

# Change from meat to non-meat consumption. A social practice analysis.

An empirical research on how to favor the decrease in meat consumption in embedded routines and eating habits.



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# Summary

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In the last decades, meat consumption has turned into a real environmental issue, and in the very near future there will be the need to decrease meat intake towards more plant-based alternatives. How can this change happen? What can favor or impede this transition? This thesis makes use of social practice theory to examine change from meat to non-meat consumption conceived as a bundle of social practices. Through empirical and qualitative data collecting methods like observations, daily diaries and interviews, a sample of 9 practitioners (3 non-meat eaters, 3 flexitarians and 3 meat lovers) has been analyzed. First, the components pertaining to both bundles of practices have been identified, and afterwards flexitarians and non-meat eaters' change from meat to lower/non-meat consumption has been analyzed. From this data, then, factors that can positively or negatively affect change has been discussed.

The results show that both bundles of practices are dominating by the component of meanings, which then directly affects the other two components of materials and competences. In particular, social context proved to be a fundamental factor in both the composition of the practices and the transition between these practices. The presence and continuous exposure to non-meat consumption can constitute a great opportunity for change to happen: for some practitioners, in fact, the tight contact with non-meat eaters favored the decision to change toward less or no meat consumption. Practices are also influenced by the cultural context, that turned out to be an obstacle for change, since it directly affects both the materials and the competences of the practices, and act as a barrier for their dynamic development. Culture also emphasizes the difference between the "standard" practice of meat consumption, performed in a more unconscious way, and the more "unusual" practice of non-meat consumption, which has been found to be more reflexive, so more easily recognizable and consciously carried out. This gives the practice of meat consumption a certain flexibility in its performance, while non-meat consumption is definitely more "rigid". In order for change to happen, then, the favoring points should be used to focus and push the flexible aspects of meat consumption toward experiencing and performing non-meat consumption practices, trying to eventually turn them into more unconscious routines.

# Table of content

---

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Problem description.....	5
1.1.1 Environmental impact of meat.....	5
1.1.2 Other issues related to meat consumption.....	6
1.2 Research objective and questions.....	8
1.3 Methodology.....	9
1.3.1 Observations.....	9
1.3.2 Interviews.....	10
2. Conceptual Framework.....	11
2.1 Social Practice Theory.....	11
<i>Figure 1</i> .....	11
2.2 (Non-)meat consumption as a social practice.....	13
<i>Figure 2</i> .....	13
2.2.1 The practices of meat consumption.....	14
<i>Buying meat products</i> .....	14
<i>Preparing meat dishes</i> .....	15
<i>Eating meat dishes</i> .....	15
2.2.2 The practices of non-meat consumption.....	16
<i>Buying non-meat products</i> .....	16
<i>Preparing non-meat dishes</i> .....	17
<i>Eating non-meat dishes</i> .....	17
2.2.3 (Non-)meat consumption: practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance.....	18
2.2.4 Analyzing change: from meat consumption to non-meat consumption.....	18
3. Results and Analysis.....	20
3.1 Practices related to meat consumption.....	20
<i>Buying meat products</i> .....	20
<i>Preparing meat dishes</i> .....	24
<i>Eating meat dishes</i> .....	26
3.2 Practices related to non-meat consumption.....	29
<i>Buying non-meat products</i> .....	29

<i>Preparing non-meat dishes</i> .....	33
<i>Eating non-meat dishes</i> .....	35
3.3 Change from meat to non-meat consumption.....	38
<i>Practitioner 2 (flexitarian girl)</i> .....	38
<i>Practitioner 3 (flexitarian guy)</i> .....	38
<i>Practitioner 6 (non-meat eater girl)</i> .....	40
<i>Practitioner 7 (non-meat eater girl)</i> .....	40
<i>Practitioner 8 (flexitarian guy)</i> .....	41
<i>Practitioner 9 (non-meat eater guy)</i> .....	42
3.4 Concluding remarks.....	44
4. Discussion and Conclusion.....	45
4.1 Steering points for change.....	45
<i>Figure 3</i> .....	47
4.2 Obstacles for change.....	48
4.3 Limitations of the research.....	49
4.3.1 Methodology limitations.....	50
4.3.2 Conceptual framework.....	51
4.3.3 Suggestions for further research.....	52
4.4 Concluding remarks.....	52
References.....	55
Annex I.....	58
Annex II.....	61
Annex III.....	62

# List of figures

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<b>Figure 1</b> – Components of a social practice.....	11
<b>Figure 2</b> - Components of (non-)meat consumption practices: buying (non-)meat products, preparing (non-)meat products, eating (non-)meat products.....	13
<b>Figure 3</b> - Differences in change dynamics and influence along the practices.....	47

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Problem description

### 1.1.1 Environmental impact of meat

Food is a fundamental aspect of our life, essential for our survival. No living being could live without the necessary nourishment. With the progress of our developed society, due to several aspects like technological progress and population growth, the food system has experienced a sharp increase in production and consumption of food-related commodities. This consequently stimulated more and more exploitation of natural resources in order to satisfy both supply and demand. Nowadays, the environmental impact of food production and consumption is largely proved and it constitutes one of the major future world challenges (Garnett, Mathewson, Angelides, & Borthwick, 2015). Within the broad food system, livestock holds the first place as a the highest-impact sector: livestock-related activities either directly or indirectly have a substantial influence on the environment (FAO, 2006/01), mainly as far as greenhouse gases emissions, land use, deforestation and depletion of water resources are concerned (De Vries & De Boer, 2010) (Garnett, 2009). Even though it is very hard to quantify the impact of the food system on the global GHG emissions, given the high level of uncertainty about the factors to be taken into account, it has been estimated to be around 17-32% (Garnett, 2008). Regarding cattle, its contribution to the total GHG emissions has been estimated to be around 18%, especially regarding non-CO<sub>2</sub> gases like methane -CH<sub>4</sub>- and nitrous oxide -N<sub>2</sub>O (FAO, 2006/01). Another substantial impact of livestock is on land use and deforestation: generally this is treated as an indirect effect (Garnett, 2009) as the main function of land is to cultivate crops to feed the animals. Massive areas of land are devoted to the cultivation of oilcrops and cereals for livestock production. Moreover, the lack of available land incentivizes deforestation practices, especially in developing countries (FAO, 2006/02); in fact, big industries seek space for expansion of fields by taking over already existing lands used for other purposes (for instance rice fields and other cultivations), thereby forcing local and small farmers and breeders to move towards rainforests (Garnett, 2009).

In such a context, one has to consider the fundamental role played by consumers, given by the demand-driven nature of today's market (Linnemann, Benner, Verkerk, & van Boekel, 2006). In fact, global meat production is highly dependent on global meat demand. The shift of consumption patterns towards a higher demand for livestock-related products in developing countries has been defined as a real "food revolution" (FAO, 2006/02) that can have deleterious consequences for the environment if the trend keeps on rising. In fact, meat demand in developing countries is expecting to increase by 92% in 2020, in respect to 1997 levels, with China being the major country to lead this high request (IFPRI, 2001). However, the

increase of meat demand will not lead to a substantial increase in per capita meat consumption in developing countries, that will stay below that of developed countries. Long-term trends hypothesize a slowdown in livestock products demand, taking into account important assumptions like the weak increase in meat demand by developed countries, a lower demand by dominating developing countries like China and Brazil, and the steady poverty status of current developing and least developed countries (FAO/02, 2006). The raise of meat demand will mainly concern poultry meat, which today represents around 30% of the share of total meat consumption. Literature asserts that poultry has been used as a substitute of either pork (IFPRI, 2001) or beef (FAO/02, 2006). Consequently, pork has been slightly increasing while beef experienced a slight decline. Following the current trend, poultry has been projected to be the sector that will expand more in the future, even if not at the same high rates of today.

Acknowledging that meat consumption is a driver of meat production, hence a factor that strongly favors the unsustainability of the modern meat industry, one important approach that can be taken in order to move towards a more sustainable food system, is the one that Garnett (2013) defines as the “demand restraint perspective”. The approach lies on the basic assumption that consumption of high-impact food – such as meat – is the leading cause of environmental problems related to the food system. Therefore, by modifying the drivers at the basis of consumption, a decrease in production and in environmental impact will result as a consequence (Garnett, T., 2013). Therefore, technological progress from the supply side is not enough to ensure a decrease in environmental damage, as from the demand side, consumption choices need to substantially change in order to see effective results (Popp, Lotze-Campen, & Bodirsky, 2010).

Several studies proved the environmental benefit of shifting our diet towards a more plant-based nutritional regime: meat-based products require more resources in terms of energy, water and land than plant-based products (Pimentel, & Pimentel, 2003). Diverse reasons are provided in support of this argument: the energy-consuming process of feeding animals, using crops such as soy, that could instead be devoted to direct human consumption (De Bakker, & Dagevos, 2012); the huge gap between the litres of water required to produce 1 kg of animal proteins and those required for 1 kg of grain proteins (Pimentel, & Pimentel, 2003); the overall “inefficiency” of livestock in terms of food value: in fact, animals require more food than what they can give back in the form of meat for human consumption (CIWFR Trust, 2004).

### **1.1.2 Other issues related to meat consumption**

When talking about meat, the environment is not the only issue to be taken into account, and it is not the only reason raised to move towards a decrease in meat consumption.

Animal welfare is certainly an important issue, and it is directly linked to ethical reasons, inasmuch the way livestock is treated is often denounced by animalists and similar organizations to be outrageous

and disrespectful for a living being. Practices like tail-docking, animal crating, administration of hormones are part of the so-called “confined animal feeding operations”, also known as CAFOs, taking place in large-scale factory farms (NALBOH, 2010). The main underlying reason for meat industry to carry out such operations is increasing efficiency, that means maximizing productivity by minimizing costs: animals are conceived as units of productivity rather than sentient beings (Animal Welfare Institute). Reportages made in such farms documented the abuses and the violence induced on animals, and animalist organizations are constantly pushing towards a more compassionate, ethical and cruelty-free diet (PETA).

Human health is another hot topic concerning meat. A recent report released by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a branch of the World Health Organization, correlates consumption of red and processed meat to the onset of cancer. According to the report, red meat has been classified as “probably carcinogenic to humans” and processed meat as “carcinogenic to humans”, especially as far as colorectal cancer is concerned (IARC, 2015). Moreover, previous studies link meat consumption to the increase of cardio-vascular diseases such as blood pressure and heart attacks – coronary heart disease CHD - due to the high presence of cholesterol and saturated fats in meat, especially red meat (Erlinger, & Appel, 2003). Those are among the reasons why health is one of the main reasons for people to reduce or stop eating meat.

Meat is not only related to the above-mentioned issues, but it has indeed a symbolic meaning attached to it, derived from social, cultural, religious and economic spheres.

Perhaps one of the strongest meanings related to meat concerns income and social status. It is no news that being able to consume meat on a regular basis has been the sign of an improvement of living conditions. With a change in per capita income, the possibility to widen the possession of commodities increases, and it has been analysed how change in meat consumption is very reactive to change in income. This specifically refers to an increase of richness in low-income countries, that presumably leads to an increase in people’s quality of life, while meat consumption in already high-income countries is not so sensitive to additional economic growth (Schroeder, Barkley, & Schroeder, 1996).

Meat is also often associated with power and physical strength, characteristics traditionally belonging to masculinity (Heinz, & Lee, 1998). This association cross-cuts several cultures, and the contrast between the idea of the strong meat-eater against that of the “weak” and “girly” non-meat eater is still very powerful in our western society. In fact, when it comes to topics like sport and physical strength, meat is mentioned as the first food that can provide vigour and virility, with many men not even considering a meatless dish as a proper meal (Ruby, & Heine, 2011). Other considerations about meat and man link the consumption of animal products with the idea of power over living beings, therefore over nature, power that, since ancient times, has always been a male prerogative (Rozin, Hormes, Faith, & Wansink, 2012).

## 1.2 Research objective and questions

The research aims at identifying strong and weak points that can positively or negatively affect the decrease in the consumption of one of the most high-impact food, meat, in the perspective of moving towards a more sustainable diet. The focus is therefore on the environmental (un)sustainability of meat, but also other issues, such as health and ethics, will be taken into account. Even though meat consumption has been the subject of a lot of research concerning the environment, it has rarely been analyzed under the perspective of social practice theory. Therefore, this thesis could give some new insight on the concept of (non-)meat consumption and on how change from meat to non-meat consumption can happen. Meat and non-meat eaters have been observed in performing the practice; materials, meanings and competences of both practices have been identified, along with the links that connect them to one another. However, reducing meat intake implies a change in the practice of meat consumption. Therefore, the breaking of links in meat consumption and the making of links in non-meat consumption operated by flexitarians and non-meat eaters have been examined, in order to assess how the change in practice occurred and how can it be taken as a tool to identify starting points and probable obstacles for possible future changes in meat consumption.

The main research question aimed at answering the research objective is the following:

**What are the main points that can foster and the ones that can impede change from meat to non-meat consumption from the point of view of social practice theory?**

Subquestions:

- 1) **How can meat and non-meat consumption be analyzed as social practices?**
- 2) **How can change in the practice of meat consumption happen in order to reduce meat intake?**
  - a) How did flexitarian and non-meat eaters move from (high) meat consumption to low/non-meat consumption?
    - (i) How were the variables of materials, meanings and competences modified in the passage from meat to non-meat consumption?
    - (ii) What links were broken and what new links were created among materials, meanings and competences?

## **1.3 Methodology**

The thesis made use of qualitative research methods: the information collected aimed to analyze the practices contained in meat and non-meat consumption and their change, therefore to identify what, how and why practitioners performed these practices and what, how and why change in practices occurred. To accomplish that, observations and interviews were used as main data collecting methods. The sample used in both methodologies consisted of students living in Wageningen, and it can be categorized in three groups: meat-lovers, flexitarians and non-meat eaters. The only criterion of division was based on the frequency of consumption of meat: meat-lovers were those who regularly consumed meat - 5 to 7 days a week - , flexitarians were those who occasionally consumed meat - less than 5 days a week - while non-meat eaters did not consume any meat. The total number of the sample was nine, equally divided among the three groups: three meat lovers, three flexitarians, three non-meat eaters. They were numbered from 1 to 9 (see Annex I for more information about the sample).

### **1.3.1 Observations**

Observations are a fundamental method for social practice theory. In order to analyze the components of a practice and their links, it is fundamental to observe how the practice is reproduced by individuals in the form of practice-as-performance. The nature of the observation of this research was participant, in the way defined by Fetterman (1998) as a method that “combines participation in the lives of the people being studied with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data”. Hence, practitioners were observed in their natural setting, but the observer was not directly involved in the practice itself. In fact, an external eye was needed to catch all the characteristics and to identify the components which were intrinsic in the practice and unconsciously performed by the individuals, and that would have been difficult to observe if the researcher had been physically engaged in the practice. In order to avoid as much as possible any kind of distortion in the performance of the practice, the sample was constituted by people known by the researcher: in this way, the individuals hopefully felt more at ease and behaved as they would normally do, without feeling under pressure. The sample of the observation is purely random, the only criteria used is the frequency of meat consumption. The observations focused on the variables enlisted in the conceptual framework part. Given the information to be gained, the observations were made during one meal and during grocery shopping. The meal observed was dinner, as it was done in the time of the day in which generally students were at home, therefore it was a meal they had time to prepare and eat. During the grocery shopping observation, the practice of buying (non-)meat products was observed, while during dinner observation the focus was on the practices of preparing (non-)meat dishes and eating (non-)meat dishes. During the observations, notes were taken in order to track the actions the individual did. The sample was observed once a week over a period of one

month, for a total of four times, to be divided between two grocery shopping and two dinner observations. In addition, for the entire period of the fieldwork, the sample was provided with a diary structured in a very simple and straightforward way: everyday, practitioners kept note of what they ate for dinner, with whom, in which way, and so on. This was useful for the researcher to keep track of the *modus operandi* of the practitioners in respect to the practices, even without directly observing them.

