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ÖZS

HAUPTBEITRÄGE

Meat consumption, classed?

The socioeconomic underpinnings of dietary change

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Abstract The link between culture and social structure is a prominent theme in cultural sociology, and food consumption and taste are a less popular but no less interesting dimension of this debate. Large-N studies show that there is a link between dietary patterns and social class background in general, and between meat consumption and socioeconomic position in particular. Albeit mixed evidence, it is suggested that in many Western countries, consumers in lower socioeconomic positions tend to eat more meat and purchase cheaper meat products than consumers in higher social class positions. There is a need to understand the mechanisms behind this link to design more effective policy measures and to address the dietary needs of different consumer groups. Maximum variation sampling was used to cover a wide range of meat consumption habits, and 46 individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with consumers from urban areas in Germany were conducted. The goal was to inquire how financial and educational resources shape meat consumption patterns. Against the background of a meat-heavy culinary tradition, meat-reduced or meat-free diets require dietary changes, and consumers' attitudes towards and capabilities for dietary change are strongly influenced by their socioeconomic position. These findings are discussed in the context of other studies and with reference to social-psychological literature on behavioral change.

Keywords Social inequality · Food consumption · Meat consumption · Behavioral change · Self-efficacy

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Fleischkonsum und soziale Ungleichheit

Wie sozioökonomische Unterschiede unsere Ernährungsgewohnheiten beeinflussen können

Zusammenfassung In der Kultursoziologie wird der Zusammenhang zwischen Kultur und Sozialstruktur häufig diskutiert. Auch die Frage von Ernährung und Geschmack spielt hierbei eine, wenn auch weniger prominente Rolle. Umfrage-Studien mit vielen Teilnehmenden zeigen, dass es eine Verbindung zwischen der Art der Ernährung und dem sozialen Hintergrund gibt, und dies gilt auch für den Fleischkonsum. Nicht ganz unumstritten, aber dafür populär ist die These, dass Konsument*innen mit weniger sozioökonomischen Ressourcen nicht nur mehr, sondern auch preiswerteres Fleisch essen als andere Konsument*innen – zumindest in Ländern mit einer westlich geprägten Ernährungskultur. Um einem hohen Fleischkonsum effektiv begegnen und Maßnahmen entwerfen zu können, die die unterschiedlichen Lebenssituationen und Bedarfe verschiedener Konsument*innen nicht aus dem Blick verlieren, sollten wir zunächst einmal verstehen, warum sich Ernährungsgewohnheiten so divers ausgestalten.

Dieser Beitrag analysiert auf Basis von 46 qualitativen, semi-strukturierten Interviews mit Konsument*innen mit unterschiedlichen Fleischkonsum-Gewohnheiten aus städtischen Gebieten in Deutschland, wie finanzielle Ressourcen und formale Bildung diese Gewohnheiten beeinflussen und formen. In Esskulturen, die im Allgemeinen durch einen hohen Fleischkonsum geprägt sind, erfordert eine Reduktion des Fleischkonsums eine aktive Veränderung unseres Verhaltens. Doch aus verschiedenen Gründen fällt es nicht allen Konsument*innen gleichermaßen leicht, ihre Ernährungsgewohnheiten umzustellen – insbesondere ökonomische und kulturelle Ressourcen wirken hier förder- oder hinderlich. Der Artikel diskutiert diese These mit Rückbezug auf sozialpsychologische Studien zur Thematik, um unser Verständnis von Verhaltensänderungen und Ernährungsgewohnheiten zu erweitern.

Schlüsselwörter Soziale Ungleichheit · Ernährungsweisen · Fleischkonsum · Verhaltensänderungen · Selbstwirksamkeit

1 Introduction

Animal welfare violations and environmental damages caused by the meat industry, as well as health problems caused by excessive meat consumption demand and receive increased public attention. Different strategies to reduce meat consumption effectively are part of this discussion; exemplified by a vivid debate about the introduction of a meat tax in German media outlets.[1] Researchers across disciplines

[1] https://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/politik/article198113225/Wie-sinnvoll-ist-eine-Fleischsteuer.html. Accessed: April 1st, 2021.
https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/steuer-auf-fleisch-und-milch-gefordert-zum-wohl-der-tiere-16628814.html. Accessed: April 1st, 2021.
https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/fleisch-gruene-und-spd-politiker-fordern-hoehere-mehrwertsteuer-a-1280806.html. Accessed: April 1st, 2021.

have engaged with the potential impacts of an increased meat tax (Nordgren 2012; Bähr 2015; Säll and Gren 2015; Springmann et al. 2018), which inevitably raises questions about different consumer groups' food demands. Can and should meat be considered a staple food? Do increases in meat prices disproportionately disadvantage low-income consumers? Existing research shows that meat-reduced and meat-free diets are indeed more widespread among consumers in medium to high socioeconomic positions compared to those in lower socioeconomic positions (Aston et al. 2013; Mensink et al. 2016; Neff et al. 2018; Koch et al. 2019; Einhorn 2020). But why is that? Large-scale survey studies rarely contain thorough investigations into the nature of the relationships they unveil. More in-depth, qualitative studies on meat consumption behaviors exist, but these have not taken a closer look at one important precondition for meat-reduced and meat-free diets: Meat-reduced and meat-free diets involve behavioral changes.

Against the background of meat-heavy cuisines, which are, albeit in a state of flux, typical of most affluent Western countries, meat-free and meat-reduced diets necessitate dietary changes. In this article, I argue that in turn, dietary changes are facilitated by educational and financial resource endowments while they are aggravated by a lack of resources. Combining these two insights greatly advances our understanding of the link between meat consumption patterns and socioeconomic position.

