



Key ways to legitimize diet shifts that favor plant instead of animal protein sources¹

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Abstract

A shift to a more healthy and sustainable diet (as recommended by the EAT Lancet Commission report) is currently hampered by persistent choices for meat. This paper puts forward the view that proposals for a diet shift will fall short without broad social legitimation by a change in social norms favoring plant instead of animal protein sources. Using psychological and linguistic perspectives, the paper aims to improve understanding of legitimation related to authority, moral evaluation, rationality, and story logic. Each category is examined with a view to how it may support (or oppose) the reordering of protein sources necessary for a diet shift. Key strategies are a further revision of the existing national authority-based dietary guidelines, using the diversity of rationality-based legitimations to support them, avoiding polarization of moral-based ideologies and being cautious of myths, micro-myths and stories.

Keywords: protein, sustainability, consumer, persuasion, plant-based, diet shift

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Introduction

Efforts to change Western eating practices towards healthy diets from sustainable food systems, as recently recommended by the EAT Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health [2], will have important consequences for the position of animal protein, as reductions of (on average) more than 50% are proposed for the coming decades. The Commission fully acknowledges that its success will require a global transformation of the food system.

These proposals raise many questions about the ways in which major shifts in diet can be supported, given the existing preferences for meat because of its nutritional content and social significance [3]. What also should not be underestimated, is the highly contested context of meat debates, which may easily give rise to meat-supporting protests and brutal anti-scientific actions [4]. Also, there are many stakeholders who try to influence protein choices, using various kinds of marketing techniques to promote meat or high protein intake in general [5], while producers of meat alternatives appear to avoid any messages that could be seen as taking an anti-meat stance [6].

Moreover, although economists can make a strong case for public policy intervention, expectations are that this would not occur until “general public opinion has already been dramatically altered” [3, see also 7]. In this highly contested context, generating processes of societal legitimation becomes of utmost importance in preparing and realizing a major shift in society [8, 9]. For that reason, the present paper aims to give a concise overview of how to legitimize diet shifts that favor plant instead of animal protein sources.

The concept of legitimacy has a long history within social thought and social psychology, and it has emerged as increasingly important within recent research on the dynamics of social systems [9]. According to an often cited definition, “legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” [9]. In other words, legitimation “is an argumentative process in which an action is justified in terms of reasons which can themselves, in turn, be justified as (worthy of being) collectively accepted or recognized” [10].

The paper’s theoretical background is primarily derived from social psychology [11] and linguistics [12] as it addresses how argumentative processes, which mainly rest on language, construct legitimation for social practices in public communication as well as in everyday interaction. From this perspective, it becomes clear that abolishing the persistence of “bad meat habits,” as diagnosed by the economist Frank [3], requires a change in social norms to accelerate a reordering of preferable protein sources.

To realize this change, it will be necessary to apply well-chosen persuasive strategies to *de-legitimize* existing practices and to *legitimize* the proposed changes [11]. The strategies can be addressed systematically within a framework that the linguist van Leeuwen [12] has synthesized. It describes how (de)legitimation is related to *authority*, *moral evaluation*, *rationality* and *myth* (or story logic).

In this paper, the four strategies are discussed with relevant references, chosen with the aim to enhance understanding on how dietary changes away from animal sources can be supported (or constrained) by social legitimation.

Background: Insights into legitimation and social change

The legitimation categories of van Leeuwen [12] can be subdivided into more specific types, which he characterizes by different answers to the spoken or unspoken question “Why should we do this (in this way)?”.

The possible answers include legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition (“this is what we always do”) or custom (“this is what most people do”), as well as the authority vested in persons and institutions, and the commendations of experts or role models (♦ Table 1).

One of the characteristics of the next category, moral evaluation, is that it refers to an ordering of human values, which is, however, often not made explicit and debatable in everyday life. Instead, the legitimation can be expressed through evaluative adjectives, such as “because it is natural,” or “healthy”, which only hint at specific discourses of moral values. A typical example is that omnivores often use these terms when asked to defend their choice of eating meat [13].

