

# **A cross cultural meat paradox: A qualitative study of Australia and India**

## **Abstract**

To date, studies on the meat paradox have focused predominantly on Western audiences. In comparison, there is relatively sparse insight on developing countries where meat consumption is on the rise. Further, most studies to date have been quantitative. This study, hence, aims to bridge the knowledge gap by providing a qualitative comparison of the meat paradox in urban Australia and India, using cognitive dissonance theory as its main framework. We conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-two Sydney residents and thirty-three Mumbai residents, aged 23-45 years. In both countries, common strategies to reduce dissonance included distancing, beliefs in a human-animal hierarchy, carnism, and criticisms of alternative dietary practices. Despite these commonalities, the manner in which these strategies manifested was different in each country, thereby reflecting some key socio-cultural and institutional differences. In Australia, there is greater awareness of the ethical challenges associated with industrialised livestock farming. Thus, many Australian participants claimed to have reduced their meat consumption or have adopted kinder alternatives as a way to reduce their dissonance. In India, however, the practice of slaughtering animals in wet markets is still widespread and presents a more confronting experience. In view of this, some Indian participants chose to reduce their dissonance through distancing and emotional numbing. Further, participants in both countries highlighted instances of moral hypocrisy in relation to vegetarian/vegan practices. While Australian participants discussed self-proclaimed vegetarians who might succumb to a dietary lapse, Indian participants discussed inconsistencies in relation to religious and caste-based norms. This is further elaborated in the paper.

## 1. Introduction

The term 'meat paradox', initially coined by Loughnan, Haslam, and Bastian (2010), refers to the psychological conflict between people's enjoyment of meat and their moral discomfort in relation to animal suffering. This concept is based upon social psychologist Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016; Loughnan et al., 2010). Cognitive dissonance is the feeling of emotional discomfort which occurs when one holds conflicting attitudes or performs behaviours that conflict with one's beliefs or attitudes (Festinger, 1957).

When it comes to the meat paradox, meat-eaters tend to use a variety of dissonance-reducing strategies. Some include hierarchical beliefs of human superiority over animals (Dhont et al., 2019); various forms of distancing (Bastian & Amiot, 2019; Rothgerber, 2014) such as referring to the bodies of sentient animals as just meat (Rowe, 2011); reliance on social norms (Loughnan & Davies, 2019); and categorising farm animals as less morally relevant compared to other species such as pet animals (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016; Joy, 2010).

Most of these studies however have been quantitative in nature (Rothgerber, 2020). They have typically involved measuring the utility gained from consuming meat versus the psychological disutility which arises from the awareness of animal suffering (Hestermann et al., 2020). The limitation of such studies is that they do not delve into how people might reflect on and discuss their dissonance (Dowsett et al., 2018) nor do they adequately highlight how social context might influence dissonance (Panagiotou & Kadianaki, 2019). By drawing upon the constructivist approach, this study aims to contribute to the current knowledge by exploring meanings in relation to meat-eating and the meat paradox. As part of this, it aims to understand how differences in meanings can occur through different historical and culturally-oriented social processes (Gergen & Gergen, 2008).

When it comes to cognitive dissonance in relation to meat consumption, Rothgerber (2020) claims culture is an important influencing factor but, to date, it has been given relatively little attention in such studies. Other work also highlights cross-cultural differences can influence whether it is considered acceptable to consume animals (Bekoff, 2010; Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010) or certain animal species (Joy, 2010). For example, in India, Hinduism, with a history extending for thousands of years (Regan, 1986), has several teachings which emphasise vegetarianism (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010) and ahimsa or non-violence towards other life forms

(Hamilton, 2000). On the other hand, some facets of Western culture historically assumed a speciesist worldview which placed humans at the centre of value and meaning (Weitzenfeld & Joy, 2014). To some degree, this explains why meat consumption remains a hegemonic practice among several Western countries (Austin & Flynn, 2015; Panagiotou & Kadianaki, 2019). Some of this is also reflected in contemporary Australian meat-eating practices (Chen, 2016). In view of this, a cross-cultural comparison between Eastern and Western ways of experiencing the meat paradox will help further our understanding of this topic. Furthermore, taking socio-cultural differences into account is important to understand how meat is viewed and how dissonance occurs in relation to meat-eating. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the meat paradox in both Australia and India, starting first with Australia.

### **1.1 The meat paradox in Australia**

Australia has one of the world's highest levels of meat consumption, at approximately 95 kilograms per capita annually (OECD, 2019). Following on from the European colonisation of Australia, meat was consumed in abundance (Chen, 2016) and was also associated with high social status (Crook, 2006). In comparison, plant-based eating was associated with poverty (Crook, 2006). Today, factors which continue to influence meat consumption in Australia include meat's association with terms such as 'iron', 'protein', and 'staple dietary requirement' (Bogueva et al., 2017). In addition, meat is often associated with masculinity (Bogueva et al., 2017), power, strength and virility (Adams, 2015; Potts & Parry, 2010). Other studies have also highlighted an association between meat-eating and social occasions (Bogueva et al., 2017; Worsley & Skrzypiec, 1998). Thus, individuals may look to these meanings and norms as a guide for their own actions (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017) and may use this to reduce their dissonance in relation to meat consumption (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016).

Meat-eating in Australia, however, tends to vary across different sub-groups. Males, in general, are more likely than females to identify as omnivores (Derbyshire, 2017; Worsley & Lea, 2008) and females report greater dissonance when it comes to issues relating to meat consumption and animal welfare (Dowsett et al., 2018). Younger Australians are also more likely to demonstrate concern about the ethical

impacts of meat eating (Lea & Worsley, 2002, 2003) as well as those with higher levels of education (Lea et al., 2006).

