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# 'Animals kill, that's how the world works'
– The role of neutralisation and affirmation techniques in the discourse of animal product consumption

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# Abstract

Despite the fact that the consumption of animal products gives rise to a number of negative environmental externalities, global consumption keeps increasing. Previous research has applied neutralisation and affirmation theory in order to understand (dis)engagement in pro-environmental behaviour, typically with a focus on the individual user of such discursive justification strategies. However, the present thesis recognises a need to address the interpersonal role of these techniques and their implications for how individuals communicate regarding environmental issues. The purpose of this study was to connect the cognitive processes of neutralisations and affirmations to the discursive practices of social interaction in the context of animal product consumption and pro-environmental behaviour. The aim was to explore the ways in which, and with what implications, these techniques are used by omnivores and vegans in social interaction. Qualitative data was gathered through four focus group sessions conducted with eighteen omnivorous and vegan pro-environmental students in the Swedish city of Uppsala. A dialogical discourse analysis of this data uncovered six topoi that proved useful when professing claims of (dis)engagement in consumption of animal products. Furthermore, this study discusses the emergent micro-deliberations, the extensive reference to non-present others, the dialectics between neutralisations and affirmations, the structuration dialectic of topoi and the implications for the discourse of animal product consumption. This study offer insights into the complexity of pro-environmental behaviour in the area of animal product consumption, insights that are of value for practical and policy interventions aimed at reducing such consumption by organisations and governments.

*Keywords*: Neutralisation theory, Neutralisations, Affirmations, Animal product consumption, Dialogism, Dialogical discourse analysis, Topoi, Structuration dialectic.

# Acknowledgement

We want to express our greatest appreciation for our supervisor Erica von Essen, postdoc researcher at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, who has guided us, provided insights and support throughout this process.

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# 1    Introduction

## *1.1*   Background

The continuously rising global consumption of animal products is problematical due to its severe environmental impacts in the form of i.a. greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, substantial water use, habitat destruction, eutrophication, deforestation and land degradation. Therefore, a number of environmental organisations stress the importance of a reduced animal product consumption (APC), typically with a focus on meat consumption. (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2014; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006; World Wildlife Fund, 2016; Naturvårdsverket, 2011). Environmental organisations have however refrained from adopting an abolitionist attitude, even as they do acknowledge that a plant based diet is the most environmentally sound choice. Instead, the environmental movement discourse is predominantly characterised by reformist messages, promoting a reduction of APC or a replacement of products that are considered more harmful, e.g. red meat. (Freeman, 2010; Laestadius, Neff, Barry and Frattaroli, 2013; Laestadius, Neff, Barry and Frattaroli, 2014). Hence, the moral standing and the rights of non-human animals (see e.g. Matevia, 2016) is rarely part of such messages and included in this discourse (Freeman, 2010; Freeman, 2014).

The scholarly field of environmental communication (EC) is i.a. concerned with issues of how to foster pro-environmental behaviour through different modes of communication (Cox, 2013). Here, human communication is understood as symbolic action that 'create meaning and actively structure our conscious orientation to the world'. (Cox, 2013, p. 15). In other words, the way we speak about environmental issues affects how we address them.

Some scholars, outside the field of EC, have applied neutralisation theory in order to understand engagement and disengagement in pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016; McDonald, Oates, Thyne, Timmis and Carlile, 2015). By exploring the justification accounts provided by individuals who engage or disengage in pro-environmental behaviour, these studies confirm that neutralisation theory is a useful framework for understanding such behaviour.

## *1.2*   Problem formulation

Previous research in this vein has attended to the *intrapersonal* functions and implications of neutralisations, i.e. how they work as cognitive alleviation for individuals who employ them, enabling them to rationalise and maintain behaviour considered questionable (see e.g. Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016; Piacentini, Chatzidakis and Banister, 2012; McGregor, 2008). However, in the field of EC it is emphasised that the way we communicate with each other about environmental issues has implications for the way we address them in policy as in our everyday life choices. Therefore, EC scholars are, in addition to intrapersonal communication, interested in the dynamics of *interpersonal* communication and go beyond the focus on individual intrapersonal cognitions (Cox, 2013). Thus, from an EC perspective, it is relevant to problematise in what manner and with what implications- both on dialogue itself and on the discourse of APC- individuals communicate with each other regarding environmental issues.

