

COVER SHEET

Department of Early Years & Primary Education

Masters course work (not for dissertations and reports)

Name	Jonas Deitert		
Course	Sociology of Childhood and Children's Right	full time/ only	part module
Module Title	Children's Rights in Practice	Module Code	
Essay Title	Should parents bring up their child as a vegetarian?		
Date of submission			

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Should parents bring up their child as vegetarian?

Attempt of a children's rights approach

Children's Rights in Practice

Assignment

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MA Sociology of Childhood and Children's Rights

Module MMACHD_02: Children's Rights in Practice

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A man can live and be healthy without killing animals for food; therefore, if he eats meat, he participates in taking animal life merely for the sake of his appetite.
Leo Tolstoy

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1 Introduction

Since I was a child I have always eaten meat¹. Throughout my childhood it was seen as something natural and a rewarding part of the family diet, usually only cooked on Sundays. Eating meat was never questioned, rather taken for granted, as something that everyone does and nobody cast any doubt on. Neither was the idea of vegetarianism immediately around, nor did my parents talk to me about the implications of carnivorism and its ethical questionability. This was once due to the fact that they themselves do not question carnivorism, but also it was commonly known for us children that meat is made of dead animals. However, in the process of growing up, I adopted the parental value judgement, that it is right to eat meat.

At the end of my secondary school time I began to question its rightness, mainly from an ethical perspective. I thought about slaughterhouses, the sheer amount of animals that are killed for human consumption and the suffering of animals. However, with all this in mind, I still found it terribly hard giving up meat and all my endeavours to become completely vegetarian have not been fruitful so far. Reasons for this might be the social and cultural environment with only a small - but growing² - number of people who are vegetarian, making it hard to break with the underlying conventions. As with many habits that have been acquired and distinguished over a period of time, they can be hard to get rid of. In the case of eating meat, that might also be due to the 'status' of eating meat as a social convention to share a dinner with meat, particularly on special events like holidays, dinners with friends or when experiencing a new culture in a different country.

The process of socialisation is central to the acquisition of values and habits of the child. It will be shown that, dependent on several factors, habits like eating meat, that are acquired and developed by the child throughout socialisation, are to varying

¹ When using the term eating meat in the following, I mean all food that contains meat and fish, so the equivalent of being a carnivore.

² Animal rights group PETA assumed in 2006 that there about 6 Million of the German population are vegetarian (around 7%), compared to 0,6% in 1983, which is about 470 000.

extents associated with certain values and meanings that the child inherits. However, socialisation is not only a one-sided process and the child's agency is also present in different ways. After looking at these concepts and their interrelation and the presentation of a moral standpoint towards vegetarianism, carnivorism and the right way to the upbringing of the child in this matter, the main question of this assignment will be raised, namely: *Should parents bring up their child as a vegetarian?* Subsequently, the question will be addressed to children's rights in the following phrasing: *Does the upbringing of a child as a carnivore (UCC) infringe children's rights?* Finally, the findings will be discussed and put into a conclusion.

2 Children's agency and socialisation

Before examining the question from a children's rights perspective, theories from the sociology of childhood will be employed so as to understand the actors and processes that are relevant to the matter. What is the role of the child in the decision that is made by his or her parents, how active or passive can it be seen? What processes enable the child to make their own decisions and speak for him- or herself?

Central to these thoughts are the understanding of children as agents with a moral awareness as well as the process of socialisation in the course of which the latter gets challenged and developed. These ideas will be presented and discussed in the following.

2.1 Agency

For a long time, children were not seen as active members in society, due to their ascribed status as human becomings who are not ready to play an active role in society yet (Frankel, 2012, pp.10, Qvortrup, 1994). This has changed with the emergence of a new paradigm in sociology that views children as active in constructing their own and also other people's lives (Mayall, 2002; James and Prout 1997). Not only are they actors in the way that they live their own life: "It is clear enough, without carrying out formal research studies, that children are social actors; that is, they take part in family relationships from the word go; they express their wishes, demonstrate strong attachments, jealousy and delight, seek justice" (Mayall, 2000, p.21); but furthermore, they are also agents, influencing the lives of the people around them and therefore

constructing reality. Mayall distinguishes between actors and agents in the following way: “A social actor *does* something, perhaps something arising from a subjective wish. The term agent suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints” (Mayall, 2002, p.21). Seeing children as agents implicates relationships beyond their family and the people they know, to the society they live in and the social structure that determines them. As James and Prout state, “children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes” (1990, p.8).

