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Long-term socio-cultural influences on food choice: The case of meat

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Abstract

This paper examines long-term and short-term influences on food choice with a particular reference to the question how current food choices in north-western Europe are shaped by long-term changes in attitude towards the animal origin of meat. The analysis aims to specify whether these changes may become substantial enough to get an impact on the consumption of meat and to contribute to a food system that is more sustainable. Using knowledge from a wide range of disciplines (i.e. psychology, sociology, anthropology, history) the author presents a cascade-like framework that sorts insights on influences on behaviour into a logical order. The framework combines perceptual and rational processes internal to the person with social, organizational, and distal processes (i.e. long-term causes). The framework shows that the various influences on behaviour have their own pace and that these differences in pace are particularly relevant for the proper diagnosis of socio-cultural changes and their linkages with food choice criteria. The paper's main argument is that gaining more insight into these influences may contribute to the pursuit of a system that is more sustainable.

Keywords

Socio-cultural change, Sustainability, Meat consumption

Introduction

The aim of sustainability in food production and consumption may require that people in Western countries choose to eat smaller quantities of meat as well as meat that is produced in a more sensible way (Aiking & Vellinga, 2000). Currently, only a small fraction of consumers fit into this pattern of sustainable meat consumption, but there are indications that meat is losing its dominant position as a particular attractive source of proteins. The indications do not only refer to the negative role of meat in several recent food safety crises but also to a number of socio-cultural changes that might gradually gain importance in the long-term. Some relevant examples are the increasing significance that consumers attribute to animal welfare (Issanchou, 1996) and the growing appreciation of vegetarian meals, not only by consumers (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997) but also by nutritionists (Sabaté *et al*., 1999). Given the various manifestations of these changes, the question can be raised whether they will continue and get a substantial impact on the consumption of meat. This question is particularly important in view of the environmental pressure that is attributed to the current system of meat supply (Tilman *et al*., 2002). Gaining more insight into socio-cultural changes and their linkages with food choice criteria may contribute to the pursuit of a food system that is more sustainable.

From a methodological point of view, studying the links between food choice criteria and long-term socio-cultural development is a challenging task. The main strategy chosen here is the development of a framework that sorts insights on influences on behaviour into a logical order. Generally, a long-term development will create opportunities for food choices that match its general direction, whereas it will put constraints on others. Accordingly, it might be expected that those food choice criteria that appear to be

part of a long-term change will have more impact in the future than criteria that are only based on short-term trends. In the next section, the framework of influences on behaviour is explained. Then, the role of Western modernization processes is analysed as an example of long-term influences on food choice criteria. These results will be combined with a short description of the changes that have influenced food supply in the past decades. In the final part of the paper, I shall draw conclusions and discuss the implications for the pursuit of sustainability.

Framework of influences on behaviour

In considering the causes of a person's behaviour, it is important to take into account that any act is the result of multiple determinants. These determinants can be sorted into a logical order on the basis of two general notions. The first one is that it makes sense to consider, from a behavioural perspective, the time it takes to create or develop certain actions and phenomena. For example, a genuine problem cannot be solved in one second and a friendship cannot be built in an hour. These time limits say something about the underlying processes. The second notion is that any causal factor can only take hold in a certain context. In other words, a virus can only cause an illness among those persons who are not immune to it. The context, in turn, is also dependent on other causal factors, such as vulnerability to the virus as determined by heredity.

Apart from strictly biological phenomena, the main influences on behaviour can be arranged in the cascade-like framework shown in Figure 1. The highest level refers to evolution of life, the lowest to processes that are internal to the person. The framework is relatively new, although similar ideas have been put forward by others (Diamond, 1999; Newell, 1990; Oyserman *et al*., 2002).

[FIGURE 1]

Figure 1 A cascade-like framework of influences on behaviour.