## *1.3*    Thesis statement

Although techniques of neutralisation are compelling on their own to study, affirmed not least by the wealth of literature that examine them in various contexts (Akers and Jennings, 2009; Enticott, 2011), we argue that they are 'uniquely interesting also from an EC perspective. Here, they are interesting inasmuch that they have an implication on interpersonal dialogue rather than what kind of role they serve for the user, i.e. intrapersonal cognition. Therefore, the present study seeks to connect the cognitive processes of neutralisation and its logical opposite of affirmation techniques (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016) to the discursive practices and processes of social interaction.' (Åhlvik and Tawast, 2016). This exploration is carried out in the context of APC and its role in environmental problems.

## *1.4*    Aim

Building on the above, the present study aims to explore the ways in which, and with what implications, techniques of neutralisation and affirmation are used in social interaction. By conducting focus group discussions with omnivorous and vegan students in the Swedish city of Uppsala we aim to investigate in what manner, and with what resonance, these techniques are employed when discussing APC as an environmental issue. In other words, we examine how justification accounts work in negotiation and their persuasive power in the group context. That is, beyond identifying which techniques that are employed by the participants, we analyse in what manner the arguments posed are seen as meaningful ways of framing the issue. Moreover, potential implications for the dialectical relationship between neutralisations and affirmations in the discourse of APC is discussed.

## *1.5*    Research questions

The present study addresses the following main research question:

*How, and with what implications, are neutralisations and affirmations used in a focus group setting simulating real-life dialogue on animal product consumption in the context of pro-environmental behaviour?*

Within this, we pose the following sub-questions:

*Which techniques are most commonly used by the participants and what argumentative purpose do they serve in the discussion?*

In addition to identifying which techniques that are employed by the participants we explore what kind of purpose these serve in the discussion, both on a content level and on the social interactions.

*Which discursive mechanisms or means do the participants employ when presenting their justification accounts?*

Through this research question, we aim to identify the means through which claims are professed. That is, when looking at the ways in which discourse is co-constructed in the focus groups, we explore the discursive means used in this process, means such as referring to non-present others, challenging or supporting claims, using humour etc.

*What are the implicit assumptions behind the justification accounts of the participants and how do these influence or shape the discussion?*

Through this question, we go beyond what is explicitly said by the participants and identify the value premises behind their claims with the aim to uncover the ways in which these influence the evolving discussion.

## 1.6  Contribution

By shifting the current focus on what role the techniques of neutralisation and affirmation serve for the user to the inherently social processes of communication, the present study contributes to an understanding of the interpersonal implications of the techniques. More specifically, it contributes to an understanding of what implications the dialectical concepts of neutralisations and affirmations have for the focus group discussion when shared in this social setting. Moreover, the present study makes theoretical contributions by providing new insights into the dialectical relationship between these techniques.

## 1.7  Disposition

In what follows we summarise relevant literature connected to neutralisation and affirmation theory and further specify the gap we have identified in current research. Section 3 outlines the research approach of the present study and is followed by a presentation of the theoretical concepts underlying our research. The method and methodological concerns are presented in section 4. Results and analysis are presented in sections 5 and 6, which is followed by a discussion of the findings section 7. Finally, concluding remarks and potentials for future research are presented in section 8.

# 2 Literature review

## *2.1* Neutralisation theory

Sykes and Matza (1957) sought to understand the behaviour of juvenile delinquents and more specifically how these individuals are able to avoid moral guilt for their actions while going against the norms and values in society. Sykes and Matza explored a number of justifications put forward by delinquents for their deviant behaviour. These justifications become valid in the eyes of the norm breaker even though it violates the legal system of society. Such justifications are commonly described as rationalisations, rationalisations that Sykes and Matza termed techniques of neutralisation.

The core function of neutralisations is to deflect self-blame and blame of others who might view a certain behaviour as unacceptable. Sykes and Matza believed that neutralisations precede deviant behaviour and therefore allows that behaviour to be carried out (Sykes and Matza, 1957). In that manner, these techniques represent discursive strategies that resolves cognitive dissonance and act as 'a defense mechanism through which people downplay the repercussions of their behavior' (McGregor, 2008, p. 265). (See also Enticott, 2011; Matza, 1964).

