



Meat and masculinity in the Norwegian Armed Forces



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ABSTRACT

In 2013, the Norwegian Armed Forces decided to introduce a meat reduction scheme in its military mess halls, for both health reasons and environmental concerns. This article explores Norwegian soldiers' reactions to the introduction of Meat free Monday, and their attitudes towards reducing meat consumption. As of yet, Meat free Monday has not been implemented due to both structural and contextual challenges. We explore both the process and potential of the Norwegian military's Meat free Monday initiative to promote sustainable and climate friendly diets. We found significant barriers preventing the military from implementing Meat free Monday. The main reason behind the resistance to reduce meat consumption among Norwegian soldiers was meat's associations with protein, masculinity and comfort. Our results underline the importance of acknowledging the social and cultural role of food. The study is qualitative and uses focus group interviews as its main methodology.

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1. Introduction

Meat is frequently addressed in public debates concerning health, food safety, food security, environmental issues and the economy. Studies on meat consumption have predominantly focused on animal welfare, yet recently, meat's association to sustainability, global justice and climate change have become themes for research too. There is a growing awareness about the substantial impact a reduction in meat consumption could have (Garnett, 2011; Gerber et al., 2013; Grønland, 2015; Westhoek et al., 2014). As much as 30% of global biodiversity loss and 14.5% of greenhouse gas emissions stems from animal husbandry (Gerber et al., 2013; Tilman & Clark, 2014; Westhoek et al., 2014). Furthermore, the production of livestock needs immense land areas, requires large quantities of water, and last but not least animals are fed with grains that could have fed people (Steinfeld et al., 2006; Westhoek et al., 2014). Several authors point to the lack of political action to address the global increase of meat production (Austgulen, 2014; de Boer, Schösler, & Aiking, 2014; Fuchs & Lorek, 2005; Spiller & Nitzko, 2015), although recent exceptions can be mentioned, such as the dietary guidelines in Brazil (Monteiro et al., 2015), Sweden (Friel et al., 2009) and China (Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2016).

Even though an increasing body of research concludes that meat consumption ought to decrease for sustainability reasons, few studies take into account how cultural and social dimensions can be an obstacle (Macdiarmid, Douglas, & Campbell, 2016). There is a need for further interdisciplinary research on the interconnectedness of factors motivating meat consumption and the appropriate strategies to shift diets (Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2016).

This study explores a governmental body's attempt to address more sustainable meat consumption, by investigating the process of implementing Meat free Monday (MfM) in the Norwegian Armed Forces. Norwegian public institutions purchase several hundred milliard Norwegian Kroner (NOK) of goods annually (Dif, 2015), and it is essential to understand how public spending can be shifted towards sustainability. In addition, the military as a social arena has the potential to influence and educate young people through information, possibly directing their consumption habits towards more sustainable choices. Serving in the Norwegian Armed Forces is compulsory, and from 2016 women were also called in. About 9000 of the Armed Forces' personnel employed each year are conscripts, requiring a minimum 12 months service at a military camp. There are three branches, the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. Although National Service is mandatory, service personnel must still meet rigorous physical and psychological criteria, and only 12–13% are selected (Forsvaret, 2016).

In short, the empirical starting point was the following: In November 2013 the Norwegian Armed Forces announced that they

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would introduce MfM in all military mess halls by the end of 2014. It was initiated by the Head of Military Catering, who wished to improve both the nutritional value and sustainability of the food served to military personnel. However, several factors made it difficult to implement the MfM initiative. Firstly, organizational and structural factors such as poor communication and decision making; key policy makers in the Armed Forces were reluctant to promote reduced meat consumption as a sustainability measure. The low recognition of the significant environmental benefit of reduced meat consumption is also found in other studies (Bailey, Froggatt, & Wellesley, 2014; Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2016; Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011). Secondly, the MfM initiative had been introduced in a top-down manner without informing or involving catering staff. Because of this, MfM was not anchored institutionally. In addition, the main bulk of its kitchen staff wanted to serve the soldiers food they wished to eat, and were concerned that reducing meat would foster negative reactions. As a result, only a minority of the military camps actually introduced any meat reduction measures at all. The assumptions made by the kitchen staff about the soldiers' reluctance to reduce meat consumption were in fact empirically justified (Kildal, 2015).

Understanding this reluctance provides knowledge that is much needed. Other studies confirm an unwillingness to reduce meat consumption (Bohm, Lindblom, Åbacka, Bengs, & Hörnell, 2015; Graca, Calheiros, & Oliveira, 2015; Holm & Møhl, 2000; Makiniemi & Vainio, 2014; Rothgerber, 2013; Tobler et al., 2011). In a study from Scotland, Macdiarmid et al. (2016) found that the social, personal and cultural values of eating meat were strong barriers against reduction. The Norwegian Armed Forces' effort to reduce meat consumption may serve as a starting point to understand meat consumption among young people more generally, and unveil certain cultural and social barriers towards eating less meat. Why did Norwegian soldiers in our study resist the MfM initiative? We argue that the answer to this can be found in the ideology embedded in the Norwegian Armed Forces alongside the soldier's mentality towards meat consumption, as we will detail further in the following.

