Dietary transition requires work
exploring the practice-transition processes of young Danish meat reducers
Wendler, Morten; Halkier, Bente

Published in:
Food, Culture & Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

DOI:
10.1080/15528014.2023.2193501

Publication date:
2023

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Document license:
CC BY-NC

Citation for published version (APA):
Dietary transition requires work: Exploring the practice-transition processes of young Danish meat reducers

Morten Wendler & Bente Halkier

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Food, Culture and Society on March 25th 2023.

ABSTRACT: There is a growing acknowledgement in research and policy that populations, especially in wealthy nations, have undesirably high levels of meat consumption seen from a climate change perspective. Many studies on the subject has focused on the characteristics and choices of individual consumers to explain their food consumption habits. Instead, this paper focus on the interrelated everyday food practices of shopping, cooking and eating, and what practice-demands processes of transition pose for practitioners when they reduce their meat consumption. We do this by analyzing interview data from 27 interviews with young people in Denmark (which has a very high of meat-consumption per capita) who have reduced- or are in the process of reducing their meat consumption. We show how the transition of food practices is a gradual and non-linear process, which entails that the practitioner develop the elements necessary to successfully perform the modified food practice. We also show this transition process demands work of the practitioner, in the form of time and effort. Finally, we show that while the explicit intention to reduce meat is widespread among practitioners, such an ‘intention to change’ is not a prerequisite element of food practice transitions that result in reduced meat consumption.

Keywords: dietary transition; meat reduction; food practices; everyday life; practice theory

To cite this article: Morten Wendler & Bente Halkier (2023): Dietary transition requires work: exploring the practice-transition processes of young Danish meat reducers, Food, Culture & Society, DOI: 10.1080/15528014.2023.2193501
Introduction

There is a growing acknowledgement that reducing meat consumption is one of the central strategies in fighting climate change. However, the concrete ways of attempting this have rested on research with an assumption about individual consumer choice as the solution (Keller, Halkier, and Wilska 2016), and such efforts have not had significant effects upon the levels of meat consumption (Springmann et al. 2018).

Instead, we argue that it is necessary to describe and analyze how processes of meat-reduction actually takes place in consumers’ concrete everyday lives. This paper investigates the characteristics of the transition of food practices of young people in Denmark who have reduced- or are in the process of reducing their meat consumption. Denmark has very high levels of meat consumption per capita, about 1 kg per week, which is one of the highest in the world and well above the European average (CONCITO 2019). At the same time, while a recent survey study show that a portion of the Danish population report a reduction of their meat intake, Danes lag behind compared to other countries in the study (EUHRIP 2021). This makes Denmark an interesting extreme case. Taking its starting point in theories of practice, this paper analyses interview data with 29 young Danes (age 18-30). We show how the transition process towards eating less meat entails that practitioners develop new modes of shopping and cooking, and work to maintain or re-establish successful coordination of food activities. In addition, we argue that it is useful to distinguish between transition as a process of meat reduction versus meat exclusion. Finally, we show how, in some cases, social coordination may become the main organizing engagement of food practice transitions.

We also discuss the practical implications of our results for intervention efforts. We argue that efforts to reduce general meat consumption need to move their focus toward normalizing plant-based modes of eating, in order to make transitions toward plant-based modes of shopping, cooking and eating less demanding for food practitioners.
Literature review

The subject of meat-consumption and –reduction has been investigated widely in social research, from a number of different angles. We identify three broad and overlapping tendencies in the field, and detail how the approach of the present study relates to each of them.

The first tendency is to focus mainly on vegetarians and/or vegans. This have been done in many different ways. Some studies looks into who goes vegan or vegetarian (e.g. Perry and Neumark-Sztainer 2001), while others focus on why they don’t eat meat (by investigating values and motivations) (Allen et al. 2000; Dietz et al. 2010; Jabs, Devine, and Sobal 1998). Yet others investigate how people perform their vegetarianism/veganism (Fuentes and Fuentes 2021; Greenebaum 2012; Saunders 2007; Twine 2018) or how omnivores view the group (MacInnis and Hodson 2017; Merriman 2010). While all of the mentioned foci may be valid in relation to some research goals, they have an important limitation when it comes to understanding how meat consumption may be reduced in general. Namely, they exclude everyone with hybrid eating patterns, i.e. everyone who does not self-identify as vegetarians or vegans but still reduce their meat-intake, from being studied (Halkier 2021). As omnivores make up the vast majority of the population, and since many who attempt to reduce their meat consumption are not aiming towards vegetarianism or veganism, not studying hybrid food practices means potentially missing out on important perspectives on the processes of meat reduction. In our study, we have interviewed both vegans, vegetarians, pescetarians, flexitarians, omnivores and other hybrids. This enables us to investigate variations and common trends among different versions of food practices and attempts to reduce meat consumption.

