Abstract

Pleasure and Purity
An exploration of the cultural potential to shift towards more sustainable food consumption patterns in the Netherlands

Processes of food production and consumption have the single largest environmental impact of all human activities. The fact that diets have to change into a more sustainable direction is generally agreed upon. However, a shared vision of a sustainable and desirable society to support these changes is missing. This thesis contributes to the question why we disagree about food sustainability and what different pathways policy makers will need to develop simultaneously to facilitate more sustainable food choices.

This thesis consists of five independent research papers that address this issue from different angles. As a result, the chapters are connected but they also follow their own internal logic. Firstly, the investigation was geared towards identifying cultural currents in Dutch society that incorporate promising elements to question the dominant food cultural paradigm and to facilitate transitional changes. The dominant paradigm can be considered problematic, particularly because it stimulates routinized mass meat consumption, which has detrimental effects on the environment and society, human health and animal welfare. Two in-depth, qualitative studies (chapter two and three) were carried out to understand what deeper motivational drivers could be identified among groups that currently show an increased involvement with food. It revealed that both groups were striving to incorporate a deeper level of meaning in their food choices. One focuses on the personal values of nature connectedness, awareness and purity and the other seeks meaning in food competences, taste and social relatedness. These themes reflect the contrast between purity and ethics versus pleasure and aesthetics. It was shown that the motivations of both groups can be interpreted and understood within larger analytic frameworks of culture and cultural change in the West. Therefore it is argued that policy efforts to motivate more sustainable
food consumption among a larger group of consumers may benefit from connecting to these underlying cultural trends, for example by means of framing and stimulating associated practices.

While theories of cultural change can indicate the nature, direction and dynamics of societal change, it concerns potentially slow and long-term developments. Therefore, policy makers need to address value pluralism and develop varying feasible pathways to stimulate a more sustainable diet. So secondly, three quantitative survey studies were carried out to investigate different types of food-related motivations, incorporating the qualitative findings mentioned above. Self-determination theory was employed to further develop the idea of meaningful food consumption. Thus, a philosophical and social-psychological perspective were combined in order to draw distinguishing parallels between the cultural and the individual level. Varying value orientations were tested in a representative survey in combination with the concept of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which gave rise to different motivational themes reflecting cultural tensions in Western society. These were the degree to which the food-nature relationship was internalized, intrinsic enjoyment of food, extrinsic orientation towards food and ambivalence towards food. These themes were all significant with regards to sustainability relevant topics: the quantities of meat that people indicated to consume, the choice for organic or free range meat or plant-based snacks and the prevalence of a high body mass index.

The study also addresses practices related to meat, meat substitution and meat reduction among Dutch consumers. The practices reflected a cultural gradient of meat substitution options running from other products of animal origin and conventional meat free meals to real vegetarian meals. The results demonstrated that patterns of meat consumption, substitution and reduction are influenced by preferences for meal formats (conventional three component meals versus combined meals), protein literacy, cooking skills, preferences for plant-based foods and motivational orientations towards food. In particular, a lack of familiarity and skill hampered the preparation of real vegetarian meals. Based on the findings a diversified understanding of meat substitution is proposed and four policy-relevant pathways for a transition towards a more plant-based diet are specified, including an incremental change towards more health-conscious vegetarian meals, a pathway that utilizes the trend towards convenience, a pathway of reduced portion size, and practice-oriented change towards vegetarian meals.

The thesis contributes to a better understanding what a culture of food sustainability may entail and it sheds light on the cultural influence on individual food choices. It illustrates how these insights might be utilized by policy makers in government and industry whose goal it is to facilitate more sustainable food choices.