

Moral Disengagement in Harmful but Cherished Food Practices? An Exploration into the Case of Meat

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Abstract Harmful but culturally cherished practices often endure in spite of the damages they cause. Meat consumption is increasingly becoming one of such cases and may provide an opportunity from which to observe these phenomena. Growing evidence indicates that current and projected production and consumption patterns are important contributors to significant environmental problems, public health degradation, and animal suffering. Our aim is to contribute to a further understanding of the psychological factors that may hinder or promote personal disposition to change food habits to benefit each of these domains. Drawing from previous evidence, this study explores the proposition that some consumers are motivated to resort to moral disengagement strategies when called upon to consider the impacts of their food habits. Data were collected from six semi-structured focus groups with a sample of 40 participants. Although affirming personal duties towards preserving the environment, promoting public health, and safeguarding animal welfare, participants did not show personal disposition to change their meat consumption habits. Several patterns of response that resonate with the principles of moral disengagement theory (i.e. reconstrual of the harmful conduct; obscuring personal responsibility; disregard for the negative consequences; active avoidance and dissociation) were observed while discussing impacts and the possibility of change. Results seem to support the proposition that the process of moral disengagement may play a role in hindering openness to change food habits for the benefit of the environment, public health, and animals, and point towards the relevance of further exploring this approach.

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Introduction

Growing evidence indicates that current and projected meat production and consumption patterns are important contributors to significant problems, on a global and local scales, on three domains: (1) nature disruption and environmental unsustainability; (2) public health degradation; and (3) infliction of death and suffering to sentient animals. However, evidence suggests that many consumers are not willing to shift to a more plant-based diet. Our aim is to contribute to a further understanding of the psychological factors that may hinder or promote personal disposition to change habits towards less harmful choices. This may be important not only to inform endeavours that promote such changes, but also as an opportunity to observe basic psychological processes associated with everyday moral action, and to provide insight into the strategies people may use to maintain harmful, but cherished, food habits and other cultural commitments (as put forward by Bastian et al. 2012).

Meat and the Environment

Food systems play a key role in anthropogenic environmental changes (i.e. changes that are caused or produced by human activities). Growing evidence depict mass production and consumption of animal-based products as one of the lead contributors to very significant environmental problems, at a global and local scale, such as climate change, degradation of arable land, atmospheric pollution, and destruction of water resources (Steinfeld et al. 2008). For example, the livestock industry is responsible for the emission of 18–51 % of the annual anthropogenic greenhouse emissions (Steinfeld et al. 2006; Goodland and Anhang 2009) and causes around 63 % of the annual anthropogenic reactive nitrogen mobilization, which contributes to global warming, loss of biodiversity and acid rains, among other factors (Pelletier and Tyedmers 2010). Also, to produce the same amount of proteins and calories to human consumption, animal sources entail extremely higher costs in terms of scarce resources such as arable land, hydric resources, and fossil fuels, than plant-based sources (Pimentel and Pimentel 2003). Such resources are being used to produce grains and other components used to feed the animals in the livestock industry which could instead be channelled to produce plant-based nutritionally equivalent foodstuffs directly to human consumption, therefore drastically minimizing waste and inefficiency (e.g., Dagevos and Voordouw 2013; Pimentel and Pimentel 2003; Steinfeld et al. 2008).

Meat and Public Health

Noncommunicable diseases (NCD) currently cause more deaths worldwide than all the other causes of death together (WHO 2011a). In Europe, estimates indicate that the four main NCDs—heart diseases, cancer, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases—are responsible for 86 % of all deaths and 77 % of health expenditures (WHO 2011b).