The second tendency in the field is to have an individualist focus on e.g. motivations (Mortara 2015; Zur and A. Klöckner 2014), preferences (Slade 2018), perceptions (Bschaden, Mandarano, and Stroebele-Benschop 2020; Circus and Robison 2019) values, beliefs or
attitudes (Allen et al. 2000; Cliceri et al. 2018; Dietz et al. 2010; Kalof et al. 1999), intentions and motives (Hielkema and Lund 2021) or choices (Rosenfeld and Burrow 2017). This strand of study tend to assume that the attitudes, values etc. of individuals drive them to choose to adopt specific behaviors, sometimes under the restraints of so-called “contextual factors” (Shove 2010). In other words, what people eat is understood as a consequence of more or less conscious choices based on somewhat stable internalized preferences and values. Although this strand of the field can be valid to research, the weakness is that social change is assumed to derive from the cognitive processes of individuals. This means that the role of social activities, -processes and -dynamics in structuring everyday life is overlooked (Keller, Halkier, and Wilska 2016). In contrast, in our study, we adopt a different theoretical approach, which is well known for its strength in analyzing everyday life processes, and which is the perspective of the third tendency of the field of meat consumption and reduction.

The third tendency is to study meat consumption and reduction as an aspect of food practices (Castelo, Schäfer, and Silva 2021; Fuentes and Fuentes 2021; House 2019; O’Neill et al. 2019; Twine 2018; Warde 2013). In opposition to the individualist studies, this group of studies decenters the individual, and instead focus on social practices as the unit of analysis. To focus on social practices is to investigate how the doings and sayings involved in food related activities are organized by certain elements, such as (practical) understandings, formal and informal rules and conventions of how-to-do as well as accepted objectives, ends and purposes (Schatzki 2019). This puts much less emphasis on reflexive choice-making and more emphasis on tacit knowledge, embodied routines and habits as well as the social dynamics of everyday life. These studies have contributed with important knowledge about how reproduction and change of food food practices are best understood and analyzed (Warde 2013). Notably, some studies have looked into the challenges practitioners of vegetarian or vegan food practices face in their everyday life and how they attempt to navigate them (Fuentes and Fuentes 2021; Twine
2018). However, there has been less focus on what characterizes the compound processes of reducing meat consumption and increasing the consumption of plant based products and meals in food practices. This is the focus of the current paper.

**Theories of Practice**

Practice theory is not one unified theory, but rather a diverse collection of theories that share some main assumptions, concepts and perspectives (Schatzki 2019). The central shared thesis is arguably that, in opposition to traditional theories of behavior, social practices are considered the main unit of analysis. The individual is thus decentered and instead viewed as a *carrier* of multiple everyday practices, which they reproduce and change through repeated performances (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). While there are different definitions of a social practice, it is commonly viewed as an “open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” that are organized by a number of requisite elements (Schatzki 2012). It is useful to distinguish between practice as *entities* and as *performances* (Warde 2005). While practice as an entity refers to the above definition, i.e. of an organized collection of doings and sayings, the performances of a practice refers to actual, temporally and spatially localized instances of carrying out an activity.

When it comes to what types of elements organize a practice, and of what their exact role is, again there are different conceptualizations. Here we will draw upon Warde’s (2005) reformulation of Schatzki’s (1996) element typology. According to Warde, practices are organized by *understandings, procedures* and *engagements*. Understandings are both practical knowledge and general perceptions of what to say and do, procedures are both written and verbal rules and instructions of how-to-do, while engagements are prescribed and acceptable ends and purposes of a given practice (Halkier 2010; Schatzki 2019; Warde 2005). In other words, together the three elements encompass the *what, the how* and the *why* of the doings and sayings involved in a practice. It follows that changes in practices can be understood as shifts
in the organization of their organizing elements. This means that change is best viewed as an uneven process that unfolds as the material, social and temporal circumstances of a practice develops, which prompts practitioners to gradually perform the practice differently (Warde 2014).

In general, practices place certain material and temporal demands on their carriers, the character and scale of which depends on the doings and sayings involved in a given practice. For example, any activity may necessitate the use of specific materials and spaces, as well as a certain amount of available time or even specific time slots during the day (Southerton 2013). Together with practice elements, practice demands are important to investigate when the goal is to understand what the process of changing food performances entail for the practitioner.

We conceptualize food practices not as one singular practice, but as a compound practice, i.e. a collection of component practices that are closely related and codependent (Warde 2013). More specifically, we include food procurement, food preparation and eating practices. Each of the three are loosely regulated and coordinated practices, with different (although overlapping) sets of understandings, procedures and engagement (Warde 2016). Consequently it is impossible to fully understand a single component practice in isolation from the others. This means that in our analysis we focus on the compound of food practices as a whole.
Methods

In order to analyze how processes of meat-reduction take place in consumers’ concrete everyday lives and what demands these practice-transitions impose on their practitioners, we build upon data from 27 semi-structured interviews with 29 young Danes¹ (age 20-29). All the participants have in some way limited- or are in the process of limiting their meat consumption. This means the participant group includes both people who self-identify as vegans, vegetarians, pescetarians, flexitarians and omnivores. In addition, young people as a group is especially interesting when investigating transition processes, since the group experiences a lot of life-phase shifts compared to the older population (e.g. new job, education, place of residence etc.).