It is also worth noting that despite the high levels of meat consumption in Australia, media coverage of issues relating to factory farming (Animals Australia, 2015) and farm animal suffering tends to create a public outcry (Tiplady et al., 2012) with calls for animal cruelty to stop (Sinclair et al., 2018). Exposure to cruelty in food production practices (Sinclair et al., 2018) has also resulted in many Australians (65%) claiming to support foods produced through more humane means (Humane Research Council, 2014). In addition, flexitarianism, which involves various ways of reducing or replacing meats (Dagevos, 2016), is also becoming increasingly popular in Australia (Charlebois, 2019; Sakkal & Fowler, 2019). In view of the relatively sparse literature on contemporary meat-eating practices and the meat paradox in Australia, the findings from this study will further elaborate upon these themes.

## **1.2 The meat paradox in India**

Current data shows that India, overall, has much lower levels of meat consumption (approximately 4 kilograms per capita, annually) compared to the global average of approximately 35 kilograms per capita (OECD, 2019). However, many are shifting from strict plant-based diets towards diets containing greater amounts of meat (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006). This is due to an increasing number of people in the emerging middle classes who can afford to eat meat for nutritional, sensory, and symbolic reasons (Dagevos, 2016). Although, India is home to a wide diversity of cultures and eating practices (Majumdar, 2010; Sinha, 2011), meat-eating in general tends to be higher among India's urban populations than among its rural and semi-rural populations (National Sample Survey Office, 2012).

On the other hand, given long-standing cultural stigmas associated with meat-eating in India (Khara, Riedy, & Ruby, 2020), meat-based foods are kept segregated from vegetarian foods in many Indian schools, workplaces (Waghmore, 2017) and religious places (Alam, 2017a; Dolphijn, 2006; Sharan, 2006). This cultural stigma has also resulted in some Indians underreporting their levels of meat consumption (Bansal, 2016) and experiencing conflict towards the practice of meat-eating (Khara et al., 2020). At a broader level, this also reflects the present-day dissonance in contemporary urban India, which on one hand seeks to embrace new consumption

practices (Mathur, 2014), but on the other is conscious of maintaining long-standing traditions (Sinha, 2011). The topic of meat consumption in many emerging markets, such as India, is relatively under-researched and the present study aims to address this gap. Against the backdrop of this current knowledge, our study aims to provide insight into the meat paradox in India and compare these findings with Australia.

## **2. Research design and methods**

Our exploration of the cross-cultural meat paradox is situated within the larger aim of this study which sought to explore contemporary meat-eating practices in urban Australia and urban India. It did so through this key question - what meat-eating practices are prevalent in each urban culture? This helped provide an understanding of meat-eating as well as some insight into how meat animals are perceived and how dissonance in relation to consuming animals is experienced across each culture. In addition, there were some specific questions relating to animal welfare and meat-eating which were also explored at the end of each interview. These helped provide further insight into the meat paradox:

- **What are your views towards animals in general?**
  - Is there a difference between pet animals and other types of animals?
  - What do you think about the practice of animals being farmed for meat?
  - When it comes to farm animal welfare, how important is this issue to you?

To date, many studies on the meat-paradox, including those spanning the broader topic of cognitive dissonance theory, tend to largely follow a survey-based approach when examining inconsistency phenomena (Panagiotou & Kadianaki, 2019). The limitations of such an approach however can include an overreliance on predominantly correlational methodologies (Piazza et al., 2015) and attempting to understand decision-making in a manner which may not actually represent what occurs in the real world (Rothgerber, 2014). By drawing upon constructivist grounded theory, our study aimed to explore how meanings are created and situated across different socio-cultural contexts. Thus, by going beyond the explicitly stated data, our findings focused on the tacit meanings behind values, beliefs and ideologies (Charmaz, 1996, 2006, 2008) and explored the nuances of how discomfort, conflict and dissonance are experienced (Panagiotou & Kadianaki, 2019).

The main data source for our study comprised 55 hour-long, semi-structured face to face interviews. Through these interviews, there was an emphasis on gathering rich and descriptive data (Charmaz, 1996). The interviews were audio-recorded, and reflective notes were written during and immediately after the interviews. Our interviews were supplemented by observations of eating practices conducted in various public settings. The observations in Australia - which spanned a period from September 2018 to June 2020 - were conducted in Sydney at various times. A total of five Australian observations are included as part of the analysis in our study. A total of seven Indian observations occurred across two trips to Mumbai. The first round of observations commenced in October 2018, following from the in-depth interviews. The second round occurred as part of another trip to India in October 2019. In both these countries, the observations involved visits to places such as shops, malls, restaurants and markets, and observing the manner in which animals and meat are presented, sold and consumed in various settings. This helped provide a deeper understanding of how meat-eating practices are situated within and shaped by different socio-cultural contexts (Daly 2020). This information was then compared to the interviews to triangulate the findings and build a richer picture.

## **2.1 Participants**

Our study focused on urban meat-eaters in Australia and India. The majority of Australians (86%) live in urban centres (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a). In comparison, India has a relatively smaller urban proportion of the population (35%; Central Intelligence Agency, 2018b) although the levels of meat consumption are higher in urban India than in the semi-urban and rural regions (National Sample Survey Office, 2012). Therefore, participants in this study were drawn from urban centres – 22 Sydney residents and 33 Mumbai residents. Sydney was chosen as it is Australia's most populated and most culturally-diverse city (Central Intelligence Agency 2017a; ABS 2017) and Mumbai was chosen is one of India's largest cities (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018b) and is a multicultural hub (Gulliver, 2008). Participants in both countries were aged 23 to 45 years.

We recruited Australian participants using two approaches. First, we advertised the study on career websites at The University of New South Wales and The University of Technology Sydney. Then, in order to ensure that our sample also included a good number of participants with conservative political views, which past

research has shown are associated with more positive attitudes toward meat consumption (e.g., Hayley, Zinkiewicz, & Hardiman, 2015; Ruby, 2012; Ruby, Heine, Kamble, Cheng, & Waddar, 2013), we used Facebook to advertise our study to users who “liked” things such as hunting, conservative political parties, and conservative media channels. This helped in terms of identifying conservatives given Facebook pages are similar to private user profiles and ‘liking’ these indicates the user’s wish belong to the community (Pöyry et al., 2013) and express their self-identity (Malhotra et al., 2013). Given differences in conservative and liberal motivations towards meat consumption (Rothgerber, 2020), we aimed to understand differences in meat-eating practices, which also includes the meat paradox, across the two groups. The Australian sample also included more men (15) than women (7).