2. Background

Policies for reducing meat¹ consumption may face resistance, as meat has high status in many cultures (Fiddes, 1991; Lupton, 1996; Roos & Wandel, 2004; Rothgerber, 2013). Meat, particularly red meat, is portrayed as the essence of a meal in western countries (Beardsworth & Bryman, 2004; Fiddes, 1991; Sobal, 2005). Recently meat has also been given an increasingly important role in transition economies such as in India and China (Bailey et al., 2014; Schösler, de Boer, Boersema, & Aiking, 2015). Meat consumption has increased drastically over the last few decades, and demand for meat is projected to grow by 70% by 2050 due to global population growth as well as a growing middle-class (Gerber et al., 2013). Globally, meat production has tripled in the past three decades (Pingali & McCullough, 2010). In Norway, overall meat consumption has continued to rise, from 53 kilos of meat per person per year in 1989 to 76 kilos in 2015 (The Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2016). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) argues that dietary changes should be part of a transformation towards sustainable consumption (IPCC, 2014), and this was given

attention and publicity again at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP21 in Paris, France. However, global political awareness has not resulted in changes in food practices, and factors such as urbanisation, marketing and consumer attitudes continue to drive consumption (Pingali & McCullough, 2010; Sabaté & Soret, 2014; Vittersø & Rosenberg, 2014).

The Norwegian health authorities have also addressed meat consumption levels, recommending Norwegians limit their consumption of red meat to 500 g per week. A national survey on Norwegian diets conducted in 2010–11 revealed that the average intake of red meat was 620 g per week for women, while Norwegian men consumed more than twice the recommended amount, eating 1022 g per week (Totland et al., 2012). Only 45% of Norwegian men and 67% of Norwegian women consume less than the recommended maximum of 500 g per week (The Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2016). It is, however, worthwhile noting that in Norway meat consumption is at a substantially lower level than in most other western countries (OECD, 2016), and that in Norway the increase is mainly in poultry consumption (Animalia, 2015).

2.1. Studying food habits

By using qualitative methodologies, we describe the underlying mentality of meat consumption in the Norwegian Armed Forces. Williams (1976) defined culture as “*the way of life for a whole society*”. A common anthropological definition of culture is a totality of norms, values and experiences shared by a group of people. This definition of culture coincides well with the term ‘mentality’ (Löfgren, 1982; Thorsen, 1993). Mentality encapsulates norms, ways of conduct, behaviour-patterns, and perceptions. As the two concepts of culture and mentality in parts overlap, one could argue that it is pointless to differentiate. We use the term culture as Williams does, as it incorporates and envelopes every trait in a society, both material (thus encapsulating food) and immaterial. As such, culture is a concept which is at a different level than mentality and ideas, because it encompasses both. We also choose to differentiate between mentality and ideology. Ideology is explicit, and articulated, while mentality is implicit, and unarticulated. Mentality can be seen as a collective way of thinking which ties a society or culture together, despite individual distinctions (Le Goff, 1980). Mentality is a vague concept, and because of this, it has been considered too unfocused and imprecise to use analytically (Hastrup, 1990; Löfgren, 1987; Setten, 2002; Syse, 2009). Since mentalities are challenging to define, they are also difficult to prove, and like customs, manners and mentalities are transferred unconsciously and without reflection because they are tied to and transmitted by everyday practices which are considered ‘right’ or ‘natural’ (Thorsen, 1993). Mentalities refers to collective notions as opposed to more professional and individual constructions of ideas and ideologies (Syse, 2009). The differences between mentality and ideology can be associated with the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious; mentality is tied to social practice and is transmitted unconsciously. Mentalities change very slowly while ideologies change more rapidly (Gullestad, 1986). Although it seems possible to contrast mentality and ideology, the boundaries between these two concepts are just as fluid as the boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious (Thorsen, 1993). Yet separating ideology and mentality provides an analytical tool which enables an understanding of the complex set of values the informants hold (Le Goff, Nora, & Odén, 1978).

Understanding the cultural and social barriers to reducing meat consumption is crucial to enabling change. Both meat as a product and the military as an institution convey the mentality of masculinity, power and strength. Soldiers in our study embrace, embody

¹ This study will not provide a specific definition of meat and vegetarianism. The intention is to map and examine “*simply that which people regard as meat*”, as opposed to providing a moral framework or judgment (Fiddes, 1991, pp. 3–4). Likewise, we do not provide a definition of ‘sustainable meat consumption’ or ‘meat-eating’. Red meat is however defined as beef, mutton and pork.

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