gustafsson, Hermerén, & Petterson, 2011), with the aim of protecting and respecting the participants. When obtaining both oral and written information, the purpose of the study, the content and presentation of the results, and what participation involved were explained to the selected subjects. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could end their participation at any time during the process and that the data would be handled solely by the researcher. Each informant was given a personal code number, but was otherwise anonymous. The step-by-step approach in the phenomenological method and the transformation of the material to a more abstract level made it impossible for individuals to be identified in the final material.

The interviews were conducted by a trained and registered (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare) dynamic psychotherapist with a PhD in environmental psychology and with clinical experience of patients with various food-related problems.

3. Results

The analysis revealed that young adults' transition to a plant-based diet comprised five dimensions: 1) *Exploring new ways of living based on health anxieties*, 2) *regulating conflicting emotions through differentiation*, 3) *transforming traditional models into new alternatives*, 4) *confirming new skills and abilities* and 5) *integrating experiences and emotions into a whole.*

These five dimensions reflected how the change towards a plant-based diet was experienced by the young adults. In the transition process, individuals reported a change in their emotional state and in their diet. Most informants appeared to transition to a plant-based diet for health reasons, but during the process also experienced a change towards a more ethical position, for themselves and other beings.

The five dimensions are described below, together with any empirical variations observed.

3.1. Exploring new ways of living based on health anxieties

This dimension concerned participants' experiences of ill-health. They described relational changes in their own physical or mental wellbeing as the reason to start exploring other ways of living, including diet options. Various life events triggered an awareness that their situation needed to change. This awareness led the young adults to search for alternative ways of living, including ways to acknowledge their inner feelings and physical states.

One informant (P3) reported starting to feel depressed, exhausted and suffering physical symptoms from stress arising in work and from illness and death among close family and friends. As a result:

> My body stopped working and then it wasn't just the food that became a complete reversal, it was the whole me that did a complete reversal in some way.

Another participant (P2) attributed the decision to their own health anxieties:

> I have had cancer twice and asked myself if I could change so that it did not come back. I heard that meat and milk products can promote tumour growth and then I decided to reduce eating these.

A third (P1) participant reported suffering from severe skin rashes for years and that it was only on changing to a more plant-based diet that the rash began to disappear:

> It was really when I tried to be vegan and stopped eating meat that I noticed that psoriasis disappeared. Then it is no idea to eat meat, rather it is a "carrot" to continue eating vegetarian.

The informants reported how they began to seek information via the internet or Facebook groups about food values, combinations of ingredients and the effects of diet on health. They also described how they tried different variants of being vegetarian or vegan for a shorter or longer period.

One informant (P4) reported being tired of wondering what to cook and joined a Facebook group focused on eating vegan food to get information on what to cook and eat. Another informant (P5) reported testing a vegan diet:

> I tried the vegan challenge for a month to see if it worked for me and to be able to eat wholeheartedly without being questioned at home.

A third informant (P6) on a vegan diet reported anxiety about not being able to obtain all the necessary nutrients in the diet, and had turned to external sources of information: "I even have a whole book about vegan nutrition so I can see that I am getting everything I need".

3.2. Regulating conflicting emotions through differentiation

This dimension concerned the anxiety participants experienced about their body being damaged by using traditional ingredients such as meat and dairy products in their diet, which they believed exposed them to unhealthy and harmful substances. This initiated a process that involved trying to exclude these ingredients from their diet.

One informant (P2) reported avoiding cooking because she felt uncertain about what she could eat: "I didn't really know how to behave and what to eat until I decided to just eat what is good for me, vegan and not meat". Meals at her boyfriend's parents made her begin to question what she ate:

> They served so much meat that it became noticeable in my head. I thought it was dead animals, I hadn't thought of that before. I felt a disgust and I felt bad about eating it, but I couldn't change in the middle of the dinner. But then I reacted quite vigorously after being forced to eat meat for a week even though I thought it was disgusting.

Another participant (P6) perceived animal ingredients as harmful or containing dangerous substances that destroyed or contaminated the meal and soiled the body:

> It felt like I was making myself unclean by eating meat, e.g. slag products in the body. Then I wanted to do some sort of purification cure to get rid of it.