In India, the recruitment comprised a mix of Facebook advertising and using a market research agency based in Mumbai. As previous work found that education levels and disposable incomes can significantly impact one’s ability to make informed and deliberate consumption choices (Khara, 2015), and given meat is a relatively expensive commodity in India (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010), the recruitment focused on more affluent socio-economic segments (The Market Research Society of India, 2011). In addition, as religion is a key factor that determines attitudes relating to meat consumption in India (Devi et al., 2014), we focused on religion as a key criterion in the recruitment process. The Indian participants were mainly Hindu, which reflects the majority of the country’s population (80%), while other participants came from Muslim backgrounds as they comprise a large religious minority (13%; The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2011). Given the practice of killing and consuming animals is taboo in some facets of Hindu culture (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010), we hypothesised the dissonance in relation to meat-eating would be more pronounced among Hindu as opposed to Muslim groups. The sample included a fairly even split of men (17) and women (16).

## **2.2 Procedure**

A pilot study was conducted in Sydney prior to the main study. Seven pilot interviews were conducted with Australian participants, and eight with recent arrivals from India. The sample was obtained through placing advertisements on university career websites and on social media. The pilot study with Indian participants only focused on their views and experiences while they were living in India. As there were

no significant methodological changes between the pilot and main study, we combined the two data sources.

All interviews were conducted predominantly in English as it is the most widely spoken language in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and is also India's subsidiary official language (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018b). The interviews in Sydney were conducted at a mix of outdoor venues such as university campuses, cafes, and restaurants. The interviews in Mumbai were conducted in a single location – a restaurant in Nariman Point in downtown Mumbai – as the city's traffic can often result in unpredictable and delayed travel times (Acharya, 2019). All participants were provided light refreshments and a chance to participate in a lucky draw where one winner was awarded AUD \$200 (approximately INR 10,000).

At the start of the interview, participants were asked to complete the Schwartz values Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; (Schwartz et al., 2001), a widely used tool for values measurement that is considered suitable for cross-cultural research. We theorised that value orientation would help to explain meat consumption practices. However, no relationship was found between values and either meat consumption practices or views towards animals. Therefore, we do not discuss the PVQ any further in this paper.

### **2.3 Data analysis**

The research used an iterative study design, which entailed cycles of simultaneous data collection, analysis, and adaptations to some questions to refine the emerging theory. This meant that, as the data collection progressed, unexpected topics raised by a participant could be explored further with subsequent participants (Charmaz, 1996). Individual cases, incidents, or experiences were then progressively developed into more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize the data, and identify patterned relationships within it (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008). Within the parameters of the research objectives, saturation of interview findings was adequately reached upon completion of the fifty-five interviews. Coding was done using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software to help sort and keep track of different categories and corresponding sections of text, thereby making it convenient to work through large amounts of data.

### **2.4 Ethics**



Prior to the commencement of this study, the research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Technology Sydney (ETH18-2328). During recruitment, each participant was informed of the purpose of this study and the recruitment proceeded only once the participant was satisfied with the requirements of the study and provided written consent. All participant information was treated in a confidential manner.

### **3. Research findings**

Our research findings present Australian and Indian participant accounts of the meat paradox, and various strategies used to resolve the paradox in each culture. We begin by presenting participant accounts in relation to animal suffering to provide some context in relation to the meat paradox.

#### **3.1 Participant reactions in both countries towards animal suffering**

Participants in both countries unanimously reported feeling concerned and even distressed in relation to how farm animals are treated. They felt it was wrong that farm animals are mistreated in such a manner and made to suffer when alive. Australian participants discussed being exposed to farm animal suffering mostly via the media and, in some instances, on farms as well:

- ... slaughterhouses, every now and then the media has come out where they treat animals terribly in there and I think those are really, really bad things...it's just unnecessary suffering (RL, male, 23-29 years, Australia)
- She (friend) lives up in Toowoomba and she took us out on her rounds...I saw how pigs were farmed...and I was really horrified...I saw the barriers they have to live in and they can't turn around...I don't know whether you've met a pig but they are like dogs...I thought how could you let something that is that sentient live like that!...that really deeply affected me actually (RH, female, 40-45 years, Australia)

Reflecting previous findings on negative public reactions towards the Australian live animal export trade (Sinclair et al., 2018; Tiplady et al., 2012), some participants reported feeling disgust in relation to recent news stories on the treatment of live farm animal exports:

- If you're going to export meat, there are a couple of things – like export the meat as meat, handle the animals here in a fair as possible manner instead of making them suffer and then kill them...so that's where you also keep the jobs in the country as well...I think it's disgusting the way they treat those poor animals, it's heartbreaking (NW, male, 30-39 years, Australia)

While the farming and slaughter of animals in Australia often occurs in remote locations away from public view (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016), in many developing countries, such as India, animals are often sold and slaughtered in open access wet markets (Chatterjee, 2017; The World Bank, 2011). Exposure to live scenes of animal suffering and slaughter appeared to increase dissonance among some Indian participants. Some even reported temporarily losing their appetite:

- We went to a fish market, and we bought a live fish...And after we brought it home, my mom was like, "Oh my God, what am I gonna do? I can't kill it"...we actually saw the fish wriggling around...She finally killed it or whatever. I didn't see it being killed. But she made it for dinner, and I couldn't eat it. Because I'd seen it alive, and I knew that same fish is on my table. I just lost my appetite (NB, female, 30-39 years, India)