### **1.3.2 Interviews**

All the information collected during the observations was integral part of the semi-structured interview that was made to every practitioner at the end of the observation process. The interview also deepened aspects mainly concerning meanings, that were harder to get merely from observations, and it was the chance to let the practitioners reflect on their doings. Moreover, as far as flexitarians and non-meat eaters were concerned, interviews constituted the only way to discover how they used to perform the practice of eating (a lot of) meat, in order to portrait the change happened in the practice. There were a mix of close and open questions, specifically designed based on the variables of interest belonging to the practices of buying (non-)meat products, preparing (non-)meat dishes, eating (non-)meat dishes. The close questions mainly deal with specific data (how many times a week do you consume meat? How long have you been a non-meat eater?): they were easier and more straightforward to answer, therefore they were asked at the beginning of the interview, to put the interviewee at ease. Afterwards, open questions – mainly “why” questions - went more in depth about the meanings, so the driving reasons for performing the practices of meat and non-meat consumption, and about the doings of the practitioner observed during the observations. To make comparison of open questions easier, the questions were formulated in order to be included in specific categories: for instance, the question concerning the reason why non-meat eaters decided to stop eating meat could be categorized into specific aspects – in this case, for instance, health, ethics, environment – but the way the question was formulated was still open to any kind of answer. The respondent could answer whatever he wanted, but he was most likely to give an answer related to one of the categories previously identified. Moreover, the questions were structurally the same, but with some of them different in content between meat eaters and non-meat eaters. Flexitarians had a mix of those questions. Notes were taken by the interviewer and all the interviews were recorded. The interview was of course anonymous, and only few basic information about gender, age and country of origin were asked at the very beginning. For an overview of the questions, see Annex III.

# 2. Conceptual Framework

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## 2.1 Social Practice Theory

The conceptual framework used in this research applies Social Practice Theory (SPT) to the analysis of (non-)meat consumption. Even though SPT has been interpreted and analyzed by several authors in different ways, there are common grounds upon which all those belonging to this approach agree.

First, SPT does not focus on the individual, by assessing his preferences and choices, but it rather concentrates on the activity as a whole, embedded in everyday life, and dynamic in time and space - namely the practice (Hargreaves, 2011). A practice has been described as a routinized and socially shared type of behaviour (Reckwitz, 2002). The performance of a practice is not consciously driven, but it is intrinsic in an individual, who “learnt” it through repeated experience – the result of unintentional actions and events - eventually turned into a habit (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). Moreover, the practice itself is acknowledged and performed by different individuals in a similar way (Schatzki, 1996)

Second, it is widely agreed that a practice involves different components. Although depending on the different authors such components can have different names, they can all be categorized and included under three main aspects: materials, meanings and competences (Shove *et al*, 2012) (Figure 1).

Materials are the physical components of a practice: they include all the tools, technologies and actions needed to perform the practice, including the human body itself. Materials can be either generic – used in more than one practice - or specific for the single practice (Røpke, 2009).

Meanings refer to the mental factors that influence the performance of a practice. Generally these factors are summarised as understandings, beliefs and emotions (Holtz, 2014). Although meanings can surely be individual-specific, SPT conceives them as belonging to the practice itself. Hence, all the practitioners have common underlying reasons to reproduce the practice (Røpke, 2009).

Competences relate to the skills to master in order to carry out the practice. This includes the know-how, the background knowledge and all the necessary practical actions. Once again, skills can be either practice-specific or they can be attributable to several practices.

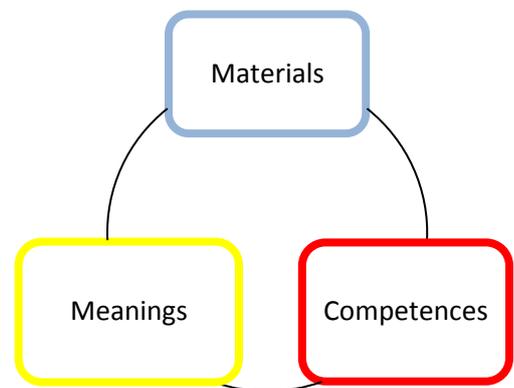


Figure 1. Components of a social practice

Third, the above-mentioned components characterize the concept of practice-as-entity, which is distinct from that of practice-as-performance (Schatzki, 1996). Practice intended as entity refers to the idea itself, so to the actual configuration of the practice: it identifies the links among the components – *nexus* –, how they tie together, how they mutually influence each other and how they are coordinated within the practice (Warde, 2005). Moreover, the entity is widely recognized by all individuals, meaning that, given a practice, each practitioner is able to identify its components and the possible relations (Rørpke, 2009). However, in order for a practice to exist, it needs to be reproduced and enacted, so the components need to be practically linked in the everyday life context. This is what practice-as-performance is about: observing how the practice is reproduced, in the form of connection and mutual influence of its components (Warde, 2005). Seen in this regard, then, a practice does not necessarily need to be performed in the same way by all individuals, but it is rather interesting to see how differently it is carried out, hence how materials, meanings and competences are organized and connected. The individual then is only a “carrier” of the practice, who performs the practice-as-entity, and he gets to know himself and the world surrounding him through the reproduction and enactment of the practice (Hargreaves, 2011).

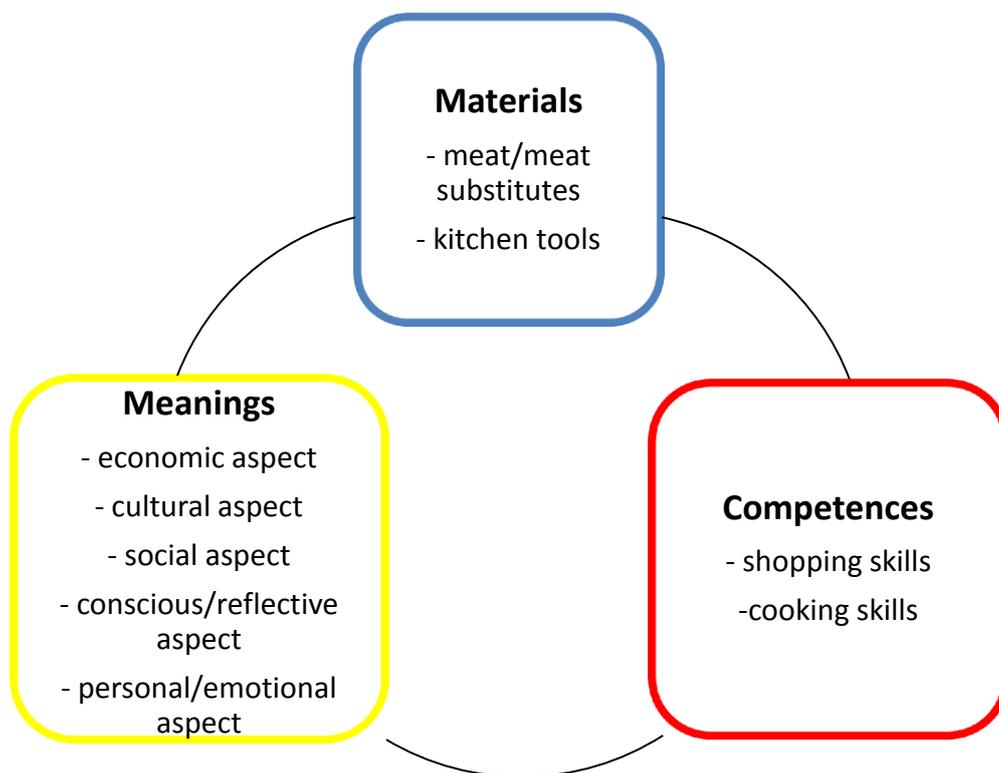
In the context of practice-as-performance, coherence among components is of prior importance for the individual in order to carry out the practice in an effective way (Holtz, 2014). Coherence addresses the importance that all the components fit together. For instance, the individual’s practical activity in the practice has to go in accordance with what he thinks and understands – correspondence between materials and meanings. The same goes for materials and competences: a practice cannot be carried out if a person does not have the necessary know how, which is derived from experiences rather than from a deliberate thinking. The habit and the repeated action develop the knowledge to be able to unconsciously deal with the material components of a practice (Holtz, 2014).

A fundamental point of SPT is the dynamic nature of the practice: change and innovation are inherent characteristics of a practice, since the relation among the three components is constantly developing and needs to be repeatedly reproduced. A main question then is where does change come from, hence how can a practice evolve or disappear – how links can be made or broken. Authors belonging to SPT agree on the fact that change in behavior arises from a change in the practice itself. Such change can have two different sources. Change can come from individuals challenging the current practice, by welcoming new habits which, experienced repeatedly, can turn into routines and be embodied in the practitioner. Change can also happen when different practices come in contact and shape new connections among materials, meanings and competences (Warde, 2005) (Hargreaves, 2011). However, assessing effective change in practices becomes tricky given the two fundamental variables of time and space: in order to say that a practice has evolved or dissolved one needs to analyze it in terms of time frame and spatial extent. (Sahakian, & Wilhite, 2013).

## 2.2 (Non-) meat consumption as a social practice

Given the above-mentioned conceptual framework, it is possible to identify (non-)meat consumption as a bundle of social practices. (Non-)meat consumption comprises the following practices: *buying (non-)meat products, preparing (non-)meat dishes, eating (non-)meat dishes*. The action of (non-)consuming meat is routinized and socially shared by several people worldwide, and it presents similar characteristics in terms of materials, meanings and competences. Such characteristics are briefly enlisted in Figure 2 and they will be deepened according to each practice in the following sections.

Figure 1 Components of (non-)meat consumption practices: buying (non-)meat products, preparing (non-)meat products, eating (non-)meat products



### 2.2.1 The practices of meat consumption

The practices related to meat consumption are constituted of different elements pertaining to materials, meanings and competences. For the purpose of this research, only some of these elements will be analyzed as variables.

#### ***Buying meat products***

The first fundamental variable belonging to materials is indeed *meat*. In this regard, meat products concern all type of meat in terms of type of animal – specifically beef, pork and poultry - and type of production technique - raw meat, processed meat, luncheon meat, ready-made meat dishes and so on. The type of meat is a very important variable to take into consideration, since different kinds of meat affect the environment in a diverse way. Moreover, choosing a certain kind of meat over another implies a different connection with other variables within the material component as well as among the other two components throughout all the three practices. In this case it is important to make a distinction within meat lovers, since the choice of a certain kind of meat has an environmental implication which differs from another type of meat. For instance, two individuals may be classified as meat lovers, but the type of meat they usually buy can be different depending on their country of origin: one can be more devoted to red meat and the other one could prefer buying poultry. Environmentally speaking, then, the practices performed have different impacts. The *economic aspect* is a first important component of meanings, useful to assess how much the practitioner is willing to spend to eat meat: is he on a budget or does he spend what is necessary to buy good quality meat? *Prices* will be taken as the variable to evaluate whether the practitioner prioritizes quality over price or not. It is presumable that who decides to go for quality is most likely to be very fond of meat, but at the same time, budget constraints might force him to give up on quality over price. Since the observed individuals are all students, it is expected that price will have a substantial influence on their purchase choices. This is the reason why practitioners need to master competences related to *shopping skills* in order to make an informed decision on what to buy, and it is interesting to see whether practitioners prioritize price over quality or vice-versa. This can be done by observing where they go doing shopping: a supermarket, an organic store, a butcher shop. The *reflected/conscious aspect* refers to the awareness and influence of variables like health, ethics or environment in the performance of the practice. In the case of buying meat, the decision about where and how much meat to buy can be influenced by such factors: for instance, a person who is very careful about his health or about animal welfare will prefer to buy organic meat – traditionally more pricy but of higher quality - while an environmentally concerned individual would prefer to buy less meat, going for types of meat like poultry. A practitioner could be also used to buy a certain kind of meat because that is what he has always done in his country of origin: the *cultural aspect* then plays an important role in the practice.

Last but not least, the *social aspect* of the practice is crucial: generally buying meat is a practice that can be carried out also alone, but one will buy a higher quantity of meat if he has to prepare it for more people. In the specific case, if students live by their own or if they live with other roommates, or they usually eat with someone else, they will perform the practice in a different way: they will buy more meat, maybe they will differentiate the kind of meat they buy, and all the other above-mentioned aspects will change as a consequence.

### ***Preparing meat dishes***

Performing the practice of preparing meat dishes requires the possession and use of proper *kitchen tools* - stove, oven, microwave, mixer, grill, barbecue, pans, bowls, cutlery, plates. Some of these tools may be useful to get information about the feeling of the individual towards meat or also about the time dedicated to cook meat. For instance, the fact that a person generally prefers to make use of the microwave to warm up precooked meat meals instead of properly cooking them on the stove could be a sign of carelessness about quality of the meat, or maybe the person does not want to dedicate a lot of time to prepare his dish because maybe he prioritizes something else over eating. Presumably, a person who does not pay a lot of attention to what he is eating will be neither aware of the environmental, ethical and health impacts meat has. Connected to the tools, *cooking skills* - grilling, roasting, frying, stir frying, steaming, baking - are fundamental for the practice of preparing meat, and they are strictly connected to the type of meat bought: raw meat needs to be cooked, so a certain kind of tool will be used, while processed meat does not necessarily need to be prepared in some ways; in the same way, beef, pork or poultry have different preparation techniques. Cooking meat can be performed in a substantially different way depending on the *social context* in which the practice is performed: is the practitioner cooking for himself or is he cooking for/with someone else? It is more likely that if other people are involved in the practice or if an individual has to cook meat for other people, then he will dedicate more time to the preparation of the dishes, and also the practice of buying meat will be different because he has to take into account other people's tastes and preferences. So the social aspect can take over other aspects related to meanings. Cooking meat dishes has also something to do with the *personal and emotional aspect* of the practice: meat is the base of a lot of recipes, and practitioners, also due to *cultural influences*, recognize themselves in these recipes, and this can explain the emotional bond they can establish with meat, and this substantially affects the way the practice is performed.

### ***Eating meat dishes***

Preparing meat is the preliminary activity who leads to the practice of meat eating. Cooking skills are strictly connected to the experience of eating meat: if meat is not well-cooked, then it is not going to be appreciated. In this practice, the component of meaning stands out for its importance in assessing the role

of meat in the practitioners' meal. A first variable is indeed the *taste* of meat, and it is connected to the *personal/emotional* aspect of meanings: meat is generally very appreciated for its taste, and that is why it enriches every meal. A general claim often made by meat eaters when they try meatless dishes is their tastelessness: whatever meal with meat just tastes better. But taste is indeed very subjective, and it could be surely connected to the *culture* of the practitioner's country of origin: one could find poultry way tastier than beef, or vice-versa, and that affects also the practice of buying meat. Once again, the *social context* plays a crucial role: sharing the meal incentivizes the appreciation of the dish itself, in this case meat dishes, so it can have a strong influence on the performance of the practice. When eating meat becomes a way to socially gather and spend some time together - like for instance during barbecues - the practice represents the main activity and creates a sense of community. Therefore, an individual might be more willing to eat meat in these collective moments, but he can be less incentivized when he is alone. The *conscious/reflective aspect* is an interesting point to be analyzed in this practice, because the variables of ethics, health and environment might explain, for instance, what pushed an individual to become a flexitarian, or whether there could be room for change if meat lovers might be interested in deepening their knowledge on one of those issues. A person who, despite informed about the effects of meat, still keeps on eating a lot of meat products, probably prioritizes more other meanings, maybe the cultural and emotional ones, and he is not willing to give up on them. On the other hand, there could also be the case in which the individual lacks information about such variables, therefore he never questioned his preference for meat: hence, knowledge about the impacts of meat could constitute a "window" for changing the practice.

### **2.2.2 The practice of non-meat consumption**

The elements of non-meat consumption practices are structurally the same as meat consumption, and similar in content as well, with few but substantial differences.

