



## The effects of dissociation on willingness to eat meat are moderated by exposure to unprocessed meat: A cross-cultural demonstration



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### ABSTRACT

Dissociating meat from its animal origins helps consumers deal with the cognitive dissonance resulting from liking meat but disliking causing pain to animals. Extending previous research, we tested whether dissociation would play less of a role for meat consumption in a country where average consumers are more frequently exposed to unprocessed meat (i.e., Ecuador) than where such exposure is rare (i.e., the US). Specifically, we randomly showed Ecuadorians and US Americans a pork roast with the head present or removed. Showing the head led to less dissociation, and subsequently more disgust and empathy for the killed animal in both countries, but to significantly larger degrees in the US. Follow-up analyses with participants' self-reported exposure to unprocessed meat supported the notion that these cross-cultural variations indeed reflected differences in unprocessed meat exposure. In contrast, disgust and empathy, in turn, predicted a lower willingness to eat meat and a higher willingness to choose a vegetarian alternative dish equally in both countries. Because the dissociation part of our model was substantially stronger in the US, it explained about double as much variance in willingness to eat meat and vegetarian choice in the US (63–72%) as compared to Ecuador (30–32%). In sum, the potency of the dissociation mechanism seems to depend on how used consumers in a country are to seeing unprocessed meat, whereas the subsequent affective mechanisms universally influence meat consumption.

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Meat is a central component of people's diets in many parts of the world (OECD, 2014; Smil, 2013). Yet, meat consumers often have an ambivalent attitude towards eating meat. They enjoy its taste, but dislike the hurting of animals that meat production inevitably involves. As becoming vegetarian often is considered an unpopular choice (Graça, Oliveira, & Calheiros, 2015), to deal with the cognitive dissonance resulting from this *meat paradox* (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010), consumers employ several alternative strategies. For instance, they reduce their concern for animals by downplaying their moral status, capacity of sensation and intelligence (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011; Piazza & Loughnan, 2016; Rothgerber, 2013), or justify their meat consumption with hedonistic, social, political, nutritional or evolutionary arguments (Bohm, Lindblom, Åbacka, Bengs, & Hörnell, 2015; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Graça, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2015; Piazza et al., 2015; Rothgerber, 2013; de Boer, Schösler, & Aiking, 2017). However, especially in consumer situation where people are directly

confronted with the opportunity to eat meat, people seem to avoid the meat paradox entirely by simply *dissociating*, that is, mentally separating meat from its animal origins (Kunst & Hohle, 2016; Rothgerber, 2013; Tian, Hilton, & Becker, 2016). This dissociation process as a way of avoiding the displeasure of linking meat with animals has been discussed in common discourse and scholarly thinking (Foer, 2010; Singer, 1995; Smil, 2013), but only recently been tested empirically (Rothgerber, 2013, 2014).

The maybe most comprehensive experimental test was provided by Kunst and Hohle (2016). In a series of experiments, the authors showed that dissociation processes could explain consumers' willingness to eat meat across various consumer choice situations because it reduced disgust and empathy for the animal that was killed (also see Zickfeld, Kunst, & Hohle, 2018 for a recent replication). Conversely, the authors showed that interrupting dissociation substantially reduced willingness to eat meat. For instance, showing the head of a pork roast decreased consumers' dissociation, which subsequently led to more empathy towards the killed animal and more disgust. These two emotions, in turn, explained why lowering dissociation decreased consumers' willingness to eat meat, but increased their willingness to consider a

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vegetarian alternative.

As compelling these results may be, an apparent limitation of Kunst and Hohle's (2016) experiments is that most of their studies were conducted in the United States, a context where consumers seldom are personally involved in food production processes, mostly consume highly processed food, and rarely are exposed to animal carcasses in consumer choice situations. This limitation leads to the question whether their findings can be generalized to contexts where people are more frequently exposed to animal carcasses and other types of unprocessed meat. Using a cross-cultural design with samples drawn from the US and Ecuador, the present study empirically aimed to address this limitation. Specifically, we predicted that dissociation processes should be less pronounced in a South American context than in a North American context, precisely because South American consumers are generally more exposed to, and used to see, unprocessed meat.

### 1. Exposure to unprocessed meat as potential moderator of the effects of dissociation

In many parts of the world, people are steadily less involved in the production of meat and this seems to be especially the case in more developed societies (e.g., in many Western countries; Foer, 2010; Leroy & Praet, 2017). The increasing industrialized production of meat and the greater division of labor has created a larger distance between the average consumer and the production process itself (Leroy & Degreef, 2015; Magdoff, Foster, & Buttel, 2000). In developed countries and big industrialized cities, most people therefore have very little interaction with living animals, are not involved in their actual killing for meat production, and also do not take part in later processing steps. Because this processing classically involves the removal of animal characteristics from the carcasses (Lerner & Kalof, 1999), the final meat product, which consumers can buy, looks very different from the animal it came from and often hardly resembles it at all. Hence, most meat products accessible to consumers in western societies are packed, presented and sold in ways that render the production process invisible and, thus, facilitates disconnecting meat from animals (Kunst & Hohle, 2016; Leroy & Degreef, 2015).