In this article, instances of dietary change or consistency are analyzed using data from 46 qualitative interviews with German meat-eaters, meat-reducers and vegetarians. The next section outlines relevant theoretical debates in cultural sociology and summarizes existing research on the correlation between meat consumption and socioeconomic position. Sect. 3 describes the sample and the methodological approach. Sects. 4, 5 and 6 present empirical results. In a brief first step, one alternative explanation for divergent meat consumption behaviors is considered. In the next step, I show how meat consumption and dietary changes are related. Lastly, I introduce two different attitudes towards dietary change and discuss how dietary changes may hinge on financial and educational resources. In Sect. 7, I follow up these findings by embedding them within relevant socio-psychological research. Sect. 8 summarizes the argument and discusses the findings against the background of different fields of research.

2 The link between (meat) consumption patterns and socioeconomic position

That a person's lifestyle choices, including their consumption patterns, relate to their social class background is a recurring theme in cultural sociology. Pierre Bourdieu's seminal book *Distinction* (1984) provides important theoretical assumptions about how and why taste and social position are associated. With a focus on France, Bourdieu argues that people acquire a class-specific habitus by way of their socialization. A person's habitus is a set of skills and dispositions, including schemes of perception, beliefs, tastes and interests, and these "mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the

structures of that world" (Bourdieu 1985, p. 18). Bourdieu's framework assumes a homology between the social space and the space of tastes and lifestyles. That is, people are bound to a specific set of tastes and lifestyle choices, which hinge on their social position. However, these assumptions leave very little room for changes in behavior and have been criticized for being overly deterministic and ill-suited to post-modern societies (e.g. Archer 2007), despite Bourdieu's longstanding impact on cultural sociology.

According to Chan and Goldthorpe (2007), there are two alternative ways to conceive of the relationship between a person's social position and their lifestyle choices. The first one is, as an ideal-type, diametrically opposed to the homology argument. The individualization argument posits that, as societies become increasingly individualized, people become more and more detached from the rules and norms of their social group and focus more on personal choice and self-realization. Other social divides like gender or ethnicity become more important in determining lifestyle choices, and the link between social class structure and culture vanishes (Giddens 1984; Beck 1992).

A second alternative way to conceive of the link between social structure and culture has been termed the "cultural omnivore thesis" (Peterson 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996), according to which the middle and upper classes—those equipped with medium to high levels of cultural and economic resources—command a broader range of lifestyles and consumption patterns than those in lower social positions. They do not only like "high-brow" cultural items but have adopted many other cultural practices, including those once typical of the lower classes. At the same time, the lower classes have not widened their cultural repertoire and do not show such a wide range of preferences and practices, sometimes being coined cultural "univores". While cultural omnivorousness has mostly been analyzed regarding musical taste, Cappeliez and Johnston (2013) and Beagan et al. (2014) also encounter three modes of cultural omnivorousness in their work on food consumption, with one of these modes depicting high levels of culinary omnivorousness. Mainly upper-middle class consumers articulate this "culinary cosmopolitanism". In the same vein, other authors argue that middle and upper class food tastes display novelty, exoticism and cosmopolitanism, depicting an omnivore orientation towards food (Warde 1997; Finn 2017). This third nexus rejects both, the homology and the individualization thesis.

Talking about meat consumption in particular, several studies investigate the relationship between meat consumption patterns and socioeconomic divisions. While the present work focuses on the role of finances and education, we cannot neglect the gendered nature of meat consumption. A consistent finding is that females tend to eat less meat than males (Gossard and York 2003; Neff et al. 2018; Koch et al. 2019). Correspondingly, females living in single households and in urban areas have the highest share of vegetarian diets (Mensink et al. 2016; Allès et al. 2017; Pfeiler and Egloff 2018a). Moreover, metropolitan areas are generally associated with lower levels of meat consumption vis-à-vis rural or semi-rural areas (Gossard and York 2003; Beagan et al. 2014; Pohjolainen et al. 2015). In most studies, age has a reverse u-shaped relationship with the level of meat consumption and a regular u-shaped relationship with the likelihood of following a vegetarian diet.

Moving on to the core topic, studies have shown that meat consumption patterns in Germany and in other affluent, Western countries stratify alongside economic and educational resources, albeit not in a straightforward way. Educational attainment and occupation play a larger role than income does. The more time spent in formal education, the less meat is consumed, at least statistically (Aston et al. 2013; Mensink et al. 2016; Neff et al. 2018; Pfeiler and Egloff 2018a; Koch et al. 2019; Einhorn 2020). This is especially true for those who attended university education.

When it comes to the role of financial resources however, findings so far are rather inconclusive. Some studies find positive associations between meat consumption and income (Pfeiler and Egloff 2018a), others find the opposite (Allès et al. 2017; Neff et al. 2018) or no relationship at all (Gossard and York 2003; Pfeiler and Egloff 2018b). Alkon et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of meat for their interviewees from lower social classes. In a similar vein, Astleithner (2007) identifies a social milieu characterized by traditional values, comparatively low levels of education and high levels of meat consumption. However, she also finds high levels of meat consumption among a group of predominantly male, health-conscious and high-income consumers.

For a more nuanced approach, it seems conducive to distinguish between strict vegetarianism and "flexitarianism" (Johnston and Baumann 2014; Rothgerber 2015). The latter term describes the deliberate choice to eat less meat and meat of a different quality (e.g. regarding production methods, animal treatment or nutrient richness) and, correspondingly, usually of a higher price. While households on low incomes tend to consume more meat and meat products than middle class households do, and flexitarians are usually better off than regular meat-eaters, flexitarians are also wealthier than strict vegetarians are (Ricciuto et al. 2006; Lusk and Norwood 2016).