Inadequate nutrition is unanimously pointed out as one of the major risk factors for developing NCDs, and animal-based diets, particularly when high in meat and dairy consumption, are increasingly portrayed as inadequate from a nutritional point of view (Campbell and Campbell 2006; Sabaté 2003). For example, mortality by heart failure and the incidence of heart diseases have been associated for long with animal-based diets (Appleby et al. 2002; Craig and Mangels 2009; Fraser 1999, 2009). Even after controlling factors such as social class, smoking, and body mass index, higher risk for suffering ischemic heart disease persists among individuals with conventional western diets, comparing with individuals who follow plant-based diets (Appleby et al. 2002; Fraser 1999). Such associations are also found regarding other health concerns such as several types of cancer (Demeyer et al. 2008; Norat et al. 2005), high blood pressure (Appleby et al. 2002; Berkow and Barnard 2008), and overweight (Appleby et al. 2002; Sabaté and Wien 2010). Conversely, plant-based diets (which may or may not contain some meat) are increasingly pointed out as conforming more closely to public health recommendations than conventional western diets, in part because they can exert a protective role, by providing higher amounts of folate, antioxidants, fibre, carotenoids and phytochemicals, but also because they typically entail less exposure to health-hazardous components, such as excessive ingestion of saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein (e.g., Lea and Worsley 2001; Sabaté 2003).

Meat and Animals

During the last century, meat production changed from extensive, small-scale and subsistence systems to intensive, large-scale and market oriented systems. At present, around 65,000,000,000 land animals are slaughtered every year in the livestock industry (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization 2013). Knowledge on the negative implications of intensive farming to animals is informed by neurophysiological and behavioural evidence that support the notion that animals, particularly birds and mammals, have the ability to experience what happens to them (Duncan 2006; Guatteo et al. 2012; Prunier et al. 2013). Having the ability to experience at least basic emotional states and feelings of pain and pleasure, the subjective experience of each animal somehow affected by human activities may therefore worsen or improve, depending on how that activity thwarts or matches its needs, interests, and preferences. In light of such findings, current patterns of mass production and mass consumption of animals and animal-based products are thus being increasingly associated with mass infliction of harm and suffering to sentient animals (Anil et al. 2005; Foer 2010). Conversely, plant-based diets are increasingly observed as means of meeting human nutritional needs while minimizing or avoiding most of the harm and suffering that animal-based diets entail (e.g., Ruby 2012; Singer and Mason 2006).

Consumer Readiness to Change Towards Less Harmful Dietary Choices

Although a transition from animal to plant-based diets (which may or may not contain some meat) is being endorsed as a mean of fostering significant benefits at the global and local scales in what concerns environmental sustainability (e.g., Stehfest et al. 2009), public health (e.g., Sabaté 2003), and animals (e.g., Singer and

Mason 2006), many consumers do not seem to be willing to make such transition and do not see their food choices as an ethical issue, in spite of the harm they may entail (e.g., Hoek et al. 2011; Verbeke et al. 2010). Animal-based diets, particularly high in meat consumption, are still widespread and cherished food practices, mainly in Western Societies but also increasingly in Asian and South-American countries that are becoming more affluent (Aldridge 2011; Pelletier and Tyedmers 2010; Stabler 2011). It may be that most consumers do not care or are not aware of the harm associated with current patterns of meat production and consumption. Still, even among consumers that do express concern about harm inflicted in some of these domains, their behaviour is often not in accordance with their concerns (Holm and Mohl 2000; Jamieson et al. 2013; Verbeke et al. 2010). Such incongruence may raise a question of moral self-regulation and moral disengagement, and indeed, in regard to animals, there is a growing body of evidence pointing to the existence of a moral conflict about meat eating, due to the fact that many people tend to worry about animals, but at the same time eat them (Bastian et al. 2012; Bilewicz et al. 2011; Bratanova et al. 2011; Loughnan et al. 2010).

One of the central principles of the theory of moral disengagement is that the process of moral self-regulation can be selectively deactivated in order to reduce dissonance when one is called upon to consider the damages associated with his/her own conduct (Bandura 1999). This allows individuals to adopt and maintain self-serving harmful behaviours, even if they contradict their moral principles, whereas at the same time continuing to advocate these principles without feelings of guilt and self-censure (Bandura 1990). Moral disengagement mechanisms may centre on the cognitive reconstrual of the conduct itself, so it is not viewed as immoral in spite of the harm it entails; obscuring personal responsibility in order to minimize one's role in causing harm; disregarding the consequences that flow from one's actions; or blaming the recipients of one's detrimental behaviour.