#### ***Buying non-meat products***

The starting point is not meat anymore, but rather *meat substitutes* - legumes, tofu, seitan, tempeh, lupin beans, sprouts, eggs, dairy products. Identifying what is the most purchased meat substitute can provide the researcher with information about how the move happened and how the individual is adapting to this new practice, especially as far as the *economic aspect* is concerned. In fact, one of the claims related to vegetarianism is that it is an expensive lifestyle, economically sustainable only for a certain kind of people. This is partially true, since meat substitutes are different in terms of *price* - legumes, eggs and some dairy products have an average price, but products like tofu, tempeh, specifically dedicated to non-meat eaters, are indeed slightly pricy. In addition, the nature of the substitute product itself influences the price tag: a product bought in an organic store, or with an organic label, is likely to be more

expensive that a similar one bought in a regular supermarket. Considering the variable of price, then, it is useful to get to know how a student decides to spend his budget on certain kind of substitutes rather than others. Purchase choices can also be influenced by the *conscious/reflective* variables of *ethics, health and environment*, since one or more of those variables made the practitioner question the value and impact of meat in the first place. The focus of the research is mainly on the environmental reason; however, reducing meat consumption will benefit the environment anyway, regardless of the driving reason, therefore all of the variables will be taken into account. Yet it is presumable that the underlying driving reason can shape the performance of the practice in a different way: for instance, a person who is concerned for the environment and for his health will probably reduce his intake of meat, so he will buy some meat substitutes but not necessarily to completely replace meat. Instead, a person who is moved by ethical principles, will be more extreme in his choice, because his prerogative is to not kill a living being in the first place, so he will probably buy a bigger amount of non-meat products.

### ***Preparing non-meat dishes***

Connected to the type of non-meat substitute, preparing non-meat dishes with some of these alternatives can be quite time-consuming: legumes, for instance, need to be boiled, tofu needs to be seasoned and enriched with other stuff, eggs need to be cooked, while dairy products – such as cheese – do not require a time-consuming preparation. Dedicating some time to prepare food from scratch, taking into consideration the busy student life, can be a symbol of interest and awareness on food. The *social aspect* plays a role in how the practice is performed: is the practitioner cooking for/with someone else? If so, is the person a meat or non-meat eater? This can potentially change the way the practitioner prepares the dish, since he might feel more comfortable to cook for/with a non-meat eater rather than for a person used to eat meat. In the specific case, the perspective of meat eaters is also interesting to see how they relate to the practice of preparing non-meat dishes with a non-meat eater.

### ***Eating non-meat dishes***

In performing the practice of eating non-meat dishes, the *conscious/reflective aspect* raises again, but in this case it is interesting to see how it is connected to the *emotional aspect* of the practice. How does the practitioner feel to not eat meat? Regardless of the ethical, environmental or health reasons, variables like *taste, empathy with the cause embraced, feeling of doing something good* – either for yourself or for what surrounds you- and feeling of *belonging to a certain identity* are all related to the personal sphere and provide the justification and the motivation for the doings of the practitioner. The identification with a specific group can also change the *social dynamics* of the practice: a non-meat eater might tend to feel closer to those who share his lifestyle, while perceiving meat-eaters as “different”, so he does not even feel like sharing the eating time with them. On the other hand, a non-meat eater could also have an

individualistic way of seeing his choice, therefore he does not necessarily identify himself within a certain group, but he carries out his lifestyle in a determined but “peaceful” way, sharing its eating time with everybody. Similar to the practice of preparing non-meat dishes, also eating non-meat dishes can be challenging for meat-eaters, so it is interesting to observe how the practice is carried out when there are also meat-eaters, especially in the everyday life context: if meat-eaters often join the non-meat eater in eating non-meat dishes, then probably meat is not a fundamental part of their meal, or the presence of the non-meat eater can have a certain influence on their being meat-eaters. Therefore the social context is useful to get insight on both sides of the coin.

### **2.2.3 (Non-)meat consumption: practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance**

Even if the variables sketched and their possible links have been identified in the chapter above, the bundle of practices can be performed in a different way by practitioners. The reproduction of the practice is the subject of the observations and interviews. The results got from the two methods will give some insights on the differences in the performance of the practice. From the interviews, also the concept of practice-as-entity can be evinced: can (non-)meat consumption be socially recognized as a practice? From a series of *nexus*, do practitioners acknowledge the bundles of practices related to (non-)meat consumption? It is more likely for non-meat consumption to be identified as an entity in itself, while it is more difficult to get the same for something more “ordinary” like meat consumption. For instance, if we invite some guests over for dinner, and we know that one of them is vegetarian, we already know that we will have to buy a certain kind of stuff and prepare at least one dish without meat: hence, we acknowledge the practice of not eating meat, and we thoughtfully take into account the fact of buying and preparing something meatless. The same reasoning does not apply to meat-eaters because it is taken as normality: we do not even ask people whether they are meat-eaters, since we automatically consider them as such. Therefore, we will prepare either meat or meatless dishes, taking into account the guests’ tastes, but not recognizing the practice of meat consumption in the first place. This difference between what is ordinary and what is not makes it more difficult to identify meat and non-meat consumption as two diverse practices on the same level: it is interesting to analyze whether this difference exists and what role it plays in steering or preventing change.

### **2.2.4 Analyzing change: from meat consumption to non-meat consumption**

The practice of meat consumption is constantly evolving, and, due to a series of reasons, it can also drastically change and turn into non-meat consumption practice. In this regard, vegetarians and vegans represent a perfect example of how change happened, since the majority of them were previously meat-eaters. What made them change their mind? What new habits were created and what elements of the practice were challenged? Investigating how current non-meat eaters used to practice meat consumption,

and the process of passing from the former to the current state, will be helpful to find out what triggered the change; a similar reasoning applies to flexitarians, especially those who were former meat-lovers. The component of the practice which is more likely to be the driving force of change is meanings, as the mental factors underlying the performance of a practice are the most sensitive to change: specifically, as already mentioned, the conscious/reflective aspect plays an important role, and change could probably be categorized under the three drivers of health, environment and ethics. However, after becoming conscious of an issue, other important aspects are needed in order for change to occur: a person could acknowledge the impact of meat but still not being willing to make such a strong commitment as stop consuming it. Therefore, what has been rationally acknowledged needs to be personally internalized in the emotional sphere, engaging the person itself to give his contribution. As far as environmental impact is concerned, it is widely proved and recognized that meat has a huge impact on natural resources, but this is not enough for people to reduce or stop eating meat: the practitioner needs to feel the problem as *his* problem. The role of the social context is also fundamental to shape the practice: vegetarians and vegans are non-meat eaters, but the path that led them to stop eating meat is different, and it could have been influenced positively or negatively by the social context that surrounded them. An example can be family, the first social nucleon in which a person is raised, and who, especially as far as nutrition is concerned, plays a key role in shaping food habits and introducing practices related to food. How did family react to the change in the practice? And what has changed since the practitioner moved out of his family house or/and out of his country of origin? Did being a non-eat eater become easier or harder, given another social context? All these points represent the turning point for change: all the rest comes as a consequence, and the new links made among the components are the result of this prior reasoning. Once acknowledged the topic that pushed the change, it is interesting to understand the actual source of change: a book, a movie, a person, a specific life event, a series of circumstances that made the practitioner question the role of meat in his nutrition. By finding out such sources, the channels through which change in the practice happened can be identified, along with the means that made change possible and the possible obstacles that were impeding it up to a certain point.

# 3. Results and Analysis

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In this part, the results gained from the observations, diaries and interviews are presented and analyzed, divided into sections according to the two subquestions to be answered. The first subquestion deals with the identification of the bundle of practices of both meat and non-meat consumption. The first section addresses the practices of meat consumption, the second one those of non-meat consumption. Each practice is described by first providing results in general terms, and then deepening specific aspects. Afterwards, the results are interpreted and analyzed emphasizing their relevance in the light of social practice theory, identifying the links among the different components. The third section deals with subquestion 2, where the experience of flexitarians and non-meat eaters in the transition from meat to non-meat consumption is described, using the information gained during the interviews taken.

## 3.1 Practices related to meat consumption

### *Buying meat products*

The practice of *buying meat products* is the first one identified among the three practices constituting the bundle of meat consumption. The first element that stands out from the observations, diaries and interviews is indeed *meat*, which is the main material component of the practice. Overall, there is not a wide differentiation regarding the *form* of meat mostly bought, which is generally raw meat. The practitioners observed do not buy a lot of processed meat (ham, salami and so on): among this form of meat, bacon is most bought one, even if it is considered quite fat so it is seen as a kind of “treat” to be eaten once in a while. Other factors that, instead, are found significantly different during the performance of the practice are mainly related to the *type* of meat, the *price* and the *quantity*. This difference is also due to specific *shopping* and *storing skills* of the practitioners, as well as connected to specific *cultural adaptation* behaviors developed by practitioners coming from different parts of the world. In the background, *social context* is a key influencing aspect of the practice.

The *type* of meat - meant as chicken, beef or pork - differs depending on mainly two variables: price and easiness of the product to be cooked and prepared. Minced meat is found to be a common type of meat bought since it is versatile, it is possible to prepare quite a wide range of dishes with it, it is quicker to cook (for instance, you don't need to cut the meat) and the taste is considered really good. Moreover, it is also relatively cheaper than other meat options. However, chicken is absolutely the most common type of meat bought, for the same above-mentioned reasons: chicken is easier, quicker to be prepared (the cooking time is less than pork and beef) the taste is softer than other types of meat, hence it can be

appreciated by a wider range of people with different tastes, and, the quantity being equal, it is cheaper than pork and beef.

The *quantity* bought is connected to specific *storing skills* of the practitioner. In fact, it usually depends on how the meat product is stored afterwards: for instance, if meat is going to be cooked and eaten right after, or in the next days, then the quantity bought is smaller than if meat is stored in the freezer, to be consumed at a later stage. During the observations, the couple formed by practitioner 1 (meat-lover guy) and practitioner 2 (flexitarian girl) was buying quite a high quantity of meat of different kind (chicken, pork and beef), almost always around 1 kg or more, that then they were going to partially store in the freezer. In general, meat lovers tend to buy more meat for a longer time – therefore higher quantities and more variety of meat -, while flexitarians tend to focus their meat purchase for a specific recipe – smaller quantities and generally just one type of meat. For instance, during one observation, practitioner 3 (flexitarian guy) wanted to prepare a specific recipe for dinner which included minced meat, therefore he bought only that particular product: in the interview he confirmed that this is his common purchase behavior. In addition, meat is generally bought a lot in one grocery shopping session for time convenience, so that there is no need to go doing grocery shopping every two or three days, but it can be done once a week.

The component of *price* is another critical aspect, given the budget constraint derived from being a student and having to manage a certain amount of money: a clear example is the attention given to special offers on meat products, that were often taken into account in the choice of what to buy. However, other types of *shopping skills* are expressed by practitioners during the performance of the practice: an evaluation of the price/quantity ratio – more than price/quality - is an important aspect, since quantity as much as price of different but similar meat products are usually checked before making a choice, to see whether the amount of money to be spent is worth the amount of meat to be bought. Other evaluation points concern the ability to recognize and pay attention to precise characteristics of the meat products at issue, such as the presence of fat, the dimension of the pieces of meat and the expiration date – the further the expiration date the fresher the product. In particular, meat lovers seem to be the most “skilled” practitioners, the ones who take into account several criteria for their choice, while flexitarians tend to just focus on few ones, mainly price and quantity. For instance, during the grocery shopping observation of practitioners 1 and 2, the choice of meat products was always in charge of the guy, who carefully checked and compared different kinds of products to decide which one to buy. When asked the reason of this behavior, the flexitarian girl stated that she is not able to distinguish the details of the product as accurately as her boyfriend can, therefore she relies on his skills for the choice of meat products. In addition, it has been observed that the majority of practitioners follow a specific route during their grocery shopping. When they go to the stand of meat products, they already know what to look at, or at least the part of the

stand to look at. If they are attracted by some other product, it is often because of an offer put on a different but similar meat product. Therefore, once applied the *skills* useful to identify a “favorite” type of meat product, practitioners tend to stick to it, unless substantial economic incentives come along during a specific grocery shopping session.

Most of the practitioners observed comes from different parts of the world: therefore, *cultural adaptation* to a new and different way of life shapes the *meanings* underlying the practice of buying meat products in a substantial way. In particular, the type of meat bought reflects this cultural difference. Some reasons for this can be an increase in price, or the unavailability of some kind of meat (for instance, during the interview, practitioner 4 – meat-lover – said: “my favorite meat is lamb, but cannot find it here”) or the different taste of such meat (“pork does not taste the same as in China” said practitioner 5 – another meat-lover- during the interview). This is why these practitioners opt for a different kind of product, and they changed their criteria of choice more towards price and easiness and quickness of preparation of meat, even though the taste of the meat is still considered an important aspect. These adaptations characteristics have found to be common for practitioners coming from totally different cultures.

#### *Links within the practice*

As described above, buying meat products is a practice which entails several aspects, that are inevitably connected to one another. A clear link is that between the form of meat, the quantity of meat and the shopping skills of the practitioners: as previously mentioned, meat-lovers pay more attention to the product itself than flexitarians, and they buy a higher quantity of meat for a longer time span. This might be due to the frequency of consumption of the product: meat lovers are indeed more likely to consume more meat than flexitarians, and they probably know how to cook different kinds of meat, therefore they can choose a greater variety and a higher quantity; flexitarians prefer to stick to a specific meal or recipe or at least to buy only what they actually need and they are going to eat. Therefore, consistent and frequent repetition of the practice allows practitioners to improve the skills necessary to perform the practice itself: the more the practitioner is performing the practice, the more skilled he gets at choosing the meat product he likes most, widening his criteria of analysis. Within this criteria, more “conscious” concepts like animal welfare, environment and health are not present. Practitioners usually prefer to do groceries in regular supermarkets instead of, for instance, butchers or organic shops, and specific labels (organic, fair-trade, sustainable) are not considered important for the choice of the product. This can be due to the fact that such labelled products are notoriously more expensive than regular ones, and given the budget constraints of a student, probably the economic aspect overcomes other aspects like quality and origin of the product. When asked about this, most practitioners confirmed the fact that price is slightly prioritized over quality.

### *Routinized behaviors*

Connected to the economic aspect, another important point regards the relationship between routinized behavior and self-conscious actions. Generally, practitioners tend to perform routinized actions like buying the same type of meat (chicken, beef or pork), so the routinized action of going to the same stand, and doing the same route when grocery shopping. However, two main elements partially break this routinized behavior: one is indeed price, and the other one is the presence of other practitioners involved in the practice or in the following practices of cooking and eating (social aspect). In case of discounts or cheaper offers on meat products, practitioners self-consciously question which product to buy, and often the cheapest one is bought. Generally this happens in case of big quantities for less price, taking as equal other features like quality and taste. As far as social context is concerned, it has been observed that people who live together and who often or always eat together also tend to share the grocery shopping moment, regardless of the specific social relationship existing between them. This also happens in the case of meat products: specifically, the couple who lives together (practitioners 1 and 2) is often doing grocery shopping jointly. During the interview, when explicitly asked the flexitarian girl whether she would buy the same amount of meat if she was not with her meat-lover boyfriend, she firmly said no, but that of course, by living together and sharing the meal time together, his preferences had to be taken into account as well. Hence, apart from the economic aspect, the social context can play a major role in how the practice of buying meat products is carried out. This type of conscious behavior stands out mainly when the practitioners have different preferences: in this case, the fact that practitioner 2 is not used to eat as much meat as practitioner 1 indeed made it more noticeable for the former to adapt to the amount of meat bought by the latter. The same goes, indeed more expectedly, for a situation in which there are guests over for dinner: when asked about having a vegetarian guest for dinner, practitioners (mainly meat-lovers) stated that they should make a more mental and organizational effort to decide what to buy and cook to satisfy the guest's preferences. For instance, they should look up recipes on the internet and then buy the necessary ingredients. That is because they do not perceive the practice of "buying (exclusively) non-meat products" as a natural and unconscious activity, but rather they have to replace the component of meat with something else which is not routinized in their everyday life.