In their extensive research Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five techniques of neutralisation; (i) denial of responsibility, (ii) denial of injury, (iii) denial of the victim, (iv) condemnation of the condemners and (v) appeal to higher loyalties. However, other researchers, who have investigated deviant behaviour in different contexts, have added to these techniques. These extended techniques of neutralisations are (vi) justification by comparison, (vii) postponement (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003), (viii) defence of necessity (ix) claim of normalcy (x) claim of relative acceptability, (xi) claim of individuality, (xii) metaphor of the ledger, (xiii) claim of entitlement, (xiv) the change- locus of control argument (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016), (xv) denial of the necessity of the law (Coleman, 1994) and (xvi) the naturalness argument (Bateson, 1989).

Techniques of neutralisation were developed to understand the reasoning behind deviant behaviour. They have, however, been applied in various contexts beyond criminology, such as understanding persistence or desistance in car use (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016), ethical consumer behaviour (Brunner, 2014; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007; McGregor, 2008), behaviour of animal rights activists (Lindblom and Jacobsson, 2014; Liddick, 2013), flying behaviour of green consumers (McDonald et al., 2015), cognitive dissonance among meat eaters (Rothgerber, 2014) and how individuals make sense of their alcohol consumption (Piacentini et al., 2012). As previously noted, these scholars have studied neutralisations chiefly in terms of their function as cognitive alleviation for the individual who deploys them (Lindblom and Jacobsson, 2014; Fritsche, 2005), saying little or nothing about their dialogic aspects.

## *2.2* Techniques of affirmation

While a number of scholars have explored how neutralisations serve as justifications for behaviour that is considered deviant or problematic by mainstream standards, few have investigated the ways in which individuals justify their resistance to conform to mainstream conventions. In their study of the straightedge community, Copes and Williams (2007)

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developed the concept of affirmation techniques. Techniques of affirmations are ordered in a similar way as neutralisations, but while some logically oppose neutralisations others compliment them. (ibid.). Affirmations enable individuals to reject social norms or to refrain from socially accepted behaviours and to develop subcultural identities in that process. Rather than attempting to neutralise their deviant behaviour, these individuals affirm their actions and construct a positive sense of self through that affirmation. (ibid.; Lindblom and Jacobsson, 2014). Affirmation techniques are, in contrast to neutralisations, 'discursive devices that shield individuals from the temptation of wrongdoing; that is, they sharpen the moral force of internalised subcultural norms instead of blunting it.' (Copes and Williams, 2007, p. 259).

Copes and Williams (2007) were able to identify five techniques, namely (i) acknowledgement of responsibility, (ii) acknowledgement of injury, (iii) acknowledgement of the victim, (iv) discounting condemners and (v) reference to priority relationships. In their study on car use behaviour Uba and Chatzidakis (2016) added to these affirmations by also identifying (vi) condemnation of individuality and (vii) recourse to contrary necessity.

## 2.3   The interplay of neutralisations and affirmations

A limited selection of neutralisation research has attended to combine techniques of neutralisation and affirmation in order to explore their interrelatedness. In their focus group study on alcohol consumption Piacentini et al. (2012) explored, not only the range of neutralisations and counter-neutralisations (which are similar to affirmations) used by students, but also the ways in which these techniques were used to manage and negotiate their relationship to alcohol. Uba and Chatzidakis (2016) took this notion of the interplay between neutralisations and affirmations one step further in their study on car use behaviour. By conducting focus groups, in which persisters and desisters of car use interacted, the authors were able to study how persistence and desistance is negotiated in interaction with respect to this behavior.

In both these studies, the main focus is on what purpose the techniques of neutralisation and affirmation serve *for the user*. Even though they conducted focus groups, which are inherently dialogical (Marková, Linell and Grossen, 2007), in order to explore the role of these techniques when negotiating engagement or disengagement, they overwhelmingly hold a focus on the *intrapersonal* function of the techniques. Such a focus is more in line with a monologistic approach to communication that view individuals and their cognitive experiences as the central phenomenon and according to which cognitive products, such as ideas and thoughts, as transferred between individuals rather than co-constructed in interaction. (Linell, 1998).