Turning to the question of morality, children historically have not been seen as moral due to their immaturity (Frankel 2012, Jones 2009, Mayall, 2002, pp.87). “The history of children's engagement with discourses on morality has at best been partial and at worst non-existent. Questions of children's competence and capability of age and reason have stripped children of a voice, leaving them powerless within the dominant world of adults” (Frankel, 2012, p.9). However, the sociology of childhood regards children as moral beings in several ways and places, so called “environments for moral agency” (Mayall, 2002, p.96), like their school, their neighbourhood and their home. This moral agency is, as Frankel emphasises, to be seen as a part of the social agency, as the moral aspects of life are included in social life itself (Frankel 2012, p.32). “Like adults, children have an elaborate social life from which troubling moral problems frequently arise” (Damon, 1988, p.2). It is argued that, due to the interlacement of the social and the moral, children are consequently confronted with moral issues, as “morality is a fundamental, natural and important part of children's lives from the time of their first relationship” (Damon 1990, cited in Mayall, 2002, p. 88).

In the development of morality we can see how closely the child's agency is related to the values that he or she is surrounded by. Frankel, relating to research conducted by Short, states that young children are aware of what is acceptable to do in certain situations and what is wrong: “Short (1999), with her work that again engages very young children, shows the way in which children actively evaluate the acceptability of their own behaviour with reference to the social situation that they are in, drawing on

notions of their identity and belonging that they demonstrate their agency” (Frankel, 2012, p. 31). Thereby, they develop their own understanding of the underlying morals of the society they live in and with it their moral agency. The distinction of what is acceptable and what is not, is always determined by the existing structures and varies with them.

This shows the importance in our case of the structures the child is surrounded by, especially the family, since in the first years at least, most of the food is consumed at home. The process of how children adopt to the values within their family is framed in the concept of socialisation. As indicated already through presenting the child's social and with it it's moral agency, theories of socialisation have to explain how this process makes children part of society by introducing them to the underlying values and rules, but at the same time take into account the child's active role as agent.

2.2 Socialisation

The process through which children become a part of society in the sense that they get to know and internalise societal rules, codes and most relevantly values, is called socialisation. For an understanding of socialisation theory that takes into account the children as agents and not only as passive receivers of socialisation, the theory of social constructionism becomes relevant in this context. It explains how not only the overarching structure influences and determines individuals, but also at the same time, individual's actions reproduce and therefore change the structure with and through their interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This reciprocity of impacts on both, individuals and structure, is therefore of a great importance for children, as their agency is indicated here. Due to Berger and Luckmann's socialisation theory, roles and meanings to things that individuals do, get picked up and internalised by children through the process of socialisation.

From the perspective of the *socialising* individual, these so called social institutions, things that individuals in a society do and its explanation, get legitimised on four different levels of justification or explanation, depending on the 'subject of socialisation'. The first level contains simple affirmations on a pre-theoretical basis and are characterised by the saying “because this is how things are done.” (Rafky, 1973, pp.49). The second level constitutes a theoretical proposition, however still in a

rudimentary form. The third level then contains explicit theories. The fourth and highest level of legitimisation is the “symbolic universe”. Symbolic universes are constituted by “the legitimisations of the social institutions that comprise them” (Rafky, 1973, pp.48). Any given religion is an example for a symbolic universe.

As pointed out already, socialisation has, as any social action by individuals, a reciprocal dimension to it (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, Giddens, 1979 in Rafky, 1973). Social institutions constantly get produced and reproduced as “action and meaning must be seen as a product of social interaction” (Frankel, 2012, p.19). Therefore, not only adults produce social institutions and objective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), children also take an active part in his process of constructing reality in the course of interacting with the people around them. James and Prout's statement that children are not “passive subjects of social structures and processes (James and Prout, 1990, p.8)” clearly points this out.

2.3 Implications for issue

The model of legitimation by Berger and Luckmann implies for the matter of vegetarianism in families, that the more the habit of eating meat or not eating meat is for the parents - or the socialising individuals - embedded in a larger cultural framework, for example a symbolic universe like religion, the higher the level of legitimation. That is, the more meaning and importance is ascribed to eating meat. I would like to argue that, as a consequence to a higher level of legitimation, the habit of eating meat is more likely to become part of a symbolic universe for the child and thereby of a greater importance to the child. This argument is based on the premise that the child internalises the habit and adopts the parent's level of legitimation for him or herself. On the other hand, if eating meat is simply a habit that has been inherited from the older generation but has no deeper meaning associated with it, then it consequently cannot be legitimised on a higher level by the parents. The lack of justification, so the argument, leads to a weaker ideological connection to the child's habit.