Others chose to avoid scenes that caused emotional distress, as narrated below by a participant. To this point, Festinger (1957) states that people may simply avoid situations that are likely to increase their dissonance:

- I went to buy fresh chicken...So I walked up to the guy and I said I want a kilo of chickens. So when he slaughtered the chicken in front of me, I wept and I wept and I wept... and this poor man is looking at me saying, "You don't want the chicken?" I said, "No, no. I want the chicken." And then I came home, I couldn't eat chicken that day. However, after that, every now and then I will go to him...I'd tell him this is what I want and I'd walk off. So I'd come back after half an hour and he got it cleaned and cut. Still, I don't want to think...my conditioning is such that I am a meat eater (TS, female, 40-45 years, India)

In other instances, some Indian participants discussed becoming accustomed to animal slaughter over time. To this point, previous work has highlighted that repeated exposure to distressing circumstances may create emotional apathy (Moser & Dilling, 2004; Shome & Marx, 2009) and may result in some repressing this

information (McDonald, 2000). Some may also seek to avoid acknowledging that their behaviour and belief are at tension altogether, as a way of coping with their dissonance (Rothgerber, 2020):

- I've seen a hen cutting in front of my eye many times. But it pinches...It feels like you're not killing a hen, you're killing yourself sometimes ... (but) it's a part of my life and I'm used to it...I can't change all of a sudden to become a vegetarian (AN, male, 30-39 years, India)

The meat paradox was noted across both cultures as participants reported feeling emotional distress when exposed to animal suffering. Indian participants tended to have more direct experience of animal suffering whereas Australian participants were exposed to this mainly through the media. To this point, one might expect that a more direct experience of animal suffering is likely to cause greater dissonance, as other literature has also highlighted that exposure to graphic scenes of animal cruelty can trigger strong emotions (Munro, 2015; Tiplady et al., 2012). However, some Indian participants reported gradually becoming accustomed to this. Thus, defence mechanisms such as numbing (Ross, 2003; Slovic, 2010) and emotional avoidance (Rothgerber, 2014) appear to have been used as coping strategies here. Having discussed participant reactions towards animal suffering, the subsequent sections highlight various strategies used to address the meat paradox. We start by discussing some cross-cultural similarities across the two countries.

### **3.4 Strategies to resolve the meat paradox: Cross-cultural similarities**

Dichotomizing animals into those we care for and those we eat is one way in which some might address their meat paradox (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016). This dichotomy arises as a result of carnism, a belief system where one learns to view certain animal species as suitable for consumption but not others (Joy, 2010). While the categorisation of edible and inedible animals exists across cultures (Joy, 2010), this categorisation can also vary by culture (Rothgerber, 2020). In this study, there were several cross-cultural similarities noted in relation to the way participants experienced the meat paradox. For one, the thought of killing and consuming a dog, considered a pet in both cultures, caused distress among participants across both cultures:

- No, I wouldn't eat a dog...I guess because, in Australian culture, they've never been considered as something you eat. It's something that you have as a pet (RK, male, 30-39 years, Australia)
- ...this dog festival thing, somewhere in China...I was quite horrified that somebody is eating dog meat... I wouldn't do it personally (PK, male, 30-39 years, India)

Perceptions of cuteness – in pets as well as baby animals – also created conflict as these animals were considered 'too cute' to consume. This is concordant with previous findings where people report greater dissonance about eating animals that look cute (Ruby & Heine, 2012; Sherman & Haidt, 2011):

- ...cute animals are a lot easier to empathize with... So things like puppies and dolphins...they're (lambs) quite cute...I am a little bit uncomfortable with the idea of lamb being killed (MC, male, 30-39 years, Australia)
- I've seen so many cat videos ...It's the affection that keeps us going...they are so cute to have...A cat is not grown to consume, they are there to be kept as a pet (AS, male, 23-29 years, India).

In addition, perceptions of animal intelligence also seemed to create dissonance. Previous literature similarly indicates that perceptions of intelligence in an animal (Ruby & Heine, 2012) or belief in animal mind (Bastian, Loughnan, et al., 2012) makes people less willing to consume the animal:

- I think that an octopus is really smart and I feel really guilty if I've eaten an octopus and I love eating octopus (laughs)...I've seen videos of octopus coming up to divers and interacting...people do say that they've got millions of these neuroreceptors and they're really smart (RH, female, 40-45 years, Australia)

On the other hand, some participants gave examples of how people in certain parts of the world consumed animals which they would consider unusual. Thus by extending carnist meat-eating principles of Normal, Natural, and Necessary (Joy, 2010) towards other species, some tended to justify their own meat consumption

practices. Furthermore, by redefining 'unethical behaviours', some may also attempt to blur distinctions between right and wrong (Barkan, Ayal, & Ariely, 2015):

- If you go to Northeast, in Assam, in Nagaland (in India)...you will get to see a lot of delicacies made out of worms, insects and reptiles. It's very common for them. It's their delicacy. So it's the same with me... Just be open to eating everything without judging. No matter what it is (PG, female, 23-29 years, India)
- I don't think anything negative towards people in Asia that eat dogs that people have as pets because that's just what they do over there. And it's no different to us eating a cow (BP, male, 30-39 years, Australia)

The consumption of companion animals was more likely to create dissonance among participants in both countries. On the other hand, when ethical dissonance arises, some might become resistant to acknowledging that their behaviours are wrong (Rothgerber, 2020). As also noted in our study, some stated that eating animals, irrespective of species, is a norm across several cultures. In this way, a reliance on external norms (Bastian, Costello, et al., 2012; Loughnan et al., 2010) was used to resolve the meat paradox. Having covered some of the cross-cultural overlaps, the subsequent sections in this paper will highlight country specific findings while also discussing some key differences noted across each culture. We begin with our findings on Australia.