The issue with breaking the routinized behavior in case of guests over for dinner, or in case of another practitioner with different preferences, is connected to another important factor: the strong connection existing among the three practices of *buying meat products*, *preparing* and *eating meat dishes*. In fact, the performance of the first practice is highly influenced by the way practitioners expect to perform the following two practices. As previously stated, social context influences the practice of buying meat products mainly because the practitioners involved also share the other two practices, and that naturally lead them to share the grocery shopping moment as well. For instance, during grocery shopping

practitioners 1 and 2 were always choosing products in the perspective of what they would have liked to cook and eat: they were discussing about which type of meat to buy because they wanted to prepare it in a certain way, or because of a specific preference, or again because they had ingredients at home that were perfect for that specific meat. However, also individual practitioners operate in a similar way: when they go buying meat for, let's say, a week, they already have in mind what and how they are going to prepare. This is done for a series of reasons, firstly for organizational reasons: it is indeed easier to buy meat once and then organize it for the rest of the week. At the beginning it might have been a self-conscious decision, but then, once having established a comfortable and time-saving "procedure" to be repeated week after week, it eventually turned into a routine for them.

### ***Preparing meat dishes***

Preparing meat dishes is a practice that mainly focuses on cooking: therefore, *meat* is again the main material component of the practice, along with kitchen tools, which have not been observed to differ so much among practitioners. What differs depending on the type of meat is instead the *cooking technique*, that establishes also the degree of skill of practitioners. In addition, more than in the previous practice, here the component of *meanings* plays a primary role, and elements like *cultural background*, *social context* and *personal involvement* are important to differentiate the reproduction of the practice and the way the components are linked together.

Analyzing the observations and the diaries, a change in *cooking technique* regarding the preparation of different kinds of meat has been noticed. In particular, meat-lovers show a high degree of knowledge of cooking skills regarding meat dishes depending on the specific type of meat - chicken, pork or beef. For instance, chicken is generally stir-fried, while beef is generally steamed. Moreover, additional ingredients – especially spices and seasoning products like garlic, onion – change as a consequence, since the taste of a particular type of meat goes with a specific combination of seasonings. When asked about their cooking habits, meat-lover practitioners confirmed this type of behavior and they explained that the main reason behind the choice of a specific cooking technique lies on the need to combine the quickness of preparation of the dish with the tastiness of the dish: they ideally want to minimize the time spent cooking while trying to make the dish tasty and satisfying. In fact, cooking time seems to be the most disturbing aspect of the performance of the practice, since preparing meat dishes is generally considered more time-consuming than preparing non-meat dishes. When cooking it, meat has to be constantly checked, and it takes approximately 30 to 45 minutes to prepare a whole meat dish, and chicken is considered the quickest type of meat to prepare in terms of cooking time.

Apart from this more material aspects, cooking skills are also strictly linked to the *cultural background* of the practitioner: regardless of the country of origin, in fact, the first and original context in

which the practitioner observes, learns and develops the skills necessary to perform the practice of preparing meat dishes is his households. So, while in the practice of buying meat products the element of *family* was not so influencing, since when they were living at their parents' place, practitioners were not used to go grocery shopping, in the case of preparing meat dishes an important role in learning the practice is played by families. Practitioners, in reproducing the practice, carry out actions and procedures inspired by what they unconsciously observed at home. In particular, skills and knowledge related to cooking techniques, such as how to cook the meat, what spices to pair each type of meat with, mainly comes from family and it is the results of a constant "exposure" to the practice of preparing meat dishes.

At the same time, while basically keeping cultural traits of the country of origin, practitioners also experienced a change in the way they cook and prepare meat dishes by means of *cultural and social adaptation* to a new environment. That is because the performance of the practice is inevitably influenced by the old as much as the new context in which the practitioner is. The adaptation is cultural because practitioners usually do not find the same ingredients as they have at home, so they have to adjust their cooking routine according to what they can find here, even though almost all of them have specific food sent or brought from their country of origin to be used to cook, including ingredients for meat dishes. At the same time, the adjustment is social because, by getting in touch with different people, they also experience new cuisines and ways of preparing food. Some practitioners stated that they included new ingredients in their meat recipes that they did not like at the beginning, but that then, by trying them many times with international friends, they started to appreciate, and now these ingredients are an integral part of their regular cooking routine.

Practitioners seems to be more willing to try out new recipes and new meat dishes when they have to prepare them also for other people. In this context, a more personal involvement comes up and practitioners state to be happier to cook for or with friends: they look up different recipes on the internet and take the proper time to cook a more elaborated dish. This also happens in case of people living together: for instance, practitioners 1 and 2 usually eat together every day, and from the diaries a quite variety of recipes has been noticed. When asked about that, they stated that the variety of dishes prepared is also due to the presence of the other person, to satisfy his/her preferences and surprise him/her with something different and tasty. On the contrary, individual practitioners who are generally used to cook for and by themselves establish a certain regularity in their everyday cooking routine, based on time constraint, laziness and fondness for a certain kind of "pass partout" recipes that are considered a safer solution to stick to. Instead, during "special occasions" or at least when there are other individuals, so when other preferences needs to be taken into account, the practice is performed in a more variegated and stimulating way. Therefore, the practice of preparing meat dishes performed with/for other people breaks the routinized behavior established in the everyday performance of the practice. This leads to a change in

the components of the practice: the material components might slightly change (the use of different kitchen tools, for instance the oven), the development of different cooking skills with different cooking techniques and a particular attention in how the dish is prepared, but mainly, the practice acquires a wider meaning than just the mere act of “preparing food to feed yourself”. There is indeed a stronger *personal aspect* to be taken into account: cooking for other people is an enjoyable activity that eventually leads to a personal satisfaction in seeing that the food cooked has been appreciated by the guests, and practitioners make conscious choices about what and how to prepare meat dishes for this purpose.

Preparing meat dishes is an intermediate practice that implies the performance of the practice of buying meat products and anticipates that of eating meat dishes: therefore, it is focal to the bundle of practices of meat consumption. It has been observed to be the most influential practice, since practitioners do grocery shopping in the perspective of what they are going to cook, and often, especially for students, eating can also be improvised, based on what is in the fridge, or on the leftovers of the day before, so on what is already prepared and ready to eat. That is also because preparing meat dishes is the most time-consuming practice of the three, so practitioners need to organize this practice to make it more effective: an example is the way meat is stored and then prepared. When it is stored in the freezer, it is generally precooked and pre-seasoned with the proper spices, so it makes it easier for the practitioner to just defreeze it and warm it up when he needs to eat it.

The practice of preparing meat dishes is therefore routinized and influenced by several aspects. As well as for buying meat products, the presence of other people, so the change in the social context in which the practice is performed, breaks the ordinary routinized behavior of the practitioner (cooking the same recipe using the same ingredients and tools, mainly by and for himself) and makes him rationally think about what to do. There are strict links between the cultural and social meanings behind the reproduction of the practice which contribute to the knowledge and the skills practitioners have and exhibit in the practical activity of cooking meat.

### ***Eating meat dishes***

Eating meat dishes is the final practice pertaining to meat consumption. In the performance of this practice, a specific focus is given to the component of *meanings*, since materials and skills related to the action of eating are not found to be particularly relevant. Therefore, *cultural, social, personal* and *conscious aspects* are those taken into consideration in the description and the analysis of the practice.

The most straightforward meaning related to the *personal* sphere concerns *taste*: when asked practitioners the reason for their love for meat, they all first answer was: “because it’s very tasty” (practitioners 1, 3, 4 and 5). Therefore, taste plays a fundamental role in the performance of the practice and in the way practitioners experience such practice: they enjoy eating meat dishes because the first

satisfaction they feel comes from the flavor of the dish intended in its strict meaning. Moreover, taste is not connected only to, for instance, a specific type of meat: the practitioners observed indeed have a favorite type of meat, but nobody stated that there is one particular type that strongly stands out from the rest. What counts is, instead, the combination between type of meat and certain ingredients and cooking technique, that makes the experience of eating meat dishes tasty and satisfying: once gained such level of satisfaction, practitioners tend to stick to a particular dish or combination of flavors. Therefore, cooking meat dishes and eating meat dishes are two strictly related practices, and cooking meat dishes contributes to create a habit in the practice of eating meat dishes, that is broken only in “special occasions” that generally happen within a different social context (going out for dinner, eating with people having different preferences and so on).

### *The cultural and social value of eating meat dishes*

However, taste is just the most superficial and straightforward reason for performing the practice of eating meat dishes. The importance of taste lies on deeper meanings, mainly related to *cultural* and *social aspects* pertaining to the practice. Another common answer given by practitioner when asked about their love for meat is: “that’s the way I was educated to eat” (practitioner 1), or “I have been doing it since I was a child” (practitioner 5), or again “that’s how we did it in my family” (practitioner 3). Indeed, culture and family play a critical role in how the practice of eating meat dishes is shaped in the practitioner as an adult in his independent life. Especially for practitioners coming from countries in which meat has a strong traditional value, the practice of eating meat dishes is seen as normal and natural to be performed: consequently, all the components related to the bundle of practices of meat consumption are widely accessible and available (meat is cheaper, there is a wide choice of types of meat, different ways of cooking it, almost all recipes contain meat, everybody eats meat dishes). On the other hand, the practice of eating non-meat dishes is seen as extremely unusual, therefore difficult to perform. When asked meat lovers coming from specific countries about the possibility of reducing meat consumption by replacing some meat dishes with non-meat dishes, the first answer they gave was the lack of alternatives: from grocery stores to restaurants, non-meat options like vegetarian dishes are either rare or not provided at all.

This strong traditional value attributed to meat comes also from a more general cultural concept related to the importance it plays in the practice of “eating” in general: when thinking about a “complete and proper meal”, meat is generally a substantial part of it. During the observations and in analyzing the diaries, eating in an everyday context seems to be quite rigid and structured: practitioners always have a one-course meal containing a cereal, a kind of meat and a side of vegetables. Getting away from such an organized and routinized way of seeing the practice of eating is therefore quite difficult: the main reasons given for this behavior were related to the idea of nutritional completeness of the meal and fullness. That is why, especially in the case of meat-lovers, eating non-meat dishes is considered unsatisfying because they

do not feel full, so they either have to eat more quantities of the dish or they have to eat an extra dish shortly after the meal.

Culture has a big influence also on the social perception related to the reproduction of the practice of eating meat dishes. Culture affects the way people teach and learn practices and how they link the components together, and this happens also in the case of eating meat dishes. As well as for the practice of cooking meat dishes, and in this case even in a more influential way, the first environment in which practitioners establish, develop and strengthen links related to the practice of eating is family. Therefore, when starting living by themselves, they try to recreate and reproduce the same kind of links experienced in their household. These links can practically be displayed through the choice of what to eat, the choice of specific dishes, a specific combination of flavors and so on: during the observations, practitioners were often eating dishes inspired by recipes of their country of origin, or dishes they used to eat at home. Eating in general has an important social meaning related to it, so it is quite inevitable that the practice of eating meat dishes can be influenced by the presence of meat or non-meat eaters. This is an issue especially for some flexitarians, who tend to adapt their eating choices to the social context they are in: for instance practitioner 3 (flexitarian guy) stated that depending on the social occasion, he tends to eat or not eat meat. For instance, when he is out for dinner with friends (all of them are meat eaters) he does not even think about taking a non-meat dish, and he enjoys eating meat dishes also because it is a social moment to share with them: if he took a non-meat dish his friends would find it really strange and funny. On the other hand, when he eats with his girlfriend (practitioner 6, non-meat eater), most of the times he prefers to eat non-meat dishes to be able to entirely share with her the meal time.

In the performance of eating meat dishes, elements like ethics, environment and health are not considered of prior importance. However, questioning meat-eaters about the importance of reducing meat intake, the most “approved” reason to limit meat consumption is the environmental one. When asked about the fact that eating meat can damage the environment, almost all replied positively, saying that they are aware of the environmental effects of meat consumption and production, even if they are not willing to give up on meat. However, since the sample is taken from students of Wageningen University, it is likely that studying in an environmental-oriented university stimulates them to reflect upon a series of issues like sustainability, climate change and environmental impact of human consumption, topics that people with other backgrounds would probably not take so much into account. Therefore, the exposure to a certain kind of social and educational environment certainly has an influence on their awareness of the issue. The ethical aspect is the least taken into account, as it is considered much more subjective and a matter of empathy: it might seem as the most self-evident reason to reduce meat consumption, but at the same time it is the most difficult to internalize, especially by men, and it is seen as an extreme and limiting choice. As far as the health concept is concerned, meat-lovers consider meat a substantial food in their diet also

because it is a big source of proteins. Therefore, for them meat does not have the negative connotation that is generally attributed to it when it comes to a high consumption of meat dishes: on the contrary, almost all of them stated that, when they do not eat meat in a day or some even in a meal, they experience meat cravings, they feel that their body is in need of meat. This is what also happened to practitioner 3 at the beginning of his change into “flexitarianism”: there were moments in which he was really craving meat, and in which he was feeling that there was something missing from his dish, but as time passed this feeling decreased, and now he can easily have meatless dishes. However, when asked about the possibility to completely turn non-meat eater, he replied that he does not want to limit himself, but rather he wants to keep the possibility of eating meat as an open option, because he really likes it.

### *Concluding remarks*

In conclusion, the practice of eating meat dishes is strongly affected by the underlying meanings, mainly cultural and social. These meanings form the bases on which the main personal aspect of the practice – taste – lies upon. Taste also seems to be the strongest point supporting the performance of the practice, and it contributes to make the practice of eating meat dishes routinized: in fact, once practitioners come to a “favorite” dish they tend to stick to it, unless variables like a change in the social context come along and break the links established within the practice itself but also and especially among the practices of eating meat dishes and preparing meat dishes. What mainly connects these two practices is the fact that, as said before, the favorite dish is usually a combination between the type of meat, specific other ingredients and a cooking technique (for instance, stir-fried chicken with garlic, onions and carrots) which is repeatedly reproduced because the result that comes out of it is considered tasty and satisfying. So there is a direct connection between what is cooked and what is eaten, and when there is a change, in this case, in the social context, then there is a change in what is eaten and prepared as well, at both a material level (change in type of meat, type of cooking technique and so on) and an abstract level (eating meat dishes becomes a social activity to be performed and enjoyed together as a community, shared in a group of friends, or in a couple).

## **3.2 Practices related to non-meat consumption**

### ***Buying non-meat products***

Buying non-meat products is the first practice identified within the bundle of practices related to non-meat consumption. The first straightforward material component of the practice, parallel to the one of buying meat products, is *meat substitutes*. Meat substitutes have been observed to change depending on the variables of *price*, *familiarity* of the practitioner with the product at issue, and *quickness* of preparation of the product. Moreover, in this practice a key role is played by the component of *meaning*, especially

what we defined as *conscious/reflective* aspect, concerning the influence of factors like ethics, environment and health in the performance of the practice. The *conscious/reflective* aspect contributes to the development of certain *shopping skills* exhibited by the practitioners during grocery shopping. Depending on the different *social context*, buying non-meat products is performed in a different way by flexitarians and non-meat eaters.

Talking about *meat substitutes*, two main categories of products have been distinguished when observing practitioners doing grocery shopping. The first ones are industrial products, so pre ready meat substitutes like soy hamburgers and vegetarian meatballs: they have the advantage of being less time-consuming, so having a relatively short cooking time, but, on the other side, they are generally quite pricy. The second category includes more “natural” products, so products that are nutritionally substitutes of meat but that are not processed, such as legumes like beans and chickpeas: they are indeed less expensive than industrial products, but they often need more time to be cooked and prepared. Practitioners are usually questioning this kind of trade-off between more expensive non-meat products but quicker to be cooked, and cheaper but more time-consuming products. Therefore, as in the practice of buying meat products, *price* and *preparation time* are two important variables for the choice of a product. In general flexitarians tend to buy slightly more industrial/expensive non-meat products, while non-meat eaters (especially those who have been non-meat eaters for a long time) tend to focus more on “genuine” food, and they usually consider industrial meat substitutes as quite bad for their health, therefore as something to eat only once in a while (the same feeling that meat eater practitioners have towards bacon). However, there is one meat substitute that stands out from the rest: cheese. In fact, from the observations and the diaries, cheese is the most bought meat substitute: several practitioners, both non-meat eaters (practitioner 7 and 6) and flexitarians (practitioner 2) stated that, since they stopped/decreased the consumption of meat products, the quantity of cheese bought increased as a consequence. Cheese is placed halfway between the two previously mentioned categories of non-meat products, since on the one hand, it has a reasonable price, and on the other hand, given its wide variety, it is also versatile and can be quicker to prepare.