Indeed, visual presentation is one key factor facilitating dissociation of meat in consumers' daily lives. Compared to dairy products, it is quite unusual to find meat products displaying pictures of animals, for instance at normal supermarkets in Western societies (Grauerholz, 2007). This presentation style seems to further increase the distance between the consumer and the animal from which the meat was produced as well as the production process itself (Rogers, 2008). Conversely, presenting cues of animal origins of the meat can interrupt the process of dissociation, making people less willing to consume it. Knowledge of products' origins can increase people's rejection of them (Rozin & Fallon, 1980; Rozin, 2006). For instance, people dislike meat and generally try to avoid talking about it when it is not dissociated from its animal origins (Hoogland, de Boer, & Boersema, 2005). Especially when it comes to seeing animal characteristics such as their heads, limbs, or blood, people experience distress and try to avoid meat (Kubberød, Ueland, Tronstad, & Risvik, 2002). Two affective pathways have been proposed to explain why dissociation influences meat consumption (Kunst & Hohle, 2016). First, it seems to reduce the empathy for the animal that was killed, which otherwise would have led to a reduction in willingness to eat meat (Cerjak, Karolyi, & Mesić, 2011; Rothgerber & Mican, 2014). Second, dissociation seems to reduce feelings of disgust, an evolutionary mechanism helping people to avoid potentially contaminated food such as meat (Rozin & Fallon, 1980; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997). In fact, simply asking people to actively reflect on the psychological

attributes of the animal used to produce meat increases disgust and reduces willingness to eat meat (Ruby & Heine, 2012), arguably because it interrupts the process of dissociation (Kunst & Hohle, 2016; Martins & Pliner, 2006).

However, while current evidence supports the role of dissociation processes for meat consumption in Western societies, we predict that it might play less of a role in societies where people are more accustomed to the animal-meat link. Indeed, recent research suggests that the cues of meat's animal origins may have less of an impact on consumer behavior in non-Western societies. For instance, in a study by Tian et al. (2016), Chinese (as compared to French) participants seemed less affected by stimuli linking meat to animals. Similarly, reminding consumers about animals' psychological attributes led to more disgust in North America (i.e., Canada or the US) than in Asia (i.e., China or India) in a study by Ruby and Heine (2012). While the underlying processes were not tested in the latter studies, we argue that different exposure to unprocessed meat may explain such cross-cultural differences. A large body of research shows that repeated exposure to stimuli may weaken or even extinguish the initial response to them, including affective reactions such as disgust (Powers & Emmelkamp, 2008; Smits, Telch, & Randall, 2002). Thus, repeated exposure to animal products that contain cues of animal origins (e.g., the head, feathers or claws) may reduce the extent to which showing such cues prospectively interrupt dissociation and, subsequently, increase disgust and empathy. Here, processes of evaluative conditioning (Hofmann, De Houwer, Perugini, Baeyens, & Crombez, 2010; Jones, 1924; Schweckendiek et al., 2013), in this case, pairing of initially negative stimuli with positive stimuli, may further contribute to extinguishing these effects. For instance, repeated pairing of cues that remind the customer of the animal origins of a meat dish with positive outcomes (i.e., good taste and smell, communal sharing) may extinguish the initially negative responses to them (Rozin, 2006).

To investigate whether previous exposure to unprocessed meat moderates the potency of the dissociation process, we conducted a cross-cultural experiment with participants from the US and Ecuador. This comparison of countries was chosen because average US American and Ecuadorian consumers differ in the degree to which they are exposed to unprocessed meat. Before describing the specific hypotheses of the present research, we present a brief description of the US American and Ecuadorian food contexts in which our experiments were conducted.

### 2. Exposure to unprocessed meat in the US and Ecuador

The annual meat consumption of US Americans is estimated to 91.7 kg per person of which 20.8 kg are pork (OECD, 2014). With factory farming being the most common way of producing meat (Foer, 2010), the US is a good example of a culture where the meat-production process has been largely distanced from the consumer. This production process creates convenient products to suit consumer demands while minimizing the degree to which the meat resembles the former animal. Moreover, due to a fast food culture and increasing habits of dining outside the home, US Americans are further distanced from the slaughtering of animals and the production of meat (Ogle, 2013). Hence, because US Americans are living in an environment that facilitates dissociation and are seldom exposed to cues reminding them of meat's animal origins, this should make them especially sensitive to such cues in consumer choice situations.

Meat is also an essential part of most people's diet in Ecuador, with an approximate annual consumption of 51 kg per person (Ministro de Agricultura, 2013). Especially in recent years, a positive economic development has made meat more affordable and available to the general population (Bermudez & Tucker, 2003). However, in contrast to US Americans, it is common for Ecuadorians

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