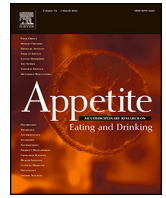




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## Research report

Rationalizing meat consumption. The 4Ns <sup>☆</sup>Jared Piazza <sup>a,\*</sup>, Matthew B. Ruby <sup>b</sup>, Steve Loughnan <sup>c</sup>, Mischel Luong <sup>d</sup>, Juliana Kulik <sup>b</sup>, Hanne M. Watkins <sup>d</sup>, Mirra Seigerman <sup>d</sup><sup>a</sup> Lancaster University, Department of Psychology, Fylde College, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YF, UK<sup>b</sup> University of Pennsylvania, Department of Psychology, Solomon Labs, 3720 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA<sup>c</sup> University of Edinburgh, School of Psychology, Philosophy, and Language Sciences, 7 George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9JZ, UK<sup>d</sup> University of Melbourne, School of Psychological Sciences Swanston St., Melbourne, 3010, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Recent theorizing suggests that the 4Ns – that is, the belief that eating meat is *natural*, *normal*, *necessary*, and *nice* – are common rationalizations people use to defend their choice of eating meat. However, such theorizing has yet to be subjected to empirical testing. Six studies were conducted on the 4Ns. Studies 1a and 1b demonstrated that the 4N classification captures the vast majority (83%–91%) of justifications people naturally offer in defense of eating meat. In Study 2, individuals who endorsed the 4Ns tended also to objectify (dementalize) animals and included fewer animals in their circle of moral concern, and this was true independent of social dominance orientation. Subsequent studies (Studies 3–5) showed that individuals who endorsed the 4Ns tend not to be motivated by ethical concerns when making food choices, are less involved in animal-welfare advocacy, less driven to restrict animal products from their diet, less proud of their animal-product decisions, tend to endorse Speciesist attitudes, tend to consume meat and animal products more frequently, and are highly committed to eating meat. Furthermore, omnivores who strongly endorsed the 4Ns tended to experience less guilt about their animal-product decisions, highlighting the guilt-alleviating function of the 4Ns.

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## Introduction

Many omnivores are confronted by a “meat paradox” (Herzog, 2010; Joy, 2010; Loughnan, Bastian, & Haslam, 2014; Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010). They are morally conflicted by the thought of their behavior harming animals, while also enjoying meat as a desirable staple in their diet. Loughnan et al. (2014) argue, consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Cooper, 2007; Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999), that resolution of this conflict can take one of two routes: one can reject meat consumption, bringing one’s behaviors into alignment with one’s moral ideals, or one can bring one’s beliefs and attitudes in line with one’s behavior through various psychological maneuvers (see below). The fact that omnivores continue to make up the vast majority of the world’s population (see Ruby, 2012) suggests that the latter route is most commonly adopted.

Research attests that there are numerous strategies available to omnivores to bring their beliefs and behavior in line, including denying that animals used as food suffer (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam,

& Radke, 2012; Bratanova, Loughnan, & Bastian, 2011), or that such animals are worthy of moral concern (Loughnan et al., 2010). One common, yet under-studied mechanism omnivores employ when resolving the meat paradox is *rationalization*. Rationalization involves providing reasonable justifications for one’s behavior when it comes under scrutiny or criticism, or when one’s behavior is perceived as discrepant with an integral aspect of one’s character (Kunda, 1990; Mercier, 2011; Tsang, 2002). Rationalizing potentially morally troublesome behaviors has both social and personal benefits. Humans live in tight-knit social groups in which it is important to manage and defend one’s actions to others (Ingram, Piazza, & Bering, 2009). Providing defensible reasons and arguments for one’s actions when one’s actions are called into question is therefore an essential part of human sociality (Haidt, 2001; Mercier & Sperber, 2011). Rationalization is also essential in maintaining a positive image of oneself as a good, moral person (Bandura, 1999; Jordan & Monin, 2008; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Research suggests that people often rationalize their behavior when they are motivated to continue in a practice or belief that they might otherwise feel guilty about on account of dissenting perspectives (Haidt, 2001; Kunda, 1990; Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009). While the ultimate goal of rationalization is to persuade others of the legitimacy of one’s perspective, rationalization functions best if the actor is convinced by his or her own justifications (Tsang, 2002). One consequence of this motivated reasoning process is that people will

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often seek out arguments that support their own viewpoint, while overlooking or dismissing arguments that challenge it (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kuhn, 1991; Nickerson, 1998). This leads people to overestimate the amount of evidence that favors their position, known as “myside bias” or belief overkill (see Baron, 1995; Perkins, 1985; Stanovich, West, & Toplak, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Meat eating is a practice that in recent years has become subject to criticism. Recent polls indicate that about 3–5% of adults in the U.S., and roughly 8% in Canada and 3–8% in the United Kingdom, self-identify as practicing vegetarians, though a number of polled vegetarians admit to sometimes eating meat, particularly fish or poultry (Gallup, 2012; GfK Social Research, 2009; Ruby, 2012; Vegetarian Resource Group, 2012). Vegetarians often endorse a multitude of reasons for rejecting meat or restricting meat from their diet, including health, environment, and taste (see e.g., Berndsen & van der Pligt, 2004; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997), yet an increasingly common motivation involves moral concerns about the cruel treatment of animals raised and slaughtered for food (Amato & Partridge, 1989; Beardsworth & Keil, 1991; Fessler, Arguello, Mekdara, & Macias, 2003; Fox & Ward, 2008; Herzog, 2010; Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998; Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000; Ruby, 2012; Santos & Booth, 1996). Although meat eating is still the norm in most countries, many people – including meat eaters themselves – believe that vegetarianism is a morally admirable practice for which vegetarians deserve credit (Minson & Monin, 2012; Ruby & Heine, 2011). For example, Ruby and Heine (2011) found that, all else equal, individuals who reject meat are rated as more virtuous than individuals who eat meat. This was true both among vegetarian and omnivore participants, and when controlling for perceptions of the healthiness of the vegetarian target’s diet.