The first author recruited participants via a large telephone survey (3000 participants) on the food habits of young Danes compared to the rest of the population. As the last question in the survey, participants were asked if they were interested in participating in a qualitative interview, and approximately 100 people in the target group replied positively. This means that the first author has been able to contact and recruit participants strategically with the goal of maximizing variation within the target group. More specifically, the first author recruited people who are different on a number of factors, including gender, age, geographical location, level of education, self-reported degree of urbanization, household type and – most importantly – self-reported eating habits. This sampling strategy has resulted in a diverse group of participants, which ensures multiple perspectives on the subject and potentially strengthens our basis for making analytical generalizations (Flyvbjerg 2006). For an overview of the participants, view table 1 below.

The semi-structured interview as a method was utilized to produce detailed descriptions of the everyday food activities of the participants. This was done by asking the participants to describe

---

¹ In two cases the partner of the originally recruited participant joined an interview. In other words, 25 of the interviews were with one participant, and two interviews were group interviews with two participants.
what they do with food, how they do it, where and when do it and with whom. Concrete examples where encouraged over generalized descriptions.

Prior to the interview, all participants were asked to create a short photo-diary, including pictures of all meal situations in the three days leading up to the interview. The photo-diaries were then included as a subject in the interviews, as a dialogical tool to enable concrete narratives about specific meals and the social circumstances surrounding them (Joosse and Marshall 2020).

An ongoing ‘dialogue’ between theory and data characterized the coding process (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). We started with an open coding, which resulted in a number of broad themes centered on different subjects of conversation. This was followed by a theoretical coding, where the themes from the open coding was examined with different practice-theoretical lenses. This ultimately resulted in a new list of codes, and in our focus on transition processes and practice demands.

The recruitment, carrying out of interviews and handling of the data material has been following acknowledged ethical standards of informed consent, GDPR and anonymity (ASA 2018)
Table 1. Participant overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Household</th>
<th>Main occupation</th>
<th>Diet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Self employed</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asger</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Private Sector Trainee</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Family of 4</td>
<td>Economist</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Retail worker</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisbeth</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Family of 4</td>
<td>Primary school teacher</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liv</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Lives with her mom</td>
<td>HPE student*</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>Self employed</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanna</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viktor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>Unskilled social worker</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilie</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Project developer</td>
<td>Omnivore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannes and Nina</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>College students</td>
<td>Omnivores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torkild</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Student dorm</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Pescetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ida</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Pescetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siri</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Pescetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Vegetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Vegetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niels</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Sound technician</td>
<td>Vegetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josefine</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Lives with parents and sister</td>
<td>HPE student*</td>
<td>Vegetarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura and Rasmus</td>
<td>20, 21</td>
<td>Family of 2</td>
<td>Sick leave / sales assistant</td>
<td>Vegetarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freja</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakob</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>HPE student*</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanna</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikkel</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Shared apartment</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofie</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>Vegan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*HPE = Higher Preperatory Examination. HPE is a Danish upper secondary education program.
The demands of food transition processes

In the following sections, we analyze how processes of transition toward eating more plant-rich and less meat-centered come about in the concrete everyday food practices of our participants, and point to both common trends and variations across the participants. We show transition processes demands work of their practitioners in two different ways, namely by necessitating 1) the development of new modes of shopping and cooking and 2) the maintenance and renegotiation of the social coordination of food activities. We then show how distinguishing between processes of i.e. meat reduction and –exclusion is useful in order to explain how the demands of practice transitions are structured. Finally, we show how practice transition does not necessitate an intention to change, but may be organized around social coordination as the main engagement. These four subjects underline how transitions in food practices are gradual and non-linear processes. The following four sections will deal with each of these subjects in turn.

New modes of shopping and cooking

In accordance with the findings of earlier studies on the subject, many of our participants report that they have a limited repertoire of ‘standard dishes’, that they know how to procure the ingredients for and how to cook, often without having to consult a recipe (Warde 2016). However, as we will show, reducing meat consumption demands a change in this repertoire, in the form of adding new dishes and/or abandoning old ones. Consider the following excerpt from the interview with Freja, who started identifying as a vegan a couple of years before the interview:
**Int:** Has something changed in your way of shopping and cooking since the change?