What really influences the performance of the practice of buying non-meat products, though, is the underlying reasons that pushed practitioners towards turning flexitarians or non-meat eaters, what we call *conscious* or *reflective aspect*. Regardless of the original motivation, right now almost all the practitioners observed stated to be mainly moved by *health* reasons, so by the fact that consuming meat is not so good for their body. Indeed, this has a consequence on the way they buy meat alternatives. When the main reason for being non-meat eater is related to health, practitioners exhibit a certain kind of behavior and skills, not only strictly related to non-meat products, but extended also to other types of products. The development of such *shopping skills* mainly depends on the meaning practitioners give to the word

“health”: for some practitioners it is about the origin of the product, like practitioner 2, who often checks the labels of different products to see whether they are organic or not; for others, it concerns the “genuineness” of the product, so for practitioners 8 and 9 it mainly means to buy fresh products or products from scratch like legumes, that need to be prepared since they are in their most natural form possible; according to other practitioners, it is more something about nutritional health, such as for practitioner 7, who has been observed to check the protein content of products several times. Practitioner 7 also buys natural protein supplements such as spirulina, which is indeed quite pricy: when asked about this, she replied that she prefers to buy something slightly more expensive but that she knows being good for her body, rather than buying cheaper but bad stuff. So in her case, quality is prioritized over price, of course always taking into account a certain budget.

Just as for the practice of buying meat products, also buying non-meat products can have a *social* meaning, especially if the practitioners involved also share the following two practices of preparing and eating non-meat dishes. For instance, practitioners 8 and 9 (flexitarian guy and non-meat eater guy) who are roommates and close friends, almost always prepare the same dishes and eat together. Consequently, they often do the grocery shopping together, sharing the food and the expenses. This kind of behavior has been repeatedly performed since both of them moved to the Netherland, so it turned out to be a routinized type of behavior. However, in this case, differently from the case of practitioners 1 and 2, the adaptation of the flexitarian guy to the purchase choices of the non-meat eater is more “engaging”, in the sense that if they want to share the practice together, practitioner 8 necessarily needs to adapt to the preferences of practitioner 9. When asked practitioner 8 about the times in which he wanted to buy meat products because he was feeling like eating them, he said that, in that case, grocery shopping is done separately or at least meat products are paid separately. Of course, when he buys a meat product, it is in the perspective of cooking and eating a meat dish: therefore, he is not sharing the practices with practitioner 9 anymore. In that moment, the routinized behavior of performing the three practices jointly is broken, because of the difference in preferences between practitioner 8 and 9. That is why the adaptation is more engaging than in the case of practitioners 1 and 2: practitioner 9 is not going to buy, prepare and eat a meat dishes as a matter of principle, so the performance of the practice is quite “stiff” and structured, while practitioner 1, even if meat-lover, can sometimes adjust to the practice of buying non-meat products because he does not have specific binding reasons to act differently.

*Cultural adaptation* is another very important aspect for some practitioners, especially for those coming from countries with a strong meat-focused culture. In fact, the first thing they noticed when they moved to the Netherlands was the wider availability of the material component of the practice, so of meat substitutes: in this sense, cultural adaptation to this new environment helped them improving and developing the practice of buying non-meat products. Also meat-lovers coming from similar environments,

when asked about the possibility to reduce meat consumption in their country of origin, replied saying that it would be very difficult, especially for the lack of proper meat alternatives. Therefore, non-meat products and the cultural aspect are two strictly linked elements of the practice, and the level of cultural acceptance of the practice of non-meat consumption determines the availability of meat substitutes. This is confirmed also by other practitioners, coming instead from meatless-friendly countries, who did not find a great difference in the quantity of non-meat products available in grocery stores.

#### *Links within the practice*

Analyzing the links within the practice, the component of meaning related to the health concept is closely connected to the skills practitioners develop and the type of meat substitute they choose to buy when they do grocery shopping. In other words, the choice of a particular non-meat product is operated depending on the driving reasons to decrease or stop the consumption of meat. The most enduring non-meat eaters are found to be the most skilled and careful ones to the choice of non-meat products: the repeated reproduction of the practice contributes to the strengthening of certain actions that solidify and eventually turn into routinized behaviors. The element of time is quite visible when thinking about the performance of the practice in flexitarians and non-meat eaters. In the case of the former, also the social environment is of prior importance to build a strong and endured reproduction of the practice. It is indeed more difficult to identify the practice of buying non-meat products as a routinized behavior in flexitarians, especially if they are not in a social context in which they can be strictly in touch with non-meat eaters: for instance, practitioner 3 buys non-meat products almost only when he is with practitioner 6, his girlfriend, and for the rest he mainly buys meat, and, as we previously said, practitioner 2 lives with practitioner 1 who is a meat-lover; both flexitarian practitioners said that it is way more difficult for them to keep carrying on their “meat-decreasing” lifestyle when surrounded by meat eaters. Therefore, in a context in which there is not the possibility to perform the practice in a consistent and repeated way, it is difficult to build solid routinized behaviors, and this cross-cuts all the practices pertaining to the bundle of practices of non-meat consumption. Diametrically opposed is the situation of practitioner 8, who, by being constantly in touch with practitioner 9 (non-meat eater), strengthened a lot the performance of the practice, and now, even when he is not sharing the practices with practitioner 9, he said that he is almost never tempted to buy meat products.

#### *Concluding remarks*

Wrapping up, the practice of buying non-meat products is mainly driven by conscious/reflective reasons, which then shape the way practitioners perform the practice in their everyday life. However, only enduring non-meat eaters are found to have developed a sort of routinized behavior, while flexitarians, especially those not constantly in touch with non-meat eaters or mainly surrounded by meat-eaters, tend

to make conscious actions when they do non-meat products grocery shopping. That is because the bundle of practices pertaining to non-meat consumption is not deeply integrated at both societal and cultural levels, so performing the practice of exclusively buying non-meat products is still seen as “unusual” compared to the usual situation which comprises also the possibility of buying meat products. This acceptance varies depending on more or less meat-focused cultures, but it is indeed a general feeling that constitutes an obstacle for a proper development of the activity of “buying non-meat products” from the point of view of social practice theory.

### ***Preparing non-meat dishes***

The practice of preparing non-meat dishes is the intermediate practice in non-meat consumption. As in the previous practice, the *conscious/reflective aspect* represents a focal component to which other elements, such as *cooking skills*, are linked. The *social aspect* influences the reproduction of the practice especially in flexitarians, while in general the practice is quite rigid if carried out by non-meat eaters. This is visible in case of special occasions, when adaptation to the practice is done by meat eaters and not the other way around. *Kitchen tools* does not change a lot, and the most common used meat substitute is *cheese*.

A first thing that is quite noticeable is the leading thread between the previous practice of buying non-meat products and the practice of preparing non-meat dishes: in fact, depending on the *conscious/reflective aspect* of meanings, a specific *cooking technique* is applied by practitioners. For instance, practitioner 2, who cares about the origin of the product and aims at preparing a healthy non-meat dish, usually uses techniques like steaming instead of stir-frying products. However, the presence of practitioner 1 influences the way non-meat dishes are prepared: for instance, he often claims that they lack taste, therefore, to make up for it, practitioner 2 puts a lot of spices. Spices are also widely used by practitioners 8, who focuses more on the tastiness of dishes and generally prepares them from scratch, helped by practitioner 9. Practitioner 7, instead, makes sure to always prepare a nutritionally balanced dish containing a part of cereals, one of proteins (any meat substitute) and a wide amount of veggies. Among the meat substitute used, *cheese* is very important because it is versatile and tasty: in fact, several non-meat dishes were prepared using cheese as a basic ingredient.

It has been noticed that, differently from meat dishes, there is not a specific way of preparing non-meat dishes, intended as a combination between specific meat substitutes with certain ingredients and cooking techniques: generally the dish is improvised given the ingredients found in the fridge, and practitioners do not stick to specific recipes, apart from certain well-known non-meat dishes such as, for instance, falafel. In fact, from the diaries emerges that meatless dishes are much more varied than meat dishes in terms of type of dish and ingredients used. Moreover, non-meat dishes are found to be less time-

consuming to prepare than meat dishes: that is why flexitarians state to opt for a non-meat dish when they lack time for cooking. Just as for preparing meat dishes, also the preparation of non-meat dishes is more unplanned when practitioners eat by themselves, while it is more accurate when preparing for other people: for instance, practitioner 6 (non-meat eater) usually cooks in a very arbitrary way, not following specific recipes and mainly using ingredients that she has at the moment. Instead, when eating with her boyfriend (practitioner 3) she likes to spend more time cooking and preparing dinner for him, looking for some nice recipes. Therefore, *social context* plays the same role in both practices of preparing meat and non-meat dishes, and it is mainly explicated by the time spent cooking and by the choice of specific recipes which modify the skills needed to reproduce the practice.

#### *Routinized behavior in the practice*

Apart from specific differences in the performance of the practice, non-meat eaters have a solid routinized behavior concerning preparing non-meat dishes, that it is very difficult to break, even in case of different contexts, like, for instance, having guests over for dinner. This is mainly due to the fact that, by principle, practitioners preparing exclusively non-meat dishes are only eating those non-meat dishes: their performance of the practice is really rigid, so guests have to adapt to the way of cooking of the non-meat eater host. That does not happen the other way around: in fact, when the guest is a non-meat eater, the meat eater host is always preparing a meatless dish for him. Therefore, it can be interesting to analyze how the practice of preparing non-meat dishes can act as a break in the routinized behavior established in the practice of preparing meat dishes. For meat eaters, cooking a main dish without meat can represent a real challenge and a conscious decision at all the levels of the practice: first of course the choice of the meat substitute can be tricky, and, in interviewing meat eaters about it, most of them stated that they would probably go for something with cheese and veggies, because the ingredients are more familiar to them and the chance to make a tasty dish are higher than by experimenting different and never-tried recipes. The second challenge regards the skills needed for the practice: the background of knowledge has a strong influence on whether meat-eater practitioners find it really hard to prepare a non-meat meal, since there is not enough information on alternatives to meat dishes in the form of recipes or use of different ingredients. In fact, when asked them about the possibility of reducing meat consumption by preparing non-meat dishes, practitioners stated that they would find it very hard to organize their cooking and eating routine around non-meat dishes also because they do not know what and how to cook such dishes. However, what makes the difference and supports this break in routinized behavior is of course the meaning that the practice acquires when other practitioners are involved, since cooking for someone else stimulates the practitioner to provide a nice dinner aimed at satisfying his guests' preferences.

### *Concluding remarks*

In a nutshell, the level of routinized behavior in the practice of preparing non-meat dishes substantially differs between flexitarians and non-meat eaters. Given the rigidity of the practice performed by non-meat eaters, the moment in which the practice of preparing non meat dishes can be carried out in a conscious way is when it is reproduced by practitioners generally used to perform the practice of eating meat dishes. In this case, all the components of the practice change and are modified in the light of the non-meat eater preferences, carried out by the meat eater practitioner in a rational way. The lack of proper information on non-meat dishes recipes influences the structural reproduction of the practice: in fact, practitioners do not develop a distinct procedure to perform the practice, so the cooking skills exhibited in the practice depend on the specific meat substitute and other ingredients available. What seems really clear is instead the link between such skills and the conscious/reflective aspect of meanings, that shapes the way practitioners choose to prepare the dish, regardless of the specific ingredients at issue.

### ***Eating non-meat dishes***

The practice of eating non-meat dishes, just as the previous ones, is mainly dominated by the *meanings* at the base of its reproduction from practitioners. As expected, the *conscious/reflective aspect* plays a prior role on the whole experience of the practitioners, and it can take over also other presumably important aspects such as *taste*. The *social aspect* is important, especially for flexitarians, less for non-meat eaters who already have a strong motivational base for reproducing the practice. Once again, a special focus is put on one specific meat substitute, *cheese*, which is considered a sort of “material link” between the practices of eating meat dishes and eating non-meat dishes, at social, personal and cultural levels.

For non-meat eater practitioners, the idea of eating meatless dishes acquires a wide and deep meaning, and the concept of *taste* is considered in a broader sense, not only intended as the flavor of the dish. In this case, the driving reason of *health* has a big influence since, by performing the act of eating non-meat dishes, practitioners have the feeling that they are doing something good for their body. Therefore, satisfaction does not come only from the pure taste of the dish, but especially from the fulfillment of a deeper need. For instance, during the interview, practitioner 7 stated that even though non-meat dishes can be sometimes less tasty than meat dishes, the pleasure she gets by eating non-meat dishes is at multiple levels, not only the merely “superficial” level of taste. Seen in a more social practice perspective, then, the conscious/reflective aspect is strictly connected and influencing the personal aspect of meanings, strengthening the reproduction of the practice and turning it into a routinized behavior. An interesting aspect found out during observations and interviews is the fact that, apart from one flexitarian practitioner, all the other flexitarian and non-meat practitioners were not originally fond of meat, even when they were meat-eaters. That confirms the fact that taste has an important and heavy influence on both the

reproduction of the practice of eating meat dishes and on the easiness and feasibility of the reproduction of the practice of eating non-meat dishes.

#### *The importance of cheese in performing the practice*

A central aspect identified in the practice is the relation existing between the decrease/the stop in meat consumption and the increment in cheese consumption. Both flexitarians and non-meat eaters stated that, since they quitted/reduced their meat intake, consumption of cheese has increased a lot. There might be several reasons for that: apart from the taste of cheese, which is generally considered really good, it is also a matter of *familiarity with the food* itself. Cheese is a type of food that practitioners were used to eat even when they were performing the practice of eating meat dishes, especially in Western countries. Therefore, they already know how it tastes, which kind of recipes goes with it, it is kind of a “safe shelter” food they can rely upon. Moreover, it is also considered a food full of proteins, therefore from a nutritional point of view is seen as a proper meat substitute. Of course, *culture* plays an important role as well: the non-meat eater and flexitarian practitioners observed all comes from countries in which cheese is very much integrated in their local cuisine, so it is something they are used to deal with. Seeing from the point of view of social practice theory, cheese can be considered as an element of the material component that connects the practices of eating meat dishes with that of eating non-meat dishes at several levels. Firstly, at a cultural level, since as we already said, cheese is an accepted ingredient in several western countries. Secondly, at a more personal level, concerning the taste of cheese on the one hand, but also inasmuch practitioners stated that, since they reduced or quitted meat, their body started requiring more cheese, as if they had automatically established a connection between meat and cheese. Finally, at a social level, since cheese is a food appreciated by a lot of people, and as mentioned in the previous practice, it is more likely that in special contexts like a dinner with guests, the non-meat dish might contain cheese. Therefore, cheese could be defined as that non-meat product that manages to “harmonize” the differences between the “usual” practice of eating meat dishes and the “unusual” practice of eating non-meat dishes.

#### *Familiar and social contexts in performing the practice*

The easiness to perform the practice, especially in flexitarians, also depends on their *familiar background*: in particular, being raised in a meat-lover family is of critical importance in whether the practice of eating non-meat dishes is reproduced in an easy or hard way. That is because practitioners were constantly and passively exposed to the reproduction of a certain kind of practice, especially as children, and, even if not fond for that practice, were inevitably influenced by it, developing skills and meanings that are difficult to completely get rid of. Specifically, eating meat dishes is a strong practice because it is connected to an activity – eating – that is performed on an everyday basis. For instance, practitioner 3

sometimes finds it difficult to not eat meat even when he is with practitioner 6, and among the reasons he gave for it, the fact that he was raised in a certain way in his family played an important role.