Concluding, three steps are important for how children take on the habit of eating meat or not eating meat: The level his or her parents legitimise their habit themselves, if and how they legitimise this to the child and, crucially for the sociology of childhood³ perspective, the way the child reflects on and internalises the socialised habit.

³As it indicates to what degree the child is an agent in socialisation

3 A moral discussion

Before addressing the question of whether parents should bring up their child as a vegetarian to the children's rights, acknowledging the moral relevance of this matter, I would like to outline a moral discussion around vegetarianism and especially arguments that are raised by supporters of the latter.

3.1 Arguments against carnivorism

There are several reasons why people become vegetarian. Some people do not eat meat because of their religion, some believe it is healthier to be vegetarian, or that it is better for the environment and global food market situation or simply because they do not like the taste of meat and fish. However, one other reason is, because they find it is wrong to eat meat. As Sherratt states, the latter position can be summarised in two main arguments, one being the argument of unnecessary suffering and the other one of animal rights (2007, p. 426).

The theory of unnecessary suffering especially focuses on the circumstances animals live in and the agonies they have to undergo: "In order to eat meat, we need to raise animals for food. When we raise animals for food, they suffer. They suffer, for instance, when they are kept in cramped conditions, transported long distances, and sometimes when they are slaughtered" (2007, p. 426). And further, "none of this suffering is necessary, since we could survive perfectly well on a vegetarian diet. It is never right to be the cause of unnecessary suffering - so eating meat is wrong" (Sherratt, 2007, p. 246). The second is the argument involves animal rights. "Like us, animals have beliefs and desires and a sense of their own past and future. In virtue of this, they have certain basic rights: the right, for instance, to be treated with respect. Raising and slaughtering animals for food involves an unjustifiable violation of these rights — so eating meat is wrong" (Sherratt, 2007, p. 246).

Besides these two arguments, further problems are raised, as the fact that about forty percent of the world's grain harvest is fed to animals, which would be more than sufficient to feed the hungry of this planet (Sherratt, 2007, p. 246).

3.2 Arguments for the upbringing of the child as a vegetarian

Subsequently, Sherratt discusses the ethical contestability of the upbringing of the child as a vegetarian (UCV) (2007, p. 427). She does not raise arguments *for* UCV, but rather presents three concerns that are known to her as raised by opponents of UCV, in order to falsify them and conclude that due to a lack of arguments against UCV, it is not impermissible and therefore acceptable.

The first argument is related to choice for the child and the two others to health. Firstly, opponents of UCV could argue that the child should be given the choice of eating meat and parents should not inflict their own moral choice on their children. However, Sherratt disqualifies this argument, since, as she states “Parents make choices on behalf of their children all the time” (2007, p. 427), including moral decisions. Furthermore, the decision for eating meat is also a moral one, if the one for not eating meat is also defined as such.

Secondly, Sherratt points out that four recent studies about children growing up as vegetarians have shown that all children that were included in the four studies did not have any health problems. Finally, she comes to the argument that there can be slight risks in a vegetarian diet and since “no responsible parent should want to take any avoidable risk with the health of her child” (2007, p. 430), parents therefore should abstain from UCV. Sherratt dismisses this argument by mentioning that a carnivore diet also contains minor risks and apart from this it is argued that “there are numerous cases in which we think it is permissible for a parent to adopt a course of action that poses an avoidable risk to the health of her child” (2007, p. 430). This is in situations that contain minor risks, when the parent thinks there is also a benefit. When parents take their child to the beach, it can have a nice time outside, which outweighs the risks of the child drowning. Likewise, the minor health risks of UCV are outweighed by the parent’s effort to teaching the child “to live in a way that will not inflict unnecessary suffering upon animals, or infringe their rights. In other words, he is teaching her to live an ethical life” (2007, p. 432). In having shown that there are no moral concerns towards UCV, Sherratt argues, it is permissible.

4 The rights perspective

So far, I have discussed relevant processes and concepts surrounding the passing on of values within the family in general as well as the individual case of UCV. Also I have presented a moral standpoint towards the upbringing of the child as a carnivore. On the basis of these concepts I would like to pose the question whether parents should raise their children as a vegetarian from a rights perspective. Therefore, the question will be modified to: *Is it against children's rights to bring up a child as a carnivore?* Possible findings can then be used to answer the initial question. I will look at legal definitions, relevant for the raised question, in the United Nations Conventions on the Right of the Child. Recognising the fact that parents are the other group of actors involved, I will look at parental rights definition to capture both sides.