**Freja:** Yes [...] Right when the change came, it was also a challenge, because you kind of had five classic dishes where, if you couldn’t come up with anything else, you could always shop for one of them. And then suddenly you couldn’t make any of them in the way you used to. You know, Pasta Bolognese, lasagna, the good pasta-salmon dish. “Oh well, I can’t make any of them. What do I do now?” So you kind of started from scratch, I guess. And I think it’s been kind of fun to figure out things, like “Okay, cauliflower isn’t always super boring. Cauliflower can be all sorts of things, it may be extremely delicious”. So I’ve gotten a whole new relationship with vegetables, in that there are so many ways you can use them.

In the excerpt, Freja describes how her “five classic dishes” had to be modified, dropped or replaced for her to be able to succeed with performing vegan food practices. The change in her eating performances caused her to “start from scratch” and she had to figure out how to use already known ingredients – such as cauliflower – in her cooking in new ways. When the interviewer reacted to the above, Freja continued with a comment on her shopping routines:

**Int:** So in other words, you’ve had to spend some time on finding new recipes and ingredients?

**Freja:** Yes. In the beginning that was hard. Also because, the first many times you went shopping, you had to turn everything around and read on the back, like “Oh there is also milk-powder in this, why is there milk-powder in this?”. There was a lot of things that you realized, “Okay, I can’t eat this either if I want to comply with this [veganism]”. So, at first you had to spend a lot of extra time on shopping (...) but you get used to it relatively quickly.

As Freja describes, her change to a vegan diet also meant that she altered her way of shopping. She had to spend more time on it to be able to appropriate new understandings, namely of what products were compatible with a vegan diet and follow procedures for acceptable vegan food conduct. Freja describes the process as “hard”, but also mention that you get used to the change “relatively quickly”. This gradual reduction in difficulty is an important detail, since it suggests that the initial extra work the participants describe is not a permanent consequence of the
change in food performances. Instead, it appears a necessary, but also temporary, part of the transition process from one mode of eating to another.

This combination of having to appropriate new understandings and create new routines of shopping and cooking are mirrored in the narratives of several other participants: Sofie, another vegan, mentions how she had to figure out which stores sold which vegan products and describes how she had to start going to several supermarkets in order to get everything she needed. Sofie mentions that this became easier after she had a chance to “orient” herself in the stores’ selections of products. Asger, an omnivore, describes how he and his girlfriend has started to use known ingredients in new ways, such as by mixing beans into their beef burger-patties. Simon, another omnivore, describes how he’s incorporated more dishes with chicken into his repertoire and has mostly limited his consumption of red meat to Fridays, which he calls “steak day”.

It is important to note, that it is not necessarily that successfully performing new, e.g. vegan, vegetarian or hybrid food practices, demands a higher level of understanding and skill. Instead, as the examples of e.g. Freja and Sofie points to, it is the difference between the practitioner’s earlier skillset, routines and understandings related to shopping and cooking and the practice-demands of the new diet, respectively, that result in a process of transition that demands work, in the form of time and effort, from the practitioner. Simply put, the larger the difference between the old performances and the new, the more demanding the transition appear to be for the practitioner.

To sum up, in this section we have shown how a change in food performances demands that the practitioner develop new modes of shopping and cooking (Fuentes and Fuentes 2021). This may include both developing a new ‘standard repertoire’ of dishes and the practical understandings of how to shop for- and cook them. It may also include developing
understandings of how already known ingredients can be used in new ways, and a reorientation in the selection of super market products to enable the practitioner to procure only those products that align with procedures of acceptable conduct in e.g. vegan food practices.

Maintaining social coordination of food performances

As Halkier has argued “routinized performing of food activities is done together with others, in front of others, and in relation to others” (2020), which means practitioners have to work to achieve coordination of their food performances through different types of social interaction. In other words, since food activities never happens in a social vacuum, food performances are best viewed as collective achievements, the success of which demand that practitioners orient themselves to each other and adjust their doings and sayings accordingly. In the following we will show how, when the food practices of one or more practitioners change, it may demand that practitioners engage in different types of social coordination work in order to (re)establish and live up to common procedures of acceptable conduct and secure the ongoing success of co-performances of food practices.

While all our participants coordinate their food performances with other practitioners, it is apparent that there are differences in the character of said coordination. Namely, social coordination of food activities can be both regularly recurring and sporadic. One example of regularly recurring coordination is the way in which our practitioners describe the development of relatively stable shopping and cooking routines with a cohabitant partner, sometimes by way of weekly meal plans as in the cases of e.g. Johannes & Nina. Another is when the participants cook certain dishes to accommodate the needs of children living at home, as in the cases of e.g. Lisbeth or August. When it comes to sporadic instances of coordination, several participants mention situations where it became necessary to coordinate meals for family get-togethers or finding a restaurant to meet up with friends for a night out. However, what happens to these
coordination processes when the food performances of one or more practitioners change? We’ve observed three ways in which our participants work to maintain or reestablish the social coordination of food activities with other practitioners; by 1) adaption of performances, 2) negotiating common procedures, or by 3) proaction.

