



Not appropriate dinner table conversation? Talking to children about meat production



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ABSTRACT

Although Australians on average consume large quantities of meat, their attitudes to farm animal welfare are poorly understood. We know little about how farm animal production is discussed in Australian households or how children learn about the origins of meat. This study consisted of an online survey completed by 225 primary carers throughout Australia recruited through social media. Findings include that conversations about the origin of meat were generally stimulated by meal preparation within the home rather than visits to agricultural shows or similar activities. Parents preferred to initiate conversations with children about meat production before they were 5 years of age. Urban parents were more likely than rural parents to reveal that they were conflicted about eating meat and would be more empathetic to children who chose to stop eating meat. Rural parents were more likely than urban parents to feel that children should eat what they are given and that talking about meat is not a major issue. Both groups felt that it was important that children should know where their food comes from. The findings of this study suggest that parental attitudes to meat production and consumption influence conversations about meat origins with children.

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1. Introduction

Australia's increasing urbanisation has been linked to decreasing levels of food and agricultural literacy (Worsley, Wang, & Ridley, 2015) and increasing unease with food production practices (Meyer, Coveney, Henderson, Ward, & Taylor, 2012). The increasing proportion of 'animal welfare friendly' products sold by major retailers (Parker, Brunswick, & Kotey, 2013), and recent high-profile media campaigns highlighting 'unethical' production methods such as live export of cattle (Tiplady, Walsh, & Phillips, 2013), suggest that Australian consumers are concerned about the welfare of farm animals used for producing food. However they have varying levels of knowledge about these practices, faring little better than chance in tests of this knowledge (Coleman, 2010). Generally, levels of agricultural knowledge in adults (Worsley et al., 2015) and children (Hillman & Buckley, 2011) are low in Australia.

In this paper we explore family attitudes to meat eating and the use of animals for food production, and the ways in which such attitudes are communicated in Australian families.

2. Background

2.1. Australians and meat

Australians ate 44.6 kg of chicken, 32.8 kg of beef, 26 kg of pork, bacon and ham, and 9.5 kg of lamb per capita in 2012–13 (Langley, 2013), which is one of the highest rates of meat consumption in the world. In historical terms, meat has been considered to be an essential part of an Australian meal (Santich, 1990), with meat-eating being a deeply engrained cultural value, exemplified by Meat and Livestock Australia's recent campaign to associate the consumption of lamb with Australia Day and promote the idea that humans evolved to eat meat (Ankeny, 2008). Meat is still considered an essential part of the evening and midday meals and oftentimes is part of breakfast. Australia has relatively low rates of vegetarianism, with Australian Bureau of Statistics figures showing 5% self-identify as vegetarians (Cornish, 2012); however it has been

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noted that Australians define vegetarianism differently for instance than those in the UK (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992) with many 'vegetarians' in Australia strictly speaking being 'flexitarians' as they eat fish, seafood, and/or white meat, and some on occasion even eating red meat, or 'reducitarians', those reducing their intake of these foods (Dagevos & Voordouw, 2013).

Animal farming has been a major contributor to the Australian economy from European settlement to the present day. Just over half of Australia's land mass is used for grazing farm animals, with additional land used to grow feed for intensively-raised animals. The image of Australia as an agrarian nation persists in popular culture, and rural industries are considered very important to Australia's future (Cockfield & Botterill, 2012). However, Australia is one of the most urbanised populations in the world, with 70.4% living in the major cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a).

2.2. Learning about meat production

There are a number of Australian school-based programs that connect school children to food production, for example the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Gardens, (see Gibbs et al., 2013) but most of these, for obvious reasons, focus on the production of vegetables and fruit. There are few programs aimed at primary school children involving farm animal production, and even fewer that focus on meat production as opposed to dairy, eggs, or wool. Exceptions are the relatively rare programs for students in secondary schools to participate in steer or goat competitions in agricultural shows, known as 'hoof and hook' classes, which require students to prepare an animal for exhibition prior to judging as a carcass after slaughter. Apart from this, overt discussion about slaughter is often absent from discussions about farm animal production aimed at school children and the broader community. We know little about how the origins of meat are explained to children; in most western societies, discussion of slaughter, particularly in front of children, is considered taboo (Heinz & Lee, 1998), and attitudes about slaughter often are deeply culturally or religiously based. One example, cited in Heinz and Lee (1998), described public outrage when a television character sang a song to children that referred to the slaughter of farm animals. This particular 'fact of life', as with others relating to death, is generally considered a matter for parents to discuss with their children. So while the school environment may be an important place for children to continue learning about food production, we hypothesize that the home environment is where most initial learning takes place.