We do however believe that, in addition to serving cognitive functions, neutralisations and affirmations serve dialogic functions – directed outward in sociality rather than inward toward cognition. We argue that previous research do not sufficiently explore the dialogical properties inherent in focus group discussions (Marková et al., 2007). Therefore, there is a need to put more emphasis on the interpersonal role of these techniques since, surely, the use of these techniques has implications for how we communicate with each other about environmental issues, which in turn affect our behaviour (see section 1.2).

# 3    Research approach

The present study follows a qualitative research approach and a social constructionism inquiry. This approach directs the researcher to focus and rely on a complexity of perspectives as they are presented by the participants in that specific context. (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2014). Social constructionism recognise that such subjective meanings are (re)constructed in interaction with others, interactions that are socioculturally and historically situated (Creswell, 2014, p. 37). Furthermore, this inquiry is informed by Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, a position of social constructionism according to which there is a dialectical relationship between individual action and structures and institutions (Giddens, 1984). Thus, a structuration approach emphasises the need for any social science inquiry to move beyond dichotomous thinking and recognise the interplay between in-situ micro-practices and macro-structural conditions, not giving primacy to either (Norton, 2007).

This line of reasoning appeal to an interdisciplinary view on dialogism advocated by Linell (1998), which in turn resonates with social constructionism in general and the theory of structuration in particular. That is, our inquiry is informed by a double dialogicality (Linell, 1998) and the way we conceptualise the relationship between neutralisations and affirmations and topoi is informed by structuration theory. How these theoretical concepts are translated into methodological principles is developed in the upcoming section.

## 3.1    Theoretical framework

In this section we present the theoretical concepts underlying our research. In order to explore the interpersonal implications of the techniques we employ a *dialogical approach* to focus group research. Furthermore, in order to take advantage of the full potential of focus group research, i.e. to emphasise the interactive processes that shape the conversation in a focus group (Marková et al., 2007), we employ a dialogical discourse analysis (DDA). In the employment of this approach neutralisation and affirmation theory takes centre stage and is complemented with the analytical and theoretical concepts of DDA and topoi. Below we describe these concepts in more detail and the way in which they are operationalised in our research and the case context of APC.

## 3.2    A dialogical approach to focus group research

A dialogical approach to research is based on a certain analytical framework for studying human cognition, communication and discourse, namely that of dialogism. Dialogism is an epistemology which originates from different social theoretical traditions that all, albeit to varying degrees, acknowledge the interdependence between the individual and his/her mind and behaviour and that of others. (Marková et al., 2007; Linell, 1998). In other words, in contrast to monologism, dialogism acknowledges that both cognition and communication are 'simultaneously present aspects of both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and practices.' (Linell, 1998, p. 17). Therefore, rather than viewing discourse as processes that involve individuals and structures that are 'autonomous and mutually independent', discourse is understood as dynamic processes involving a mutual interdependence between 'individuals as actors-in-specific-interactions' and various contexts (Linell, 1998, pp. 7-8).

Not only is dialogue dual in the sense of being simultaneously inward- and outward-oriented, but it also exhibits a *double dialogicality* with respect to its relationship to the outside world; 'it is dialogical both in the contexts of in-situ interaction and within the sociocultural practices established over long traditions of indulging in such interactions.' (Linell, 1998, p. 54). In that sense, Linell argues, dialogism ought to be understood in terms of a structuration dialectic:

> [...] linguistic structures, cultural routines, norms etc. do not exist prior to interactions (but only in and through the interactants' being acquainted with them). At the same time, however, these structures, routines, and norms are interactionally generated, traded down and reconstructed. That is, they exist prior to individual interactions, yet would not exist without a living historical continuity of interactions. Social structures are (re)created, tried out, tested, negotiated and modified every time they are instantiated or drawn upon.
>
> (Linell, 1998, pp. 59-60).

This quality is important inasmuch as neutralisations and affirmations are neither used in a vacuum nor conjured out of thin air in social settings; they draw on established normative value grounds. In addition, we argue that these normative value grounds or frameworks can advantageously be understood through the concept of topoi (which will be described in more detail in section 3.3) as it is used in DDA.

