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## Research report

## Efforts to overcome vegetarian-induced dissonance among meat eaters



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## ABSTRACT

Meat eaters face dissonance whether it results from inconsistency (“I eat meat; I don’t like to hurt animals”), aversive consequences (“I eat meat; eating meat harms animals”), or threats to self image (“I eat meat; compassionate people don’t hurt animals”). The present work proposes that there are a number of strategies that omnivores adopt to reduce this dissonance including avoidance, dissociation, perceived behavioral change, denial of animal pain, denial of animal mind, pro-meat justifications, reducing perceived choice, and actual behavioral change. The presence of vegetarians was speculated to cause meat eating to be a scrutinized behavior, remind meat eaters of their discomfort, and undermine the effectiveness of these strategies. It was therefore hypothesized that exposure to a description of a vegetarian would lead omnivores to embrace dissonance-reducing strategies. Supporting this hypothesis, participants who read a vignette about a vegetarian denied animal mind more than participants who read about a gluten-free individual. It was also hypothesized that omnivores would be sensitive to individual differences between vegetarians and would demonstrate using dissonance-reducing strategies more when the situation failed to provide cognitions consonant with eating meat or to reduce dissonant cognitions. Four experiments supported this prediction and found that authentic vegetarians, vegetarians freely making the decision to abandon meat, consistent vegetarians, and anticipating moral reproach from vegetarians produced greater endorsement of dissonance-reducing strategies than their counterpart conditions.

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## Introduction

Most individuals hold animals in positive regard. The majority of Americans have pets, on which they spent \$52 billion dollars in 2012. Exposure to friendly animal characters in movies, television, books, as toys, stuffed animals, etc., plays a central role in the early experiences of children (Melson, 2001). On the other hand, the vast majority of individuals in western societies eat animals regularly, and many do not consider a meal complete without animal protein (Sobal, 2005). In short, people believe that it is wrong to hurt animals, yet in the case of Americans at least, eat 240 pounds per capita of them each year (see Herzog, 2011). How can we psychologically reconcile these two positions, what researchers have recently called the “meat paradox” (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012; Loughnan, Haslam, & Bastian, 2010)? At the heart of the meat paradox is the experience of cognitive dissonance whether one adopts classic dissonance theory focusing on inconsistency (Festinger, 1957: “I eat meat; I don’t like to hurt animals”), the new look dissonance emphasizing aversive consequences (Cooper & Fazio, 1984:

“I eat meat; eating meat harms animals”), or self-consistency/self-affirmation approaches emphasizing threats to self-integrity (Aronson, 1968; Steele, 1988: “I eat meat; compassionate people don’t hurt animals”). Highlighting the magnitude of the paradox, an examiner of intellectual growth in young children commented nearly a century ago that “there is probably no moral field in which the child sees so many puzzling inconsistencies as here” (Isaacs, 1930).

The general purpose of the present research is to elaborate on and investigate the dissonance-reducing processes that enable omnivores to maintain the practice of consuming animal flesh with minimal compunction. It is not the first study to identify dissonance reduction as a factor in the perpetuation of meat consumption – the concept has been used to explain why meat eaters deny animal mind (Bastian et al., 2012; Loughnan et al., 2010), and others have referenced dissonance to describe what occurs in the minds of meat eaters who experience guilt over their behavior (e.g., Hoogland, de Boer, & Boersema, 2005; Mayfield, Bennett, Tranter, & Wooldridge, 2007). But the present work is unique in its attempts to articulate a comprehensive range of techniques that omnivores utilize to reduce dissonance from eating meat. After explaining these dissonance-reducing techniques, I then demonstrate how this framework is useful in explaining reactions that vegetarians produce in meat eaters, not in terms of overt retaliatory

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behaviors but in the form of subtle perceptual and judgmental changes.

In identifying strategies that omnivores employ to reduce the discomfort they experience from eating animals, the present work drew upon not only dissonance theory but also upon several more general theories describing mechanisms that enable individuals to act in immoral or non-normative ways: Bandura's (1990, 1999) *theory of moral disengagement*, which suggests that while actions are typically governed by an individual's moral standards, there are processes that disengage these self-sanctions and allow for inhumane conduct; and Sykes and Matza's (1957) work on *techniques of neutralization*, justifications of deviant behavior that allow disapproval from others or from violating internalized norms to be blunted in advance.