With the first type of work, adaption, we refer to instances where practitioners adapt their food performances in ways that make them compatible with the performances of their friends and family. Consider the following excerpt from the interview with Nanna, an omnivore, who “try to limit [her] meat-intake to one or no meals a day”, but whose boyfriend can’t eat most plant-proteins due to a chronical illness:

**Int:** So if I understand correctly, your boyfriend needs meat in his meals (...) Do you ever end up in situations where you make a meal for dinner with meat for him and without meat for you? Or do you always eat the same?

**Nanna:** We try to eat the same. That’s a little easier when you are two people, to make one dish instead of two separate dishes. But we’ve tried to change our cooking so the dishes doesn’t revolve around the meat, but consist mainly of grains and greens with a supplement of some meat. And maybe in smaller amounts. So we’d never make, like, a steak with a side dish. Its always something like a wok or a pasta dish with some meat, or a salad with some chicken bits in it or something.

This excerpt is a good example of adaption: In order to successfully coordinate her cooking and meal-activities with her boyfriend, Nanna adapts her food performances and eats more meat than she otherwise would have. Here, we will mention two other examples of adaption: Firstly, semi-vegetarian Ida, who eats “around the meat” when her parents make stew. Second, mostly-vegan Stefan, who cooks dishes with meat for his omnivore 3-year old son.

The second type of work, namely the negotiation of common procedures, entails instances where practitioners maintain social coordination of food activities by making agreements with their acquaintances about how to co-perform e.g. dining or cooking together. While negotiation
often results in the change of one or more practitioners’ diets, the difference between the two
types is that adaption does not necessarily involve active negotiation.

Consider the below excerpt from the interview with Johanna, a vegan, who lives and studies in
Copenhagen, but who grew up in a village in rural Jutland:

**Int:** So what does a usual day look like when it comes to food?

**Johanna:** […] There is a bunch of vegetarians and vegans in my cohort. So
our study group sessions on Tuesdays and Fridays, we usually find
something vegetarian or vegan together. So in that way, meeting up with
those people is not cumbersome. But it’s different in Jutland, there it’s more
like “I need to find a place that has both meat-dishes and something for me”. Where my friends here in the city, they are a lot like me. The few meat-eaters,
they’ll usually just be like “Ok no problem, I’ll just eat something vegetarian
too”. […]

**Int:** You mentioned that in the study group you find something vegetarian or
vegan food together. Do you ever eat eggs or cheese?

**Johanna:** Not over here, actually. But I made a deal with my parents, for
when I visit them in Jutland. I’m usually there a week at a time, and then I’ll
eat what they make, and make my own meat-free sides. So, if they make a
curry with rice, which has cream in it, then I’ll eat that. But then they’ll delay
adding the meat until I’ve taken some of the sauce before they add the meat.
And then I’ll make some vegan “meat” for myself, which of course isn’t meat.
So I kind of compromise in Jutland. Also with my friends over there, because
they are not really used to vegans.

This excerpt provides an illustrative example of *negotiation* because Johanna has “made a deal”
with her parents, which includes the parents adjusting their cooking by making sure to “delay
adding the meat” and Johanna making a part of her own meals. Other examples of *negotiation*
include when the couple Laura & Rasmus agree to live as “everyday vegetarians” (i.e. to e only
vegetarian food at home, but still sometimes accept meat when it is served) on Rasmus’
suggestion, or when omnivore Simon agrees to weekly vegetarian evening meals on the
condition that his wife does the cooking for them.
Johanna’s example also illustrates an important feature of how social coordination of food activities work: The larger the difference between the practitioner’s diet and the diets of their friends and family, the more work is required to ensure successful co-performances. This becomes apparent when Johanna contrasts the easy coordination with her mostly vegetarian and vegan study group in urban Copenhagen, with that of her omnivore friends and parents in rural Jutland.

The third type of coordination work, proaction, refers to instances where the practitioner takes the initiative in coordinating food activities to make sure co-performances are successful. Consider the following excerpt from our interview with Lisbeth, who has mostly excluded red meat and pork from her diet, and lives with her husband and their two kids:

**Int:** Has anything changed in your meat consumption compared to earlier?

**Lisbeth:** Yes. If I look back at our food routines just six years ago, we ate meat all the time. Like, big steaks, potatoes and gravy and so on. And that’s not at all how it is anymore. […] And I think that because I’m the one who cooks most of the time, and since I don’t eat it [red meat], it’s not what I buy either. And as long as nobody asks for it, well then I don’t shop for it. […] I mean it’s mostly my husband that wants it.

What Lisbeth describes is a good example of proaction: By being the one that “cooks most of the time”, Lisbeth can also better control what dishes are made and thus mostly avoid red meat. The example also makes clear why proaction is a type of work: In Lisbeth’s case, the time and effort she uses on being the one mainly responsible for shopping and cooking.