Results from past studies, particularly in the domains of environmental behaviour and animal-human relationships, suggest that the theory of moral disengagement may provide an integrative framework from which to observe lack of willingness to change concerning cherished but harmful self-serving behaviours. For example, in the environmental domain, a large body of evidence shows that the relationships between environmental knowledge and awareness, pro-environmental attitudes, and pro-environmental behaviours, are often weak or non-existent (cf. Carrington et al. 2010; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Following a review, Bandura (2007) proposed that the process of moral disengagement may indeed play an influential role in maintaining social practices that degrade the environment. However, to our knowledge this proposition has never been operationalized.

Much research has also been conducted on attitudes about animals and the use of animals for human purposes, suggesting that although people tend to show concern for animal welfare, their concern diminishes as the perceived utility of that suffering for humans increases (e.g., Braithwaite and Braithwaite 1982; Herzog 2007; Knight and Barnett 2008; Knight et al. 2003). Results that point towards the existence of moral disengagement in animal-human relationships are also observed in recent studies specifically about meat eating and meat avoidance (Bastian et al. 2012; Bilewicz et al. 2011; Bratanova et al. 2011; Loughnan et al. 2010; Ruby 2012). Most of these findings

are framed in the “meat paradox” and in the general scope of cognitive dissonance, and resonate with many of the proposals of moral disengagement theory. Indeed, following a review on attitudes towards using animals for human purposes and the structure of current meat production and distribution systems, Mitchell (2011) proposed that the process of moral disengagement may play a role in the support for the animal farming industry. However, to our knowledge, this proposition also awaits for empirical operationalization.

Following from these evidence and propositions, this study provides an initial exploration of the hypothesis that some consumers are motivated to resort to moral disengagement strategies when called upon to consider the impacts of their food habits, thus minimizing willingness to consider change. Our aim is to contribute to a further understanding of the psychological factors that may hinder or promote personal disposition to shift habits for the benefit of the environment, public health, and animal welfare.

Method

Participants

We collected data from six semi-structured focus groups with a sample of 40 participants (37.5 % males and 62.5 % females; aged 18–54, $M = 31.5$, $SD = 9.8$). Most had a full-time employment (55 %) or were graduate/post-graduate students (42.5 %), and one was unemployed. After each focus group was finalized all the participants identified themselves as meat consumers.

Focus Group Interviews

Participants were recruited in university and training centers and told they would be participating in a study aimed at exploring people’s opinions about how different lifestyles and behaviours affect the environment, public health, and animals. Two sessions were focused mainly on nature and the environment, two mainly on public health, and the other two mainly on animals. Each focus group had five to nine participants and lasted between 61 and 113 minutes. All participants gave their consent to record the session and were assured that their identity would not be disclosed when analysing and reporting the data. In each session we started by asking participants about their representations and moral duties towards nature and the environment, public health, or animals, respectively (e.g., “When you think about animals, what kinds of feelings or ideas come to your mind?”; “To what extent do you think that we have some kind of duty or responsibility about how to relate to them? Why?”). In the second part of the discussion we mentioned that in that particular group we would like to hear their opinions about how different food practices might impact the respective topic in discussion, and then directed the discussion to meat consumption (e.g., “How do you think current meat production and consumption patterns may impact animals?”; “How might we minimize harm?”). We also asked them how they would perceive the possibility of changing meat consumption habits in order to minimize harm to the area in discussion (e.g., “Would you be willing to change habits to minimize harm? Why?”).

Analytic Approach

The data were analysed using thematic analysis “as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79). This analytic approach is endorsed for allowing to engage with theory in a quasi-deductive fashion in order to add theoretical depth to the data analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006). “Theoretical” thematic data analysis also provides opportunities to identify key issues, generate new theory, and develop hypotheses that may afterward be tested in research with larger sample sizes (as described by Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). Drawing from previous findings and given the present study’s aims, data were analysed through the interpretive lens of Moral Disengagement Theory. Likewise, given our focus on participants’ perceived meanings and experience, this study adopts a realist epistemological approach. Thus, it acknowledges participants’ accounts as fairly dependable indications of their perceptions and personal disposition to consider the possibility of change.

