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How Can Meat Consumption Be Both Increasing and Decreasing?

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Hal Herzog Ph.D.
Animals and Us

ENVIRONMENT

How Can Meat Consumption Be Both Increasing and Decreasing?

New research helps explain the “Meatless Monday Paradox.”

Posted May 2, 2023

Reviewed by Lybi Ma



KEY POINTS

- The percentage of Americans who do not eat meat has doubled in the past two decades.
- Per capita meat consumption in the U.S., though, has not changed in decades and remains among the highest in the world.
- The moralization-polarization effect explains this paradox.
- Cognitive dissonance may induce some people to eat less meat but others to eat more.



Source: Photo by Havucvp/123RF

paign to motivate Americans to cut back on the consumption of meat has been successful. For example, 42 percent of participants in a 2019 representative **sample** of

American adults had heard about the Meatless Monday campaign, and 21 percent had participated in Meatless Monday activities. But as Hal Herzog has **written**, while vegetarianism in the U.S. has doubled in the past 20 years, Americans ate more red meat and poultry in 2022 than in any other year, 240 pounds per person. What's responsible for this "Meatless Monday Paradox?"

I was fascinated by Herzog's post. It was the first time I'd seen someone put in writing a phenomenon I began re-searching a few years ago. I suspect the "*moralization polarization effect*" can explain how both vegetarianism and meat consumption is increasing.

Moralization Polarization Effect

For the moralization part, when we shop, it increasingly feels as though we're asked to consider the moral implications of our purchasing behavior. Did we buy furniture from sustainable wood? Were the workers treated well and compensated justly? Meat consumption is no exception, as increasingly the behavior has come under greater scrutiny, with critics objecting to meat on the grounds of animal mistreatment, global warming intensification, harm to personal health, and more.

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Our behavior reflects on us, and we want to ensure that our actions are morally defensible and that they mirror our self-perceptions as moral creatures. For some behaviors, such as donating to charity or volunteering for a favored cause, it is easy to feel good about oneself. But other behaviors are more problematic, bringing personal benefit but seeming at odds with core principles. In this delicate space, we feel motivated to justify these behaviors that contradict prior attitudes, beliefs, or values. This is the essence of *cognitive dissonance theory*. If I love animals or care about fighting climate change, eating meat makes me feel guilty or anxious because my behavior doesn't align with my attitude.

An important point: Moralization campaigns make the dissonance worse. They continually remind us of values that our behavior may contradict.

Some of us reduce dissonance behaviorally, by reducing or eliminating meat from our diet. The jump in rates of vegetari-

## The Dark Side of the Moralization of Meat

But there is a dark side to moralizing individual consumer behavior. Not everyone changes their behavior in response to dissonance. In fact, most individuals reduce dissonance by strategically distorting their perceptions. We selectively consider information that reduces our moral guilt or rationalizes our behavior. *Animals can't think or feel. We were meant to eat them. We need their protein.* And so on. I consider a number of these strategies [here](#).

As moralization efforts require individuals to reduce dissonance through perceptual distortions, these justifications become more practiced and accessible. This means that well-intentioned moralization campaigns actually strengthen some individuals' commitment to and belief in eating meat. For these people, meat consumption will likely increase because they have become more attached to it in defending their eating behavior. As they convince themselves that meat is morally justifiable, it becomes more compelling, legitimate, and attractive.

The moralization hypothesis proposes that campaigns to change attitudes and behavior are double-edged. They lead some people to lessen guilt by abandoning eating meat but, for others, they will increase meat consumption through the formulation and strengthening of justifications.

For the polarization part, while some may move toward the vegetarian side of the spectrum, a greater number of others move further toward the meat side. On the whole, overall

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## Evidence for the Moralization Polarization Effect

Swiss economists Stefan Mann and Christian Ritzel, UCLA graduate student Daniel Rosenfeld, and I examined several decades of [data](#) collected by the Centers for Disease Control on the diets of Americans. As we predicted, we found that individual differences in how much meat people ate increased over the years. The top 10 percent and bottom 10 percent of Americans had become more extreme in how much or how little meat they ate or did not eat over time. Researchers found a similar pattern of changes in meat consumption [among Swiss consumers](#).