We’ve also noticed examples of proaction in more sporadic instances of social coordination, e.g. when vegan Mikkel mentions he actively suggests a specific vegan-friendly pizzeria when he orders takeaway with his friends, or when Johanna mentions finding restaurants that have “both meat dishes and something for me” when she dines out with her omnivore friends in Jutland.
To sum up, we have shown how, when the food performances of one or more food practitioners change, the transition demands that the practitioners work to coordinate successful co-performances of food activities with each other. More specifically, through three types of work, namely negotiation, adaption and proaction. It seems evident that the types are closely related and often overlap in practice. To name an example, the example of Johanna includes both aspects of negotiation (the deal she made with her parents), of adaption (since she includes animal products in her diet e.g. by eating sauces with cream), and of proaction (in that she tries to find restaurants that “has both meat-dishes and something for me” when meeting up with friends in Jutland). They also seemingly happen across both regularly recurring and sporadic instances of social coordination of food activities. However, it seems that the amount of work required to maintain the social coordination of food activities vary among our participants. As we have argued in this section, this variation may in part be understood through the varying differences between the practitioners’ dietary habits and the habits of practitioners in their social network. However, as we will comment on in the next section, some of the variation have to do with the type of transition process the practitioner has undergone.

*Transition as meat reduction versus meat exclusion*

In this section, we’ll show why it is useful to analytically distinguish between practice changes characterized by a) a reduction in the consumption of meat and/or other animal products and b) an exclusion of them. The distinction is analytical, since in practice it is more a spectrum of more or less reduction and/or exclusion, than of two mutually exclusive categories. However, as we’ll outline below, we find the distinction useful in that it may help us understand variations in what the transition of our participants have entailed.

The transition processes of our participants vary in how comprehensive a change of their food performances has undergone. On the one hand, we have participants such as the vegans Freja
and Johanna: Both are examples of food practices that has gone from being meat-inclusive to excluding meat and most animal products. On the other hand, the food performances of other participants have undergone more incremental changes. This includes the cases of Lisbeth, Nanna and others, who have not excluded meat entirely, but describes either eating meat less frequently, in smaller portions and/or having reduced red meat consumption and substituting it with light meat, such as poultry.

We argue that it is useful to make an analytical distinction between dietary transitions that involve either an exclusion of meat or animal products or merely a reduction of them, since the two types of processes pose different demands for their practitioners. Consider the following excerpt from our interview with Emilie, who during her interview describes how she has reduced her meat intake and even considered becoming a vegetarian:

    Int: Earlier you mentioned that you’ve considered becoming a vegetarian. [...] Why do you think that hasn’t happened?

    Emilie: It’s a good question. [...] I think it’s about- You know, I don’t want to visit Carl and Anne, and then not be able to eat what they’ve made. So I guess it’s a kind of convenience. I want it to be easy for others to figure out what food to serve me. When I told you that half my friends are vegetarian, that leaves the other half of my friends who aren’t. Especially some of my male friends, who really loves steakhouses.

In reflecting on why she has not become a vegetarian, Emilie touches upon an interesting difference between reducing her meat intake and excluding it from her diet: The latter would potentially complicate the coordination of food performances with her omnivore friends, Carl & Anne, both when visiting them or when going out. Emilie’s example is especially interesting when compared to that of vegan Johanna, who described how she works in several ways to keep her food performances compatible with those of her parents and Jutlandish friends. Emilie seem to be aware of the social coordination work involved in excluding meat from her diet. In other words, by merely reducing her meat intake and staying omnivore, Emilie keeps her food
performances easily compatible with those of her omnivore friends and thus keeps the demands of her transition low.

Earlier, we argued that when the food performances of a practitioner change, work has to be done to ensure that successful social coordination of food activities are maintained. By making an analytical distinction between those transition processes that entail reducing meat consumption and those that exclude (certain types of) meat and animal products, it becomes visible how the two types of processes pose different demands for its practitioners. Our data show that the more “exclusionary” a diet is, the more the practitioner will have to work to ensure successful co-performances of food activities with others: Stories of social coordination work are much more prevalent among those participants who have excluded (some types of) meat and/or other animal products from their diets.

The distinction is also useful when it comes to understanding the development of new modes of cooking and eating. Earlier, we argued that the larger the difference between the old performances and the new, the more demanding the transition process is for the practitioner. In line with this, we would argue that the more meat-exclusionary food performances are, the more demanding the process of transition will become for the originally omnivore practitioner. This is because the practitioner will both have to integrate new ingredients and recipes into their repertoire, and abandon parts of their ‘old’ standard repertoire: those dishes that are centered on meat and other animal products.