### 3.2.1   The four principles of dialogical discourse analysis

By conducting a DDA the researcher can explore the ways in which different thoughts, ideas and arguments interact in the 'discursive web' (Wibeck, Dahlgren and Öberg, 2007, p. 259). The aim of DDA is to investigate 'under which contextual conditions, and with what rhetorical force and dialogical consequences, ideas and thoughts are constructed and used' (Marková et al., 2007 in Wibeck et al., 2007). This approach highlights that the interactive processes in focus groups take place on different levels. They take place in the interaction among the participants themselves and in the interplay between different thoughts and arguments. Furthermore, they take place in interaction with the wider sociocultural context in which the conversations take place. (Marková et al., 2007; Wibeck, 2010).

In what follows we outline the four principles of DDA as presented by Marková et al. (2007). By following these principles we are able to explore and analyse the interplay between content and interactions, two interdependent phenomena that is often insufficiently explored in focus group studies (ibid.).

The first principle adheres to the importance of viewing focus groups as *group* discussions. Rather than representing dyadic interactions, group discussions are characterised by 'multi-party talk' (Marková et al., 2007, p. 48). Furthermore, Marková et al. (2007) make a distinction between external and internal framing. The former refers to the external context of the group, which is constituted by an interplay between a number of independent entities, such as the practical organisation of the group, the physical setting and the objective characteristics of the participants. Such entities make up a specific external context or frame. The latter refers to the evolving social dynamics and interactions within that specific constellation of individuals. Marková et al. (2007) emphasise that there is an interplay between the external and internal framings of the communicative activities and that they are 'necessarily dialogically interdependent' (p. 204). The external and

internal contexts are presented in section 4.1, while the interplay between the two is presented in section 7.

The second principle stresses the importance of taking into consideration the heterogeneity of the subjects. Marková et al. (2007) emphasise that participants may, in addition to speaking from their own perspective, speak from the position of others. This reflects a double dialogism; dialogue refers not only to talk-in-interaction between present participants but speakers may give discursive room for other voices in the conversation. Therefore, it is not evident who is in fact speaking in the group since this speech may be on behalf of 'virtual participants'. (p. 49). In addition, while the participants engage in an external dialogue with the others in the group they simultaneously carry out an internal dialogue with themselves. This gives rise to a heterogeneity in discourse, a heterogeneity that can be expressed through i.a. the presentation of a variety of perspectives and views and the representation of non-present participants. Following this principle we look for which actors the participants choose to represent, in what manner they are represented and how they view their agency.

The third principle emphasises the notion that there are no isolated utterances, but rather participants respond to, build on and challenge each other's statements. Therefore, one must consider the ways in which discourse is constructed and the discursive means employed in this process. In other words, one must consider how the participants build on each other's statements, how they come to agree or disagree with each other, how they might develop or change their opinion in the evolving discussion etc. Therefore, any analysis of focus group material must, in addition to taking into consideration what is said, also consider how it is said, by and for whom and the discursive means used in this dynamic process (Marková et al., 2007). Following this principle, we aim to uncover the manner in which discourse is co-constructed by the participants.

Finally, Marková et al. (2007) problematise the common notion that the results derived from focus group research tend to be seen as 'mere products of the ongoing interactions' (p. 50). This notion leads to a decontextualised view that overlooks the fact that the participants are part of various social groups which are socio-historically situated. They call for research that take into consideration the specific context and discursive processes at work in the focus groups, while simultaneously acknowledging that in these processes the participants bring in, draw upon, jointly elaborate on and (re)negotiate discourse that is part of their social group(s) *and* larger society in general. (ibid.). This principle goes in line with the research approach adopted here (see section 3) and is explored through the theoretical resource of topoi (see upcoming section).

## *3.3*  The theoretical resource of topoi

Topoi are ready-made arguments which can be found in what Cicero describes as "storehouses of arguments" (Cicero 1988 in Zagar, 2010). Topoi can be seen as the base or the common ground of an argument where the speaker create his/her argument around these topoi or a specific topos (Zagar, 2010; von Essen, 2015). Topoi can also be described as 'framing modes of arguments' that assist sensemaking and/or persuasion (Barker, Gilmore and Gilson, 2013, p. 281).