The inconclusiveness regarding income may result from two aspects. First, only few studies consider potential differences between different types of meat (e.g. poultry, pork, beef), and emphasize that these distinctions are necessary to understand the link between socioeconomic position and meat consumption (Darmon and Drewnowski 2008; Daniel et al. 2011; Aston et al. 2013). A recent study from Germany suggests that the ambiguous findings regarding income effects do indeed result from the fact that different types of meat are rarely analyzed separately, and that linear relationships between income and any type of meat consumption, be it poultry, beef, pork or fish, are exceptions (Einhorn 2020). Second, quantitative data about consumer behavior does not allow for distinctions between different motivations to pursue a meat-reduced diet, which may map onto the social structure differently. Students and young people in general point to ethical reasons to reduce meat consumption more often than older people do. The latter frequently mention health considerations (Astleithner 2007; Rosenfeld and Burrow 2017; Graça et al. 2019). Furthermore, there is a difference in motivation between voluntary and so-called "economic vegetarians" (Lusk and Norwood 2016). The former deliberately abstain from meat while the latter forgo or reduce meat consumption to save money. That no unidirectional link between vegetarianism and income is found in existing research may result from the fact that, depending on how vegetarianism is measured, economic vegetarians and voluntary vegetarians are part of the same category.

It is less clear, however, why consumers have different preferences. Several studies show that all consumers discuss ethical issues when talking about their food consumption practices (Adams and Raisborough 2008; Johnston et al. 2011; Beagan et al. 2014; Grauel 2014), and that differences in meat consumption do not primarily accrue from differences in values or in knowledge about food. A plurality of consumers draws on ethical eating discourses, independent of socioeconomic position (Paddock 2016; Smith Maguire 2016; Beagan et al. 2017). This also includes negative perceptions of the impact of meat production on the environment and on animal welfare (Oleschuk et al. 2019). Different attitudes towards meat consumption may play a minor role, but cannot provide a full-fledged explanation. Only few studies to date go beyond statistical associations in an attempt to understand and interpret them.

3 Data and method

To inquire how financial and educational resources shape consumers' meat consumption, 46 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with consumers with different dietary habits and from different social backgrounds were conducted. The sampling strategy was theory-driven. Regarding meat consumption patterns, a maximum variation sampling strategy was applied. 23 consumers with meat-free, and 23 consumers with meat-reduced to heavy meat-diets were recruited. After identifying financial and educational resources as a major influence on food and meat consumption patterns, the sampling strategy was slightly modified to include as many respondents from different socioeconomic positions as possible. The final sample consists of consumers with different levels of formal education, different occupations, and from different income categories, both among the group of meat-eaters and among the group of meat-abstainers. In addition, a balance between female and male, as well as between older and younger participants (aged 19 to 71) was obtained. All participants resided in urban areas.

Respondents were recruited on social media (Facebook), through personal networks, through ads in grocery stores and other public locations, and through snowball sampling. To avoid selection bias, potential participants were told that the interviews would address food consumption more generally. Otherwise, consumers particularly interested in the topic of meat consumption may have self-selected into the sample. As mentioned, the final sample consists of 23 consumers with a meat-free diet[2] and of 23 consumers with a meat-reduced or meat-diet.

The interviews focused on consumers' subjective accounts of their dietary history and of dietary changes throughout their life course, including potential difficulties and obstacles they faced. Participants were asked whether they would adapt their

[2] For the purpose of this study, this category comprises vegetarian and vegan respondents. While there is research about the differences between vegetarian and vegan consumers (e.g. Rothgerber 2014; Lund et al. 2016; Rosenfeld 2019), this distinction was not necessary here as both types of diets feature no meat consumption, require dietary changes, and deviate from traditional food norms.

diets (again) if they had more or less money. Interviewees were also probed about their favorite foods, about their food ideals and attitudes towards meat consumption.

Because differences in socioeconomic position were not an initial sampling criterion, interviewees did not provide information about their net amount of income or about their years of formal education. However, their dietary biographies provided a plethora of educational and occupational background information. Some respondents openly talked about their financial situation without being probed. Whether they reported financial worries or not was not only a function of their material conditions but also hinged on their needs and on their overall expenses. In addition to the educational and occupational background information derived from the interviews, respondents' perceived lack or perceived abundance of financial resources provided an indicator of how financial resources can affect food consumption patterns.[3]

Thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to search for themes and patterns in the data, and to derive analytic categories from the material in a first step. Several themes were identified and subsequently collapsed into broader categories. In a second step, the focus was on similarities and differences between interviewees with different levels of resources to find systematic links between different themes and interviewees' educational as well as their perceived level of financial resource endowments. In the same manner, all interviews were analyzed twice with a considerable time lag in between to ensure intra-coder reliability.

4 Differences in food ideals?

Before spelling out the main argument, it is helpful to take a quick glance at one popular alternative to explain differences in meat consumption patterns. The two most prominent reasons for reducing or abstaining from meat consumption are ethical considerations and health considerations (Rothgerber 2014; Rosenfeld and Burrow 2017; Graça et al. 2019). Consumers with heavy meat-diets may deem meat-consumption necessary, healthy and ethically unproblematic while meat-abstainers express the opposite.