Analytic Procedure

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using MAXQDA v.10, following the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing with the data—repeated reading and hearing of the data in an active way (i.e. initial search for meanings and patterns); (2) generating initial codes—relevant semantic features within the data were coded and apparent contradictions and patterns were noted; (3) searching for themes—codes were sorted and collated into potential themes to capture and summarize the essential qualities of participants’ accounts with the lens of moral disengagement theory; (4) reviewing themes—candidate themes were reviewed and revised against the data to assure an adequate fit between the thematic map and the data set; (5) defining and naming themes—the essence of each theme (i.e. the core meaning and pattern of the data it captured in relation to the research question) was identified and themes and sub-themes were named and defined in accordance. They were subsequently cross-checked with the principles of moral disengagement theory and the final version of the thematic map was achieved. Specific quotations from the focus groups which were considered vivid and representative were selected to illustrate each theme/sub-theme. In these excerpts, three dots within square brackets indicate where material has been excised; other material within square brackets is clarificatory; and double hyphen indicates an interrupted sentence (e.g., when the participant started to say something and then switched direction or chose other words).

Results

Moral Duties

Participants widely affirmed nature and the environment, public health, and animals as entities/systems/beings with moral relevance, and expressed holding moral duties towards preserving/promoting/safeguarding them from harm.

Of all the other beings in the whole Universe, no one else can do anything [to preserve nature]. It's only up to us. Because we are the only ones who do wrong, so it's in our hands to make things right. [...] [We have a] unique and increased responsibility. (Nature and the Environment; Female, 40 years)

Sometimes people don't have the knowledge [about unhealthy habits], right? They think they're doing the right thing, but they're not, because of simple unknowing. [...] It makes a huge difference if someone draws it to our attention. (Public Health; Female, 23 years)

Respect [towards animals] should be the same as the one we have towards humans. For me it's the same. Respect, in the same way, in the animal dimension. (Animals; Female, 52 years)

Meat Production and Consumption Patterns: Perceived Impacts and Personal Disposition To Change

We identified five themes from the participants' patterns of speech on how they perceived impacts of current meat production and consumption patterns, and their personal disposition to change. Four of these themes conceptually fit well with the principles of moral disengagement theory, namely: "Yes, but..."—Reconstrual of the harmful conduct; "It's not up to me"—Obscuring personal responsibility; "It's not that bad"—Disregard for the negative consequences; and even active and explicit dissociation and avoidance, a disengagement mechanism not originally proposed in the theoretical framework, which we labelled "Don't make me think about it". In contrast, the last theme—"We could change"—refers to a pattern in which some participants occasionally acknowledged the benefits of changing towards less harmful dietary patterns, and seemed less resistant to the idea of considering such possibility. Some themes were expressed/operationalized through different paths (sub-themes).

"Yes, but..." – Reconstrual of the harmful conduct

While discussing the impacts of current meat production and consumption standards, and the possibility of changing habits to minimize these impacts, the most recurrent pattern of response was the tendency to justify and legitimize such standards even while recognizing them as potentially harmful to the main topic in discussion—"Yes, but...". This justification was expressed through three different paths. The first one was by portraying it as serving a biologically worthy higher purpose—sustenance—or even an imperative—survival and evolution. This way, harm associated with meat production and consumption was seen as a kind of pay-off, a means for serving higher ends to which each person is naturally entitled, so that all the damage it might eventually convey is almost unconditionally justified and legitimized. Likewise, some participants also portrayed current meat consumption patterns as a mean of affirming belongingness and a collective identity, in accordance with cultural roots and gastronomic traditions. We labelled this sub-theme "Yes, but... there's a reason". While stating such ideas, participants seemed to reject a priori any kind of possibility of changing habits, and associated such

possibility with a step backwards into times of economic insufficiency, quoting historical periods of deprivation and even hunger.

Well, I mean–. Reduce impact–. I mean–. People have to eat to do the rest. Perhaps what I hear from my grandparents and even from my parents is that they used to eat less [meat] because they had fewer [financial] possibilities. [...] There was less money, fewer opportunities to eat the way we eat today. (Nature and the Environment; Male, 33 years)

Proteins were the great–. From an evolutionist perspective it's what gave us a major breakthrough, right? It's protein consumption. (Public Health; Male, 31 years)

We must think of two different things–. [...] [Harm] which is necessary, everybody needs to eat meat, fish, and they, the animals, also do it [...]. I think it is a matter of survival [...], natural survival, a natural act of survival. [...] To fight for one's survival with the death of others is a basic principle both of human existence and the existence of life itself. [...] The law–. The basic law of survival is to attack the weakest with the means we have. (Animals; Male, 24 years)