The difficulty to identify habits in flexitarians also comes from the fact that they tend to adapt every time to specific *social contexts*. Given their not-so-binding motivational reasons, reproducing the practice of eating non-meat dishes is intended more as a moment to be shared with other people rather than an activity to be carried out necessarily every day. In case of eating in a restaurant, for instance, they stated not to pay so much attention to the presence or not of meat, especially if they are in a group of meat-eaters. In case they are with non-meat eater, instead, they gladly adapt to the practice of eating non-meat dishes. Even the strongest non-meat eater flexitarian, practitioner 8, stated that, in certain “special occasions” he does not preclude himself the possibility to eat meat, even if on an everyday basis he eats non-meat dishes. However, also non-meat eaters are affected by the social context: even if in their everyday life eating non-meat dishes is a solid habit, not to be questioned, when they find themselves out of their “social comfort zone” so in another context, when they have to share the eating time with different people, they are constantly reminded of their being non-meat eaters. A typical example is the fact that, if invited over for dinner, they always have to remind the host to prepare some non-meat dishes for them. In this case, a routinized behavior like eating meatless dishes turns into a more conscious action, because practitioners not performing the same practice are involved as well. This has always something to do with the distinction between an “usual” practice (eating meat) and an “unusual” practice (not eating meat) not shared by everybody, which for non-meat eaters in their everyday life is not an issue, while in these special social contexts (dinner outside, either in a restaurant or at another place) becomes a more rationally aware behavior. However, it is also true that there are different social contexts: if there is a constant relation among practitioners, then such difference between practices is less evident, because meat eater practitioners already know the non-meat eater preferences and can easily adapt to it. That is to confirm the fact that a repeated contact between the two practices facilitates the adaptation of eating meat dishes to eating non-meat dishes, making it a less conscious action to be performed by both non-meat and meat eaters.

### *Concluding remarks*

Summing up, in the practice of eating non-meat dishes, the component of conscious/reflective meaning plays a major role inasmuch it gives the basic driving reasons to perform the practice and especially to keep on reproducing it constantly and repeatedly. Constance is what makes the difference between non-meat eaters and flexitarians: the former religiously stick to the practice, while the latter tend to behave depending on social and cultural variables. The conscious/reflective aspect is connected to the personal aspect of taste, which is not only strictly related to the flavor of the dish itself, but it rather involves a more personal feeling of satisfaction derived from the fact of having fulfilled the reasons at the

base of the reproduction of the practice: in the case of the sample such reason is mainly health. In few word, a dish is considered tasty also because practitioners feel that, by eating that and not a meat dish, they are doing something good for their body. The component of time is really important in establishing the level of routinized behavior of practitioners: enduring non-meat eaters strengthened the practice in their everyday life, turning it into a routine, while for brand new non-meat eaters or flexitarians the performance of the practice is still considered quite rational and conscious. However, when the two practices of eating meat dishes and eating non-meat dishes “crash” such as in case of special eating occasions in a different social environment, this routinized behavior generally comes up as a conscious action since practitioners are reminded of the fact that they are performing a practice implicitly considered “different” from the standard one.

### **3.3 Change from meat to non-meat consumption**

In the sample of students observed, there are three flexitarians and three non-meat eaters. In social practice theory, analyzing how the move towards the decrease/stop in meat consumption happened is really important to identify common points which can be applied in a wider context to different other practitioners. This section deals with the specific stories of the single practitioners: while explaining their experience, a special emphasis is put on the links modified in the transition between meat consumption and non-meat consumption. Differently from the previous section, here the main distinction is between meat consumption and non-meat consumption as bundles of practices, without necessarily going in depth in the three practices identified in each bundle. This analysis is useful to determine common points throughout all the stories, that will be further presented and analyzed in the discussion part, stressing their positive or negative influence on social practice change.

#### ***Practitioner 2 – Flexitarian girl***

The decision to reduce meat consumption in practitioner 2 happened few years ago: at the time she was following a yoga course with her sister, and in the group there were a lot of people interested in health-related vegetarianism. She followed that course for quite some time, so she was exposed to that kind of *social context* repeatedly for a certain time span. Her sister was really interested in that kind of topics, and she decided to try to be vegetarian for a period, which eventually lasted one year. The two sisters were living together, and practitioner 2 was really busy with her job: therefore, the one in charge of *preparing the meal* was her sister. Hence, when her sister started cooking non-meat dishes, she started eating non-meat dishes as a consequence. Surprisingly, she found them really tasty and she was not missing meat at all. In this case, then, it was the *social context* and also the fact that a non-meat eater practitioner was accounted for the practice of cooking, to “oblige” her to eat non-meat dishes and to change her eating behavior. In other words, the practice of *preparing non-meat dishes* was in charge of a

non-meat eater, therefore practitioner 2 started performing the practice of *eating non-meat dishes* as a consequence of the strict relation existing between the two practices given a specific *social context* (the two sisters were living together) and the appreciation of the *taste* of the dishes (practitioner 2 really liked those non-meat dishes). At the same time, she started getting informed on the *health* impacts of consuming meat, developing also the *conscious/reflective aspect* of the practice. The development of the conscious/reflective aspect was strengthened and motivated also by the fact that she had a vegan colleague who, according to her, was looking healthy, nice and younger and she took her as an inspiration to keep on carrying on the practice of non-meat consumption. During that one-year period, she only ate meat with his friends when she went out for dinner: once again, the social context mattered since during these “special occasions” she was exclusively with meat-eaters, while generally during the eating time she was in contact with a non-meat eater (her sister). After one year, her sister found a job that prevented her from cooking non-meat dishes and trying out new recipes, so she started eating meat again, and consequently practitioner 2 as well, even though less than before. So the change in the social context led to a change in the performance of non-meat consumption. However, when she moved to the Netherlands, she started again eating less and less meat. Therefore, a change in both *cultural and social environments* strengthened again the performance of the practice of non-meat consumption, not only supported by conscious/reflective aspects but also by an *economical aspect*: in fact, she found meat very expensive, so the practice of buying non-meat products was way cheaper than that of buying meat products. A similar reasoning applied to the practice of preparing non-meat dishes, considered less time consuming than preparing meat dishes. Moreover, she was living by herself, so most of the times in which she was performing the practice she did not have other practitioners involved. Yet when she moved in with practitioner 1, a meat-lover, her performance of the practice changed again, adapting it to the necessities of her boyfriend, and at the moment she tries to balance the consumption of meat with some non-meat dishes.

### ***Practitioner 3 – Flexitarian guy***

The change of practitioner 3 is relatively recent, and it corresponds to the moment in which he started dating practitioner 6, his girlfriend. Therefore, as in the previous situation, *social context* was a very important input for the change between meat and non-meat consumption. In particular, the couple started having dinner together, and practitioner 6 was always cooking non-meat dishes. Surprisingly, practitioner 3 found them really tasty and easy to prepare, so he asked her the recipes to recreate them at home. So, at the beginning a new *social context* got practitioner 3 closer to the practice of non-meat consumption, because he started spending more time with a non-meat eater practitioner and performing the practice related to non-meat consumption as a consequence, since she was also *preparing non-meat dishes* when they were together. The *personal aspect* of *taste* played a substantial role since he appreciated the dishes

so much that he learnt the recipes, acquiring new *cooking skills* and learning to deal with different *meat substitutes* to recreate the dishes tasted with his girlfriend. Along with this change, the *educational environment* and the Master he studies stimulated him also to raise a certain *environmental awareness* on the consumption of meat (*conscious/reflective aspect*), which can be considered as an additional input to keep on reducing meat. At the beginning, given also the *familiar context* in which he grew up (meat-lover family) he was missing meat when eating with his girlfriend, but as time passed, he got used to these new tastes and flavors, and now he can easily stay without eating meat sometimes.

#### ***Practitioner 6 – Non-meat eater girl***

Practitioner 6 is the most enduring non-meat eater of the sample. In fact, apart from a very short period of time when she was 7 years old, she decided to completely turn vegetarian when she was 11. The reason for her choice was because of a teacher who, when explaining something about animals, mentioned the fact that some of them were treated with antibiotics and, since she was never fond of meat and she already tried to not eat meat before, she was really impressed by that lecture and she decided to quit meat right away. In this case, the *educational environment* strengthened an apparently already existing willingness to give up on meat consumption because of *taste* (she was not really fond of meat) giving her a strong *conscious/reflective* reason like health: of course, she was really young, so the consciousness of the decision initiated when she was 11, but then it developed further along the following years. The *familiar context* was very supportive of this change, since the person in charge of the cooking practice (her father) started *preparing non-meat dishes* for practitioner 6. Based on what she saw at home, then, when she moved out, in a different *social context* she started performing the practice of preparing non-meat dishes by herself, and she started living “independently” already performing the bundle of practices of non-meat consumption, so they are deeply strengthened in her everyday life.

#### ***Practitioner 7 – Non-meat eater girl***

Practitioner 7 has been vegetarian for one year, but she tried to stop her meat consumption way before, because she never liked it. The attempts failed because in her family, and in the culture of her country of origin, meat has a very important role in the meal, so every time they were eating, a meat dish was there and eventually she was finding herself eating it. Therefore, practitioners 7 already had a motivational reason to stop meat consumption lying on the *personal aspect* of *taste*, but change was impeded by the meat-centered *culture* of her country which reflected on the eating habits of her *family*. What finally made her decide to try to stop eating meat was a 6 week-raw vegan challenge for a research project she decided to participate in. During that period, she could not eat meat, fish or animal derivatives, and according to her, that was the only way in which she could impose to herself not to eat meat and to her family not to prepare meat for her. It was also a quite binding challenge, since every week she had to

report what she had eaten, and she also had to attend a series of talks and lectures that mainly concerned the impact of meat on human health, the importance of eating plant-based food and similar topics. These classes stimulated her curiosity towards this subject, and she started getting more and more informed, while at the same time experiencing the healthy and positive effects of the new diet (in the interview practitioner 7 explicitly stated: “I had more energy”, “I was not feeling heavy after eating”, “I was losing weight”). Eventually, at the end of the challenge she found a strong and solid motivation to quit meat consumption, and now she is still a happy and satisfied non-meat eater. In this case, in order to fight strong obstacles like culture and family, the practitioner needed to find a way that “obliged” her to change her habits, but especially that could have been accepted and applied at the level of preparation of the meals by her family. The 6-week challenge represented a perfect “window of opportunity” for change, because it put practitioner 7 in a certain *social context*, in which the practice of non-meat consumption was shared with other practitioners (other people joined the challenge as well) and was constantly checked and strengthened by lectures and classes about the health benefits of not eating meat. Her family accepted it as well, eventually changing part of the cooking habits towards the preparation of meatless dishes. Therefore, the repeated and forced exposure to the practice, the additional information gained and the positive feeling practitioner 7 experienced during that period contributed to the development of a *conscious/reflective meaning* associated to non-meat consumption and an increase in the already existing *personal aspect*, which was not only about taste but also about a wider sensation of doing something good for her body. This is the kind of feeling she still experiences now, and that is the driving reasons that keep the performance of the practice going on in an effective and constant way.

### ***Practitioner 8 – Flexitarian guy***

Practitioner 8 is used to consume few amount of meat since he was a child: in fact, he does not considered himself as a “flexitarian” and he did not experience a “change” in his eating habits because that is what he has always been used to eat. However, this is still really interesting because, contrary to the other practitioners observed, in his case *family* and *culture* had a very strong impact as far as non-meat consumption is concerned: in fact, in his family they are really bound to a certain culinary culture that favors the use of genuine ingredients such as legumes and vegetables and put in the background food like meat and its derivatives. As a consequence, he was exposed more to the bundle of practices related to non-meat consumption than to the ones related to meat consumption. However, a change in *social and cultural contexts* led to a change in the performance of the practice as well: in this case, the change experienced by the practitioner was a “reverse” change, that means passing from a mainly plant-based diet to a more meat-based diet due to cultural and social adaptations. For instance, when he moved out from his parents’ place to go living in another Italian city for studying, the first months he tended to consume more meat due to the fact that the local cuisine was full of meat dishes, but after that adjustment time he went back to his

old habits. When he moved to Canada for a one-year exchange study, instead, keeping his habits was extremely difficult, and he ended up eating a lot of meat, and one of the first reasons he gave for that change was the fact that he could not find the *meat substitutes* he usually used to eat back home, and the ones that were available were extremely *expensive* and given his limited budget, he had to rely on cheaper and mainly meat-related stuff. Therefore, the change in the practice happened because of the difference in the fundamental variables of *social* and *cultural* aspects that forced him to adapt to a new environment: however, in the case of the move to another Italian city, he could easily get back to how he used to perform the practice of non-meat consumption because such difference was minimal, so in a relative short period of time he reestablished a routine in buying non-meat products, preparing and eating non-meat dishes. On the contrary, in Canada he experienced a sharper *cultural difference* in the local cuisine, which reflected on the *unavailability* of certain meat substitutes and especially on the *economic aspect* of these substitutes. On the other hand, meat products were extremely cheap, therefore he had to adapt his habits to the most convenient material component he had at that moment. Right now, he is definitely performing more the practices related to non-meat consumption, also due to the strict and daily contact with practitioner 9. Since he started studying an environmental-related master, he developed a certain *conscious/reflective* meaning underlying the practice, but it does not play a very strong role, since the most influential aspects are still the *cultural* and *familiar* ones (in the interview practitioner 8 explicitly said that his father passed down to him the passion of cooking from scratch and with genuine ingredients).

#### ***Practitioner 9 – Non-meat eater guy***

Practitioner 9 is another enduring non-meat eater: he turned vegetarian in 2010 and then vegan one year ago. The circumstance that triggered the change towards stopping meat consumption was during high school: he had a really inspiring professor who was always advising students to read books that in some ways were dealing with meat and non-meat eating; moreover, they were often writing essays on environmental issues. The reading of the books and the focus on environmental issues stimulated practitioner 9's interest towards topics like food and its impact on the environment, pushing the change into non-meat consumption. Hence, starting from a specific *social context* (high school, the presence of an inspiring professor) that triggered his curiosity, practitioner 9 started getting informed on the *environmental aspect* of the practice of (non-)meat consumption (such as the issue of intensive livestock), building a strong motivation to pass from consuming to not consuming meat. His *family* at the beginning was a little bit hostile but then accepted his choice and cooked differently for him, starting preparing also exclusively non-meat dishes (some *cooking techniques* changed). In this change, the *personal aspect* of *taste* helped him a lot, since he had never been fond of meat. He kept on performing the practice of non-meat consumption with this dominating *conscious/reflective aspect* of environment for a while, but then, during some researches on the internet and media platforms, he came across a famous vegan activist by

ethical reasons, who inspires him to turn definitively vegan. However, the *social context* was not favorable, since his family did not allow him to be vegan, and as long as his parents were in charge of the practice of preparing the meal, he could not freely take decisions for himself. When he moved to the Netherlands one year ago, he could finally experimenting being vegan, and now he is still following this regime. Therefore, changing the *social* and *cultural contexts* helped him changing the practice even further, because when living by himself, he was the only one in charge of the whole non-meat consumption practices (buying, cooking and eating dishes) and he could freely decide on his diet choices and habits. It is interesting because the change from vegetarian to vegan happened because the *conscious/reflective aspect* changed, passing from a more environmental-oriented reason towards a more *ethical reason*. He first modified the practice of *buying non-meat products* by taking away from his grocery shopping also eggs and dairy products: consequently, the other two practices of *preparing* and *eating non-meat dishes* were modified in their material component; however, in the very first months, he was still “flexible” as during “special occasions” in which he was in a different *social context* than his everyday life, he was still eating animal derivatives. At a certain point, which coincided with the moment in which his parents decided to turn vegan as well, in their case for *health reasons*, he started getting informed also on this side of veganism and that was the final motivation that pushed him to completely quit animal derivatives for good. At the moment, health is the main driving reason for him being vegan, and it is highly likely that there had been a mutual influence in the development of this change between him and his parents. On the one hand, the initial choice of practitioner 9 of trying being vegan might have influenced his parents, who in turn decided to become vegan as well; on the other hand, the health reason that pushed them to change their habit might have affected practitioner 9 in getting furtherly informed on the links between veganism and health, eventually giving him enough motivation to make a definite change. The strengthening of the *conscious/reflective aspect* has pushed practitioner 9 towards a more and more convinced change of the practice, and it is really interesting because the path followed by him can be compared to the one that a potential flexitarian could do in the transition between meat and non-meat consumption. Common factors can be the everyday routine established and broken only in “special occasions” influenced by the social context; the importance of the practice of buying products and the consequential effect it has on the following practices of preparing and eating the dishes prepared with those products, that shows the strict relation existing among the three practices; the importance of the social context (in his case family) in motivating, pushing or impeding the change.