Table 1 Number of interviewees who mention meat-related food ideals by diet

Food ideal/theme	Meat-abstainers ($N = 23$)	Meat-reducers ($N = 10$)	Meat-eaters ($N = 13$)
Healthy eating	22	9	12
Body image	13	5	12
Animal welfare	20	5	10
Waste avoidance	10	6	4
Organic foods	14	7	7
Local foods	3	8	6

[3] To be sure, this is not to say that real material conditions do not matter. Real and perceived income do modestly correlate (e.g. Grable et al. 2013), there is also evidence that perceived financial well-being is a major source of stress in and of itself, and contributes to subjective well-being (e.g. Manturuk et al. 2012; Netemeyer et al. 2018; Brzozowski and Spotton Visano 2020).

However, the data shows that meat-abstainers, meat-reducers and meat-eaters, as well as respondents in different social positions do not differ substantially when asked about their food ideals. Interviewees unanimously discuss a variety of food ideals, but attach different priority to them. They all elaborate on the topics of healthy eating, body image, and ethical eating with its various implications and interpretations. Moreover, all interviewees were aware of the negative repercussions of factory farming (regarding animal welfare, the environment, and the quality of food). Table 1 shows the number of respondents with different diets who discussed relevant meat-related food ideals.

Many interviewees explain that they try to eat healthily or that they would like to eat more healthily, care about animal welfare and reject factory farming, and know that purchasing seasonal and local products is better for the environment. But why do some of them still have "bad" diets? Why are they not behaving in line with their food ideals? Are they lying and simply providing socially desirable answers?

In the following sections, I will argue that small differences in food ideals cannot account for large differences in meat consumption practices. Instead, these differences are a result of consumers' capabilities to translate their food ideals into practice. That is, to change their diets.

5 Meat consumption and dietary change

Like in many other Western industrialized countries, meat-dishes are typical for and deeply rooted in Germany's culinary culture (Smil 2002; Trummer 2015; Kofahl and Weyand 2016). Hence, meat-free or meat-reduced diets often diverge from the diets consumers grew up with, and thus require a deliberate change in food consumption patterns.

Albeit this may be changing, respondents unanimously acknowledge that meat-based recipes and meals as the default and meatless recipes and offers as exceptions. Only one interviewee was raised on a meatless diet. Some did not have meat dishes on a daily basis. Still, all respondents perceive the default diet in their social contexts as a meat-heavy diet, and deviations from meat-heavy diets as precisely that—as deviations. Many vegetarian and vegan respondents distinguish their own dietary habits from "normal" diets. Several interviewees link meat consumption to habitual behavior, evoking regularity. Hannah, a 34-year old vegan, remembers:

> Because my mother is not a good cook unfortunately and my father worked all the time, so we always had—we always had potatoes and vegetables and some meat with it. It was always the same! Or some sausages. Always the same.

Sandra, a 34-year-old flexitarian, complains about her ex-partner's unwillingness to adapt to her diet:

> My ex-boyfriend used to say "my meals need to consist of three components" or something, like—he probably learned this at home somehow—his mother cooked meat, vegetables, I don't know, carbs and there you go, this was his "three-component-meal".

Anita, a pensioner, describes her day-to-day dinner like this:

> We have potatoes, vegetables and meat, or rice and vegetables and chicken or something that has minced meat, as simple as that—really standard food.

All interviewees consider meat to be an essential component of the popular diet. They frequently refer to the structure of a "proper meal". British anthropologist Mary Douglas introduced this term in 1972 (Douglas 1972). She focused on customary food consumption patterns and argued that a "proper meal" is supposed to have the structure "2a + b". It consists of two side dishes and one meat component. Consequently, reducing meat intake requires replacing the meat component or learning about alternative meal compositions and accepting those as "proper meals". Being able to change dietary habits and meal structures successfully is not a sufficient condition for switching to meat-reduced or meat-free diets but a necessary one.

6 Attitudes towards dietary change

Respondents have different attitudes towards dietary change. Some of them refer to dietary changes with discomfort and discouragement while others are keen on changing their diets and seem to be much more at ease with it. The first group of respondents considers dietary changes as a nuisance or as a threat to social cohesion. The latter group sees dietary changes as a pleasant leisure-time activity or as a welcome personal challenge. While there is certainly a lot of heterogeneity within each of these groups, the two groups of interviewees share their general approach towards dietary change: They express mostly negative or mostly positive attitudes towards it.

6.1 Theme A: Change of plans, comfort foods and social conflict

This first group of respondents expresses mainly negative feelings about dietary changes. During the course of their life, they never attempted to change their diets voluntarily; and they rarely see it as a viable option at all. When asked if they would like to change some aspect of their diet, many meat-eaters, and primarily those with lower amounts of capital, reported being content and satisfied with their current diets, and emphasize the ordinariness of their diets and that their diets are "ok".

A few of these respondents acknowledge that a lack of alternative culinary knowledge is a barrier to switching to a meat-free diet, or to including meat-free dishes into their diet. Some meat-eaters ruefully acknowledge their lack of alternative culinary knowledge. Levi, a 25-year old meat-eater, admits that he is not used to eating meat-free dishes:

> Yes, because I—I really have to think about what to eat if I cannot have meat and it always takes me a while to come up with something. And I am really not good at cooking or preparing stuff without meat.

This statement reverberates with Samuel, a 35-year-old vegan who remembers:

> I'd say it was difficult for me because just imagine you had to get rid of 27 years of routine at once, you know? To stop doing things that you think are normal since childhood [...] I am sure it was also difficult in practice to say "Ok, let's not have that but something else", you know? Or to cook something different than usual, whatever, it would be boring to just have a plate of vegetables every single day. So you need a change of plans.