Following this line of thought, current patterns of meat production and consumption were therefore made not only acceptable, but sometimes even desirable, in spite of being in direct opposition with the moral duties they previously expressed towards nature and the environment, public health promotion, and animals. At the same time, participants often dismissed and even scorned any potential alternatives to current meat production and consumption standards, which were depicted as too expensive, too difficult, somewhat strange and exotic, and overall not really a possibility. We labelled this second sub-theme “Yes, but... there's no alternative”. Even while acknowledging that their own food habits might have a detrimental impact in the respective topic in discussion, participants justified maintaining their habits with the lack of perceived viable alternatives, and this idea seemed to neutralize any feelings of self-censure that might arise from inflicting harm. At the same time, some participants also showed a tendency to immediately frame the discussion as an extreme stance, in the sense that being open to question the possibility of making changes to their habits would inevitably imply changing them in a drastic way. And this drastic alternative constituted a scenario about which many participants reacted quite defensively and did not express a will to even discuss. Eventual alternatives to current production and consumption patterns were sometimes even depicted as highly artificial and adulterated foodways, in an almost dystopian picture.

The only solution would be–. Since the industry is evolving so much, to develop one of those pills–. Like Dragon Ball's magic beans. There's this small case with a pill with this protein, this carbohydrate–. People eat it, it's a pill, and they're satisfied. (Nature and the Environment; Male, 24 years)

Some people are extremely rational and eat Vitamin A and Vitamin B almost as if it they were taking a pill. [...] I eat what tastes good, so I wouldn't be able to eat a meal with a pill and put it into my mouth just because it has the

vitamins that are good for the brain, or that prevent that disease. (Public Health; Female, 29 years)

For me it's about the price. I mean, in order to be able to eat only free-range animals, for example, with a great life outdoors—. Those animals are far more expensive. A free-range chicken is far more expensive than a factory farm chicken who lives in those conditions. (Animals; Female, 30 years)

One last path for participants to apparently justify current meat production and consumption patterns and their own personal habits was the tendency to compare harm with problems that were depicted as inflicting even greater harm. We labelled this third sub-theme “Yes, but... there are worse things”. In face of such contrast, the absence of change seemed to be perceived in a more favourable and acceptable way, and the resulting harm seen as less serious, or even insignificant, when compared to other more serious and pressing problems. However, this pattern of speech was observed only when the discussion was framed in the impact towards animals and public health, and was not present when discussing the environmental consequences.

For me the question is really the level—. The severity of the issues that we are discussing. [...] I mean, tobacco is never healthy, there is no minimal quantity in which it is not harmful [...] so we are talking about different levels [of risk]. (Public Health; Male, 31 years)

I say the same as a comment I read [in a national magazine], which is, we have less chickens per square meter [in chicken farms] than students in our schools. Right. It's very interesting that a student in school needs fewer square meters than a chicken [in a farm]. [...] Students' education can be intensive, but [producing] chickens can't—. (Animals; Female, 30 years)

“It's not up to me” —Obscuring personal responsibility

Another pattern of speech we identified refers to the tendency to obscure and displace personal responsibility concerning the impacts of current meat production and consumption patterns, and the possibility of change towards less harmful alternatives—“It's not up to me”. This displacement was expressed through two different paths. The first one was by projecting accountability exclusively to mass production systems, while minimizing the role of current consumption patterns. This way, discussion was kept mainly outside the locus of individual habits and choices. We labelled this sub-theme “Blame mass production (not mass consumption)”. Mass production systems were criticized by some participants but seemed to be mainly depicted as if existing by themselves, and not to meet demands from current mass consumption standards. And even when the role of demand was occasionally mentioned, it was framed as a consequence stemming from factors such as the global population growth or food waste caused by food safety rules. This pattern was observed only when the discussion was framed in the impacts towards nature and the environment.