Although having a different focus and explaining different phenomenon, the processes proposed by these scholars from different disciplines converge on three basic mechanisms enabling problematic behavior: (1) hiding or avoiding the injury, possibly by making the victim invisible; (2) denying one's role/responsibility in causing the harm; and (3) denigrating the victim. Applying these principles to a dissonance framework, with inspiration from theoretical work by Joy (2011) and Plous (1993) and empirical work by Rothgerber (2012) on the psychological justification of meat eating, I identified eight mechanisms that omnivores employ to reduce the discomfort they experience from eating animals, including *avoidance, dissociation, perceived behavioral change, denial of animal pain, denial of animal mind, pro-meat justifications, reduction of perceived choice, and behavioral change*. The first three strategies (i.e., avoidance, dissociation, and perceived behavioral change) are derived from the hiding injury/denying responsibility mechanisms. These strategies are apologetic and essentially seek to avoid recognizing and confronting the issue; in these cases, the individual acts more ambivalently, without rationalizations, and merely attempts to proceed without confronting the issue. The fourth–sixth strategies (i.e., denial of animal pain, denial of animal mind, and pro-meat justifications) are derived from the denigrating the victim mechanism. These strategies are unapologetic and unabashedly embrace the practice of meat consumption through various justifications; in these instances, the individual does not evade the issue and is prepared to explain why the practice is acceptable. The seventh and eight strategies (i.e., reduction of perceived choice and behavioral change) are derived from dissonance theory and represent well-known ways of eliminating inconsistency across a multitude of domains.

### *Dissonance-reducing strategies*

#### *Avoidance*

In Festinger's (1957) classic formulation of cognitive dissonance, he argued that people will actively avoid situations and information that would likely increase dissonance. Perhaps because it is so overwhelming and may induce psychic numbing (Slovic, 2007), 67% of respondents indicated that they do not think about animal suffering in factory farming when they purchase meat (Signicom, 1997; see also Mayfield et al., 2007). More generally and outside the realm of purchasing decisions, the very topic of factory farms is considered taboo (Iacobbo & Iacobbo, 2006). That is, avoidance has moved from a personal strategy to a cultural norm.

Individuals have much assistance in avoiding unpleasant thoughts about the treatment of animals used in food. The sheer physical isolation of factory farms from the rest of society fulfills Bandura's (1999) observation that harming others is made easier when their suffering is not visible. Avoidance has also been culturally enabled by institutions and legal guidelines in our society that make gaining information about farm animal welfare nearly impossible (see Joy, 2011). Finally, socialization practices encourage American chil-

dren to believe that meat originates from happy farm animals living in peaceful settings; as a result, children believe that farm animals are less likely to ever be unhappy relative to pets and wild animals (Plous, 1993).

#### *Dissociation*

Individuals can also psychologically alter how much meat they perceive themselves to consume by dissociating the animal from the food product. According to Adams (1990), one way that individuals render animals absent from their consciousness is to change language about them as food products. Words like bacon, hamburger, and sirloin become substitutes for the animal flesh people consume, allowing omnivores to maintain the illusion that animals are not involved. As Bandura (1999) notes, such euphemistic labeling is often used to disguise objectionable activities.

Supporting this dissociation strategy, many consumers do not like to think that meat comes from a live animal (Mayfield et al., 2007), and this explains why the more meat resembles the actual animal, in terms of being red, bloody, and fatty, the more individuals are disgusted by it (Kubberod, Ueland, Tronstad, & Risvik, 2002). Pieces of meat that clearly remind consumers that they were from an animal (e.g., eyes, tongues, brains, etc.) are unwillingly handled by consumers (Kubberod et al., 2002). Explicit reminders of the animal origins of meat led shoppers to purchase less meat or prefer free range and organic meat (Hoogland et al., 2005).

#### *Perceived behavioral change*

As a substitute to actual change, individuals may convince themselves and others that they avoid meat consumption. This is an attempt to eliminate the cognition "I eat meat" despite evidence to the contrary. At least a dozen studies have documented that some people claim they are vegetarian but then simultaneously acknowledge that they eat red meat, chicken, and/or fish (see Rothgerber, 2014; Ruby, 2012). For example, a survey of 10,000 American adults found that 60% of "vegetarians" admitted that they had eaten animal flesh within the last twenty-four hours (Time/CNN/Harris Interactive Poll, 2002). Others take a less drastic approach than attempting to pass as vegetarians and convey that they consume less meat than they actually do. For example, when they believed they were about to view a PETA video, women reported eating less meat than otherwise (Rothgerber, in press).

#### *Denial of animal pain*

It is also possible that the omnivore is less apologetic and, instead of trying to distort how much meat they consume or redefine what they are actually consuming, may acknowledge that they regularly eat animals. At this point, the individual may try to eliminate the dissonant cognition "I hurt animals" with "Animals don't really experience pain, at least as humans do." Indeed, one of the attempted refutations against utilitarian arguments for vegetarianism is that it overstates the amount of pain that animals experience (Gruzalski, 1983). Rothgerber (2012) found that the more respondents endorsed statements such as "Animals don't really suffer when being raised and killed for meat" and "Animals do not feel pain the same way humans do," the more meat they reported consuming. Without animal pain, there is no injury, and as Sykes and Matza (1957) articulate, the denial of injury breaks the link between acts and their consequences, thus enabling the individual to act without compunction.

#### *Denial of animal mind*

Because pain is strongly associated with the act of killing that precedes eating animals, it reasons that this dimension would be salient, but there is also a more general denial of animal capacity that may occur to reduce dissonance. In referring to the dehumanization, Bandura (1999) notes (proving the point), "it is easier to bru-

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