The difference between these two respondents is, however, that Samuel was able to put this "change of plans" into practice while it appears as an insurmountable challenge to Levi. Not only was Samuel's wife already on a meat-free diet at the time; Samuel also knew how to gather new information quickly and was very eager to buy new products and change his food shopping behavior. He says that, as an academic, he is used to doing his own research, to reading and interpreting studies and to organizing himself. He also has the financial means to purchase a variety of new products. In contrast, Levi is on a rather tight budget with his job as an unskilled laborer.

In addition, many respondents in this group agonize over extensive food shopping and preparation in general and experience it as a time- and energy-consuming source of stress. They usually revert to foods that are familiar, easy to prepare and well known. They emphasize the comfort and feelings of ease and relaxation they derive from eating snacks, sweets, fast food and convenience foods, as these come with little to no additional time and planning requirements, and provide a lot of immediate nutritional energy. Greta, a 25-year old student who just started a full-time job, acknowledges:

> And if you increase your work hours—if you work full-time for a while, you learn valuing the advantages of these things (convenience foods), and that sometimes you just—if you're really not up for it or you're in a rush.

Ella is a 19-year old woman who is currently homeless and has very limited financial means. Her situation is particularly illustrative. She explains:

> If you're really stressed out and hungry, you just take any food that you're familiar with and that is easy to understand for your brain. Well, I could buy some bread now, that's also what I did before, but now I am so tired, exhausted, now I just want something that I know, and that provides comfort.

Ella acknowledges the importance of eating more healthily. She says that she would like to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables, but ruefully admits that most of the time she does not have much of a choice given her limited financial means. She has to rely on cheap convenience foods, which often contain meat, and she does not have the opportunity to eat in accordance with her food ideals. She also relies on well-known and familiar foods that "provide comfort", and that aid in feeling less stressed and exhausted.

Moreover, dietary changes come with a tax on social conformity, which is why some respondents express no interest in deviating from their current food consumption patterns. They describe several situations when they enjoyed eating with others.

For them, deviating from eating norms would cause undue conflict, and a threat to social cohesion. Anita is a woman in her 70s, and she describes the importance of the social aspect of eating:

> It's the conviviality, and that's just how it is, conviviality is part of our lives! And for elderly people it's really important that we have our social ties.

Mirroring views like that, all interviewees who had changed their diet at some point during their life report a range of difficult and confrontational situations, from misunderstandings and indifference to straight out hostility. Almost all vegetarian respondents had experienced the latter. Emil, a 59-year old vegan physician, remembers his transition towards a meat-free diet in 1981:

> Well, it was—it was really stressful. I basically—I moved out from my grandparents' place one year after deciding that I didn't want to eat meat anymore. And—well, let's say the meat thing was not the trigger but it was basically what the conflict was based on [...]. It was a huge fuss. My grandmother was like "Don't you like my cooking?", and I said "I like it, but I don't want to eat it anymore, for health reasons, I don't need that" [...]. And it was the same discussion with my mother.

Dominik, a 25-year old vegetarian student, was on a trip with a friend when he told him that he was going to stop eating meat:

> He was really offended by my comments [...]. And on our way to [name of a city], we argued and fell out with each other, and we just said "Let's not talk about this anymore today, let's just leave it here".

However, despite these manifold situations of social conflict, this group of respondents stuck to their new diet and maintained it. Social conflict caused discomfort but respondents were equipped with the necessary confidence to overcome conflict. Some respondents altered parts of their social networks because of their dietary changes; seeking social support and engaging with new social networks that helped them sustain their new dietary habits. These respondents belong to the second group of respondents; respondents who share a strong commitment to their diet.

6.2 Theme B: Self-actualization and food neophilia

The second group of respondents frequently engages with their dietary habits and is eager to experiment and try out new things. When asked if they would change parts of their diet if they were on a larger or on a tighter budget, most interviewees came up with a variety of ideas and showcased their culinary knowledge and experience.

Most respondents in this group gladly explain, and often pride themselves on their diets as being distinct, and as resulting from their individual choices. For some vegetarians and vegans in particular, their diet is an important part of their self-identity. Milan, a 28-year old psychologist explains:

> Well, it's important to me to have an ideal. Something that you are convinced of; something that you thought through (.) and (.) I don't know—if I didn't, if

> I didn't have an ideal, I may as well just kill myself. For me, it's not a real life to live without ideals and to give no fucks and to, you know, act just like everyone else does or something (.) just because it's easier.[4]

Many respondents had deliberately changed their diet several times during their life, and some had tried several other diets before choosing to stick to a meat-reduced or meat-free diet.

In fact, several respondents started their dietary change as a challenge, as a temporary change during the fasting period, as a New Year's resolution or as a joint challenge with a friend. Anna, a 48-year old vegan dietician, started her new diet as part of a challenge:

> In 2014, it was basically just for fun that I tried out this challenge by Attila Hildmann with a friend—tried it for 30 days and then you realize "Hey, that's actually great".

Lena, a 27-year old flexitarian student, remembers her first attempt to switch to a meat-free diet:

> And then it basically changed because I used to always—I always made resolutions for the fasting period. Previously, this was usually about sweets, not to eat sweets, then it was about meat at some point (.) or even about both.

She remembers how she switched to a meatless diet because she wanted to "make her live a bit harder".

Attitudes like this usually go hand in hand with a positive perception of new culinary knowledge and with an interest in learning about new foodstuffs. Interviewees in this group elaborate on their dietary practices and cooking skills in detail. They value the search for recipes, studies, new ingredients, and find enjoyment in these activities. Some proudly present themselves as adventurous eaters. They describe browsing through various types of media, talking to friends and colleagues about food-related issues, and visiting new restaurants.