### **3.2 Strategies to resolve the meat paradox: Australia**

Meat has long been a key part of Australian culture and identity. However, recent awareness of ethical and environmental issues related to animal farming is causing some concern. Thus, in an attempt to reduce discomfort in relation to this as well as one's own dietary practices, Australian participants discussed using a variety of dissonance-reducing strategies. These have been elaborated upon in the following sections.

#### **3.2.1. Ethical and environmental issues relating to meat consumption in Australia**

Many Australian participants mentioned meat was often present at the dinner table at home and was deemed necessary for a '*balanced diet*'. To this point, one participant even mentioned that his family of cattle farmers have traditionally not been in favour of alternative diets as these are seen to not support the Australian way of life. Bastian and Loughnan (2016) highlight that individual dissonance can thus be reduced through institutionalization, where individual practices, such as meat consumption, are supported by and embedded within larger social practices:

- I think that (meat consumption) probably characterizes quite well their (reference to family) food practices - and so if anything's a huge variation with that, then they're probably going to resist it some extent...they almost view it as an insult if you are consuming things that they don't make...My understanding of quinoa is that it isn't really made in Australia. Yeah, they would probably resist that because you're not supporting Australian farmers. It's a very big deal, supporting Australian farmers (RL, male, 23-29 years, Australia)

Among Australian participants, there was also relatively greater awareness of factory farming and its related problems. However, for some, issues such as the growing human population and overconsumption in other parts of the world were discussed as the main contributors to the problem, rather than one's own meat consumption being a moral concern. To counter their own dissonance and guilt, some individuals may resort to strategically distorting their perceptions and convincing themselves that this type of behaviour does not really apply to them (Rothgerber, 2020). In this way, people might view their individual actions as being "a mere drop in the ocean of collective harm" (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016, p. 281):

- It's more about that there's a meat industry and it's the industrialization of meat that I think would be the problem than the fact that we eat meat (LL, female, 40-45 years, Australia)
- The reason why there is more meat consumption is because...all those developing countries are getting wealthier...So that's the biggest driver. It's not the guy like me (NW, male, 30-39 years, Australia)

Other participants discussed limiting their meat intake. To this point, previous literature has also highlighted that some may seek to reduce dissonance by looking at more ethical alternatives (Szmigin et al., 2009). One way in which an individual might adopt ethical alternatives is through engaging in more flexible forms of behaviour (Szmigin et al., 2009) such as reducetarianism:

- This is the analogy - when the Titanic sank you don't say 'oh I don't have room for everyone, throw everyone overboard, out of lifeboats', you do what you can. I guess that's the philosophy of reducetarianism, eating one bit of chicken a month is better than a person who eats it twice a day (AL, male, 40-45 years, Australia)

In addition to reducetarianism, buying animal-based foods produced through more humane means was also used as a way of addressing the meat paradox. Thus, by assuming the position of the 'conscientious omnivore' (Rothgerber, 2015) one may use this as a "shield" against their own dissonance experienced in relation to their meat consumption (Rothgerber, 2020, p. 5):

- At some point, a death of an animal is involved and there are ways that animals can be put down without pain...it also ends up resulting in a better product because they don't get stressed (MC, male, 30-39 years, Australia)

As highlighted here, some participants, in their attempt to address the meat paradox, discussed changing their behaviours to adopt more sustainable dietary practices. Others chose to minimise individual roles and responsibilities in relation to the problem of meat consumption. Other dissonance-reducing strategies also involved criticisms directed towards alternative dietary practices such as vegetarianism. We elaborate upon this in the next section.

### **3.2.2. Criticisms of plant-based eating in Australia**

Some Australian participants claimed to feel uncomfortable when in the presence of vegetarians/vegans. This also reflects past work where meat-eaters report feeling conflicted in the presence of plant-based eaters as they may perceive them taking moral positions that they are unwilling to take (Adams, 2001). In addition, some meat-eaters may also fear moral reproach (Minson & Monin, 2012):

- Sometimes I feel like if I order some kind of meat dish, are they (vegetarian friends) going to be judgmental and negative towards it? (RK, male, 30-39 years, Australia)

Further to these points, vegetarians may also serve as an uncomfortable reminder that some have succeeded in making ethical food choices whereas those experiencing dissonance have somehow failed to act in a similarly ethical way (Rothgerber, 2020). Thus, when it comes to reducing dissonance, one tactic may involve drawing upon new information (Festinger, 1957) which either supports existing behaviours (Adams, 1961; Engel, 1963) or refutes the alternatives (Cummings & Venkatesan, 1976). This was noted in our study as some participants discussed inconsistency in vegetarian/vegan dietary practices. By pointing out flaws within the plant-based eater, meat-eaters may, to some degree, use this as a way to reduce their own dissonance by shifting attention away from their own behaviours (Rothgerber, 2014):

- Hypocrite (reference to plant-based consumers)...they just want to be seen to be doing the right thing and in the right environment...they're trying to put themselves in a certain hipster category...there are a hell of a lot of vegetarians and vegans who are not true to themselves...it's just that to do it properly I think you've basically got to be making your own food (SG, male, 40-45 years, Australia)

On the other hand, some mentioned that, while they were concerned about animal suffering, they also considered strict plant-based diets to be relatively unhealthy. This reflects previous literature in that some Australians may view vegetarianism as extreme (Lea & Worsley, 2003). In this regard, their dissonance was reduced given the perceived lack of attractive alternatives (Festinger, 1957):

- ...with meat, you're sort of giving yourself a complete diet, but with veganism, not only are they shunning meat, but...No more dairy, no more eggs, no more cheese, nothing like that. You're really kind of depriving yourself of...the nutrients...when you see a lot of these vegans, they don't look well, you know? (DC, male, 23-29 years, Australia)



While meat consumption is widespread in Australia, growing awareness of unsustainable farming practices (Voiceless, 2012) appears to be contributing to the meat paradox. Dissonance can be reduced by either changing one's beliefs or behaviours (McMaster & Lee, 1991) and Australian participants appeared to use a mix of strategies. Some behaviours were modified by adopting alternatives perceived to be more ethical. On the other hand, traditional belief systems such as meat being a necessary dietary requirement as well as cynicism towards alternative diets were also used to reduce dissonance. Our next sections will highlight how the meat paradox was experienced by Indian participants and strategies used to resolve their dissonance. As part of our discussion, we will compare some of the Indian findings with those from Australia.