Informant P7 reported adapting to avoid meat emotionally:

> Although I have always eaten meat because it was served everywhere, I have never longed for meat or craved it and now I feel nothing for meat.

Informant P4 described imagining what it would mean for the animals providing the meat:

> When it comes to ethics and animals, I have seen so many films about how animals may be kept, so it is nice not to be guilty of slaughtering animals or having to throw them away if you can't eat them.

The young adults also talked about contradictions in meal situations and incompatible feelings directed at ingredients in the diet. For one informant (P1), feelings about meat were somewhat divided:

> I think meat is the best thing there is. But I just don't want to eat it. If I had never eaten meat, then it would not have been the worst thing to exclude it. Then I wouldn't have missed it and could focus on finding new dishes instead. Then I wouldn't have had to compare.

3.3. Transforming traditional models into new alternatives

The third dimension reflected how participants had found traditional models of cooking monotonous and joyless. These feelings became the starting point for seeking new knowledge and experience, with the help of imagination and playfulness.

One participant (P1) described how cooking had become a boring routine just like other everyday chores:

> I cooked a lot of food, but it was boring food. It was more of a chore, like cleaning and vacuuming. In with the sausage in the oven and such things. It wasn't like doing something creative that you felt was fun.

Another informant (P2) said that cooking became the starting point for trying something new and finding alternative "safe" ingredients:

> More new and exciting ingredients than before, but at the same time in a safe area.

A third participant (P3) talked about avoiding some foodstuffs in order to improve health:

> Many people suffer from cardiovascular disease, so I never fry in butter and so on. Having oil at home is more useful and easier.

A fourth (P4) informant described starting with dishes that she already liked:

> I took spaghetti and minced meat sauce and replaced the meat with lentils … …often when I want to do a new thing, I look online at a lot of different recipes and I find maybe six or seven different recipes and then I get some thought in my head and I do my own version of it.

Informant P5 described transforming meals by completely replacing ingredients, e.g. Portobello mushroom or eggplant to replace Christmas herring, and experimenting with the recipe, e.g. for mustard sauce, to make the ingredients taste good together. Another informant said that "after a while you develop a kind of … intuitive feeling for what could fit together".

3.4. Confirming new skills and abilities

This dimension reflected how participants gained independence from previous 'rules' and models over time, as repeated use of new ingredients in cooking increased their independence and autonomy. They described trust in their own ability and courage in showing their work to others. A new feeling began to emerge, of being able to stand up for themselves and their needs. They felt they should be respected for expressing differences regarding diet and life. One informant (P4) said:

> It has been a challenge to think about vegetarian, because food is something automatic in a way. You do not begin to explain why you eat a sandwich for breakfast, or a cutlet for dinner. You distinguish between what is breakfast, dinner and supper. There are many things that are obvious. Vegetarian food is a little more difficult, preparing vegan meals. They do not always look like regular meals. Because it is vegan, it involves vegetables in different forms and then it can be difficult to know how much of each one should have. Now I have learned how to make meals feel that you are not just eating salad, that it feels more like a meal.

Another informant (P2) talked about trying to prepare proper meals to feel more satisfied and satiated and to avoid blood sugar drops, which also reduced uncertainty about food:

> I have re-taught myself a bit […] now I try to make more complicated stuff. […] I need a food-now dish which gives good satiation […] much better with my blood sugar now. I don't get the same dip in the afternoon.

Informant P6 described trying new products and new ways of cooking and then beginning to look differently at food and cooking:

> It's more fun now, I look at food in a slightly different way. I research a lot more, try to find inspiration more actively than I did before. Being vegetarian is nothing strange now.

That informant added:

> My family has become more curious about what I do, and I want to invite them to eat my food. I don't ask for their old recipes or cook exactly the same things I've eaten for 23 years with them. I want to show that this is what I have become. The whole family think that food is important all the time. It has been fun to try new ingredients, and it is fun to be able to show that food can be made in a different way.

3.5. Integrating experiences and emotions into a whole

The fifth dimension reflected the fact that participants felt that their emotions, conflicts and past and new experiences were increasingly becoming coordinated and balanced in a unified direction. They described these feelings as more consistent with how they related to the ingredients they preferred to use in their diet. A more stable relationship with food also made them more flexible in life situations. They described a greater tolerance to deviations and being able to handle new and unforeseen situations. They also said that they took the initiative themselves and decided when and to what extent they would use the new diet.