Hannah, a 34-year old vegan, says about herself:

> Well, I am this kind of person, I like to try everything. And I always tried everything that I could get, you know, because I am a person who likes to eat and who eats a lot—well, food is very important to me.

Greta, a 25-year old vegan, calls dealing with all sorts of food, "to cook and experiment and try stuff out in the kitchen" her "hobby". For some, gathering culinary knowledge and adventurousness was a side effect of traveling, moving, or living with people from other cultural backgrounds. Jacob, for example, is a 67-year old flexitarian, and remembers his first trip to China when he talks about his dietary habits:

[4] Note how this quote also indicates that consumers who do not share and live up to the ideal of a vegan diet are assumed to "live without ideals" and to "give no fucks", reverberating with an often-encountered reservation against consumers on "bad" diets.

> Actually, there's very few things that I won't at least try. I will never forget: we went to China for a three-month business trip [...] we had a sheep's leg for lunch [...] What I'm trying to say is that you really learn to try everything. We also ate out on the streets, there are small streets and everyone has an old, tiny grill or whatnot and they just fry everything and we used to say "If it looks good, try it".

Jacob also lived abroad and discovered many different dishes at the time:

> Well, the last time I lived abroad, I was in London and in Bangalore for two years and what I really miss here [in Germany] is the multicultural food. [...] In London, you simply cross the street and you have an eatery here and an eatery there and so on.

Many interviewees on meat-free and meat-reduced diets show this level of curiosity in food and in trying out new recipes, techniques and ingredients. Several of them report that they already had this level of curiosity and culinary knowledge prior to reducing or cutting their meat intake altogether—it was not a result of their dietary transition, but a precondition. Notably, respondents in this group had all obtained tertiary education and none of them reported severe financial worries at the time of the interview. The willingness to learn about new foods and to experience culinary art as something enjoyable is usually expressed by respondents who had attended universities. Many, especially older respondents who enjoy engaging with food and who are proud to display their culinary knowledge are also comparatively well off, which facilitated learning about new food items. Eating out in a variety of different restaurants is another source of culinary knowledge, and some of these interviewees bought culinary knowledge directly by participating in cooking classes or ordering ready-made cooking boxes. While only few of them acknowledge that it takes up resources to engage with one's diet proactively, Lena draws a clear connection:

> I think they [vegetarians and vegans] are mainly people who can afford to think about it. I think there are many people who have other problems [...] and I can't judge them for it. You know, I had the privilege of growing up in [name of a region] with my parents; I always had enough money and I received good education, not everybody has that.

6.3 Interim conclusion

All interviewees share the view that, against the background of a meat-based culture, meat-free or meat-reduced diets present deviations from social eating norms. Adopting a meat-free or meat-reduced diet is associated with changes in eating routines and patterns. Most interviewees were raised on a diet that included the regular consumption of meat, and they were not familiar with meat-free or meat-reduced diets.

However, respondents were not equally capable of changing their diets. Some never considered dietary changes, and some considered but never implemented them. On the one hand, lacking culinary knowledge, relying on comfort foods to save

up energy and time or to relieve stress, and eschewing social conflict that can accrue from dietary changes discourages dietary transitions. On the other hand, comprehensive culinary knowledge, constant engagement with one's dietary habits and confidence to overcome potential social conflict encourages dietary transitions.

Respondents' approach towards food and dietary change is, among other things, associated with their financial resources, their educational experiences, and their social context. Primarily younger and highly educated interviewees see their diets as a personal challenge, as something to experiment with. Mainly highly educated and financially well off respondents display curiosity in trying out new foods and have sophisticated knowledge about a variety of products, recipes, or cuisines. In contrast, not a single respondent facing a difficult financial situation expressed this attitude. When time or money is scarce, respondents show no interest in engaging with food planning, shopping and preparation. In stressful situations, interviewees report relying on or reverting back to more convenient food options like fast foods or high-energy, calorie-dense foods that are familiar, quick, and easy to prepare.

But how and why do these different attitudes towards dietary changes relate to financial and educational resources? How can behavioral, including dietary change come about in the first place? Why do behavioral patterns show more resilience in some consumers than in others? Micro-sociological questions like these touch upon the workings of our psyche and are thus scrutinized in social-psychological research, providing interesting insights into individual processes of decision-making.

7 Socio-psychological perspectives on dietary change

Dietary changes are behavioral changes, and much micro-sociological and psychological work can help make sense of different attitudes towards behavioral change. It provides useful terminology and can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between food consumption patterns and social class background. Three lines of research substantiate the argument that attitudes towards dietary changes and resource endowments are linked. This is research on 1) tunneling and compensation effects induced by scarcity, 2) the importance of self-efficacy for behavioral changes, and 3) the desire for social conformity or uniqueness.

7.1 Tunneling and compensating

Food costs money, and meal planning and food preparation are time- and thought-consuming activities. Stress and anxiety accruing from financial instability or from other severe problems can direct emotional and mental resources away from planning meals, from food shopping and food preparation.

Lamont et al. (2017) describe this change in priorities as "tunneling effect": People exclusively focus on managing a scarce resource, which inhibits long-term planning. In their insightful and revealing book, Mullainathan and Shafir (2014, p. 60) argue that "poverty itself taxes the mind. [...] the poor have less effective capacity than those who are well off. This is not because they are less capable, but rather because part of their mind is captured by scarcity". In line with this, Mani et al.

(2013) show that, because the human cognitive system is limited, "preoccupations with pressing budgetary concerns leave fewer cognitive resources available to guide choice and action" (ibid., p. 976).