### **3.3 Strategies to resolve the meat paradox: India**

Rising levels of urbanisation (Ali, Kapoor, & Moorthy, 2010) and exposure to new global practices (Khara & Ruby, 2019) are changing Indian consumption practices. However, there are long-standing traditional practices that are seen to conflict with these new practices, and can thus give rise to dissonance. This is elaborated upon in the following sections of the paper.

#### **3.3.1 Changing meat consumption practices in India**

In comparison to the Australian participants, there was relatively less awareness of factory farming and its related problems among Indian participants. This is likely due to the fact that, until fairly recently, the practice of industrialized meat production was more widespread in developed countries (Thornton, 2010). However, meat production in India is gradually changing from small-scale backyard farming into large-scale factory farming (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006). Furthermore, the growth of the meat-retailing industry in India means that, similar to many industrialized nations, consumption and production practices in India are becoming increasingly disjointed (Kumar & Kapoor, 2014). In the present study, participants discussed how meat could now be purchased at supermarkets, which meant that one was no longer exposed to the suffering, blood, and gore of the animal slaughtering process. Hence, distancing (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016; Rothgerber, 2014) – a commonplace strategy in many

industrialized Western nations, where one views the animal as separate from meat (Hoogland, de Boer, & Boersema, 2005) – appears to be increasing in India as well:

- Nowadays you know, when you go to the markets and all, especially supermarkets you get clean cuts. Even the chicken is very clean. They are nicely cut. They've removed everything, you know, the blood and all. Nicely wrapped into a tray, cling wrap (FK, female, 30-39 years, India)

Socio-economic changes in India have also helped transform urban Indian culture and consumption practices (Mathur, 2010). Not only are many urban Indians becoming increasingly distanced from the origins of meat, many also consider the practice of meat consumption to be novel and modern as compared to traditional vegetarianism (Khara & Ruby, 2019). This was also noted in our study's findings in that any conflict experienced in relation to animal suffering appears to be overshadowed by the desire to seek the new and different. On the other hand, in many ways, India also remains conscious of maintaining aspects of its long-standing traditions (Hensoldt-Fyda, 2018; Mathur, 2014). In this regard, social context is an important factor when it comes to understanding influences on the meat paradox. This is elaborated upon in the following sections.

### **3.3.2 Traditional Indian consumption practices and the meat paradox**

This section explores the meat paradox from the perspective of Hindu and Muslim participants in India, starting with the former. Some Hindu participants reported experiencing dissonance given the religion's emphasis on vegetarianism (Puskar-Pasewicz, 2010). This is because many Hindus tend to believe in reincarnation and karma (Davidson, 2003) and view humans as being in a continuum with other life forms (Hutchinson & Sharp, 2008).

- ...we believe in God...we never eat non-veg...In our caste, nobody eats and I was eating...It's wrong that we are killing (animals) (PA, male, 30-39 years, India)

Different cultural categorisations of animals can also lead to different experiences of the meat-paradox (Joy 2010). In this case, religion played an important role in these categorisations as Hindu participants discussed their dissonance in relation to beef consumption in particular:

- I'm sure my mom would have had a big problem if she found out I started eating beef...She passed away in 2006 and around then is when I started experimenting with beef...She would have had a problem (with this) – “You’re eating Krishna Bhagwan’s (God) favourite animal!” (KS, male, 30-39 years, India)

When it came to reducing this dissonance, like the Australian participants, some Indian participants pointed out the discrepancies and inconsistencies in vegetarian practices. However, these were discussed in relation to religious and caste-based norms:

- Actually, we are killing plants...Jainism said you should not pluck onions...Over there also we are killing someone, and over here also they are killing someone to feed someone...so it's a life cycle. You cannot stop it (RK, male, 23-29 years, India)
- Even Brahmins in India have non-veg these days...They might be having a particular taste for non-veg, I don't know if such people would be indulging in a (secret) addiction of some kind you know? (AG, male, 23-29 years, India)

In a similar vein, the perceived hypocrisy of plant-based eaters, as pointed out by Australian participants, was also mentioned by Indian participants, albeit for different reasons. The beef ban in India, enforced by Hindu vigilante groups (Alam, 2017b; Biswas, 2017) is viewed as hypocritical in that animal welfare has been used as a facade to promote religious far-right ideologies (Narayanan, 2018; Tharoor, 2017). Similarly, the participants in this study criticised the ‘double standards’ in relation to the beef ban and the promotion of vegetarianism. Thus, it seems that by highlighting the religious hypocrisy, participants may have also looked to reducing their own meat-eating dissonance, particularly in a culture that can be relatively intolerant towards individual deviations from socially sacred norms (Fershtman et al., 2011):

- India has BJP who promotes a lot of vegetarianism and stuff, and that is mostly towards cows more than any other animal. I find that it's bullshit because if you love animals you should love each and every animal (AG, male, 23-29 years, India)

- I think there are double standards everywhere because I live in a country or I live in a state where beef has been banned. India remains one of the top exporters of beef in the world (TS, female, 40-45 years, India)

Similar to Hindu participants, Muslim participants also reported experiencing dissonance in relation to their consumption practices. Many reported feeling conflicted about animal slaughter but attempted to resolve their dissonance by highlighting that meat-eating, unlike in many Hindu practices, is justified in Islam. Thus, religious teachings were a key factor when it came to resolving the meat paradox. To this point, other work similarly highlights how some may justify their meat consumption through beliefs relating to human dominion over animals for religious reasons (Piazza et al., 2015; Rothgerber, 2013):