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shifts in attitudes toward mask wearing in the U.S. increased from April 4 to July 18, 2020, as the behavior became increasingly moralized. The percentage of people that strongly agreed *and* strongly disagreed that “people should be required to wear masks in public” both increased. And we found similar effects with other political attitudes that became moralized from 1996-2016, such as whether the government should provide aid to Blacks and other minorities and whether abortion should be legal.

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## Reshaping Moral Movements

What can we conclude about moralizing movements? If the goal is to create an expanded base of ardent followers, regardless of the backlash it creates, moralization efforts seem well-founded. But if the goal is to change short-term collective behavior, the data we examined provide no support for moralizing behavior. To the chagrin of many with good intentions, moralizing meat has not led to fewer animals being consumed.

To avoid the negative aspects of polarization, movement leaders may want to direct their moralization attempts to population segments more likely to be sympathetic to the cause and avoid trying to convert those unlikely to be sympathetic. In doing so, they might encourage the desired behavior while

aspects of the message or to promote more gradual behavior. Emphasizing that meat is unhealthy and promoting “meatless Mondays” may lead to less defensiveness and in turn, less justification-induced increases in meat consumption.

*Hank Rothgerber, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at Bellarmine University. His research focuses on the psychology of eating animals and its counterpart, vegetarianism.*

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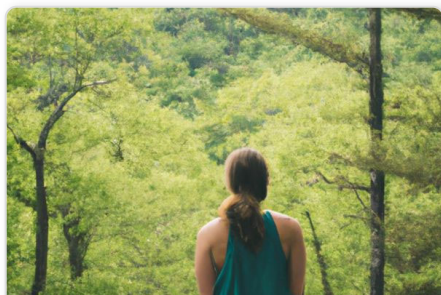


**Hal Herzog, Ph.D.**, is the author of *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard To Think Straight About Animals*.

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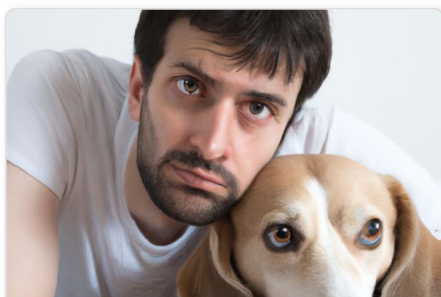


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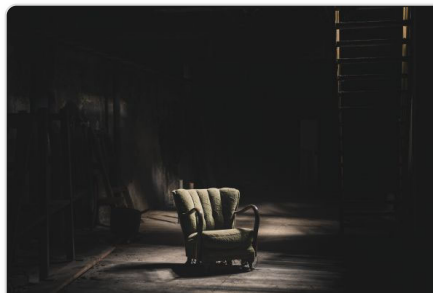


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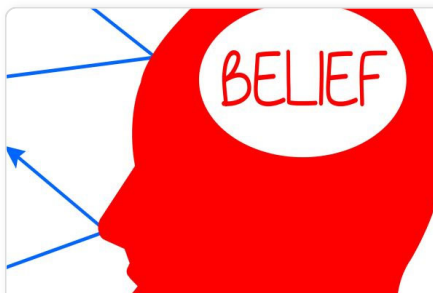


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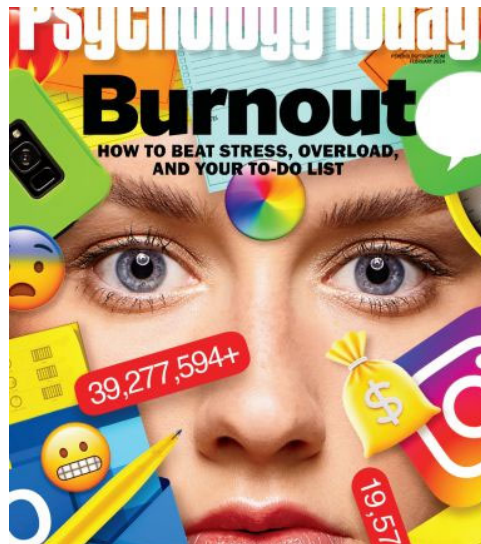
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