Backett-Milburn et al. (2006) find that for low-income families, concerns about food are low down in the hierarchy of worries. Devine et al. (2006) observe that parents in low-income households "described negative feelings of being 'used up', 'too tired to eat', 'chaotic', 'always tired', 'exhausted', 'too rushed and too hurried to eat', 'stressed out', and 'guilty'" (ibid., p. 2596). These feelings lead them to skip meals, to simplify or to speed up meals, or to consume fast foods. Studies also show that consumers on low wages or those who experience job insecurity and stressful work atmospheres frequently rely on prepared foods. They cook less from scratch, consume fast and snack food more often, and have more unhealthy diets in general (Devine et al. 2006; Ricciuto et al. 2006; Darmon and Drewnowski 2008; Fekete and Weyers 2016). While fresh ingredients and healthy food items are also expensive (Rao et al. 2013; Darmon and Drewnowski 2015), these authors argue that food practices can be a compensation for stress and anxiety at the workplace. Eating certain foods can offset negative feelings accruing from job dissatisfaction by providing a sense of comfort, familiarity and relaxation (Devine et al. 2006; Fekete and Weyers 2016; Smith and Anderson 2018). Beyond that, a lack of financial resources can result in efforts to conceal this lack because it is associated with shame. Financial resources may therefore be diverted from buying high-quality and healthy foods to buying prestigious products used to publicly display prosperity or to simply "keep up with the Joneses" (Sayer 2005; Davidson et al. 2006; Smith and Anderson 2018).

7.2 Self-efficacy and locus of control

A personality trait that encourages behavioral change is self-efficacy. According to AbuSabha and Achterberg (1997), self-efficacy reflects "a person's belief in his or her ability to overcome the difficulties inherent in performing a specific task in a particular situation" (ibid., p. 1123). The "locus of control" is a comparable concept in psychology (Snibbe and Markus 2005). It describes "how people view the attainment of a particular outcome as being either within their control (internals), where their action determines the outcome, or outside their control (externals), where reward is controlled by forces other than one's self" (AbuSabha and Achterberg 1997, p. 1126). In the area of (sustainable) consumption, Antonetti and Maklan (2014) draw similarities between self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control. Droomers et al. (2004) argue that self-efficacy is the crucial mechanism involved in the transition from intention to actual behavioral change.

Numerous studies show that self-efficacy relates to socioeconomic position, which points to the contingent and socio-genetic nature of personality traits. On average, people on higher incomes display higher levels of perceived behavioral control and self-efficacy (Kraus et al. 2009; Sachweh 2011; Smith and Anderson 2018). Hojman and Miranda (2018) show that a person's perceived level of agency (capacity of acting) is negatively associated with income poverty, and positively associated with level of schooling and employment status. Accordingly, Devine et al. (2006) argue

that parents with stressful and insecure working conditions rarely feel that they have the power to change their situation, i.e. to command agency over it. Higher levels of education relate to more self-efficacy as education provides a sense of individual achievement, contributes to better labor market opportunities and occupational prestige and thus also increases social recognition (e.g. Gecas and Seff 1989; Wiederkehr et al. 2015).

Research in this field also shows that perceived behavioral control maps onto practices of sustainable consumption (Antonetti and Maklan 2014) and reduced meat consumption (Graça et al. 2019). Self-efficacy is associated with more healthy diets (Fekete and Weyers 2016) and is a key component in explaining smoking cessation because it makes people believe in their capacity to successfully change a routine behavior (Droomers et al. 2004; Thompson et al. 2009). In conclusion, Smith and Anderson (2018) identify a low sense of control, or lack of self-efficacy, as key psychosocial mechanism that links social and economic disadvantage to poor health.

7.3 Conformity and uniqueness

Sociologists argue that preferences for being unique and "standing out", or for being similar and "fitting in", reflect differences in socialization, in material conditions, and in educational pathways. They show that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds put more emphasis on being "ordinary" and "respectable", and value "fitting in" with their respective communities. People from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, on the other hand, more often appeal to self-development, uniqueness and to the demarcation of difference (Gillies 2005; Sayer 2005; Stephens et al. 2007; Skeggs and Loveday 2012; Van Eijk 2013).

In light of this research, the concept of individual agency may have divergent meanings across social groups (Snibbe and Markus 2005; Stephens et al. 2007; Markus and Kitayama 2010). Stephens et al. (2007) assert that the exercise of individual choice is an essential part of middle classes' understanding of agency while models of agency in working class contexts "reflect a preference for similarity to and connection with others" (ibid., p. 827). This preference "can be seen as an intentional adjustment to others' desires in order to fit in, belong, or maintain good relations with others" (ibid., p. 826). Snibbe and Markus (2005) argue that this results from the fact that people with fewer resources more often have to rely on others to help them through tough situations, which is why their preference for "fitting in" instead of "sticking out" is a function of the material options and constraints they face.

To be sure, these associations are not deterministic, and people from all socioeconomic positions can engage with different models of agency. That those with fewer resources more often value similarity over difference than the other way around partly reflects social and material inequalities, and the degree of command they have over certain resources.

8 Conclusion: Social class background, capacities for dietary change and meat consumption

In this study, I argue that social class matters. People's social class background shapes consumption patterns in various ways—among other things, financial and educational resources influence the capacity to adjust and to transform routinized behaviors, such as food consumption behaviors. This insight is relevant to many fields of research—sustainability research, studies on healthy eating, smoking—and meat consumption.

