

How handling meat leads to psychological numbness

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Participants were presented images of meat from three animals--cows, sheep, fish--that were experimentally manipulated in their degree of animal resemblance, from an image of the entire carcass to the cooked animal product. Credit: Lancaster University

Butchers and deli workers become desensitised to handling meat within the first two years of handling it as part of their job say psychologists.

The study led by Dr. Jared Piazza of Lancaster University recruited 56 people in Lancashire with commercial experience handling meat and

another group of 103 people without any such experience.

He said: "Thinking about the animal origins of meat and the harm caused to [animals](#) for meat production can be psychologically distressing for many people. Presumably, the constant handling of meat requires people to adapt to their environment. After all, it would be terribly disruptive to the task of preparing meat if butchers and deli workers were continually thinking of the animals that were slaughtered."

Participants were presented images of meat from three animals—cows, sheep, fish—that were experimentally manipulated in their degree of animal resemblance, from an image of the entire carcass to the cooked animal product.

For each image, participants rated the images on measures of [disgust](#), [empathy](#) for the animal, and the extent to which the images reminded them of animals. Broader beliefs and attitudes about meat and animals were also assessed.

Dr. Piazza said: "Our sample of deli workers and butchers expressed diminished feelings of disgust, and diminished empathy for the slaughtered animals, when evaluating [meat products](#), compared to individuals who lacked such direct experiences with meat production."

Butchers and deli workers were also less likely to think about animals when viewing meat and more likely to justify eating meat on the grounds that it is:

- Necessary for health
- Natural due to our ability to digest meat and history of hunting
- Normal as eating meat is widespread
- Nice because meat is enjoyable

"Furthermore, the longer our participants had worked in the [meat industry](#), the less disgust and empathy they felt towards meat and the animals involved, and this reduced sense of empathy and disgust was observable within the first two years of work. This suggests that psychological adaptation to meat may occur over relatively short time periods."

Psychologists suggest three reasons for these lower levels of both disgust and empathy:

- Repeated exposure to meat may promote adaptation, for example, by quieting thoughts of the animal origins of meat
- The benefits of a job may make working with animals products a positive experience
- Their beliefs may change to become positive about [meat](#) production, e.g., the animals are treated humanely before slaughter

The study led by Dr. Jared Piazza of Lancaster University was published March 2020 in the journal *Emotion*.

More information: Jared Piazza et al, Butchers' and deli workers' psychological adaptation to meat., *Emotion* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000738](#)

Provided by Lancaster University

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