One participant (P3) described beginning to explore self and alternative ways of relating to diet:

> Today I am more explorative in terms of both myself and the food.

Another (P2) said;

> Since I became vegan and removed meat, I have not had so many stomach problems […] I have not felt so bad emotionally, I do not want to get that back.

Informant (P6) described becoming more open to new ideas and tastes, having discovered that eating plant-based meant using spices and ingredients in a different way and not using traditional recipes:

> I have stopped thinking too much about it being steak, potatoes and sauce, but done as vegetarian food […] now I can do differently from the beginning, like making meringue out of chickpeas instead of egg white. I understand that it's just that things have to fall into place. Vegetarian feels more like my identity now too.

Another informant (P1) described eating in a special way to avoid being hungry and having to modify initial restrictions on ingredients: "I eat eggs and milk in foods, but I do not drink milk and do not eat eggs".

Informant P4 reported doing most of the cooking when meeting friends for vegetarian meals:

> When we cook vegetarian food together […] the others want the food to go fast while I want it to take time. So I cook the meal and the others can sit and talk. It works, of course.

Informant (P7) reported being identified as a vegetarian now:

My focus on vegetarianism has started to be accepted by others around me. They buy vegetarian for me or order it for me. So that's good. What they offer me when I visit has changed even more in the past six months. My mother-in-law found different recipes and my husband has learned what halloumi is in the grocery store, tofu as well.

Informant (P7) also described being more flexible in relation to vegetarian:

> I want to be vegetarian but not slavish, eat well, but not perfect. Want to have the right load on myself in life, so that I can cook but also do other things. And so, it is better for health. You have to find some realistic variant on the whole.

Another informant (P5) described the experience of being vegan:

> How easy I feel, bouncing on little clouds, it feels better to know that no one has been killed for me to be satiated. […] Now it feels really strange to put my teeth in a piece of meat, it's the cow's child and I don't want to eat it.

4. Discussion

This study investigated young adults' transition to a plant-based diet and challenges, mental states and experiences associated with the shift. The results revealed five dimensions illustrating how changing to a plant-based diet is experienced by young adults and what happens within the individual on moving from one form of diet to another. The dimensions also provided insights into how food can be used as a symbol of young adults' development into a more cohesive self in a stable life.

A psychoanalytically informed object relation perspective was used as guidance when assessing how the meal could be seen as an object, divided into parts, differentiating good and bad ingredients, and seeing which objects were important. This framework added an understanding to the young people's eating habits and diet (Tasca & Balfour, 2014), contributing a developmental perspective and subjectivity and revealing the meaning behind actions, adding a good understanding of people's needs (Allen, 2013). It also helped to increase understanding of what needed to be expressed and communicated by the young people, the way to relate to themselves, food and others that makes it possible to develop new ways of relating to thoughts, feelings and conflicts.

In this analysis, the plant-based diet could be seen as a symbolic therapeutic object supporting development of a more sustainable lifestyle. The dietary transition of the participants started with an existential anxiety (Berman, Weems, & Stickle, 2006) about physical and mental health, but ended in more stability. Ultimately, emotions, conflicts and past and new experiences were coordinated and balanced under a common "label", which gave the participants a sense of meaning and purpose (Shapiro, 2015). Thus all parts of the young adults' everyday life, in the inner and external worlds, were integrated within the individual into a stable whole, a whole object (Winnicott, 1971).

Two dimensions (*Exploring new ways of living based on health anxieties* and *Regulating conflicting emotions through differentiation*) reflected young adults' concerns about ill-health and feeling vulnerable. Anxiety about fate and thoughts about living and dying (De Masi, 2004; Tillich, 1952) occupied their minds and triggered exploration of a plant-based diet, which they believed to be a more health-protective option (Mascioli & Davis, 2019). When conventional models about how conditions can be cured or alleviated fail to provide answers, exploring other alternatives regimes becomes important (Coveney, 2002; Panksepp, 1999). In the present study, young adults discovered and trusted the plant-based diet as a way to achieve better health and answer their existential questions. However, the transition required them to take a stand on traditional cooking and dietary rules and models, including dealing with questioned and even hated ingredients. Part of the internal conflict was solved by dividing and sorting both feelings and food ingredients based on projected qualities, good attributes that contributed to health and bad attributes that damaged health. The plant-based diet was given all the good qualities that the young adults desired and symbolised vitality and existence.