That's the thing, if it could be produced—. If it could be produced—. If everything could be made more smoothly—. But there's this problem of the population [growth]. (Nature and the Environment; Male, 24 years)

A similar pattern was identified when discussing impacts towards animals. In this case, participants tended to attribute the responsibility of promoting and enforcing changes mainly towards legal spheres, public/educational entities, production systems, or professionals from specific areas of expertise, minimizing their role as individual consumers. We labelled this second sub-theme “It’s their responsibility”. This displacement of responsibility seemed to facilitate a feeling of non-liability for maintaining one’s eating habits, even after having acknowledged harm potentially inflicted to animals resulting from these habits.

That [to find ways to minimize harm and suffering] is what biologists and veterinaries are for. (Animals; Female, 53 years)

“It’s not that bad” – Disregard for the negative consequences

Another pattern identified in some discussion groups was the tendency to downplay the negative impacts associated with current meat production and consumption standards—“It’s not that bad”. This disregard for the negative consequences was expressed through two different paths. The first one was by disputing a priori possible evidence regarding these consequences, labelling such evidence as facts that may eventually change over time or as findings that might not be applicable to different contexts and persons. We observed this pattern mainly when discussing impacts towards public health, and labelled this sub-theme “Today’s truths are tomorrow’s lies”. Some participants contrasted evidence on the negative impacts with examples of health practices that in the past were seen as desirable and even recommended by public health authorities, but in time came to reveal themselves as neutral or even harmful; and vice versa. This way, eventual information about how current meat production and consumption patterns might negatively impact public health seemed to be automatically framed as pseudo-scientific truths or partial facts (e.g., “half of the story”) that were not to be taken seriously. Accordingly, while expressing such ideas these participants did not seem willing to consider the possibility of changing their personal habits in order to minimize harm.

I think I once also read a study in which [they found that] red meat was good for your health–. I don’t remember–. [It was good] To I don’t know what. I mean, studies always capture only a fragment of reality, one minor detail, and then there is always a different study that–. [...] In which [they find] it’s actually good to do another thing that the first study didn’t [consider]. (Public Health; Male, 29 years)

A similar pattern of disregard for the negative consequences was identified when discussing impacts towards animals. In this case, some participants downplayed harm inflicted to animals by stating that current production systems have to comply with welfare recommendations, and that current regulations safeguard animal wellbeing both in production units and in slaughter houses. We labelled this sub-theme “Meat is happy”. The lives and deaths of animals raised for food were framed on a process depicted as constantly evolving thanks to progresses in technology and areas of expertise that allow to minimize and eventually neutralize

suffering. These ideas, although not shared by all participants, seemed to unconditionally endorse current production and consumption patterns among those who subscribed it, since harm to animals was actually not acknowledged.

[There's] *Like an assembly line, with splints to hold them, to apply pressure on the animals [...]. To apply pressure on an animal is almost like when we hug someone. Hugging diminishes— Raises pressure in the veins, diminishes blood stream, [...] the person feels calmer, relaxed. So animals feel relaxed when they're slaughtered. And then, when the time comes [...] it must be the quickest death, because the animal doesn't—* (Animals; Male, 24 years)

“Don't make me think about it” —Active avoidance and dissociation

Another pattern we identified referred to the tendency to actively avoid discussing and having information about the impacts of current meat production and consumption patterns—“Don't make me think about it”; but only when the discussion was framed on the impacts towards animals. Although this pattern does resonate with the principles of moral disengagement theory, it is not explicitly advanced as a mechanism *per se* in the original theoretical proposition. Concerning this theme, some participants expressed uneasiness with the lives and deaths of animals raised for meat. Uneasiness about their lives was mainly expressed when discussing the conditions animals may endure from birth until they reach the slaughterhouse, particularly in factory farms. Uneasiness about their deaths seemed to be framed in the notion that an animal had been slaughtered for the purpose of meat extraction, particularly if the portion they would feed upon resembled the image of the living animal, or when blood and other body fluids were evident in the meal. Some even noted that in certain conditions they were not able to eat specific meals, or meats, as a result of not being able to dissociate the portion of meat from the animal from which that portion was taken (e.g., having seen animals alive and afterwards knowingly eat them). However, in both cases (i.e. uneasiness about their deaths and about their lives) participants affirmed that in the events such uneasiness might arise they would try not to think about it and often avoid being exposed to stimuli and information that could trigger such uneasiness.