The lowest levels of Figure 1 refer to the perceptual and rational processes that enable a person to adapt his or her activities to the situation at hand. These adaptive processes refer, for example, to the taste of a food and the person's ideas about its origin. If a person is in doubt about the quality of a food served by a host, his or her behaviour may be influenced by personal loyalties to this host. Also relevant might be the person's thoughts about the business practices that are common in the food supply chain. In short, the behaviour in question is not only a function of processes within the person, but also of social and organizational processes that act as "proximal" causes of behaviour.

Moving from processes that are internal and proximal (i.e. short-term causes) to more distal processes (i.e. long-term causes), we can see determinants of behaviour that will not dramatically change during the lifetime of an individual. These relatively stable processes can influence the person tasting the food, if, for example, he or she is drawn to beliefs about purity and danger that result from broadly shared worldviews (e.g., philosophies of life, beliefs about magical powers). These worldviews have gradually changed over the past millennium, due to a process of cultural modernization (Levine, 2001). Unlike mediaeval men and women, modern people will not expect solutions from magical powers but they may still be sensitive to some of these beliefs under conditions of uncertainty.

A final category involves evolutionary processes, which have shaped human capabilities to cope with the environment, for example the ability to make a quick distinction between sweet (i.e. rich in calories) and bitter tasting (i.e. possibly poisonous) foods.

The framework can help to get insight into the congruency of the various influences on behaviour. An important practical message of Figure 1 is that distal factors provide the context in which the more proximal or internal factors can have their effect. For example, the taste of a new food may only be pleasurable for those persons who have already learned to appreciate the corresponding cuisine. Similarly, the introduction of a "free-range" label will only have a moral effect on people who value animal welfare.

The role of Western modernization processes

Many of the links between current food choices and long-term socio-cultural development can be explained in terms of Western modernization processes. To put it simply, modern society can be distinguished from its predecessor by its potential democratisation of both its wealth and its political process (Levine, 2001: 11). The overall process of modernization covers a number of more specific socio-cultural processes, three of which should be mentioned here. They are:

- the increasing self-control considered typical of Western civilized man, such as the self-control of animal-like behaviour (since about 1500, see Elias, 1978),
- the rise of consumerism (or the belief that it is good to buy and use a lot of goods) among the middle classes (since about 1700, see Stearns, 2001),
- and the growing importance of an "engineering culture" characterized by the systemic application of scientific knowledge to societal issues (since about 1800, see Carroll-Burke, 2001).

The changes were to a certain degree supported by the mainstream of society, but criticized by one or more counter-movements. For example, the "democratisation of meat " among European working-class families in the nineteenth century, influenced by the agricultural and industrial revolutions (Knapp, 1997), was accompanied by moral objections to the subjugation of animals and the foundation of the first vegetarian societies (Thomas, 1983).

The process of modernization brought many changes in dietary choice and culinary technique. Due to the prevailing prominent position of the court society in France, most of the changes were at first part of a French-style modernization before they became accepted more generally. As far as meat is concerned, many changes were particularly related to its animal origin. An interesting example is the practice of bringing the whole dead animal, or large parts of it, to the table, where the meat was to be carved by the master of the house or by distinguished guests. Research by Flandrin (1999) indicates that the number of animal species served on the tables of the French aristocrats decreased between 1500 and 1650. This refers, for example, to a decreasing consumption of various large birds (e.g., swan). By contrast, the status of beef rose and much attention was paid to the particular cut of meat.

Each of the differences must have one or more proximal causes that explain how changes were created, but the literature only offers some suggestions of what these might have been. For example, that members of the elite ate many types of animal may indicate that 17th-century diet was still largely determined by fluctuating natural circumstances (Flandrin, 1999). In that period in history, beef was considered "crude" and dismissed as indigestible by chefs in the aristocratic kitchens. Members of the elite left "gross" meats as well as most vegetables to the common people, whose stomachs were supposedly more robust. The elite ate only "delicate" fowl, relatively "light" fish and soft wheat bread. In later years, progress in the arts of butchery and cooking made it possible that the status of beef rose and that more attention was paid to the particular cut of meat. Accordingly, the serving of large parts of the animal to be carved at table slowly went out of use. This decreasing practice is also connected with the gradual reduction in the size of the household and the transference of household activities to specialists (Elias, 1978).

