Who's Lying About Not Eating Meat?

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New research says some of us eat more meat than we claim. Find out who.

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Women eat less meat than men. For example, in a national survey conducted in 2006 by the Vegetarian Resource Group, nearly twice as many women as men claimed to be vegetarians. This lopsided sex ratio is not surprising. In other studies of ethics and animals, gender looms large: Roughly 3 of 4 animal rights activists are women, whereas men make up 9 of 10 hunters in the United States, and over 95 percent of people arrested for extreme animal cruelty.

However, an experiment conducted by Dr. Hank Rothgerber makes me wonder if sex differences in carnivory might actually be smaller than indicated by national surveys. Women, it seems, are more likely than men to misrepresent the amount of meat they consume.

In a previous study, Rothgerber, a social psychologist at Bellarmine University, developed a Meat-Eating Justification Scale and used it to examine how omnivores come to grips with eating animals. He found that men had more kinds of justifications for eating meat than women. Men were also less apologetic and more direct in confronting their carnivory. Unlike men, though, most women simply used denial and I-look-the-other-way as cognitive strategies to avoid the moral implications of their diet.

If women are more likely to invoke denial to ward off the moral discomfort that comes with the “meat paradox”—both loving animals and loving to eat them—Rothgerber reasoned that they would be more apt to lie about (or as he puts it, “strategically under-report”) the amount of meat they eat.

And in a study that will soon be published in the journal Society and Animals, he came up with a clever way to test this idea.

How To Induce Meat-Guilt in Women

Rothgerber found it easy to get women to lie about their meat consumption: He told them they were about to watch a PETA slaughterhouse video.

Subjects (college students) in the experimental group were told they would be watching the video as part of a study of memory. The movie, they were informed, was a short PETA-produced documentary about animal abuse in slaughterhouses. Then the participants were asked to complete a brief “lifestyle” questionnaire while the experimenter set up the video. The questionnaire included a series of questions on how much and what kinds of meat they ate in a typical week. It also included items designed to measure the degree they believed non-human animals experience emotions such as fear, happiness, nostalgia and guilt. The participants in
the control group were students who completed the same questionnaire but were not told they were going to watch an animal rights video on meat.

Here's the rub: There was no PETA video.

The purpose of telling subjects they were going to watch an anti-meat movie was to create a shift in their mind-set. Rothgerber hoped that just the anticipation of watching a film on meat would be an ethically threatening mental prime. He was right.

Hank tested two hypotheses: First, because men experience less guilt from eating animals, he thought being told they were going to watch a PETA video would not affect their reported meat consumption. Women, on the other hand, would be more threatened by the prospect of watching the video. Hence, he predicted that female participants in the experimental (video) group would experience more guilt when completing the meat-consumption survey and thus be more likely to tend to under-report their meat consumption. Second, he thought that underreporting meat consumption would be particularly pronounced in subjects who believed that animals and humans experience similar emotions.

The Results

Hypothesis 1: Sex Differences in Reported Meat Consumption

Rothgerber was right on both counts. This graph depicts a composite meat consumption index based on all the types and amount of meat the subjects claimed they ate in a typical week. The sex differences are clear: The prospect of having to watch a movie on the cruelty of meat had no effect on the men. Indeed, the meat index scores of men in the anti-meat video group were 10 percent higher than in the control group. (This difference, however, is not “statistically significant.”) For women, however, just the idea of having to watch a PETA video had a major
effect on their self-reported meat consumption. The women in the “movie group” had meat consumption scores 23 percent lower than women in the no-movie group. This is a statistically significant difference. The sexes also differed in the degree that the prospect of watching the PETA movie affected their self-reported frequency of eating vegetables: Women in the experimental group reported higher frequencies eating plant-based food, but this was not true of men.

Sex Differences in Reported Vegetable Consumption

**Hypothesis 2: Belief in Animal Emotions**

Rothgerber’s second hypothesis was also confirmed. Women who believed that animals possess human emotions also said they ate less meat than women who felt that animals did not experience human-like emotions. But here is the interesting part—this was only true of women who thought they were going to see the PETA movie. There was no relationship between meat scores and belief in animal emotions among women in the control group, or among either group of men.

**Why Do Women Lie More About Their Diet?**

Among the subjects in the control condition— with no prospect of seeing a PETA movie—women claimed they ate roughly 90 percent as much meat as men. But when faced with the prospect of watching an anti-meat movie, their meat consumption scores dropped to 64 percent of the scores of men.

This is the first study of sex differences in under-reporting meat consumption, but other studies have also found that people lie about eating animal flesh: British researchers discovered that only 25 percent of individuals who claimed to have reduced their meat consumption actually did so. And in a study of 13,000 Americans, two-thirds of people who said they were vegetarians admitted that had actually eaten animal flesh in the previous 24 hours.
Why should women be more inclined than men to misrepresent carnivory? Rothgerber offers several possible explanations:

- **Guilt.** Based on his earlier study, Rothgerber thinks that women feel guiltier than men about eating animals. The prospect of watching the PETA film may have amped up their guilt and anxiety levels. Hence they were more apt to use denial to protect themselves from cognitive dissonance.

- **Social Pressure.** He also suggests that social pressure may play a role in under-reporting of meat-eating by women. One study, he notes, found that women eat less when they are in the company of a desirable, rather than undesirable, male partner.

- **Disgust.** Women are more susceptible to disgust than men (here and here). Rothgerber hypothesizes that women in the study may have been more disgusted by meat than men, and the threat of the movie produced increased visceral disgust that may have caused them to lose their appetite.

I find this study fascinating, and it raises a host of interesting and important questions: Were women in the experimental group consciously aware of down-playing the extent of their meat-eating—were they overtly lying? Or, were they engaged in unconscious self-deception? And do sex differences in self-reports of meat-eating compromise the accuracy of studies on the amount of animal flesh Americans eat each year?

Over the past three years, Rothgerber has conducted an impressive series of studies on the human-meat relationship. I look forward to seeing the “fruits” of his next endeavors.