One consequence of this moral accreditation is that meat eaters sometimes respond defensively to the presence of vegetarians. This may be because vegetarian appeals and campaigns sometimes come across as self-righteous, and thus off-putting. Additionally, it may be that the moral commitments of vegetarians pose an implicit threat to meat eaters’ own moral identities. If some individuals refrain from eating animals out of concern for animal welfare, this raises the question of whether others should do likewise, in effect, “If we can do it, why don’t you?” (see Minson & Monin, 2012). Thus, omnivores today sometimes find themselves in social situations where they must defend their commitments to eating meat.

### The 3Ns of justification

According to Joy (2010), there are principally three categories of justifications that meat eaters have at their disposal to preserve their commitment to eating meat and diffuse any guilt they might otherwise experience as a consequence of consuming animal products. These justifications include that eating meat is *natural*, *normal*, and *necessary*, otherwise known as the “Three Ns of Justification” (see Joy, 2010, pp. 96–97). Joy argues that through a recurrent process of socialization people come to believe that eating meat is *natural* – that eating meat is written in our biology, meat is what we naturally crave, and it is what our species evolved to eat; that eating

meat is *normal* – that it is what most people in civilized society do and what most people expect from us; and that eating meat is *necessary* – that we need meat for survival or that we need to consume at least some meat to be strong, fully healthy individuals. Joy proposes that the 3Ns are widespread beliefs that are reinforced through various social channels, including family, media, religion, and various private and public organizations. For example, one popular belief related to the *necessity* of eating meat is the idea that one cannot maintain a diet that contains enough protein without consuming at least some meat. Although scientists, including the American Dietetic Association (ADA), America’s leading organization of nutritionists, have released numerous publications showing that this is not the case (see e.g., American Dietetic Association, 2009; Rand, Pellett, & Young, 2003; Young & Pellett, 1994), the belief is persistent.

The application of the 3Ns is not limited to meat eating. The 3Ns may be a ubiquitous set of rationalizations that have an even broader application. Many historical practices, from slavery to sexism, have invoked the 3Ns as justification. For example, in defense of male-only voting practices in the U.S. opponents of women’s suffrage often appealed to the *necessity* of denying women the vote to prevent “irreparable damage” to the nation, to the *natural* superiority of male intelligence, and to the historical *normalness* of male-only voting as “designed by our forefathers” (Joy, 2010, p. 97; see footnote for a contemporary example).<sup>2</sup> Today, most people find such arguments in support of male-only voting ludicrous at best. However, it is often only after a system collapses that people come to scrutinize or question the justifications supporting it. By contrast, when an ideology is widely endorsed, as meat eating is in most parts of the world today, the justifications supporting the ideology generally go unchallenged. Unless directly challenged by an alternative viewpoint, people tend not to question the legitimacy of their rationalizations (see Haidt, 2001).

### A fourth “N” and present research

Although there have been some qualitative studies of the 3Ns, mainly by Joy (2010), there is currently almost no systematic, quantitative research in support of the 3Ns as prevalent meat-eating justifications. Nor has there been any work investigating the relationship between 3N endorsement and people’s eating practices, meat and animal-product consumption, or attitudes toward animal welfare. Thus, the present research was intended to fill this empirical gap.

Before we outline our research plan and hypotheses, there is one final matter to address. There may be a fourth N specific to meat eating, not captured under the 3N justification scheme. Several lines of evidence suggest that the enjoyment people derive from eating meat is a major barrier to reducing meat consumption and/or adopting a vegetarian diet (e.g., Kenyon & Barker, 1998; Lea & Worsley, 2001, 2003; Ruby, 2012). For example, Lea and Worsley (2001) found “meat appreciation and enjoyment” to be one of the biggest obstacles for Australian women contemplating a vegetarian diet. Likewise, Rothgerber (2013) found that pro-meat attitudes, which tend to be higher among men, are a strong predictor of continued meat consumption. Furthermore, as we discuss below (see Studies 1a and 1b), when meat-eaters are asked to defend their right to eat meat, they often appeal to the tastiness of meat, or the hedonic

<sup>1</sup> In one unpublished study (Piazza, 2013) a group of Americans were asked to rate the extent to which animals were suffering as a result of current factory-farming practices in the U.S. Individuals who believed animals do not suffer much tended to also believe that raising livestock for meat does not have destructive consequences for the environment, that being a vegetarian does not help reduce world hunger, that eating meat has major health benefits and few risks, that practicing vegetarianism does not promote human-directed compassion, and that meat-based meals are more affordable than vegetarian-based meals. In short, people’s beliefs about vegetarianism came packaged in such a way that the bulk of evidence was stacked highly in favor of their preferred view, consistent with a belief-overkill or myside bias.

<sup>2</sup> 3N justifications are currently being applied within various ongoing, ideological debates. As one example, opponents of same-sex marriage often appeal to the *necessity* of limiting marriage to heterosexual couples to prevent “further weakening of the institution ... giving people in polygamous, incestuous, bestial, and other nontraditional relationships the right to marry”, to the *naturalness* of marriage as “a union of man and woman, uniquely involving the procreation and rearing of children within a family”, and to the *normalness* of heterosexual marriage as an institution “as old as the book of Genesis” (Gay Marriage ProCon.org, 2014).

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