



Confronting the meat paradox in different cultural contexts: Reactions among Chinese and French participants



Qirui Tian, Denis Hilton*, Maja Becker

Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès, 5 allées Antonio Machado, 31058 Toulouse, France

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ABSTRACT

As a well-known source of nutrition and pleasure, meat plays an important role in most people's diet. However, awareness of the "meat paradox"—the association of liking to eat meat but not wanting to kill animals—often implies the experience of cognitive dissonance. In two studies, focusing on meat production and meat consumption respectively, we examined whether participants used reduction of willingness to eat meat and reduction of mind attribution to food animals as strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance from the meat paradox in the Chinese and French cultural contexts. Focusing on meat production (slaughtering of an animal to produce meat; Study 1, $n = 520$), participants reported lower willingness to eat beef in a condition that emphasized the slaughter of a cow compared to a condition that presented a diagram of a cow as meat. In addition, French but not Chinese participants attributed less mind to cows when the relation between meat and its animal origin was made salient. Focusing on meat consumption (the transformation of meat into food; Study 2, $n = 518$), participants reported lower willingness to eat beef and attributed less mind to cows in a condition that emphasized the animal origin of meat compared to a condition that presented a recipe. These results suggest that the use of different strategies to resolve cognitive dissonance from the meat paradox depends on different contexts of the meat-animal link as well as on cultural context.

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1. Introduction

There is broad cross-cultural evidence that humans experience discomfort at the killing of animals to obtain meat (Simoons, 1994). The "meat paradox" reflects a phenomenon whereby most people enjoy eating meat but few want to kill another sentient creature (Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010). When confronted with this paradox, individuals may easily experience a kind of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) due to the psychological discomfort caused by the conflict between the idea of eating meat and that of caring for animals.

1.1. Strategies for resolving the meat paradox

People may have several ways of coping with cognitive dissonance in response to the meat paradox. Similar to *repression*, one common strategy is to psychologically distance oneself from the

idea of killing animals, keeping animal slaughter out of sight and mind, and obscuring the link between meat and live animals (Plous, 1993). However, in modern life, the repression strategy seems to be effortless, because the abattoir usually is far away from and out of the sight of most people, with the result that most people will not spontaneously think about the animal origin of meat while eating the delicious food. On the other hand, when the animal origin of meat is made salient (as in our experiments), the repression strategy is no longer effective. This will apply pressure on people to resort to other strategies to deal with the potential cognitive dissonance arising from the meat paradox.

One commonly used strategy, defined as *denial of mind*, is to deny that food animals have human-like mental states. In line with this reasoning, animals' perceived edibility was negatively correlated with the perception that animals have minds, and when reminded of the slaughter of animals to obtain meat, individuals tended to dematerialize food animals (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012b). The more participants denied animals' capacity for suffering and believed that animals were lower in a hierarchy than humans, the more meat consumption they reported (Rothgerber, 2013). Indeed, mind perception of animals may be more subjective than objective. When people made comparisons between humans and animals in different directions, they found more

* Corresponding author. Maison de la Recherche, 5 allées Antonio Machado, 31058 Toulouse, France.

E-mail addresses: qirui.tian@univ-tlse2.fr (Q. Tian), hilton@univ-tlse2.fr (D. Hilton), mbecker@univ-tlse2.fr (M. Becker).

similarities between humans and animals in the direction of comparing animals to humans, and perceived more differences when comparing in the direction of humans to animals (Bastian, Costello, Loughnan, & Hodson, 2012a). Specific to the meat paradox, researchers have found that people often mentally separate the meat on their plate from its animal origins in order to enjoy pork chops or steaks without thinking about pigs or cows (Hoogland, de Boer, & Boersema, 2005). This process is even easier with minced meat, for which the association with live animals has been obscured (Holm & Mohl, 2000). Indeed, just categorizing an animal as a food source was enough to lower people's perception of animals' capacity for suffering (Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011). Similarly, reading a book about the omnivore's dilemma made participants temporarily report more reluctance to eat meat and greater tendencies to buy and eat organic food (Hormes, Rozin, Green, & Fincher, 2013). Additional evidence from research comparing vegetarians and omnivores demonstrated that omnivores attributed significantly fewer mental states, especially secondary emotional states, to food animals than did vegetarians (Bilewicz, Imhoff, & Drogosz, 2011).

Based on *changing behavior*, another strategy is to refuse to eat meat and to become a vegetarian, which is used by a significant minority in many cultures (Leahy, Lyons, & Tol, 2010). A variant of this third strategy for non-vegetarians may be to express their willingness to reduce their meat consumption in the future, even if they do not stop it altogether. Evidence for this proposition can be adduced from several sources. For example, in a study of UK consumers, most people would rather refuse to eat meat altogether if they had to kill the animals themselves (Richardson, Shepherd, & Elliman, 1993). Relatedly, people are especially unwilling to eat animal products that are readily reminiscent of the live animal, and avoid eating animal parts associated with intelligence or personality, such as the eyes and brain (Plous, 1993).