Other methods of expressing moral evaluation are abstraction (“because we would give everything for the planet”) and analogy (footprint metaphor). Rationality (legitimation by reference to beliefs or assumptions about reality) has two types: instrumental and theoretical. Instrumental rationality refers to purposes (“to get an adequate diet”), means and effects of practices. However, purposes can only serve as legitimation if an action is in principle morally justified. Theoretical rationality is based on experience or on science and can be expressed in terms of definitions, explanations or predictions. A special feature of predictions is that they can be denied by contrary experience, at least in principle.

Finally, legitimation can be achieved through myth-making and storytelling; that is, by organizing and condensing the components of stories such as characters, motive, and plot (often a conflict between opposing forces) to demonstrate what is legitimate.

Category	Main forms and contents (with practical examples)
Authority-based	The authority of conformity and tradition Personal and impersonal authority (including laws, rules, and market regulations) Commendation of experts and role models (influencers) Example: Providing official dietary guidelines
Moral evaluation	Evaluative adjectives that hint at specific discourses of moral values (“natural”) Abstractions that describe the essence of a practice in a moralized way (“save the planet”) Analogies that describe a positive or negative comparable practice in a moralized way (footprint metaphor) Example: Identifying anti-vegetarian biases
Rationality-based	Instrumental rationality legitimates practices by reference to their goals, means and effects (with moral undertones) Theoretical rationality legitimates practices by reference to a natural order of things (definitions, explanations, predictions) Example: Providing practical dietary advice
Story logic	A myth or story with characters and plot (conflict between forces) that provides a model of social action with happy or unhappy endings Example: Discarding the myth of manly meat eating

Tab. 1: Overview of categories, forms and contents of legitimation (adapted from van Leeuwen [8])

The types of legitimation can occur in various combinations to address particular audiences in specific situations and they can be expressed in language and other forms of expression that combine with language (e.g. advertising and entertainment media).

This work may help to understand how the recent report of the EAT Lancet Commission [2], which provides the scientific basis for a diet transformation, might become the beginning of a change in food-related norms; i.e. that what previously belonged to the domain of morally acceptable practices (eating animal protein sources) has to be strongly limited because it leads to unacceptable side effects, whereas what was previously not considered particularly noteworthy (eating plant protein sources) should become a preferable and, subsequently, an accepted alternative (without raising the total protein intake).

Existing authority-based guidelines

One of the instruments to stimulate a process of reordering protein sources is to use the authority of national Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs) in a revised form. FBDGs present science-based nutritional information in the form of simple, food-based messages and graphics, adapted to the food culture of a population [14]. The process of developing FBDGs includes several steps, such as setting nutrition and health objectives, preparing technical guidelines and sets of food recommendations, testing whether the recommendations are understood and feasible for the average consumer and widely supported by the various government agencies, professional societies, and food-industry and consumer associations.

FBDGs were originally intended to promote public health and prevent chronic diseases, which led to a focus on sources of animal fats and carbohydrates; now they are increasingly being used to support food sustainability, which means that several countries are revising the guidelines to pay more attention to sources and amounts of protein. Worldwide, there are now two emergent patterns of recommendations on protein [15]. One pattern combines positive advice about key protein sources with limiting messages to reduce (or replace) the consumption of animal protein (e.g. “Eat more beans and pulses, Eat less red meat and processed meat,” United Kingdom). The other pattern encourages both animal and plant protein, thus diversifying the set of protein sources, without negative advice on animal-based food sources (e.g. “Eat protein-rich foods from a good balance of vegetable and animal sources,” Vietnam).

Public opinion surveys show that when European consumers are asked directly about the role of governments in this context, only small minorities say governments should be leading in a possible reduction of meat consumption [16]. Therefore, it is important that the authority of FBDGs is grounded in expert knowledge, supported by participation from various government agencies, professional societies, food-industry and consumer associations.