### *Concluding remarks*

The stories of the practitioners depict the change occurred from meat to non-meat consumption according to their experience. Several links were broken within the bundle of practices of meat consumption, which then favored the creation of new links in that of non-meat consumption, incentivized

by certain aspects, prevented by others. The stories has been analyzed under the perspective of social practice theory, therefore highlighting the components that changed first, and that consequently had an effect on the other ones.

The stories show a common aspect which is the influence of social context in the initial phase of change. In fact, apart from practitioner 8, all the practitioners were incentivized by a person or a certain social situation, and being in contact with certain people or being in a certain context helped them performing the practices of non-meat consumption repeatedly and slowly changing also other aspects, firstly the conscious/reflective aspect that developed as a consequence. We also saw in certain situations the conscious/reflective aspect changed as the performance of the practices of meat-consumption was evolving, generally getting stronger. An important role was also played by social and cultural adaptations to a new environment, which had different impact on change, and also modified the links that were previously established in the change (when practitioner 2 moved to Wageningen, she decided to reduce meat consumption not only for the initial reason – health reason – but also for economic reasons). Therefore, the transition from meat to non-meat consumption presents a varied pattern of variables, whose role will be analyzed deeper later on in the discussion part.

### **3.4 Concluding remarks**

Chapter 3 addressed the data gained and its analysis. The first and second sections aimed at answering the first sub-research question: *how can meat and non-meat consumption be analyzed as social practices?*. By describing the dynamics behind the performance of the bundles of practices of meat and non-meat consumption, the most relevant elements of the practices resulted from the observations, the diaries and the interviews has been identified. After having described the practices, the experiences of flexitarians and non-meat eaters in changing from meat to non-meat consumption have been presented as practical examples of how the bundle of practices modified their links, answering the second sub-research question: *How can change in the practice of meat consumption happen in order to reduce meat intake?* The combination of the data gained in the first and second sub-questions, together with the initial analysis made, will be further examined in the discussion part.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

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The results and analysis section dealt with the display and interpretation of the data gained through the observations and interviews, answering the two sub-questions. This section merges the information of the previous section to answer the main research question: what are the focal points that can foster and the ones that can impede change from meat to non-meat consumption from the point of view of social practice theory? The points in favor will be presented first, followed by the obstacles, and a special focus will be given to the practices identified within non-meat consumption, taking meat consumption practices as the starting point of change. The direction of change is therefore from meat to non-meat consumption practices.

### 4.1 Steering points for change

In general, the component that is more sensitive to change, therefore the one that gives the initial input to change, is that of *meanings*. Therefore, meanings is the first component that modifies the way the practice is performed in meat and non-meat consumption. The different aspects of meanings can change when passing from a practice to another: an interesting example is the change in the personal aspect of *taste*, that we saw being really modified in the way it is intended in meat consumption and non-meat consumption. Taste for meat eaters is much more related to the pleasure of the flavor of the meat dish itself, while on the contrary eating non-meat dishes carries out wider and deeper understandings for non-meat eaters, giving the element of taste a different meaning. These diverse understandings often derive from a change happened in the so-called conscious/reflective aspect, when practitioners raise awareness on a certain topic (health, environment or ethics) related to meat consumption, wittingly deciding to make a change. For instance, in the sample, non-meat eaters and flexitarians are mostly moved by health reasons: therefore, taste for them is also intended as a way to take care of their body and it gives a feeling of satisfaction derived from the fact of having done something good for themselves. Accordingly, a specific driving reason also influences the development of distinct *competences* and *materials*: the habit of checking for the protein content of non-meat products, or opting for healthy meat substitutes are skills generally referred to the health aspect. Instead, if a person was moved by ethical reasons it would be more focused on, for instance, cruelty-free products or just non-meat products, regardless of their health impact.

The most important element of meanings to boost change is *social context*: in fact, all practitioners in different ways were pushed to change due to specific social situations – yoga course or the 6-week challenge – or the presence of specific people – family members, colleagues, professors, girlfriend – who played an important role in bringing about the passage from meat to non-meat consumption. This confirms the argument that change is heavily influenced by the context in which the practitioner is, and the constant

exposure to the reproduction of the practices of non-meat consumption favors the modification and the breaks of the links established within the practice of meat consumption. That is because the contact with a practitioner who performs the practice of non-meat consumption constitutes a window to the practice for the meat-eater practitioner. Specifically within the bundle of practices of non-meat consumption, the first practice from which change usually generates is that of *eating non-meat dishes*. As said, taste is really important to make a change, even if then other meanings come up next to it. Two out of three flexitarian practitioners (practitioners 2 and 3) stated that it was also the fact that they surprisingly liked the taste of non-meat dishes that made them want to try to eat less meat. The exposure to the practice of eating non-meat dishes, in order to be a trigger for change, needs to be repeated: the practice needs to be performed often, for instance weekly (as happened for practitioner 3) or even daily (as happened for practitioner 2).

After having tasted meatless dishes and started modifying the first aspect within the practice, then, change can consequently be spread towards the other two practices of buying non-meat products and preparing non-meat dishes. That is because there is a *strict relationship existing among the three practices* in the everyday routine of practitioners. In particular, buying non-meat products influences the practice of preparing non-meat dishes, that eventually affects that of eating non-meat dishes. While the last practice can also be performed in a “passive” way (the practice of eating non-meat dishes can be carried out separately from the previous ones, mainly due to different social contexts, for instance at the restaurant, or at another person’s place, in a situation in which practitioners “have to” eat that dish because they are not in charge of the reproduction of the previous practices), the first two are active practices that imply the direct personal involvement of the practitioner in their performance. In this sense, the *social context* plays a very important role and influences change in the practices. As said before, change happens when there is a constant exposure to the practice of non-meat consumption, especially to that of eating non-meat dishes: that means that the practice of *preparing non-meat dishes* is critical in this sense, since eating is the direct effect of what has been prepared. When there is a social situation in which a non-meat eater is often in charge of the performance of preparing the meal, then the meat eater is going to be repeatedly subject to the practice, hence there is more chance for change to happen: this is what happened to practitioner 2 when she was living with her sister, and to practitioner 3 when eating with practitioner 6. In order for change to happen in the practice of *buying non-meat products*, instead, an already strong motivational base is needed, because it is a completely active practice to be performed, and it is the initial one that directly and strongly influences the performance of the following two practices. The most evident change in this practice is in the material component: as seen for practitioner 9, his change (in his case from vegetarianism to veganism, but it can be similarly applied from meat to non-meat consumption) started when he decided to stop buying certain products, so that he was “obliged” to prepare and eat vegan dishes. However, this drastic modification in the material component (passing from meat to meat alternatives) implies that links between the conscious/reflective aspect and the personal aspect of non-

meat consumption are already built: non-meat products will be bought only if the practitioner thinks that he is doing something good for himself/the environment/animals and if doing that makes him feel good. Hence, the more active and directly engaging the practice, the stronger the component of meanings, therefore the sharper the change within the practice itself and in relation to the other two practices.

In few words, then, change occurs in a different way depending on the practice at issue. It generally happens first in the practice of eating non-meat dishes, for a series of reasons: it is a practice that can be performed separately from the other ones and meat eaters do not need to be necessarily in charge of the previous practices (non-meat consumption performed in a more “passive” way). Consequently, it does not require a direct involvement of meat eaters at the initial stage, and this gives room for a slow modification of aspects like taste and conscious/reflective reasons due to constant exposure to the practice. Afterwards, change can be spread towards the other two practices as well. If change is in the initial practice of buying non-meat products, instead, the main change is in the material component of the practice and it starts from a conscious choice, which implies more “effort” and motivational conviction for the practitioner to really modify his habits and turned them into a routinized behavior. Therefore, links between personal and conscious/reflective aspects already need to be established. Moreover, a change in the initial practice has a heavier impact on the following two, since such practices are one the consequence of the other. Hence, where exactly change occurs in non-meat consumption makes a lot of difference in terms of links to be established among components within the single practice and the influence it has on the other practices. Figure 3 schematically shows this reasoning:

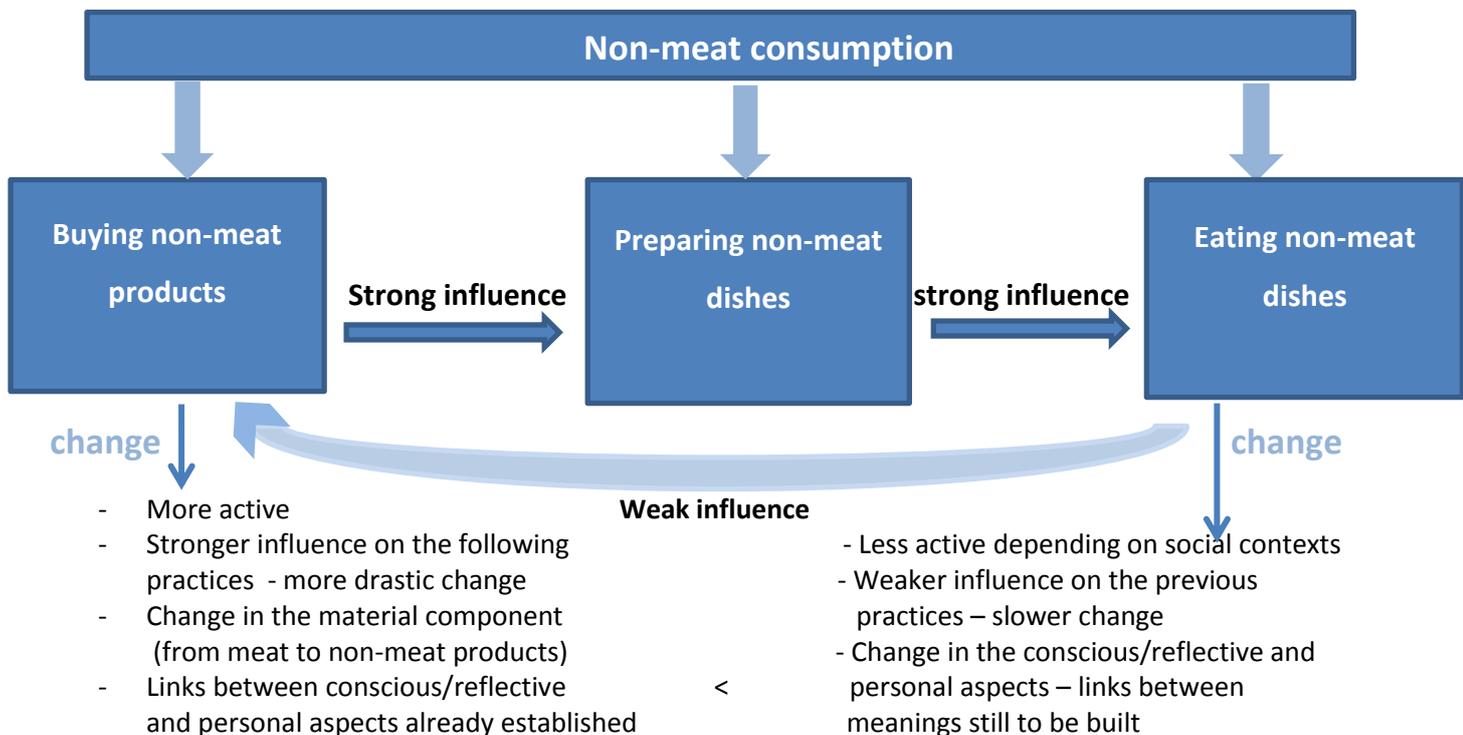


Figure 3. differences in change dynamics and influence along the practices

## 4.2 Obstacles for change

The *cultural aspect* seems to be an element of meanings that obstructs change. Apart from one practitioner (practitioner 8), all the other practitioners of the sample were raised in families in which meat is an important part of the diet. That is due to the nature of the practice of meat consumption, which is deeply integrated in most of the cultures in the world. That means that the practice is recognized as such and performed in an unconscious way by practitioners. This is not the case for the practices of non-meat consumption, which are not considered as widespread as the ones of meat consumption. The typical example in which this difference is more evident is the occasion of having guests over for dinner: normally, when preparing dinner for guests, meat is almost always present because it is considered an important part of a dish in order to make it “complete”. Hence, a non-meat eater has to state that he does not eat meat, in order for the host to prepare something meatless for him. We could say that meat consumption is considered the “standard” practice to perform. It is inevitable, then, that non-meat consumption, compared to the standard one, is seen as “different” therefore it is carried out in a more reflexive way by practitioners. In this sense, the concept of practice-as-entity is stronger for non-meat consumption since it is a more “visible” and recognizable practice that every practitioner could understand given certain components: if I say that I am vegetarian, everybody can relate it to certain material characteristics (I do not eat meat, so I do not buy and cook meat) and they could also guess some conscious/reflective aspect behind it (I could be vegetarian for health, environment or animal reasons). Cultural aspect also influences the presence of material components such as the availability of non-meat products, as we saw from people coming from meat-centered countries, and the presence of meatless recipes, so the creation of cooking skills and competences pertaining to non-meat consumption.

Another obstacle for change is the *stiff nature of the practice of non-meat consumption*. As said, eating meat is considered a standard practice: therefore, the practice itself is more flexible in its performance and practitioners can adapt to different situations, even if that would mean making a break in their usual everyday behavior. For instance, a meat eater can easily eat a non-meat dish once in a while, without necessarily need to make a change in the practice of meat consumption. Instead, the other way around is not possible because otherwise the basic reasons for reproducing the practice of non-meat consumption would fail: a practitioner who claims to be a non-meat eater will never eat meat, in any situation. Therefore, non-meat eaters have a more conscious idea of the practices they perform, because they are often reminded of being distinct from the standard practitioners in different social contexts, and they consciously acknowledge the “stiffness” of the practices of non-meat consumption, that makes it challenging for them to adapt to certain situations. For a meat eater, choosing between eating a meat and a non-meat dish does not make a substantial difference, and the only criteria that he can use refers to what he feels like eating at that moment, not questioning the presence or not of meat. On the contrary, for a

non-meat eater the choice is much more conscious, since the fact that a dish contains meat indicates whether he can or cannot eat that dish. That is why, in order to change and perform the practice of non-meat consumption, practitioners need a strong motivational base that can guarantee a constant reproduction of the practice. In this way, the practice is more likely to eventually turn into a routinized behavior, even if in specific social contexts it might come out as a conscious choice. Therefore, the performance of the bundle of practices of non-meat consumption carried out in an unconscious way implies the stop in the performance of the bundle of practices of meat consumption by principle: if you want to build a routinized behavior around non-meat consumption practices, you cannot constantly keep the two options open. This explains the difficulty in establishing a specific routinized behavior around one of the two bundles of practices in flexitarians.

### **4.3 Limitations of the research**

A special remark needs to be done as far as the sample is concerned: the nine practitioners observed are all Master students, coming from different countries and/or living by themselves. Therefore, *cultural and social adaptation* might have had a substantial influence on the results obtained. While moving out from his parents' house could be a normal change in a practitioner's life, which leads to a change also in the performance of certain practices, moving to another country is a much deeper change that inevitably has consequences on the habits previously established. Eating is one of the first adaptations that is done in another cultural context, and as we said in the previous sections, it can be both an obstacle for change from meat to non-meat consumption (the experience of practitioner 8 in Canada is an example of how food who is not so popular can be more expensive or less available, and in his case non-meat products he was used to buy) or it can favor change (the example of practitioner 7 who, when she moved to the Netherlands, could find more non-meat products to carry out the practices of non-meat consumption in an easier way). Therefore, some practitioners changed or they were facilitated in the change because of this moving. That is because the choice of the sample did not have any other criteria but the frequency of consumption of meat: a more precise selection of practitioners might have given different results.