Meat and dairy products were projected (Bollas, 1979) to have bad and unhealthy qualities, which the participants believed would harm them. They described feeling physically sick (Kelly, 2008; Thompson, Cummins, Brown, & Kyle, 2015), when they were forced to look at or smell e.g. meat, but also by the idea of having to eat meat. In fact, they

felt that the bad ingredients were contaminating the meal and damaging them from the inside (Kinzl, Hauer, Traweger, & Kiefer, 2006; Ruby, Heine, Kamble, Cheng, & Waddar, 2013). These ingredients therefore needed to be excluded from the meal, so that the participants could avoid the tension they felt in different meal situations. Similar expressions of meat as poison or carcasses as impure (Twigg, 1979), or feelings of disgust (Kubberöd, Ueland, ÅsneTronstad, & Risvik, 2002; Rozin & Fallon, 1987), reflect a basic human emotion (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011) associated with food and eating (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000, pp. 9–29; P.; Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, Dunlop, & Ashmore, 1999). This emotion can lead to food aversions, anorexia and purging (Izard, 1991), but can also provide motivation for adaptation to avoid perceived harmful physically or psychologically objects, in order to avoid contact with death (De Masi, 2004).

However, the participants reported difficulties with replacing popular ingredients, which led to conflicts about excluding some ingredients considered to provide better functioning, wellbeing and satiation. One informant had difficulty giving up breakfast sandwiches with butter and cheese, because they taste so good, and drinking coffee without milk. Such ambivalence seemed to give the young adults great anxiety, about not only expressing aversion but also libidinal feelings towards certain properties in the rejected object (Fairbairn, 1952). It could be that these ingredients present a duality of aspects that becomes as great a difficulty in the inner world as the former ambivalence was in the outer world.

Being unable to eat meat was also somewhat enticing, especially when the participants unconsciously loaded meat with negative properties related to an interpersonal relationship earlier in life (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017). They then sought an alternative solution to this negativity, e.g. by experimenting with plant-based ingredients similar in structure and taste to meat.

A similar struggle between life and death is described by Roth (2001), where the individual tries to deal with ambivalent feelings for an object by dividing it into good and bad. The aim is to take advantage of the good and get rid of the bad by projecting it onto another object (here meat and dairy), and then moving it outside the good object (here the plant-based diet). Ambivalence arises as a reaction to the frustration of having to make the choice. Fairbairn (1952, p. 172) suggests that this way of coping with the frustrating ('bad') object by excluding it from reality is a defence mechanism to help gain control during the internalisation process.

In this study and from a Kleinian perspective (Klein, 1975), the plant-based meal may also be linked to the life instinct and ingredients such as meat with the death instinct. Thus, young adults may deal with meal conflicts and anxiety by projecting unconscious bad onto specific ingredients and excluding those from the diet, reducing the tension in the meal situation. If the good aspects are promoted, the diet creates resilience that helps the young person endure periods of adversity and anxiety.

Klein (1975) describes the ability to distinguish bad objects from oneself as an important aspect of development. Inability to distinguish between different internal states often also means difficulty distinguishing between and seeing one's own needs e.g. what is hunger and what are feelings. This may pose a risk of eating disorders (Clinton, 2006). The solution may be to satisfy the individual's physical hunger and engender loving feelings in them (Bronstein, 2001).

In the dimensions *Transforming traditional models into new alternatives* and *Confirming new skills and abilities*, the young adults who participated in this study expressed a desire to create something new based on their own needs and health, and to have these needs and new skills confirmed. The young adults described a new consciousness and ability to link important parts of everyday life, including routines and meals, but also emotions, as a starting point for a new strategy on how life should be lived. They used their curiosity, interest and expectations as a driving force to make this possible. Spontaneity and play became a new force allowing them to experiment and create meals with new ingredients, structures and flavours. Imagination and playfulness led to creation of new inner images of what they wanted their reality to be.

