Chapter 1

The Psychology of Meat Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This chapter starts with a brief outline of the historic development of the interspecies relationships and discusses the role of norms in changing behavior. Norms play a role in maintaining the ideology of carnism which enables people to eat the flesh of certain animals due to the invisibility of meat production and to the mechanisms of objectification, deindividualization and dichotomization of livestock. According to the meat paradox theory, people alleviate the unpleasant feelings about eating animal flesh by diminishing the minds of the eaten animals. The 4N (normal, natural, necessary and nice) rationalizations which justify eating meat in current society are also pointed out. Furthermore, the role of values, attitudes and different type of motivations are discussed. In conclusion, possible ways of employing community-based social marketing are offered.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Czech philosopher Kohák, the traditional European attitude dominated deeply over all other “non-European nations and nonhuman fellow creatures alike” (Kohák, 2000, p. 30). In the course of modern history, the European region has made a large progress in attitudes toward nonhuman animals. Over the last several centuries this attitude changed to being more compassionate.

The historian Thomas (1991) claims in his analysis that human attitudes to animals changed mostly because of two factors – the Enlightenment combined with urbanization. Serpell and Paul (2003, p. 134) explain that the migration of the European population into towns and cities helped distance people from any personal involvement “in the slaughter, subjugation or maltreatment of animals, and thus removed the need for belief systems designed to justify or reinforce such practices”. The German sociologist
Norbert Elias (2006) also claims that the post-medieval European standards regarding violence against humans and nonhuman animals, as well as table manners, were gradually transformed. Throughout the history, together with the rise of civilization and evolution of good manners, people found it increasingly difficult to see a whole animal served on the table while eating (Elias, 2006). During medieval feasts, whole animals were served and cut on the table, but today the same picture often causes disgust (Elias, 2006, p. 193). Nowadays Europeans keep animals as members of their family, they admire wild animals and tend to understand that humans should protect endangered species (Franklin, 1999). According to Special Eurobarometer 442 (2015), the attitudes of Europeans toward nonhuman animals are generally positive and their concern for them is high.

At the same time, a vast majority of people consume large amounts of animal products, mostly from industrial-sized confined animal feeding operations where animals are treated more like units than individual living beings (Twine, 2010). Through excessive consumption of animal products people take part in unnecessary suffering and killing of sentient creatures (Pluhar, 2010) but also contribute to serious environmental threats (FAO, 2006; Thaler et al., 2013; Scarborough et al., 2014; Springmann et al., 2016).

How do people deal with this obvious paradox? What are the mechanisms which make it possible for them to love animals on the one hand and eat them on the other? How can it be the case that some environmentally aware people have no problem to save water, use public transportation instead of cars and sort their waste, but they keep eating meat despite the fact that it strongly contributes to environmental threats? What are possible ways of encouraging people to eat less meat and other animal products? This chapter aims to answer such questions by focusing on the psychology of meat eating.

THEORIES EXPLAINING MEAT CONSUMPTION

Current studies, concepts and theories on the issue of meat consumption are introduced below. They can inform possible ways for marketing campaigns to help people get their behavior in line with their attitudes.

Social Norms

Evidence shows that our behavior is to a large extent governed by social norms shared by society. Norms represent implied sets of rules or standards that determine appropriate or desirable behavior (Atkinson et al., 1995, p. 750; Myers & Twenge, 2016, p. 144) and reflect the group’s accepted way of thinking, feeling or acting (Smith et al., 2014, p. 312).

Our behavior is also greatly influenced by a reference group, which consists of people “who portray standards with which to evaluate one’s own attitudes, abilities, or current situation” (Koger & Winter, 2010, p. 100). In other words, it is a group of people that we identify with (Myers & Twenge, 2016, p. 257). For instance, students of environmental studies often conform to the social norms of their vegetarian and vegan fellow students and usually avoid meat when in their company as discovered in a Czech research project (Šedová et al., 2016). In some cases, the norms were so deeply internalized that the students felt guilty when shopping for meat even though none of their vegetarian friends could see them (Šedová et al., 2016).
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