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**Cognitive dissonance and individuals' response strategies as a basis for audience segmentation in social marketing to reduce factory farmed meat consumption**

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Iris Bergmann holds a Research Fellowship for social change for sustainability at the Global Cities Institute, RMIT University. She is a member of the Climate Change and Social Context Research Group of the Centre for Design. Her work is guided by her interest in visual methods and whole systems approaches. The question about how do we shape our thinking about our environment and what are ways of knowing had led her to investigate these phenomena with her doctoral work, earning her the Award for Outstanding Educational Research of the Institute of Educational Research (IER) (NSW), and the nomination for the Thesis of the Year Award (AARE). Iris has recently directed her attention to issues of factory farming and meat consumption. In 2009, she had initiated a research project investigating Australians' attitudes toward factory farming, gaining the support of the largest single grant awarded to date by Voiceless.

This research was part-funded by the animal protection group, Voiceless - an independent non-profit think tank dedicated to alleviating the suffering of animals in Australia.

## **Introduction**

This paper describes an audience segmentation study that highlights several areas where current social marketing strategies in relation to reducing factory farmed meat consumption could be more effectively applied. The need to address factory farming (intensive animal agriculture) and meat consumption is supported by a large body of evidence that points to their deleterious impacts worldwide, including their impact on the health of communities, on social and environmental justice (e.g. Nierenberg and Garcés 2004), on animal welfare (e.g. Donham et al., 2007), on water, air and biodiversity and their contributions to greenhouse gas emissions (Steinfeld et al., 2006).

This paper presents part of the analysis of data collected in 2009 for a study designed to shed light on what factors influence Australians' attitudes toward factory farming and under what circumstances they would support or reject factory farming. Initial results showed that motivations for maintaining meat consumption are strong, extremely varied and complex. Yet one factor emerged that could help to better understand this audience's motivations and to develop audience segmentation - the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (CD) and the response strategies that individuals apply to avoid it. CD is an uncomfortable and unsettling feeling that arises when conflicting ideas or ideas and behaviour occur simultaneously. According to Festinger (1957), humans try to avoid CD by adjusting their behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, by rationalising and justifying them or by actively avoiding situations or information that increase CD. This phenomenon has not yet received much attention in social marketing theorising. Here we explore the role of CD in understanding factory farmed meat consumption with a view to informing social marketing strategy.

## **Methods**

Seven focus groups with a total of 55 participants (including a pilot group) were conducted in regional and metropolitan areas in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The focus group discussions were designed to elicit participants' views and knowledge of factory farming in Australia, of the impact of factory farming on the farm animals, society and the environment, to elicit the impact of those issues on their consumption behaviour, and their visions of the future of animal farming in Australia. Quantitative data was collected at the start of each focus group using a survey of knowledge, attitudes and consumption habits together with demographic data. Photographic images of farm animals were used and the data used for this study are those that demonstrate the participants' knowledge of factory farming in Australia. (In support of the use of photo elicitation for this study see Bergmann, 2000; Christenson and Olson 2002; Zaltman, 1997).

## **Results and Discussion**

Findings from our study indicate that the participants' attitudes and values toward farm animals can be measured along a continuum. The underlying motivation for an individual's factory farmed meat consumption behaviour is largely determined by their position on this continuum. As such, three main audience segments can be distinguished. Firstly, at one extreme are individuals who display strong pro-meat consumption views and who appear to have resolved their CD by rationalising that animals will only suffer for a short time or are incapable of suffering at all. If suffering is acknowledged, then it is argued that this cost is acceptable to feed humans. Some amongst this group do support more humane treatment of farm animals. At the other extreme of the continuum is the group of individuals (including vegetarians and vegans) who have resolved their CD by acknowledging the inherent value of

animals and use it as their guiding principle. It includes also those who continue to battle with CD and with competing response strategies. Individuals in this group undertake the greatest effort of all to reflect their attitudes and values in their consumption behaviour. The third and largest group is located in the centre of the continuum. Here are those who express concern for farm animals as sentient beings, yet the focus of their rationalisations is, for example, on human health or the environment. Most support the consumption of meat, but they have begun to ask questions about meat consumption. Some consider alternatives, but do not necessarily translate this into changes to their meat consumption behaviour. Further segmentations of all three groups, in particular of the one placed at the centre, would lead to the identification of subgroups at various stages of transition along the value continuum.

Overall, many participants experienced a strong sense of CD between their stated concern for animal welfare and their desire to consume meat. Some experienced an ethical juggle – “do we choose the cheapest option or the morally correct option?” A consensus on what is morally correct was not found. The response strategies of individuals to avoid unsettling feelings of CD can vary yet the most typical strategy is the development of a variety of rationalisations for meat consumption. This is described by Williams (2008) as one of the expressions of ‘affected ignorance’. We found that most of these rationalisations are based on incomplete knowledge and misinformation such as a lack of awareness of animal experience, of the impact of factory farming, of the nutritional value of plant products, and of ways to prepare plant-based meals. This can be addressed with common social marketing techniques, but it is known that the transfer of knowledge alone does not necessarily lead to behaviour change. The behaviour change literature argues that to achieve more than incremental steps in behaviour change, we need to address the motivations that reflect the values und underlie behaviour (e.g. Crompton, 2008; Jackson, 2005). Such value-based approach is consistent with the findings that ethical considerations for the treatment of farm animals are becoming increasingly important to consumers in industrialised countries (e.g. Vinnari, 2008).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The audience segmentation highlighted in this study identifies possibilities for interventions and indicates their required foci. The discomfort of CD in the context of meat consumption primes individuals for behavioural change. Social marketing strategies can be developed to leverage the CD phenomenon and reduce the consumption of factory farmed meat. We recommend that social marketing research place greater emphasis on exploring motivations for behavioural change, in particular the values and attitudes that bring about and/or increase CD that arises between meat consumption and those attitudes and values. Further, social marketing initiatives are called for which increase the likelihood of individuals taking up the desired response strategies (e.g., as identified by the participants, reduction in meat consumption; actively seeking out relevant information; more forcefully demanding humane farming practices, small scale farming, regulated labelling of free-range products, an increase in the availability of meat alternatives). Finally, many participants describe how purchasing, preparing and consuming meat are nested within the habits and routines of day-to-day practices. This demonstrates how behaviours are facilitated by the structures of the production and supply system, as well as by social and cultural assumptions and expectations. To be effective, a social marketing strategy also needs to target the key stakeholders in the entire structural system, such as regulatory bodies, retailers, producers, service providers, media and others (in support of a stakeholder approach see Andreasen, 2006; Peattie and Peattie, 2009). A detailed discussion of this based on our data will be the subject of future work.

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