The young adults used previous models, such as traditional recipes or experiences, as a base to safely explore the new possibilities that a plant-based diet could bring. Similar use of existing models has been reported in a previous study (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017), where emotional memories of eating situations associated with the family emotionally present functioned as a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) that made the young adults feel 'held' during the process (T. H. Ogden, 2004; Winnicott, 1960), so that they could explore unknown topics and environments. In the present study, using the traditional meal as a safe base enabled young adults to explore new alternative ways of living and eating, thus developing a more stable sense of independence and sustainability.

The young adults talked about a transition to putting meals together themselves, rather than following old models, so that something new like a sense of control and autonomy emerged from creativity, i.e. meals based on their own needs and preferences. Experimenting with flavours and textures occupied their minds. The kitchen was transformed into a workshop filled with imaginings (Winnicott, 1969), transforming newly discovered ingredients into new meals. Thinking about meals and cooking was used by the young adults to fantasise about themselves, their health and their future. Through experimentation, they also developed other ideas about what food could be. By withdrawing from food in the outside world and external impressions from their surroundings, they felt that they could consider themselves, and not the needs of others. They described this as being in a "creative bubble" or their "own world", where they could test different dietary options. The potential space described by Winnicott (1971) links the individual's internal and external environments. Exploration of ingredients and new ways to cook them seems to reflect young adults taking steps to independence from traditions and meal patterns of the previous generation.

The first plant-based meal was given special significance, particularly how it was created, with informants emphasising that it would not be affected by previous designs and models. Winnicott (1971) described a similar budding feeling of something, the first owned possession, in the individual that is independent of the experiences of others. Thus, the young adults in the present study can be said to have started creating their own reality through their new diet. They also said that creating their own meals increased their confidence in themselves and their ability. Thus their new diet became an expression of self-determination and independence, referred to in other studies as "personal development" and "self-realisation" (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2014).

The young adults reported that their new diet had become more obvious in their life. After withdrawing to experiment and identify what fulfilled their needs, they felt confident in what they were doing. Cooking and eating plant-based food then became more automatic and no longer required their full power and attention. During the process, they increasingly abandoned use of pre-made ingredients and used raw ingredients in their meals. Finally, they were ready to reconnect and share with their surroundings and interpersonal relations, but on their own terms based on how they wanted to live and how they wanted to cook. Their next step was to display their created meals and test them against reality. To test their skills, they focused their attention on the surrounding environment (Winnicott, 1971), in tense expectation of how these skills would be met, acknowledged and shared by family and friends.

Finally, in the dimension *Integrating experiences and emotions into a whole*, the young adults' ideas and experiences were shaped into something more sustainable. By that stage of the process, reflecting on themselves in relation to diet had become natural. The young adults described internal changes towards seeing themselves as more cohesive individuals, with the plant-based diet becoming a state of mind: "a way of life that has contributed to greater autonomy, integration and self-mastery" (Marcus, 2008), p. 62). External changes were that they changed both their diet and their attitude to diet. This resembled an "integration process" whereby parts of experiences are gathered from inside to form a whole experience, which is an important part of

developing the self and a sense of existence (Winnicott, 1971). Klein (cit. Temperley, 2001) added another dimension by describing integration as a gradual process that involves modifying fantasies and comparing and testing them against reality, in parallel for both individual and object. In the present study, this integration also meant creating new and healthier traditions where the young adult experienced the influence of new norms that resembled conscience and motives (Kelly & Morar, 2018) or a real inner self (Winnicott, 1965).

The young adults in this study reported that other parts of their life had also changed. An initial focus on keeping bad and good objects separate had shifted to a more reflective way of relating to different situations (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008), including meals. The young adults also appeared to have increased their reflective function, i.e. their ability to draw conclusions from others and themselves (Köber, Kuhn, Peters, & Habermas, 2017). They no longer felt threatened and compelled to get rid of or project bad aspects of parts of the diet. Food became something more appetising, taste became an important component and the meal situation became more flexible and varied (Fredrickson, 2001). Food was used in more versatile way and based on how it could help e.g. as a therapeutic and "holding" object (T. H. Ogden, 2004; von Essen & Mårtensson, 2014; Winnicott, 1960). It was a source of nutrition for function, but also a symbol of transition (Winnicott, 1971) in relational situations.