- This is just an animal, the God's has said only, you know this is thing, we have sent this thing to eat for you only...Those are the command of God. So we think and do it (SA, male, 20-29 years, India)

During the festival of 'Bakri Eid'<sup>1</sup> in India – which is also known as the festival of sacrifice (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.; First Post, 2019) – some Muslim participants reported experiencing pity and discomfort in relation to the animal's imminent death. Others discussed developing a bond with the animal, prior to its sacrifice, but chose to participate in the ritual for a larger cause deemed to benefit both the animal and person. To this point, Bastian and Loughnan (2016) highlight that benevolence, where humans may view themselves as custodians of the animals and therefore feel they have a right over an animal's life, is one strategy used to resolve the meat paradox. In this regard, by citing reasons relating "natural selection, human evolution, and to God him/herself...the meat eater is excused for outcomes that would otherwise be objectionable" (Rothgerber, 2020, p. 7):

- I used to cry because the bakra (goat) used to come (home) two days before. We used to give it a name, and then, play with it...The animal, it used to cry (before its sacrifice). I know that. But then, we were used to it...we were told that they (the sacrificed animals) help you when you die...the animal is innocent, he'll put you on

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources refer to the festival of sacrifice as Bakri Eid whereas some participants called it Bakra Eid. Despite the different terms used, this refers to the same religious festival.

your back and cross (the bridge which leads to heaven)...Because he's innocent, he will be able to cross that bridge (SS, female, 40-45 years, India)

One participant reported feeling disturbed and losing her appetite during the festival of 'Bakri Eid'. She, hence, chose to resolve her dissonance through avoidance (Rothgerber, 2014) where she closed her windows at home, during the animal's sacrifice, as the experience was described as emotionally overwhelming:

- ...in my house, if that thing (reference to slaughter) is happening also, I just shut my windows and everything...When you slaughter the animal, of course they'll make the noise, so that disturbs me...And during that days, I cannot eat also so properly...  
...two, three days I'm feeding that animal and all of a sudden, if it's slaughtered in front of you, it's quite disturbing for me (TS, female, 30-39 years, India)

Others resolved the dissonance by changing their behaviours. This involved refusing to participate in the festival of sacrifice or looking to alternative practices, such as marking the ritual by cutting a cake with a goat on it rather than an actual animal:

- During Eid times, the goat's getting killed. So nowadays what people did was instead of killing goats, they cut the cakes...they had a goat cake and they were cutting that, instead of killing the goats. It was like a protest... you feel very sad that it's happening in India, the way they have been treated it's very bad (LS, male, 23-29 years, India)

Muslim and Hindu experiences of the meat paradox appear to sit in contrast to one another. Muslim participants reported feeling conflicted in relation to animal suffering but some were compelled by religious practices to slaughter and consume the animal. On the other hand, many Hindu participants were conflicted due to religious teachings which emphasised the opposite – i.e., vegetarianism and non-violence towards animals.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

Many studies on the meat paradox, to date, tend to focus excessively on experimental quantitative procedures (Buttler & Walther, 2018; Kunst & Hohle, 2016; Piazza et al., 2015; Rothgerber, 2014). Thus, this topic could benefit more from

research which explores the nuances, characteristics and dynamics of contradictory thought processes (Panagiotou & Kadianaki, 2019) as well as the influence of the socio-cultural context upon these (Rothgerber, 2020). This paper aims to explore the cross-cultural meat paradox using constructivism as its main research paradigm. In contrast to positivist approaches, constructivism views the world as comprising multiple individual realities influenced by social context (Charmaz, 2000). By exploring the meanings attached to meat-eating as well as the role of family, community and the media in influencing meat-eating practices, our study focused on enhancing our understanding of the meat paradox in each country and the socio-cultural conventions which have helped influenced this.

Traditionally, Australia and India have differed in their socio-cultural practices in many ways. However, there were several common strategies noted when it came to reducing dissonance towards meat-eating. These included various forms of distancing (Bastian & Amiot, 2019; Rothgerber, 2014), belief in human superiority over animals (Dhont et al., 2019; Regan, 2004; Singer, 2009), carnism (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016; Joy, 2010), and criticism of alternative dietary practices (Adams, 2001; Rothgerber, 2014).

Despite the similarities, the ways in which these strategies manifested reflect some of the socio-cultural and institutional differences that prevail across the two countries. In Australia, the plight of animals on factory farms is a distant reality for many. However, the mistreatment of farm animals has been a recent area of focus in the media (Sinclair et al., 2018; Tiplady et al., 2012). This appears to have created some dissonance towards the traditional meat-heavy diet. As a result, many Australian participants claimed they have reduced their meat consumption or have looked at kinder alternatives. On the other hand, in India, open air wet markets, where live animals are slaughtered in public view, are still widely prevalent (Chatterjee, 2017; The World Bank, 2011). Although Indian participants discussed being disturbed by this, many used emotional numbing (Nabi, 1998) and avoidance (Rothgerber, 2014) to overcome their dissonance.

Participants from both countries also discussed instances of moral hypocrisy in relation to vegetarian/vegan practices. However, while Australian participants mentioned the self-proclaimed vegetarians who might succumb to a dietary lapse, Indian participants highlighted these inconsistencies in relation to religious and caste-based norms – i.e., the use of garlic and onion in Indian food despite some

religious faiths prohibiting this, meat-consuming Brahmins, and the cow protection movement being promoted by groups with a hidden religious agenda. Thus, as noted in both countries, the strategy to reduce one's dissonance involved judging the moral transgressions of others more harshly in comparison to one's own (Barkan et al., 2012). However, the way in which this strategy manifested was different in each country given their different socio-cultural contexts. In this regard, paradoxes can be socially constituted (Panagiotou & Kadianaki, 2019).