Calf meat [veal]— I came to know about this a short time ago, it affected me, but there we are, I admit, sometimes we are a little— Sometimes we prefer not to have some knowledge, [...] the more we know the worse. [...] Calves are completely crammed on each other so they won't gain muscle, in order for their meat to be tender, like calf meat is. So they get totally deformed, crippled. Because that's how the meat is good. [...] I read it, and regret having read it. (Animals; Female, 34 years)

“We could change” – Considering change towards less harmful dietary patterns

Some participants seldom acknowledged that a change towards less harmful dietary patterns might be desirable and beneficial for nature and the environment, public health, or animals—“We could change”. In these cases personal change was mainly pictured as a hypothesis for the future and not something to pursue at the

present time. Likewise, these participants also expressed what we framed as moral disengagement mechanisms in other instances of the discussions, which again suggests they were experiencing some level of dissonance. Nonetheless, even while not explicitly expressing willingness to change their own habits, they seemed less resistant to the idea of considering such possibility. This pattern of speech was occasionally followed by awareness that one was expressing conflicting ideas about the topic in discussion, and an effort to conciliate such ideas (i.e. often recurring again to one or more of the abovementioned disengagement mechanisms).

Meat is cheaper than fish. But vegetables are, on the other hand, often cheaper than meat and fish. And this [eating more plant-based meals] might be a way to sustain this production - more organic [ways to raise] animals - if there was a balance in [our] diets. (Nature and the Environment; Female, 23 years)

I'm a little bit in favour of restricting the amount of meat that is [currently] eaten, mainly because it's having consequences for the planet, and this is more than studied and discussed. For this reason, I think we might adjust habits a little bit in order to not ruin the planet. [And] Also due to the toxicity that meat itself [may entail for human health] -. (Public Health; Female, 30 years)

Perhaps I could start eating those [free-range] animals. [But] I would have to stop having other things, and perhaps I don't [want to] stop having other things. So this whole talk looks like a huge hypocrisy from my part. Animal rights-. In the end, to have money to go on holidays, I don't buy the animals that live in the outdoors and buy the ones from cages. (Animals; Female, 30 years)

Discussion

The present study aimed at contributing to a further understanding of the psychological factors that may hinder or promote personal disposition to change food habits for the benefit of the environment, public health, and animal welfare. Drawing from previous evidence and propositions (Bandura 2007; Bastian et al. 2012; Bilewicz et al. 2011; Mitchell 2011), this study provides an initial exploration of the hypothesis that some consumers are motivated to resort to moral disengagement strategies when called upon to consider the impacts of their habits, thus minimizing willingness to consider change.

Results indicate that although participants affirmed personal duties towards preserving the environment, promoting public health, and safeguarding animals from harm, they showed patterns that resemble moral disengagement strategies (see Bandura 1990, Bandura et al. 1996) when discussing impacts associated with current meat production and consumption patterns, and the possibility of change—reconstrual of the harmful conduct; obscuring personal responsibility; disregard for the negative consequences; and active avoidance and dissociation.

Reconstrual of the harmful conduct (“Yes, but...”) referred to the tendency to justify and legitimize current meat production and consumption patterns, even while

recognizing them as potentially harmful. This justification was expressed through three different paths—“Yes, but... there’s a reason”, portraying meat production and consumption as serving a worthy higher purpose (e.g., sustenance; tradition) or even an imperative (e.g., survival; evolution), thus framing harm as a trade-off; “Yes, but... there’s no alternative”, dismissing and even scorning potential alternatives to current meat production and consumption standards, and framing them as unrealistic, radical, or artificial and adulterated foodways; and “Yes, but... there are worse things”, comparing and relativizing harm entailed by meat production and consumption with problems that were depicted as more important or inflicting even greater damage.

Obscuring personal responsibility (“It’s not up to me”) referred to the tendency to obscure and displace personal responsibility concerning harm and the possibility of changing habits. This displacement was expressed through two different paths—“Blame mass production (not mass consumption)”, projecting accountability exclusively to mass production systems, while minimizing the role of one’s own individual habits; and “It’s their responsibility”, attributing the onus of promoting and enforcing changes mainly towards legal spheres, public/educational entities, production systems, or professionals from specific areas of expertise, again disregarding one’s role as individual consumer.