To sum up, in this section we’ve argued that making a distinction between meat reduction and exclusion helps us understand why practitioners face varying demands when they change their food performances, both in relation to issues of social coordination and cooking skills.
Social coordination as an organizing element of transition

As we outlined in the theory session, a part of what organizes a social practice is *engagements*, i.e. certain prescribed and acceptable ends and purposes of a given practice. Our participants articulate a multitude of such different ends and purposes, when they describe how and why their food performances have changed: Climate friendliness, animal rights, weight-loss, taste preferences, dealing with eating disorders etc. as the purpose behind eating less meat. For some participants, such a *practice project* (Schatzki 2002) of certain ends and purposes are a large part of their transition-narratives. In this section, we want to show how social coordination in itself may become an important engagement in the transition of practitioners’ food performances.

Consider the following excerpt from the interview with Anders, who moved in with his pescetarian girlfriend a couple of months before our interview:

**Int:** You mentioned that your girlfriend is a pescetarian, and that you eat less meat when you are together with her, than when you eat by yourself?

**Anders:** Yes definitely, because most of the times we eat together, like three out of four times, I’ll eat something vegetarian or with fish. And the last 25% of the times, we’ll make something where we each make a part of it, so to speak. Like, if we make Mexican pancakes, we’ll make two versions. I’ll fry some chicken in a pan, and she’ll make something based on kidney beans as her main filling. (...) When she cooks, it’s always pescetarian or vegetarian. I mean, the dishes she usually make, like her “go-to dishes”, from before she met me, they were all vegetarian or pescetarian dishes. And that’s the direction it’s gone in. Because the dishes I used to make had a lot of meat in them. And those dishes haven’t really entered our common cookbook, so to speak. […]

**Int:** I hope I don’t misquote you here, but you said something about not being religious about-

**Anders:** No no, I mean- I don’t buy into the whole story about eating less meat because it’s not climate friendly and so on, but on the other hand it’s not like I have a religious need to have meat every day. […]

**Int:** So you can find vegetarian mels tasty too?
**Anders:** Sure. And then I can look even more forward to the days where I’m alone and can make a good steak (laughs)

In Anders narrative, eating less meat is not a *personal project* (Warde 2016), i.e. something he actively tries to do, nor something that is tied up with the end-goal of being “climate friendly”. Simply put, mainly he eats less meat than he used to because he now lives together- and have to coordinate his food performances with a pescetarian. This means that the meat-heavy dishes of Anders’ earlier food repertoire have not become a part of their common cooking and meals, while vegetarian and pescetarian dishes, on the other hand, have. Namely, the coordination work Anders engages in is arguably an instance of *adaption*: Anders regularly eats pescetarian and vegetarian dishes (and less meat) in order to be able to coordinate everyday meals with his girlfriend. In other words, in Anders’ transition towards eating less meat the social coordination of his food performances with his girlfriend is arguably a main *project-end-goal*, i.e. engagement.

There are several other examples of such coordination-focused transition among our participants, and they often revolve about a live-in partner or a roomie. Both Asger, Johannes and Laura describes how their partner took the initiative to reduce their common meat intake. Jakob describes how moving in with a vegan friend prompted him to make a lot of vegan food, and eventually become an almost-vegan himself.

Importantly, if social coordination is the main – or only – *project-end-goal* that organizes the transition towards a reduced meat consumption, this may have consequences for the way in which performances of meat consumption are structured. Let’s return to the case of Anders:

**Int:** If you for some reason ended up living by yourself again, would you then go back to eating more meat?

**Anders:** I probably would. Because, while I would probably keep some of the fish-dishes, the same wouldn’t be the case for most of the vegetarian dishes. I’d probably always make some meat instead.
Int: And a little less speculative, do you ever cook meat-free dishes when you are home alone?

Anders: No, not for dinner (laughs)

Int: [...] So you haven’t considered making more of a dietary transition, you know, more than what you already did when you moved in with your girlfriend?

Anders: No, I haven’t considered that.

The role of meat in Anders food performances seems to be structured systematically by his coordination with his girlfriend: When he is by himself, he usually cooks dinners with meat, and when asked what would happen if he ended up living by himself again, he predicts meat would play a larger role again. While Anders prediction is hypothetical, it does substantiate our earlier claim that Anders does not view the reduction of meat as an end in itself. Less hypothetically, at the time of our interview, Anders’ girlfriend was away on vacation, which Anders described prompted him to buy a large rump-steak. This means that all the three dinners documented in Anders’ food-diary consisted of steak, green beans and potatoes.

The case of Anders is illustrative of a seldom-discussed aspect of dietary transitions, namely that a transition towards eating less meat does not necessitate that the practitioner adopts engagements in which eating less meat is an end-goal in itself. In other words, intention to change (Hielkema and Lund 2021) is not a prerequisite for a dietary transition. Instead, social coordination of food activities, e.g. with a cohabitant partner, is in some cases the main organizing engagement.