Consumers from different socioeconomic positions consume different amounts of meat, and this is not because they advocate different food ideals. As long as the standard or "default" diet in a given context features the regular consumption of meat, meat reduction or meat abstention necessitate behavioral changes. However, the capacity for behavioral changes differs between consumers. It is unevenly distributed across socioeconomic groups and hinges on the possession of material and educational resources. For consumers with comparatively high amounts of financial and/or educational resources, it is easier to adopt and maintain dietary changes towards meat-reduced or meat-free diets.

Undoubtedly, the capacity for dietary change is not solely a function of socioeconomic position. Neither are all privileged consumers at some point bound to switching to a meat-free or meat-reduced diet, nor are only privileged consumers able to pursue a meat-reduced or meat-free diet. Several other factors beyond socioeconomic position do also shape dietary choices and the likelihood for dietary change. Some of the most well known factors regarding meat consumption are gender, age and household type.[5] In prospective research, it will be interesting to analyze how these factors interact with the effects of financial and educational resources. The argument of this article is therefore of a probabilistic nature: Not all consumers have the same likelihood of switching to meat-free or meat-reduced diets, and these likelihoods are partly shaped by financial and educational resources.

What do these findings imply for debates about the link between social structure and culture? Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) suggest that the omnivore-univore thesis receives increasing support. In line with this, the current study points to a divide between those who know and like a wide range of food items on the one hand, and those who repeatedly rely on a restricted set of foodstuffs and dishes on the other. An openness and curiosity for novel foods—which could be termed *food neophilia*—often emerges as a corollary of practices that are linked to financial resources, like traveling or geographic mobility. Culinary knowledge can also be bought directly, e.g. by attending cooking classes, or it can be acquired with plenty of time, e.g. by reading food blogs online. It can also be a side effect of a person's educational pathways, which may include moving or traveling to dif-

[5] There is a strong symbolic link between meat and masculinity, and this link certainly contributes to the gendered nature of meat consumption (e.g. Adams 1990; Rothgerber 2013; Love and Sulikowski 2018). However, in light of the present findings, it is also plausible to argue that women do, on average, have more culinary knowledge than men, given their female role as caregivers. This may make it easier for them to adopt new dietary habits, and should be scrutinized in prospective studies.

ferent places. Food neophilia is not a sufficient condition for meat reduction—in fact, many consumers are very adventurous about new food items but do not reduce their meat consumption. However, it is a necessary disposition, and it resembles the omnivore orientation towards cultural practices, and the cosmopolitan orientation towards food consumption that Cappeliez and Johnston (2013) and Beagan et al. (2014) describe. The findings also corroborate the argument that abstaining from meat requires knowledge of alternative food items, recipes and preparation techniques (Schösler et al. 2012; Stoll-Kleemann and Schmidt 2017; Graça et al. 2019).

What is more, while many vegan and vegetarian interviewees describe themselves as being unique and different, the individualization thesis does not receive support on closer inspection. Those high in financial and/or cultural resources do not only risk less by deviating from others' expectations, they may even be encouraged to do so (Snibbe and Markus 2005). A preference for distinctiveness among middle and upper classes may be a normative standard, and as such becomes part of the habitus of a specific social group.

Going beyond these debates, this research illustrates that many themes in cultural sociology, in the literature on social stratification and on social class, have important underpinnings in psychological research (DiMaggio and Markus 2010; Kraus et al. 2011; Collett and Lizardo 2014). While some, including the above-mentioned scholars put a strong emphasis on macro-level relationships, psychological concepts can help understand behavioral differences and the ways in which these behavioral differences form patterns—mapping onto the social structure in turn.

Social psychology can help open parts of the black box of causal mechanisms that comes with macro-level research, and this applies to the empirical topic addressed in this research as well. To adopt dietary changes, consumers need to believe in their ability to implement dietary changes successfully, and in having the necessary knowledge, energy and endurance to maintain them. Self-efficacy is a crucial precondition for behavioral change because alternative ways of action need to be perceived as viable. Behavioral change needs to be experienced as something positive and realizable that can lead to expected outcomes and is "worth the effort". Consumers with higher levels of financial and educational resources usually command higher levels of self-efficacy. Financial scarcity, on the other hand, can induce a scarcity mindset, reduce cognitive bandwidth, and lead to tunneling. Essential cognitive resources, necessary to disrupt routines and to implement dietary changes, can then be missing. Furthermore, educational pathways and financial security enable and foster culinary adventurousness. Being an adventurous eater with a lot of culinary knowledge and experience is an advantage for the adoption of a meat-reduced or meat-free diet. A lack of culinary knowledge is, in contrast, an impediment to the adoption of an alternative diet. Financial insecurity diverts mental resources away from food planning and preparation, or from researching alternative recipes and increasing culinary knowledge. Lastly, food consumption provides social bonds and dietary changes may involve conflict. Respondents with lower levels of education or with fewer financial resources express a desire to stick to the diet of their social networks. In contrast, many respondents in higher socioeconomic positions emphasized their uniqueness and noted that they valued "standing out" from others. Financial

stability supports behavioral independence while scarcity makes consumers more reliant on other people's support and thus encourages behavioral, including dietary, conformity.

One final remark remains. Cultural patterns are constantly in flux. In twenty years from now, the arguments in this study will likely be less adequate in the realm of meat consumption. In twenty years from now, supply structures and ideas of the "proper" meal may have changed quite drastically. What once constituted "deviance" could be "normal" in two decades. As soon as meal patterns and food supplies change, alternative foods (including meat-free dishes) can proliferate more easily. As soon as more children grow up in vegetarian or meat-reduced households, we will likely observe less social stratification when it comes to meat consumption patterns, as extensive alternative culinary knowledge may become more widespread, and adopting a meat-reduced or meat-free diet does not necessitate dietary changes anymore.

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