4.1 Children's rights

The United Nations Conventions on the Right of the Child include four articles that can be regarded as relevant in this case.

Article 29 states that “the education of the child shall be directed to [...] (c) the development of [...] his or her own cultural identity, language and values”. This paragraph focuses on the formation of the child's *own* set of values and identity which includes enabling them to come up with ethical judgements like the decision between vegetarianism and carnivorousness based on moral factors. Furthermore, section (e) centres on “the development of respect for the natural environment”, which can be interpreted as meaning that children should value all animals, just as plants, oceans and the whole planet itself.

The child's best interest as a “basic concern” of parents or legal guardians is claimed by Article 18. However, there is clearly no simple and common answer to what is in the best interest of the child in this case. I am claiming that the best interest for the child is to bring it up as a vegetarian, as will be discussed later. Article 14 mentions the respect for the child's “freedom of thought, conscience and religion” as well as for the parents “to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.” Possible overlapping can already be indicated between the child's freedom of thought, the development of his own values and identity and the task of the parents to direct the child to make use of exactly this

right. The border between motivating the child to develop values in general and develop *specific* values, namely the ones that the parents believe are the 'right' ones, is a theoretical one, but probably blurs in practice.

Most relevant for this concern is article 12.1: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” Although the article explicitly states the right for the child to be able to articulate his or her own opinion freely, at the same time it opens up the question about capability and maturity of the child in order for his or her views to be taken account of. As a matter of fact, the decision whether the child's nutrition contains meat or not definitely affects the child directly. However, there can be dissensions about the point when a child has the capability to form his or her own view on eating meat and therefore make an own informed decision him- or herself. Before looking into that, parental rights have to be considered so as to capture a whole picture of the existing legal framework for this issue.

4.2 Parental rights

In the European Convention of the Human Rights of 1953 little can be found about the upbringing of the child and the respect for the child's own view. Solely article 8, the 'Right to privacy' tackles issues about family life, in relation to the state and its right to interference:

“(1) Everyone has the right for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.

(2) There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others⁴” (<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/Html/005.htm>).

Article 8 states that family life in its broad sense and its privacy has to be respected, only as long as it does not interfere with national or international laws. This

⁴ When 'others' obviously stands for 'other humans', the inclusion of animals in the convention would have made the case quite clear.

is, as the convention states, among other things due to the protection of health and morals. In other words, if an individual's family life internalises specific sets of values that are not conform to the state's view, interference in family life is allowed. This opens up the possibility for a state's intervention in private life in relation to the concern about carnivorousism: Assumed that it comes to the situation that a government changes its values about this matter, the convention allows it to apply its values onto families and therefore also the child's family education and socialisation. However, this remains only a theoretical account, since this scenario is quite unlikely and such strong state interference in family life is unusual.

A UK government statement interprets the parental rights in the following: "On the whole, the law allows parents to bring up their children in accordance with their own beliefs and values" (<http://www.childsupportlaws.co.uk/your-legal-rights-parent.html>) and clearly underlines the family privacy that protects the family values in education of the children. Further, it says that "This [law] gives parents the right to make decisions about the child's upbringing, provided the child's well-being is never put at risk. To determine their child's name, religion, form of education and healthcare".

4.3 Conflicts

Contrasting the posed rights entails several problems and limitations on both-theoretical and practical levels. Firstly, the children's right to participation in exercising choice in the child's own nutrition only comes at a certain point. The age recommended by the NHS when parents should start giving their children solid food ('weaning') that can also contain meat and fish, is 6 months⁵. At that age, it can be argued, children have not yet developed a sense of understanding for the implications of eating meat as well as a moral awareness. Judy Dunn summarises that in their second year, children start to show moral behaviour (Dunn, 1990, p.106). However, children can and do express views about their food, if not through articulating this on a moral level, than about taste and through their bodily reaction to it. Priscilla Alderson showed with her work that pre-mature babies express their feeling about their own health through bodily movements and expressions (Alderson, 2005). To my knowledge, there has not been any academic research done about very young children who deny meat and for what

⁵<http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/812.aspx?CategoryID=62&SubCategoryID=63>

reasons. It can be questioned in a case when even young children deny meat, if it is due to a lack of appetite for it or due to other reasons.