In the few countries where it has been investigated how consumers respond to FBDGs, the literature indicates that there is an increasing awareness and general understanding of recommendations, but not much actual use of specific guidelines [17]. However, as also acknowledged by the EAT Lancet Commission [2], the development of FBDGs has many aspects that may effectively prepare the ground for change at economic/organizational level, provided that the guidelines are followed through with enabling or enforcing legislation or other policies, such as public procurement policies, food reformulation, measures to create healthier food environments, and regulations on food marketing and advertising [18].

Moral evaluation and ideological stance

In the process of reordering protein sources, different groups with distinct moral values (i.e. vegetarians and carnivores) might become change advocates and opponents, respectively. This may have various consequences for legitimations based on moral evaluation, because group-specific moral values are often linked to their identities and particular ideologies. An *ideology* is an organizing principle in the judgments of a group that provides the basis for group-related legitimization of their position in society and of their practices [19]. Simply put, it enables people who belong to the group to find the right things to think or do *for themselves* (rejecting the opinion of others).

In view of this, it should be noted that moral issues can be conceptualized from at least two important perspectives [20]. The first perspective sees moral issues in terms of self-evident and fundamental intuitions about right and wrong that are non-negotiable [21]. The second perspective acknowledges that in a diverse society even basic moral norms are subject to fundamental disagreement and that compromises should be found to settle the issues cooperatively [20]. A likely consequence of the former case is that advocates and opponents of a particular change may start seeing the moral aspects of the issue in an ideologically polarized way [21]. The potential polarity between vegetarians (who legitimize their abstention from meat by referring to the imperative “thou shalt not kill for food” [22]) and carnivores (approving meat eating as being “natural” for humans [13]) may interfere in different ways with official and unofficial decisions about protein sources. An example of the former is that the publication of science-based dietary guidelines to limit red meat consumption did not receive the necessary approval by official bodies in some countries. Examples of the latter are everyday interactions between followers of different diets that require “face-saving” techniques to avoid inconveniences [23]. Also, negative associations with vegetarianism can make it difficult to explain to non-vegetarians that a diet with an emphasis on plant foods can be distinguished from a straight vegan or vegetarian diet.

An ideological bias against meatless diets has also affected the early nutrition literature, which resulted in an abundance of pub-

lications about nutrient deficiencies until the scientific advances in the 1970s [24]; in recent years, diets largely based on plant foods, such as well-balanced vegetarian diets, have gained more respect from a public health perspective than meat-based diets [2].

The diversity of rationality-based legitimations

Van Leeuwen’s [8] framework demonstrates a diversity of rationality-based legitimations that may be important for the reordering of protein choices. These legitimations are all related to reality, they can have science-based (using formal rules) or experience-based (using social confirmation) forms, and they can be either theoretically (founded on some kind of truth) or instrumentally (related to purposeful action) oriented.

For instance, the aim of the EAT Lancet Commission is to guide societies about future protein production and consumption by developing a common framework (“the safe operating space for food systems” [2]). This strategy is, in terms of van Leeuwen [8], legitimization by reference to goals, means and effects of institutionalized social action, and, above all, to the knowledge that society has constructed to describe phenomena in the world. However, what often remains implicit is that this legitimization assumes beliefs about reality that people in a given context share, which is a little problematic in some contexts, in particular, in relation to topics that are potentially controversial. The controversy may result from interference by ideological factors (e.g. protesting carnivores) and/or loyalty to different sources of authority (e.g. authority of custom and tradition).

These factors could make it challenging to communicate with consumers about the health and sustainability impacts of animal and plant protein in order to legitimize drastic diet changes. This point already has been demonstrated by firm opposition in social media [4]. Hence, a sophisticated approach is necessary, using the diversity of rationality-based legitimations.

Rationality-based legitimations can be broader and more varied than scientific argumentation. This is demonstrated by the role of ex-

perience and social confirmation in the framework [8], which may refer to, for instance, beliefs in social knowledge about the way things are, or beliefs in practical solutions that work for a certain purpose. These insights can, in particular, be important for efforts to make authority-based dietary guidelines (“limit the consumption of red meat”) more concrete by providing additional information about changing norms on how one should eat and practical solutions.