**Conclusion and discussion**

In this article, we have analyzed the characteristics of the transition of food practices among young people in Denmark who have reduced- or are in the process of reducing their meat consumption. We have shown how the transition towards less meat consumption demands that practitioners a) develop new modes of shopping and cooking and b) adapt, negotiate or proact social coordination of food activities. We have detailed how both the development of new
modes of shopping and cooking and the maintenance of social coordination of food activities demands work of the practitioner in the form of time and effort. We’ve shown how the amount of work necessary to successfully develop new modes of shopping and cooking depends on how comprehensive the transition of food performances is, i.e. what the difference is between the ‘old’ skillset and routines of the practitioner and the practice-demands of the new diet.

When it comes to the social coordination of food activities, we’ve shown how the effort demanded of the practitioner depends on the difference between the new food performances of the practitioner, and the food performances of the people in their social network. We have also shown that it is useful to distinction between transition-processes aimed at respectively a *reduction* of meat consumption and the *exclusion* of meat and or/animal products: In general, transitions involving *meat exclusion* involve relatively higher demands for the successful development of new modes of shopping and cooking, as well as more social coordination work. Finally, we have shown that, contrary to how dietary transitions are often viewed and analyzed, intention to change is not necessarily a prerequisite to or element of the transition towards a reduced meat intake. Instead, social coordination of meal activities may become the main engagement organizing the practice transition.

Based on the above analysis, we can make three general observations about the character of food practice transitions towards reduction of meat. First, the transition of food practices is a gradual and non-linear process, which entails that the practitioner develop the elements necessary to successfully perform the modified food practice. Second, this transition process demands work of the practitioner, in the form of time and effort. Third, while the explicit intention to reduce meat is widespread among practitioners, such an ‘intention to change’ (Hielkema and Lund 2021) is *not* a prerequisite element of food practice transitions that result in reduced meat consumption.
Taken together, these observations result in a perspective on food transition that is altogether different from the general perspective deriving from the individualist studies reviewed earlier in the article (Shove 2010). Instead of assuming the attitudes, intensions and choices of individuals to be explainers of unit actions, such as the action of purchasing a plant-based burger (Slade 2018), we have shown how the transition of everyday food routines and – repertoires is a gradual and demanding process for the practitioner, especially in cases of comprehensive changes in food performances. To successfully transition to- and maintain food practices with a reduced meat intake, the practitioner have to develop the practical understandings and social procedures necessary to sustain them.

With this view of food transition as a process demanding work from the practitioner, the focus of intervention efforts aiming to reduce meat consumption also changes. Namely, it is not enough to focus on the dispersion of information and guidance about the unsustainability of meat products, since this does not change the conditions for sustainable food practices to spread. When the amount of work a transition demands is contingent on the amount of new skills, understandings and routines the practitioner has to develop, the labor involved also depend on the availability and normalcy of these elements in social and material food infrastructures. As recent research has documented, when socio-material infrastructures are ”meat centric”, they prefigure and enable meat-centered food practices while they complicate meat-exclusive or –reductive practices (Fuentes and Fuentes 2021). In other words, reconfiguring socio-material food infrastructures in ways that disperse the necessary elements of plant-based food practices may lower the demands of food practice transitions for practitioners.

A similar argument can be made when it comes to the social-coordination work involved in food practice transitions. As we showed, the amount of social coordination work in a food transition is contingent upon the differences between the practitioners’ novel dietary habits and
the habits of other practitioners in their social network. Consequently, dispersing and normalizing procedures of acceptable social conduct that supports plant-based food practices may lower the amount of labor connected to processes of transition towards a reduced meat consumption. To name an example, if the notion that it is socially appropriate to accommodate the dietary habits of e.g., vegetarians become more widespread, the need for the vegetarian practitioner to exercise *adaptation, negotiation* and *proaction* diminishes.

The principle of normalization in the above sense, i.e., as the dispersion of relevant practice elements organizing mainly plant-based dietary food performances, can be translated into many concrete forms. Namely, it arguably encompasses any approach that gives as many people as possible as much personal experience- and surface of contact with mostly plant-based meal types and ingredients, and to the skills needed to procure and prepare them. Such approaches are not limited to the borders of private homes and lives, but includes looking to workplaces, public institutions and organizations (Keller, Halkier, and Wilska 2016). As the time and resources of practitioners are limited, such strategies may very well entail a parallel *de-normalisation* of elements organizing meat centric food practices: The move toward plant-based diets is also a move away from meat centric ones.

Centrally, the main goal of intervention is not to convince people that a different diet is desirable – indeed, as we have shown, an intention to change, while normal, is not a necessary element of dietary transition. Instead, a main goal becomes to reduce the amount of social and practical labor transitions toward mainly plant based diets demand of potential practitioners.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Velux Foundation under Grant 27826, 2019.

ORCID

Morten Wendler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4064-2641
Bente Halkier http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7010-7012

Ethics approvals

In Denmark, there is no tradition or requirement for ethical review board to process and assess the ethical standards of standard social scientific research projects, which is why we have not attempted to obtain approval from one. That being said, our study has adhered to the ethical standards of ASA, including the obtainment of informed consent.
References