In addition, there were also some differences noted across the two major religious groups within India – Hindus and Muslims. Some Hindu participants reported feeling guilt in relation to meat consumption as they were violating customary norms. In contrast, some Muslim participants felt conflicted about committing violence towards animals but felt mandated to do so according to their religious rituals. This reflects other findings that individuals from collectivist cultures, in general, are more likely to experience guilt if they are seen to violate sacred social norms (Wong & Tsai, 2007).

#### **4.1 Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study was the exclusive focus on urban participants and thus it did not take into account potential differences in the way urban and rural participants might experience the meat paradox. To this point, a recent Australian study highlighted that urbanites, who are more distant from the meat production process (Bastian & Loughnan, 2016), are more likely to feel conflicted about meat production and consumption as compared to rural Australians (Bray et al., 2016). There also might be similar such differences in India given the levels of meat consumption are relatively lower in the semi-rural and rural regions as compared to its urban regions (National Sample Survey Office, 2012). In this regard, the findings encompass a somewhat limited representation of the cross-cultural meat paradox.

Furthermore, when attempting to understand ambivalence or the “psychological tug-of-war between opposing evaluations”, one limitation is that studies often tend to over rely on participants' potentially biased reporting into their own psychological states (Schneider et al., 2015, p. 2). Another challenge with self-reported data is that participants may also underreport their levels of meat consumption in order to reduce their dissonance (Dowsett et al., 2018; Rothgerber,

2013). This raises questions about the extent to which some participants changed certain behaviours – such as adopting more ethical alternatives, cutting back on meat consumption, or refusing to participate in sacrificial rituals – as a means to reduce their dissonance. Indeed, other literature highlights that some participants may emphasize certain behaviours that they think are appropriate while simultaneously downplaying perceived inappropriate behaviours in order to create a positive impression on the interviewer (e.g., Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002; Jones, 1983).

In addition, the primary researcher of this study follows a plant-based diet for ethical reasons. Although this was not disclosed to the participants, it raises the possibility of there being some subconscious bias on part of the researcher (Pillow, 2003; Probst, 2015) that may have coloured interpretations of meat-eater accounts of the meat paradox. However, Charmaz (2000) highlights that researcher subjectivity is an inevitable part of constructivist grounded theory. Therefore, we should not attempt to remove researcher subjectivity from the resulting theory, but rather, should aim to prioritize the data over any prior knowledge or views in relation to the topic (Charmaz, 2000). In this study, this was done was through gathering perspectives from multiple researchers as part of the analysis (Gordon & Langmaid, 1998), some of whom have different dietary practices. In addition, triangulation – through the use of secondary data sources – helped with obtaining diverse viewpoints (Olsen, 2004) and with validating and corroborating the data gathered for this study (Ramalho, Adams, Huggard, & Hoare, 2015).

## **4.2 Potential applications**

Cognitive dissonance is reduced when the alternative choices are not deemed as attractive as the current choice (Brehm, 1956; Festinger, 1957). This creates the need to make the alternatives to consuming animals more appealing. Previous studies have shown that humane education is effective in encouraging compassion towards animals (Bekoff 2012; Taylor & Signal 2005). This is because such programmes foster empathy (Daly & Suggs, 2010; Faver, 2010), which also helps mediate aggressive tendencies towards both humans and non-human animals (Ascione & Arkow, 1999). In addition, animal-related stories can also help foster stronger human-animal bonds (Faver, 2010). Some examples include the 90s movie 'Babe', which featured the story of a pig destined to be slaughtered and eaten. The



movie helped turn some of its audience into vegetarians – a phenomenon known as ‘The Babe Effect’ – after the audience developed empathy for the pig and were shown the social bonds that existed between the farm animals (Nobis, 2009). Another example is the recent Netflix film ‘Okja’, which features the relationship between a young girl and a ‘superpig’ who had been genetically engineered to fulfil the world’s growing appetite for meat (McCorry, 2017). The film reportedly led many viewers to question their decisions to consume meat (Ellwood, 2017; McCorry, 2017; Ramsier, 2017). Therefore, removing perspectives that objectify farm animals while continuing to increase their visibility in popular culture (Morgan & Cole, 2011) is likely to change our views towards them because, for one, perceptions of animal sentience make people less willing to consume an animal (Loughnan et al., 2014; Ruby & Heine, 2012). In this regard, the continuing emphasis on “nearness, equality and recognition” may also help encourage greater empathy (Sollund, 2017, p. 9).

Looking ahead, it might also be worth asking what could be done to widen our circle of compassion? One suggestion might involve establishing a culture of kindness and compassion. Making kindness ‘cool’, for example, is currently being considered in schools to stop bullying and encourage greater empathy among students (Kaplan, DeBlois, Dominguez, & Walsh, 2016). Similarly, some animal welfare organisations, as part of their attempt to dismantle meat’s association with power and dominance, have highlighted that kindness is a strength (PETA, 2013). In this regard, there is the underlying message that “it requires courage, self-control and resolve to feel and express compassion and empathy for animals” (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018, p. 345).

### **4.3 Future research directions**

The findings from the present study highlighted similarities and differences in relation to the meat paradox in Australia and India. Looking ahead, future research should explore the meat paradox across different sub-groups. In Australia, for example, researchers could delve deeper into demographic differences, given previous findings that Australian women (Worsley & Lea, 2008), younger Australians (Lea & Worsley 2002; Lea & Worsley 2003), and people with higher levels of education (Lea, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006) are more receptive to information on changing their dietary practices.

Similarly, India is home to a large diversity of sub-cultures, each of which have their own foods and cultural practices (The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2011). Hence, understanding these different food practices and perceptions of animal welfare, across various Indian sub-cultures, would also be worth exploring. In addition, it is worth investigating the meat paradox in other developing countries, given the rising levels of meat consumption (Steinfeld et al., 2006). As part of this, researchers could examine the extent to which people experience dissonance around eating meat, the strategies people used to reduce this dissonance, and ways in which meat alternatives could be made more compelling.

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