Some of the young adults transitioning to a plant-based diet encountered additional difficulties and reported challenges and obstacles that made the transition difficult, e.g. a focus on satiation and body functioning made it difficult to exclude eggs and dairy products. In some, the transition activated old patterns or past experiences from meal situations that made it difficult to see the meal as positive (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2017). The informants also described how their current life situation, with work, studies and stressful life events, hindered their development. This made transitioning to a plant-based diet more mentally demanding than they initially expected, and not as helpful as they had wished or hoped.

The five different dimensions identified here show several similarities to those reported in the transition to organic food as a self-therapeutic process (von Essen & Mårtensson, 2014). In both, there is an endeavour to become a whole person with the ability to exist. Like those transitioning to organic food, the young people who switched to a plant-based diet wanted to live a sustainable and good life. They wanted to be seen for who they are and accepted and respected for that, and for the lifestyle they have chosen (von Essen, 2015), a lifestyle that meets both their physical and mental needs. The transition to a plant-based diet based on health considerations is similar to the "schizoid position" described by Klein (cit. Roth, 2001). However, that transition is grounded in a fear of self-destruction, whereas transition for more ethical reasons may be influenced by care and empathy considerations, as in a (depressive) position (Temperley, 2001).

4.1. Limitations

One limitation of the present study was that it was difficult to recruit engaged informants with the right background who were willing to commit for a long period. Therefore, recruitment lasted almost a year. Informants were sought via advertising, restaurants with vegetarian menus, participation in events and a dozen Facebook groups focusing on vegetarian and vegan food that are popular in Sweden. Informants were recruited from cities, where choosing a plant-based diet is more common, and from smaller communities, where interest in a plant-based diet is increasing. In the material, a difference in attitude was detected between these two groups of informants. Another limitation was that although the informants ranged in age from 20 to 35 years, most were 20–25 years old. There may be differences in how individuals relate to diet depending on their phase of life. A third limitation was that there was not many males among the informants.

4.2. Conclusions, implications and suggestions for future research

Previous studies show that young people are increasingly becoming vegetarian or vegan, but rarely discuss what this transition really means and the internal and external challenges and obstacles involved. This study showed that the transition is a process where challenges increase awareness and knowledge that, in the best case, leads to an inner change in the young person towards increased self-confidence and independence, and external changes in the form of a new food orientation. Together, the transition is an integration of the individual's different experiences into a whole.

One important aspect of the transition process was that young adults put the good parts together and formed representations of food, and then used their own resources to create something they can build on in future. Another important aspect was that they seemed to have increased their ability to understand themselves and other beings. In future development of their ethical position, they may use this when thinking about the human-animal relationship. In addition, good representations may be a precondition for the ability to take an ethical position. The ability to relate to other beings may depend on the individual working through their focus on health.

More research is needed to understand the role of the psyche in transition to a plant-based diet and to determine whether e.g. deeper psychological theory can provide insights into this transition. A deeper psychological perspective can provide insights into difficult internal processes in young adults and what they choose to include/exclude from their diet beyond a pathological level. It can also help examine ethical positions when transitioning to a plant-based diet. More research is also needed to identify what happens when young adults' attempts do not lead to integration of parts into a whole self.

Ethical statement

The entire study underwent ethical review at the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in Lund, Sweden (decision 2016/79), and was conducted with the guidance of ethical guidelines published by the Swedish Research Council (Gustafsson et al., 2011) with the aim of protecting and respecting the participants. For both oral and written information, the purpose of the study, the content and presentation of the results, and what it meant to participate were explained. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could end their participation at any time during the process and that the data would be handled solely by the researcher. Each informant was given a personal code number but was otherwise anonymous. The step-by-step approach in the phenomenological method, and the transformation of the material to a more abstract level, made it impossible for individuals to be identified in the final material.

The interviews were conducted by a trained and registered (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare) dynamic psychotherapist with a PhD in environmental psychology and with clinical experience of patients with various food-related problems.

Declaration of competing interest

The manuscript for submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration. There are no conflicts of interest to declare. The authors did not receive any funding or benefits from industry.

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