The interlocutor refers to or invoke topoi with the purpose of connecting one's argument(s) and conclusion(s) to a broader and more established context of values and ideas. In addition, topoi serve the purpose of producing a certain effect (e.g. sympathy or

outrage) or justifying a certain conclusion. For example, a claim that indigenous people are entitled to whaling, because it is a cultural custom, connects to a topos of tradition. Oppositely, when someone criticizes homosexuality for being 'unnatural', they appeal, in their understanding, to a topos of naturalness that is normatively associated with goodness. (Zagar, 2010).

Topoi describe parts of the societal context and structure that provide guidance and resonance to neutralisation and affirmation techniques. Rather than constituting semantic themes from content, topoi are more akin to implicitly shared background assumptions and value premises, to which the interlocutor appeals when presenting arguments and neutralising or affirming values. In that manner, we argue that topoi can be recognised as implicit assumptions or value premises that are often left unquestioned (Wibeck, 2010). Such implicit assumptions can be recognised as premises that are often abstract and implicit, but which constitute the joint requisite for the conversation and shape the argumentation in a certain topic. In that sense, implicit assumptions represent that which the participants speak from rather than about. (Wibeck, 2010).

Moreover, topoi can be put in relation to the notion of normative contexts, which refer to 'different sets of normative expectations' that underpins a context and points to different courses of action (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016, p. 279). We believe that normative expectations *can* be part of justification accounts that appeal to topoi. For example, when 'retrieving' a ready-made argument from the storehouse of justice the interlocutor frames the subject matter as an issue in which claims of justice are valid or invalid. This, however, can be done with or without referring to expectations of what is considered just in the specific topic or situation.

Uba and Chatzidakis (2016) focused on the two conflicting normative contexts of pro-driving versus pro-environment. In the present study we position the participants in the normative context of pro-APC versus pro-environment (see Appendix 5). We do however acknowledge that the participants may not view these two contexts as being in conflict. We also acknowledge that the participants may introduce additional normative contexts. Moreover, we argue that it is reasonable to suspect that what kind of topos the participants 'retrieve' their arguments from depends on the broader context in which the discussions take place, in this case the context of APC and pro-environmental behaviour. In other words, while a single topos, e.g. topos of culture, may resonate in a certain normative context, such as pro-APC, it may not resonate in another, such as pro-environment. Also, what kind of norms s/he may apply to that topos depends on the broader context and is co-constructed in dynamic conversations in a focus group setting, and arguably in everyday interactions.

# 4 Method of research

Before outlining the method adopted here, we would like to highlight that the present study initially followed a different premise. This premise was based on the preconception that having omnivores and vegans interacting in focus groups would result in a negotiation of substantially different views on APC. In these negotiations we suspected that neutralisations and affirmations would play a prominent role and that their dialectical relationship would pave the way for a heated debate. Moreover, these divisive views could lead to disagreements and potentially even conflict. In other words, we suspected that instead of being able to engage in dialogue, upholding a dialogic process, the communicative activities would follow a dialectic process and potentially take a destructive turn and result in conflict. (see e.g. Guerin, 2014).

## *4.1* Focus group research

In addition to enabling the exploration of different thoughts and opinions regarding a phenomenon, focus group discussions can be used as a method to explore the dynamic processes through which opinions of the individuals are demonstrated, negotiated, reformulated etc. (Wibeck, 2010). Focus group discussions can generate dynamic conversations and enable the researcher, in contrast to other interview methods, to explore social interaction (Madriz, 2000; Boscoe and Herman, 2010).

### *4.1.1 Organisation of focus groups*

Smaller groups of four to six individuals were assembled since the topic of the discussions, notably the justifiability of APC, might be considered somewhat delicate (see e.g. Guerin, 2014). Therefore, the participants may feel more comfortable discussing this matter in smaller groups (Krueger, 2006). Also, in smaller groups each individual is given more room to influence the discussion and to give and receive feedback on the arguments posed (Wibeck 2010). In addition to the number of group participants, interpersonal factors may have implications for the social dynamics of the discussions affect the data that is generated (Wibeck, 2010). The social interactions in focus groups may e.g. be influenced by a will of belonging to the group, which may become problematic if it results in a decrease of different views and in "group-think" (Wibeck, 2010, p. 31; Sears, Freedman and Peplau, 1985).

