Chapter 10
What Is More Important: Perception of Masculinity or Personal Health and the Environment?

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ABSTRACT

The unnecessary question what a man is without his masculinity, is deeply ingrained into the socially established norms of strength, power, virility and machoism. Although the traditional male masculinity stereotype and its association with meat consumption are still undisputable for many “real” men, there is indication about a shift toward a new modern evolutionary masculinity which reflects more sustainability values. The chapter explores this based on a survey of Sydney men. It reveals the influence of new factors, such as environmental, health and animal welfare concerns, which shape the concept of the masculine. Meat-eating men will experience increasing pressure to defend their traditional masculinity. The Sydney study also explores the factors likely to influence Australian men to replace a meat-centred diet with more plant-based alternatives.

INTRODUCTION

Manliness (of old English origin) describes a set of traits, abilities, attributes and qualities which characterise the male human species, whilst masculinity (of Latin origin) is the property of manifesting these features (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2017). Although these two terms are intertwined, masculinity – that is, the manifestation of manliness, is much more affected by social factors and practices.

The relationship between man, meat and masculinity has manifold meanings and for centuries has represented a socially acceptable norm about male self-perception and identity. Currently, the list of prevailing hegemonic masculinity characteristics in western countries includes: heterosexuality, power, physical strength, toughness, aggression, decision-making, independence, dominance, authority, assert-
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tiveness, courage, rationality, emotional stoicism, musculature and prowess, adventurous spirit, initiative, self-confidence, work supremacy, financial independence, virility, playboy behaviours and violence (Fiddes, 1994; Austin, 2008; Van Hoven & Hopkins, 2009; Bogueva & Phau, 2016; Kahn, 2011; Reeser, 2010; Pease, 2010; Hearn et al., 2013).

Masculinity is also determined by biological and presentation factors. In the past male emperors, sages and leaders of yore had attributes like facial hair – a style also popular nowadays for many celebrities. Beards have been associated with high testosterone, virility, leadership and power (Schiebinger, 1993; Withey, 2015). The upper class male aristocracy in 16th-17th century Europe enjoyed the privilege of eating meat abundantly as well as “manly” attributes, including wearing high-heel shoes and wigs (Zevallos, 2014), which are no longer considered such. Socially-defined signs of power, rank and prestige change over time and, for example, high-heel shoes now symbolise femininity (Zevallos, 2014). What this chapter explores is whether the connection between meat and masculinity is also evolving.

MEAT AND MANLINESS

Meat, and especially red meat, is an archetypical masculine food (van den Wijngaard, 1997) embedded in the western construction of masculinity (De Boer, 2006; Rothgerber, 2012; Rozin et al., 2012). The contemporary male meat consumption behaviour is equated and effectively wrapped under the pretext of traditional masculinity traits aimed at positioning men at the top of the social and animal hierarchy. Historically a scarce resource attributable to the privileged rich as a means of demonstrating authority and wealth, meat has become a highly palatable food associated with strength, virility, blood, masculinity and tangibly represents human power over the rest of the natural world (Fiddes, 1991; Kubberød et al., 2002; Stibbe, 2004; Ruby & Heine, 2011). The deeply believed link between meat and masculinity is traced back to ancient times with Aristotle stating: “other animals exist for the sake of man” (in Fiddes, 1994, p. 276). In the 1840s meat gained a scientific status with the popularised ‘protein myth’ and the notion that animal food is more nutritious than plants as it can replenish muscular strength (Fiddes, 1994).

According to Lupton (1996), the type of food men prefer to eat is a central part of their subjective identity, sense of self and experience of macho embodiment. Attempts to usurp the western menu consisting of a piece of flesh from warm-blooded animal plus a piece of vegetable, usually potato or pumpkin, and gravy (Lupton, 1996; Murcott, 1982:203; Douglas and Gross, 1981, p. 6-8), could cause serious social disharmony and instability (Lupton, 1996). Manly foods are not a necessary part of the male nourishment and physiological need to eat, but a major aspect of the socio-cultural environment where they belong or with which they identify.

While there is a shared culture across the western world considering meat as normal, natural, necessary and nice – the 4Ns (Piazza et al, 2015), it is particularly perceived as a masculine food (Willard, 2006) and masculinity is performed through meat-eating (and macho behaviour) for the approval and recognition by other men. When men consume meat in public places, such as steak houses, strip clubs or around the BBQ, they validate their manhood and self-comfort about being a man (Rothgerber, 2012). “Meat eating is an act of a self-definition as a privileged (male-identified) human” gaining strength from consuming strong animals, such as bulls and cows, as vegetables represent passivity (Adams & Calarco, 2016, p. 34). Men often emphasise meat while women minimise meat, displaying gender individualities (van den Wijngaard, 1997).