A third disengagement mechanism was the disregard for the negative consequences (“It’s not that bad”), which referred to the tendency to downplay the negative impacts associated with current meat production and consumption standards. This downplay was expressed through two different paths “Today’s truths are tomorrow’s lies”—labelling evidence concerning harm as facts that may eventually change over time or as findings that might not be applicable to different contexts and persons; and “Meat is happy”, holding to the notion that production systems have to comply with welfare recommendations and that current regulations safeguard animal wellbeing.

Active avoidance and dissociation (“Don’t make me think about it”) also seemed to emerge as a moral disengagement mechanism, although such mechanism is not proposed in the original theoretical framework. This pattern referred to the tendency to actively avoid discussing and having information about the impacts of current meat production and consumption patterns, and was expressed by avoiding thinking of and being exposed to information about the lives and deaths of animals used for meat.

The expression of these disengagement mechanisms seemed to defuse potential feelings of guilt and self-censure when discussing harmful but self-serving behaviours (meat consumption). It also seemed to be associated with the lack of willingness to consider the possibility of transitioning toward less harmful dietary choices. Such patterns conceptually fit the core propositions of moral disengagement theory, which states that the process of self-regulation of moral behaviour can be selectively neutralized in order to reduce potential dissonance when one is called upon to consider the damages associated with his/her own conduct (Bandura 1990, 1999).

These findings thus reinforce the notion that mere knowledge and exposure to information may not be sufficient to help people consider how their eating habits

impact nature and the environment, public health, and animals, and promote changes that are in accordance with their own moral principles and perceived duties in these domains. If this is the case, discussing the impacts of current meat production and consumption patterns with people who eat meat may have the potential to induce a state of cognitive dissonance. Moral disengagement may therefore be triggered as a self-protection mechanism, turning people resistant to change even when having knowledge about the negative impacts associated with their eating behaviours. This may create conditions for current patterns of meat consumption to endure even among people who affirm the environment, public health, and animals as entities/domains with moral relevance.

There were occasional expressions of acknowledgment that a change towards less harmful dietary patterns might be desirable and beneficial considering the moral duties participants had previously expressed—gathered by the theme “We could change”. This resonates with findings from previous studies indicating a trend around certain segments of consumers that are developing less favourable attitudes towards meat, and reducing their levels of consumption (e.g., Holm and Mohl 2000; Lea and Worsley 2001). But even in these instances participants seemed to hold ambivalent and contrasting attitudes about the possibility of changing their personal habits and often resorted to moral disengagement mechanisms, apparently as a means to reduce dissonance. This also gives strength to the proposition that the process of moral disengagement may indeed play a role in making people more resistant to the possibility of pursuing such changes.

Limitations and Future Research

We must note that the present study does not aim at explaining actual eating habits and behaviours. Our purpose was merely to engage in an initial operationalization and exploration of how the moral disengagement theory may be a helpful framework to explain consumers’ perceptions regarding their habits and personal disposition to change. In order to clarify and strengthen the present findings, future studies should seek to refine the themes that emerged during our analysis and explore the extent to which they can indeed predict resistance to change towards less harmful dietary choices. Following from this it may be worth further exploring how different disengagement mechanisms might emerge and relate between themselves, opting for larger samples and different methodologies, and also introducing additional constructs in order to increase explanatory capacity.

Indeed, it is worth mentioning that in the current study, in most discussion groups, some participants would take the initiative of expressing what we framed as moral disengagement strategies about meat eating, and often the remainder participants would follow the lead showing agreement and reinforcing their speeches. Although focus groups are typically recommended as particularly useful in exploratory approaches because of their potential to provide both consonant and divergent patterns of speech, in the present study such patterns were mainly consonant. This fails with also providing us some glimpses of themes that might direct us to a concept of “moral engagement” (e.g., to express willingness to change

towards less harmful dietary choices) on this behalf. In order to capitalize potential contributions of addressing this subject with the theoretical framework emerging from this study, it might therefore be useful to assure that future endeavours do include a wide spectrum of individual meat consumption patterns among the participants (not only meat consumers but also, for example, meat avoiders, “flexitarians”, and vegetarians), while also allowing for answers provided individually and not only in group settings.

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