It may help people if they would be informed about the already changing norms in society regarding animal and plant protein, that there is an increase in meat-free recipes and that well-balanced vegetarian meals are gaining more respect in public communication [2, 24].

This type of information may rationalize and legitimize changes in the way people are thinking about protein in their diets and in how they choose their meal. However, such an approach can only be effective if the information is realistic in offering social knowledge about what other people are doing as well as their reasons for doing it.

Beliefs in practical solutions may be an important guide to dietary changes. In addition to the dietary guidelines (“eat more plant-based food”), the reordering of protein sources could be further supported by a belief in the practical value of plant protein sources for meal purposes, based on common knowledge about food and nutrition.

One solution is to improve the distinctiveness of particular tasty plant protein meals instead of lumping all plant-based foods together [25]. Several studies suggest that significant segments of consumers see the value of spicy, plant-based meals that use authentic plant protein sources (e.g. nuts, chickpeas and lentils), often inspired by ethnic cuisine [26]. This work demonstrates that the appreciation of plant-based proteins depends on the meal context in which they are presented and suggests that it is feasible to develop attractive, practical meal concepts for distinctive products.

The persuasive role of myths, micro-myths and stories

Myths, micro-myths and stories have in common that they use story logic to draw people’s attention and initiate thought and feeling processes. The scholarship on these topics emphasizes language, metaphor, narrative and the elaboration of meaning. In this field, the term myth is used neutrally to denote a condensed story about human experience, which provides comprehensible meaning and credibility.

Myth-making and storytelling are important parts of public communication, and can be commercial or noncommercial in nature. Their persuasive role comes to the fore when new or changed practices are proposed [8]. Dependent on whether the changes are being supported or opposed, this involves legitimation, de-legitimation or re-legitimation of particular practices.

In the past decades, legitimation through myth-making and storytelling has become increasingly important in the worlds of or-

ganization research, marketing and entrepreneurship research [5]. More than any other strategy, storytelling may affect the social identities of products and people (in particular when visual elements are added).

However, both the story and its impact are highly context dependent. For example, the latest generation of manufactured meat substitutes, which is partly based on advances in the medical and pharmaceutical sectors and aims to closely mimic meat, has brought forth many stories about entrepreneurs (the Vegetarian Butcher™), functional protein ingredients (plant-based or cell-based), and consumer products (high profile burgers), which generate much free publicity and social media attention.

In contrast, the myth that “real men” eat large amounts of meat may seriously hamper dietary change initiatives. Hence, both noncommercial and commercial myth-making and storytelling should be critically considered from a health and sustainability perspective.

Concluding remarks

This is the first paper that examines how dietary changes away from animal sources, in line with the proposals made by the EAT Lancet Commission, may gain social legitimation. Its envisaged predictions of health and sustainability limits for food systems refer to a typically science-based legitimation of diet changes. From the perspective of how legitimation works, however, a broader approach is required.

The previous sections show that all types of legitimation could have positive or negative influences on a process of norm changes. Although there are no easy recipes to cope with the negative influences, it is at least important to monitor them.

Many protein-related legitimation strategies are still under development. For instance, it is vital to develop the further implementation of FBDGs, thus avoiding a too narrow nutritional approach. This can be achieved by integrating detailed guidelines into broader strategies of dietary improvements at the levels of diets, dishes and dish ingredients, acknowledging that there is no single best way of eating, and actively comparing the various trade-offs [25].



The improvement strategies should be stimulating for a range of stakeholders who are essential sources of authority- and rationality-based legitimization, such as farmers, food processors, retailers and restaurant owners. These actors may be supportive in various ways, for instance, by developing new meals or meal compositions that demonstrate both limiting (of animal protein) and diversifying (of plant protein sources) recommendations in daily practice.

As noted before, a process of changing norms can be set into motion by the statements and predictions of scientific authorities, but its progress depends on many forces operating throughout society. Although it is mainly the power relationship between affected groups that will determine the pace of progress toward change in a given society [11], the choice of legitimization strategies is of critical importance to guide consumers and to help them choosing foods that may be far better for themselves and for the planet.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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