Similarly, the *educational environment* might have affected some practitioner's change from meat to non-meat consumption: as mentioned in the results part, practitioner 3 stated that studying a certain field helped him raising his awareness about the environmental impact of food, providing him with a stronger reason to make the change. Therefore, an important role is played by education, and if the sample had been mixed between university students and workers, or students of different fields, the results could have probably been different. For instance, all the practitioners of the sample, including meat lovers, are well aware of the environmental effects of meat consumption, even if they in the first place are still eating it, but at least they acknowledge the existence of an issue concerning meat. This gives them a different

approach to the problem, more aware even if not directly embedded in their everyday eating routine. An example is provided by practitioner 4: even if still considered part of meat-lovers, he decided to cut off his red meat consumption also because of the Master in environmental sciences he is currently doing, which made him studying and critically reflecting upon this issue. A person with a different background, or with another educational level, who is exposed to different environments, would probably have a different view of the situation, maybe less aware, especially if we take into consideration meat lovers.

Even if random and not based on several criteria, the composition of the sample generated some nice results that different practitioners probably would have not produced. For instance, the presence of the two roommates (practitioners 8 and 9), the couple living together (practitioners 1 and 2) and the couple not living together (practitioners 3 and 6) gave very interesting insights on the social aspect of meat and non-meat consumption, and on how tight relationships can substantially affect the way the practices are performed and their potential for change. In the same line, examples like practitioners 4 and 5 confirmed the importance of culture in building eating habits; however, practitioner 7 represents a nice exception to this argument, since she is a non-meat eater coming from a very meat-centered country. Hence, the diversity of the sample gives rise to different dynamics within the practices that describe in how many distinct facets they can be reproduced. Moreover, the different processes for change confirm the fact that practices are dynamic and links among components can be modified in a wide range of ways, depending on where change started, how it developed and turned into a routine, and so on.

#### **4.3.1 Methodology limitations**

The sample is constituted by people known by the researcher, and with whom there is already a friendly relationship. The researcher made this choice in the light of the *methodology* chosen. In fact, the participant observations (4 observations per practitioner), the 4-week daily diary and the final face-to-face interviews are quite intrusive and time-consuming methods of analysis, but they are also the most proper ones to dig into social practices and embedded routines. Consequently, a certain degree of acceptance is required by the sample, who needs to feel at ease in certain situations, in order to get as reliable data as possible. Therefore there was a need to minimize a potential change in behavior due to the presence of an external person, especially during observations. That is why, by observing practitioners with whom the researcher already had a contact, the probability of succumb to this bias would have been less. At the same time, the sample would have been more willing to fill in the everyday diary. This choice proved to be quite successful, since, apart from predictable organizational issues (it was quite hard to properly manage all the observations because people were busy, or some observations sometimes overlapped so they needed to be rescheduled) the whole fieldwork went quite smoothly without major problems, and people felt quite at ease being observed and showed interest in the research, as well as the researcher was more comfortable in carrying out these observations. However, for a bigger and deeper research, this kind of selection is not

ideal, since other types of biases can occur: for instance, knowing the sample could lead the researcher to be less objective than if he was dealing with strangers, and the whole data collection process might seem less “professional”.

The 4-week diary has proved to be a nice method since the researcher could keep track of what the practitioners were buying, preparing and eating, and it made possible to analyze whether there was a kind of routine in the performance of the practices or if the social context had some kind of influence (for the structure of the diary, see Annex II). However, if the time span had been longer, the data gained from the diary could have been more reliable since a longer routine would have been taken into account. Moreover, practitioners need to be committed to fill it in everyday, so they have a high importance in making this method effective: during the 4 weeks, sometimes they forgot some days so they filled them in afterwards, and this might have affected the reliability of certain data.

The last methodological limit is constituted by the *size* of the sample: indeed, nine practitioners (three per type) is not enough to conduct a thorough and representative research, especially from the perspective of social practice theory, for which a bigger sample would have been more interesting to study, yet it would have also required a longer time span for fieldwork. In fact, the mainly qualitative and empirical nature of the research did not allow the researcher to have a wider group, also due to time constraints and to the use of time-consuming data collecting methods. That is why this small sample size made the researcher focus on each of the practitioners carefully, and with the necessary attention, in order to understand their performance of the practice in the best way possible. As previously said, the sample choice lied only on the frequency of meat consumption criteria: therefore, no criteria concerning country of origin, gender, age were taken into account.

#### **4.3.2 Conceptual framework**

Social practice theory has been used as the conceptual framework of this research. The theory has been adapted to the specific nature of the research, which is definitely empirical. That is why meat and non-meat consumption have been identified as bundle of practices, more specifically analyzing three practices within each bundle, giving it a structure that could fit the needs of the research. The choice of dividing the practices according to the three components of materials, competences and meanings identified by Shove *et al* (2012) was also made to facilitate the data collection and analysis. Within the components, especially the one of meanings, only certain aspects have been taken into account in the analysis, deliberately chosen by the researcher. On the one hand, this division could look simple and maybe it could leave behind some aspects of the practice, but on the other hand, a broad categorization like this allowed the researcher to organize the data in a more systematic way and it made it easier to understand the links among the components: a more specific classification would have made the grouping of data more

complicated and time-consuming, probably resulting in a less understandable analysis afterwards. Moreover, the analysis started from the practice examined in the form of performance in order to get to the practice intended as an entity in itself, so the sample of practitioners constituted the starting point of the whole research: that is why sometimes it was challenging for the researcher to keep focused on the practices as a whole activity without deviating on individuals. The same reasoning was applied for the change in the practices: the flexitarians and non-meat eaters of the sample represented the empirical example of how change occurred, and from their experiences, a more general idea of change could be generated, always taking into account the fact that the conceptual framework chosen addresses everyday activities – in this case meat and non-meat consumption – in more collective terms, connecting actions made by individuals to a more general pattern of elements common to all the practitioners, even if then performed in different ways.

#### **4.3.3 Suggestions for further research**

The research represents one of the first attempts of approaching change in meat and non-meat consumption from the point of view of social practice theory. Hence, there is wide room for further improvements in this direction. One first suggestion is to narrow down the criteria of choice of the sample, that means selecting people based on specific aspects that can be age, educational level, cultural origins, in order to have a more focused range of practitioners that could probably give more accurate results. Secondly, enlarging the sample and the time span of observations is fundamental to get more reliable data and to provide deeper and better understanding of embedded routines. Thirdly, in this research, change has been analyzed more as a whole, not going in details regarding each of the three practices identified in meat and non-meat consumption: the arguments presented deal with general reflections on the bundle of practices and based on the experiences of practitioners. A more focused study on each specific change (for instance, from buying meat to buying non-meat products) could give new useful insights on how to promote this transition and could confirm or dismiss the more general points made in this research.

#### **4.4 Concluding remarks**

This research dealt with meat consumption, presented as one of the highest environmental affecting issues of our modern society. In order to carry out a global sustainable lifestyle in the future, a decrease in meat consumption will be needed. In this regard, analyzing what can foster and what can instead prevent change from meat to non-meat consumption from happening can give useful insights in how to decrease meat consumption. This change has been analyzed using social practice theory as the conceptual framework of reference. First, the main elements pertaining to meat and non-meat consumption as bundle of practices have been identified, and later on, change from meat to non-meat

consumption has been analyzed starting from the experiences of the sample of practitioners at issue, eventually coming up with steering points which favor and obstacles which impede change to occur.

The bundle of practices related to meat consumption shows common elements, mainly related to the personal aspect, the material aspect of meat (chicken is the most bought type of meat), and the main criteria observed for choosing a certain meat-product, preparing and eating meat dishes is a mix between easiness and quickness of preparation, taking into consideration the overall important aspect of taste. Skills and competences developed by practitioners mainly showed up during grocery shopping and cooking, with meat-lovers being the highest skilled practitioners in these activities. The main meanings carried out substantially related to cultural traits coming from the country of origin but also to a certain cultural and social adaptation experienced by practitioners when moving out from their parents' house and/or from their country. The presence of embedded routines seems to break mainly in cases when meat eaters need to actively perform the practices of buying non-meat products and preparing non-meat dishes because of a specific social situation (for instance, having a non-meat eater guest over for dinner), so when they need to adapt to the non-meat eater needs given the stiffness of non-meat consumption practices.

On the other hand, the practices related to non-meat consumption are mainly driven by underlying conscious/reflective meanings, specifically that of health, which shaped the development of shopping and cooking skills in practitioners and the type of meat substitute bought and prepared. Health also influenced the modification of the concept of taste related to the practice of eating non-meat dishes. The creation of a routinized behavior in non-meat consumption is strong on the one side (non-meat eaters really stick to the practice) but at the same time, especially in different social situations in which both meat and non-meat consumption practices are performed, such behavior becomes conscious since it is implicitly compared to the standard one of meat consumption.

Given the composition of the practices, then, how can change happen? The experiences of the non-meat eaters and flexitarians of the sample show that change can occur in different ways and circumstances, but there are some common aspects that favored it and others that prevented it. Throughout the whole research, *social context* is undoubtedly the aspect with the highest influence on change: being in touch with people who constantly reproduce the practices of non-meat consumption, first that of eating non-meat dishes, can steer meat eaters to go for these kinds of practices as well. The importance of social context in this sense is also connected to the "stiffness" of the practices of non-meat consumption on which we previously discussed. Making such practices completely unconscious will be hard, since they are compared to the regular practices of meat consumption which are considered "normal" because socially and culturally integrated in our everyday life. This "identity contrast" between eaters and non-meat eaters comes out in certain situations, and usually not eating meat gives rise to a stronger feeling of identity in practitioners,

since there is more the need to “get together” and recognize themselves as a whole group. It is not usual to hear a person claiming to be a “carnivore” but it is indeed more common to state to be vegetarian.

Despite the empirical nature of the analysis, there are some general final considerations regarding the decrease in meat consumption that could be drawn from the findings. First, results show that the practice of *eating non-meat dishes* has the highest potential for change, since it requires less direct effort from the practitioner, but it still exposes him to non-meat consumption. In this regard, *taste* is a very important aspect to appeal meat eaters, but we also saw that change is strengthened when an awareness on *conscious/reflective* issues comes up, and cultural traits could negatively influence the performance of the practice in a substantial way. Non-meat eaters can play a critical role in catalyzing change, since they are already involved in the practices of non-meat consumption in their everyday life. At the same time, the dynamic nature of change in social practice and the flexibility of the practices of meat consumption give room for a slow but effective transition from meat to non-meat consumption, that does not require flexitarians and meat eaters to drastically change their habits or join a certain identity group like that of non-meat eaters, which we saw being a potential obstacle for change.

Although this research is only the result of a circumscribed and purely empirical analysis, with a limited number of practitioners involved, the points made could give interesting inputs for developing further similar analysis on a larger and deeper scale which could eventually help creating future strategies to reduce meat intake.

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## Annex I

### Information on the sample – list of practitioners

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>1</b>
Group	Meat lover
Age	32
Gender	Male
Country of origin	Belgium

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>2</b>
Group	Flexitarian
Age	31
Gender	Female
Country of origin	Armenia

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>3</b>
Group	Flexitarian
Age	27
Gender	Male
Country of origin	The Netherlands

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>4</b>
Group	Meat lover
Age	33
Gender	Male
Country of origin	Bolivia

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>5</b>
Group	Meat lover
Age	24
Gender	Male
Country of origin	China

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>6</b>
Group	Non-meat eater
Age	24
Gender	Female
Country of origin	The Netherlands
Non-meat eater since	2002

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>7</b>
Group	Non-meat eater
Age	25
Gender	Female
Country of origin	Mexico
Non-meat eater since	2015

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>8</b>
Group	Flexitarian
Age	25
Gender	Male
Country of origin	Italy

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>9</b>
Group	Non-meat eater
Age	23
Gender	Male
Country of origin	Italy
Non-meat eater since	2010

## Annex II

### Structure of the diary

Week ....

Days/ Activity	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
WHAT (type of meat*, type of meat substitute**)							
HOW (cooking technique)							
WITH/FOR WHOM (cooking/eating by yourself or for/with someone else)							

Grocery shopping

Date/Activity	dd-mm-yyyy								
WHERE (supermarket, butcher, organic store ecc)									
WHAT (type of meat*, type of meat substitute**)									
HOW MUCH – quantity									
HOW MUCH - price									

FOR/WITH WHOM (for/by yourself or for/with someone else)									
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### Annex III - General overview of interview questions

The following list addresses the questions that have been asked to all the practitioners during the interview. Since the nature of the interview was quite informal –aimed at putting practitioners at ease – some open questions gave rise to additional questions specific for each practitioner, which mainly concerns change from meat to non-meat consumption, but that have not been written here. The same goes for questions specifically related to the doings of each practitioner noticed during the observations. Generally this kind of questions started with a common “during the grocery shopping/dinner observation, I noticed that .....” and then they went in depth in the particular behavior observed asking why and if it was something the practitioner was used to do or not. Therefore, the list of questions is not limited to the following one, but each interview ended up being tailored for each single practitioner. However, the extra questions, as well as the general ones, all related to the elements of the practices identified in the conceptual framework.

ML: Meat Lovers      V: Non-meat Eaters (Vegetarians/Vegans)      F: Flexitarians

***Buying (non-)meat products:***

- How much time do you usually dedicate to do grocery shopping? ML, F, V
- Grocery shopping: do you prioritize quality over price or price over quality? ML, F, V
- Did you find meat substitute cheaper/more expensive/the same price as meat? F, V
- How much meat do you usually eat per week? ML, F
- Do you usually do grocery shopping alone or for/with other people? ML, F, V

***Preparing (non-)meat dishes:***

- How much time do you usually dedicate to prepare dinner? ML, F, V
- Do you usually cook for yourself or for/with other people? ML, F, V
- What is your favorite way of cooking meat and why? (see conceptual framework for types of cooking skills) ML, F

- What is your favorite way of cooking meat-substitutes and why? (see conceptual framework for types of cooking skills) F, V

***Eating (non-)meat dishes:***

- How many times a week do you consume meat? ML, F
- Do you usually have dinner alone or with other people? ML, F, V
- How long have you been a non-meat eater? V
- Which kind of meat do you usually eat and why (classify types of meat per frequency of consumption – beef, pork, poultry)? ML, F
- What are the meat-substitutes you are consuming most and why (classify types of meat substitutes per frequency of consumption – see conceptual framework) ? F, V
- Describe a typical dish you usually eat. ML, F, V
- Why do you find meat an essential part of your meal? (probable categories: taste, social aspect, habit, cultural aspect, economic aspect) ML
- What is your favorite recipe with meat/meat substitutes and why? Is it typical of your country of origin? Do you usually prepare it here in Wageningen? ML, F, V

***Change from meat to non-meat consumption:***

- What is the driving reason towards stop eating meat/reducing the consumption of meat? (classify the reasons per importance – Health, Ethics, Environment) What was the occasion or the event that triggered this choice? V, F
- Are you aware of the impact of meat consumption on health, animals and the environment? ML, F, V
- Did you find it easy to change your diet towards a (more) plant-based diet? easiness in terms of:
  - o economically easy – is it cheaper, more expensive, the same F, V
  - o socially easy – in occasions in which you eat together with other people, is your diet a kind of an obstacle? For instance, in a restaurant, if there are no meatless dishes? During a barbecue, do you manage to eat non-meat dishes with the same easiness as before? V And also: how did your family and friends react when you told them that you were stopping/reducing meat? F, V
  - o Culturally easy – what role does meat play in the food culture of your country of origin? F, V and also for ML

- Personally easy – what does eating less/not eating meat make you feel? What do you like and dislike most about your choice? Does your choice have a negative side (you miss meat, you do not feel comfortable in some social moments, you do not feel “free” in what you eat, you feel like you built up boundaries, you feel confined to an “identity”)? F, V
- How did moving out from you parent’s house/country of origin affect your being non-meat eater/flexitarian?