From the perspective of cognitive dissonance, the latter two ways correspond to distinct methods for reducing cognitive dissonance—either changing one's beliefs or changing one's behavior/behavioral intention. However, the questions of whether and to what extent they are effective in changing perceptions of food animals or intentions to eat meat needs to be further examined. Thus, in two experiments reported below we will investigate the effect of reminders about the source of meat on mind perception of animals and willingness to eat meat at two different stages: meat production and meat consumption.

1.2. Meat in two cultural contexts

Across the globe, meat consumption is prominent in most people's diets. More particularly, it is a central ingredient in both Chinese and French cuisines. Nevertheless, per capita meat consumption varies. For example, meat consumption per capita in 2011 was 56.85 kg in China mainland, including 4.71 kg beef, and 88.67 kg in France, including 25.35 kg beef. It is also noteworthy that whereas the level of meat consumption in France in 2011 was similar to that twenty years before, meat consumption in China mainland more than doubled during the same period (Food and Agriculture Organization of The United Nations, 2011).

Little research has been conducted to explore the experience of the meat paradox in the Chinese and French cultural contexts. The studies of these cultural groups will broaden the geographical reach of research on the meat paradox, and help identify important cultural differences in attitudes to food consumption (Rozin, 1990, 2007). In addition, these studies will be informative about the claim that westerners are more likely to experience cognitive dissonance than easterners (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004). According to this view, the

French, who generally belong to a western culture, should experience more cognitive dissonance due to the meat paradox than the Chinese. In the current research, we recruit participants from China and France, and explore the cognitive dissonance arising from the meat paradox as well as possible cultural differences.

1.3. Two stages related to the meat paradox: production and consumption

As mentioned above, the transformation of animals into meat passes through two stages: meat production and meat consumption. In the first stage, meat production involves transformation of animals into meat. This requires slaughter of the animal. Reminders of this fact should make the animal origin of meat transparent. At the second stage, meat consumption involves transformation of meat into food. This tends to happen in the kitchen or at the table, and obscures the animal origin of meat. It may also focus people's attention on the deliciousness of the food, rather than on its origin.

However, drawing attention to either stage can play a role in influencing people's awareness of the animal origin of meat. In addition, conventional presentations that emphasize the deliciousness of the food (e.g., by listing the ingredients or showing a picture of the dish) may actually increase willingness to eat meat. In the current research, we aimed to investigate how omnivores in two different cultural contexts (China and France) would resolve cognitive dissonance arising from experience of the meat paradox in the meat production (Study 1) and meat consumption (Study 2) stages. We predicted that when people are made aware of the animal origin of meat (beef in the research), they will report less willingness to eat meat and/or attribute less mind to food animals.

It is possible that using one method of dissonance reduction may be enough to re-establish an equilibrium that has been disturbed by awareness of the meat paradox. In other words, the order of presentation of the two ways of dissonance reduction may matter, as the dissonance manipulation will be more likely to result in a reduction of mind perception of food animals if it is measured first (mind perception-first), or in a reduction of the willingness to eat meat if it is measured first (willingness-first). Varying the order of presentation of the two methods of dissonance reduction allows a test of this prediction (Gosling, Denizeau, & Oberlé, 2006; Götts-Marchand, Götts, & Irle, 1974; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995; Voisin, Stone, & Becker, 2013).

2. Study 1: the meat paradox in the meat production stage

Study 1 focused on the meat paradox in the meat production stage. Adapting procedures from Bastian et al. (2012b), four different conditions of dissonance manipulation (abattoir condition, pasture condition, meat condition, and control condition) were created with the aim of varying the transparency of the connection between meat and its animal origin to activate participants' cognitive dissonance due to the meat paradox.

From the control condition to the meat condition, through the pasture condition to the abattoir condition, we expected that the animal origin of meat would become more and more obvious, up to making the actual slaughter of a live animal salient in the abattoir condition. Our two intermediary conditions, the pasture and meat conditions, include no direct mention of slaughter and may thus be ambiguous in arousing cognitive dissonance. Some people may associate the stimuli used with the animal origin of meat, whereas others may only think about the life of cows in the pasture or the meat itself. Therefore, we will compare the abattoir condition, as an explicit and strong dissonance induction condition, to the other three conditions. We will also verify whether the meat and pasture conditions induce cognitive dissonance, compared to the control condition.

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