2.3. Learning to eat meat

Food preferences are established in the early childhood years (Laing & Oram, 1999) which tend to persist to early adulthood. At some point, children become aware that when they consume meat they are eating the flesh of a dead animal and either accept or reject the notion, although we have little information on how this occurs in Australia. Research from the USA has shown that children in meat-eating families can become independent, *moral* vegetarians (Hussar & Harris, 2010), that is, someone who chooses not to eat meat because of the perceptions of the suffering produced by animal production and slaughter for food. However there is limited literature about events which may trigger children's decisions or the context in which the decisions are made. One study focussing on vegan animal activists suggests that 'meat resistance' as children was common among these people; those who remained omnivorous through childhood, or returned to omnivorism but became vegan as adults, still spoke of meat resistance in childhood as part of their initial responses to animal suffering (Pallotta, 2008).

Experiments have shown that people's reluctance to harm

something with a mind (a thinking, feeling creature) creates cognitive dissonance. This psychological discomfort can be—and is often—resolved for individuals by denying that animals have minds (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012). Australian research into this paradox between caring about animals and eating them shows that a diet that includes meat is associated with beliefs that animals are dissimilar to humans and lack mental attributes such as the capacity to experience pain (Loughnan, Bastian, & Haslam, 2014). Omnivores also may distance themselves from the idea of animal killing (Rothgerber, 2014). Although children may not have strategies to deal with the incongruity of being simultaneously taught to 'love' and consume animals, socialisation works to minimise these potential conflicts (Pallotta, 2008). For example, Stewart and Cole (2009) examined the role of children's movies featuring 'talking animals', finding that the 'social/cultural construction of omnivorism' required animals to be categorised according to their perceived use by humans. Animals can be categorised in more than one way, for example 'Babe' the pig is perceived as different to bacon and these categories are taught both explicitly and implicitly through popular culture and family life.

2.4. Explaining the origins of meat to children

It is clear that at least some parents may feel ill-equipped to answer children's questions about where their food comes from. Existing scholarship provides hints as to why parents may feel uneasy about revealing the true origins of meat products to children. First, explaining to children that animals are killed for food may increase the discomfort the parents feel at eating meat themselves. Rothgerber (2014) suggests that omnivores experience increased dissonance when exposed to vegetarians because the inconsistency between caring for animals and eating them is highlighted. A second source of unease relates to parents' concerns that their children will reject meat and in so doing isolate themselves from the dominant cultural paradigm of omnivorism. In addition, parents may be apprehensive about the potential health consequences of a vegetarian diet for a growing child. Parents also may be anxious about the effects on children's attitudes to animals, given that cruelty to animals is a demonstrated precursor of violent and anti-social behaviour in adulthood (Ascione, 1993; Gullone, 2014). Thus to reveal to children that their own (and their pets') dinners consist of dead animals is viewed as dangerous since they may come to believe that killing or hurting animals is morally acceptable (Paul, 1996). Parents may be uneasy because they fear their children's attitudes to them will change: "they could even come to regard their parents as accessories to murder" (Paul, 1996). As with other difficult 'facts of life' conversations, parents may consider the emotional readiness of the child when 'revealing' the true origins of meat, so that conversations are postponed until the child is 'old enough'. It is also possible that parents simply do not often reflect on the origins of their food. 'Mindless eating' has been described by Wansink (2006) and others, namely eating large amounts of food without pondering the ways in which the environment has influenced eating behaviours (such as packaging and the volume of food presented), and may well apply to considering where the meat they are eating has come from. However, we have limited empirical evidence as to whether these reasons apply among Australian parents.

3. Aims

Against this background including clear gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how and when Australian parents tell their children about where meat comes from, whether there is any unease around these types

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