Although the direct causes and the precise timing of these changes may not always be clear, their consequences got their meaning in the long-term process of Western modernization. For example, due to the circumstances mentioned above, people got fewer reminders that the meat dish has something to do with the killing of an animal. According to Elias (1978: 120) this shift means that the mediaeval standard of feeling by which the sight and carving of a dead animal on the table were actually pleasurable, or at least not at all unpleasant, has been replaced by another standard by which reminders that the meat dish has something to do with the killing of an animal are avoided. Although this development is not uniform everywhere, the general direction of the changes seems to be the same. In many of our meat dishes the animal form is so concealed and changed by the art of its preparation and carving that while eating one is scarcely reminded of its origin.

Current development

The long-term processes mentioned in the previous section can be complemented by a number of processes that have happened during the past decades. Some of these processes refer to shifts in the way people manage to organize their household, taking due account of differences in economy of scale. For example, if the costs of preparing a meal are compared per unit time of the eaters, a decreasing number of persons per household will make convenience food more attractive (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997; Warde, 1997). Other important processes refer to the way producers manage to supply foods and the way the authorities manage to control the public dimensions of food. There is a growing influence of world markets, more emphasis on processing and marketing, and less emphasis on primary production.

One of the almost unnoticed consequences that the recent shifts have in common is their match with the long-term process of paying less attention to the meat-producing animal as a whole. Modern consumers seldom serve whole animals, but they serve cuts of meat that they have bought at stores in which the carcasses have been hidden from the customer's eye. Moreover, partly as a result of concerns about risk factors, such as fatty acid profiles, there has been a shift in consumption toward poultry and fish and away from beef and pork. As opposed to whole roasters, many consumers use further processed products, such as fillets.

The psychological and socio-cultural implications of this development have not yet been fully explored. Some results of our on-going research among consumers in the Netherlands give an interesting clue. It appears that many consumers are no longer aware of the animal origin of meat and that this awareness strongly decreases among the younger generations. Another result is that the "three components" meal (meat, potatoes, vegetables) that was dominant in the Netherlands during the second part of the 20th century has become much less popular. This may indicate that meat is less used as a central part of the meal (see also Holm & Møhl, 2000). It should be emphasized that these consumers had not become full vegetarians; they did at least sometimes buy meat. Their attitude towards meat was not completely negative and they showed positive responses to either meat from well-treated animals or some meat alternatives.

Concluding remarks

Sustainable development is not primarily a psychological process. Technical experts might change food systems in a way that does not have to be noticed by the people who are using it. For example, the fact that meat is less used as a central part of the meal makes it feasible to design ready-made meals that contain less animal and more plant proteins. If the meals are being developed and prepared by retailers, and consumers can choose such a meal without thinking about the proteins, such an approach may create a substantial shift from animal to plant protein foods without much consumer involvement. However, there are at least three reasons why such an approach is not recommendable. Firstly, there are cases in which a behavioural change can contribute to the objectives of sustainable development, for example by buying less meat. Secondly, it is expected that values will come into conflict in many technology-related areas, such as genetically modified food. This makes it important that all the people involved are mindful of those conflicts. And thirdly, by reinforcing mindless acceptance of technological changes people might become a kind of ecological dummy.

The fact that many people are no longer aware of the animal origin of meat may be interpreted in terms of indifference toward the origins of proteins. This opens possibilities for novel protein foods, based on plants. However, if people are no longer aware of meat's animal origin, they will also be less inclined to pay attention to animal welfare. This may have negative consequences for attempts to stimulate sustainable agriculture by promoting high quality meat from well-treated animals. The solution will be that governing bodies should pay more attention to the segmentation of protein products in terms of bulk products and specialties.

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