On a theoretical level, a conflict is arising between the parental rights to bring up their children in accordance to their own beliefs and values and the children's right to participate in decisions that affect them dependant on their capability and the right to freedom. It can be questioned whether the children's right to participate in decisions that affect them outweighs the parental responsibility to decide about the child's upbringing. As mentioned earlier, the term of the child's capability is not defined clearly, neither is a guideline for the overlapping of the child's right to her or his own view to be taken account of and the parent's right to the upbringing of the child and leaves this field to a matter of negotiation on a theoretical level and probably the parent's decision on a practical one.

5 Discussion

Clearly, the legal framework does not provide enough and especially clear advice to answer this question. As a result, neither looking into children's and parental rights, nor further discussion of the division of those provided a clear answer to the question: Is bringing up a child as a carnivore against children's rights?

Very young children might, as suggested, at the moment of the parental decision-making not be capable of understanding the associated values. This has consequences for their agency as Allison James raises doubts about the child's agency through a lack of capacity: "Do all children have the same capacity for agency?" (James, 2009, p.44). One could furthermore claim that children, as soon as they are capable of understanding, should simply make their own decision and stop, or continue eating meat, or continue being a vegetarian or start eating meat. However, in claiming this, the aforementioned importance of values inherited in the course of socialisation has not been considered. Doubts about the ethical rightness of carnivorism might come into conflict with once acquired values, in this case that is the belief that eating meat cannot be wrong because parents and family members do it.

On the basis of the understanding of how children adopt to their parents values through socialisation and the moral position established that the UCV is morally correct, I am suggesting that carnivore parents should not feed their children meat, but rather

raise them vegetarian until they decide for themselves if they want to start eating meat. *Eating meat should be something that is an opt-in rather than opt-out option.* One of the major concerns arising with this claim are potential inconsistencies between the child's and the parents' diets and mainly between the parents' values and the ones that are here claimed to be socialised. The greater the importance of eating meat and the more the belief of the moral rightness of eating meat is embedded into a symbolic universe for the parents, the more problematic and unrealistic the claim, as the habit gets legitimised on a higher level (see 2.2).

6 Conclusion

The most important claim however, is that the child is listened to and encouraged to make their own decision as early as possible. In that way he or she is given responsibility to make an important decision and gets encouraged to think about moral issues. Furthermore and in this sense, there is need for a more distinguished definition of a right for this case and an awareness that children are able to decide and speak for themselves. The argument is, giving them the right to choose about their own diet will also, in a liberationist understanding of children's rights (Archard, 2003, pp.17), give them not only agency but also the capacity to do so. As Archard points out about capacity in relation to rights, "it is not thus that children are capable now but illegitimately denied their rights but, rather, that they will only – or at least more readily at an earlier stage – acquire that capacity⁶ if given their rights"(Archard, 2003, p.18). Even though this might not be valid to a full extent for very young children, thus they have preferences and ways to express them in different ways (compare Alderson, 2005).

Is this conclusion generalisable for all children and all cultures worldwide? As with the difficulties of formulating international rights conventions like the UNCRC, consent in moral outlooks are as hard or even harder to agree on. From a pragmatic point of view it has to be acknowledged that some people cannot cut out meat or fish as it constitutes an essential part of their diet that they cannot easily replace due to a lack of resources. Therefore, the claim established includes only families who are in the

⁶ Capacity in this context is used with a 'thin' definition of choosing and expressing a preference or desire as well as "an ability to understand and appreciate the significance of the option facing one" (Archard, 2003, p.19).

position to be able to provide for a vegetarian diet that is wholesome and consequently not putting the child's health at risk.

In the introduction to this paper I mentioned my own personal experience, including the perceived difficulties in becoming a vegetarian. This paper was, besides addressing the main questions, an attempt to explore reasons for the mentioned difficulties, mainly in the theory of socialisation. To a degree, it has provided me with the insight that I inherited my parent's values in the course of socialisation. However, my values have changed but the habit is still there. This shows that the study of socialisation does not give us a wholesome account of who we are.

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"Der Trend ins Vegetarische ist unaufhaltsam. Vielleicht isst in 100 Jahren kein Mensch mehr Fleisch." *Helmut Maucher, former Nestlé CEO.*

('The trend towards vegetarianism is unstoppable. Probably in 100 years, no one will eat meat anymore.')

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<http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/meat-wastes-natural-resources.aspx>

<https://vebu.de/lifestyle/anzahl-der-vegetarierinnen>

<http://www.peta.de/web/vegetarismus.149.html>

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>