We carefully informed the participants of the conditions of their participation by providing them with information a few days before the group interview via a confirmation letter (see Appendix 2). We also asked them to complete a demographic survey (see Appendix 3). We began the focus group session by emphasising that the purpose of the discussion is not necessarily to reach consensus, that there are no right or wrong answers and that we are interested in their thoughts and opinions. The discussions were conducted in English and lasted for one to one and a half hours.

Four semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with the aim to foster relatively free conversations among the participants and to limit our influence on the group dynamics, while, if necessary, giving the facilitator room to guide the discussions back on topic. Furthermore, we wanted to give the facilitator room to interfere if some participants

were to hold a more reserved or dominant position and to ask probing questions (Wibeck, 2010). Probing questions served the purpose of asking the participants to elaborate on their accounts or to explore whether other participants hold a different view.

While one of us facilitated the focus group discussion the other took notes and handled the recorder. The facilitator followed the outline of the interview guide (see Appendix 5) and both the facilitator and the assistant asked probing questions. We offered tea and cake before the session in order to foster a more relaxed atmosphere (Krueger, 2006). We actively showed interest in the discussions without agreeing or disagreeing with the participants, since such encouragement may shape what is seen as socially acceptable in the group and divergent opinions might therefore not be shared (Wibeck, 2007; Krueger, 2006).

### 4.1.2   The sample of the present study

The participants in the present study were selected through a combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. We asked the participants to get in contact with others who might be interested in participating. We approached prospective participants via social media, mainly through different Facebook groups. We also put up flyers (see Appendix 1) at all the main University buildings around Uppsala and at cafés where we might find people who would be suitable for our research, based on a combined assessment of personal experience and recommendations.

Our invitation stated that we seek individuals who are either vegan or omnivore and who care about the environment. This resulted in eighteen participants of whom six are vegans, five are omnivores and seven are vegetarians. It is important to note that some of the vegetarians stated that they eat meat occasionally while some of the vegetarians mainly eat vegan but occasionally consume dairy. The age range fell between twenty to thirty years with one participant who is fairly older, and with the exception of this participant they are all students. Finally, since we used snowball sampling to gather people, some participants knew each other beforehand.

### 4.1.3   The interview guide

The interview guide covers a broad range of topics regarding the relationship between APC and the environment. All questions in the interview guide are open-ended, aimed at fostering free conversations among the participants and opening up for the possibility of the full range of neutralisations and affirmations being used (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Questions of 'why' were excluded since such questions might give the impression that the participants are being interrogated, or that their answers are unsatisfactory to the researchers (Krueger and Casey, 2009; Patton, 2002).

The guide consists of seven questions and three statements that focus on APC as an environmental issue. The initial questions in the interview guide aimed to create a comfortable atmosphere (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The remaining questions aimed to make normative expectations of pro-environmental behaviour salient and serves the purpose of fostering the employment of neutralisation and affirmation techniques. For example, by initiating a discussion about the characteristics of an environmentalist, we aimed to encourage thinking in terms of what is consistent with being an environmentalist. However, due to a shortage of time we were unable to ask all the interview questions in all of the groups. We acknowledge this might have altered our results.

Furthermore, the questions in the guide are formulated as statements that reflect attitudes and habits of fictional individuals. For example, we asked the participants to react to statements such as; 'some would argue that we as consumers have a responsibility to reduce or even stop consuming animal products due to environmental reasons while others argue that it is a personal choice and a private matter.' (see Appendix 5). How this may have influenced the findings of this study is elaborated on in section 7.

### 4.1.4   Validity and reliability

All focus group interviews were recorded and notes were taken during the session and used as a complement in the analysis when interpreting the material. After transcribing the recorded interviews verbatim we started to manually code the material. In order to limit our individual bias, i.e. having our preconceptions shape what we look for in the material, we coded the material separately and then compared our different understandings of the material. (Wibeck, 2010).

In the initial coding we identified the techniques that the participants used. However, in the second coding we coded other things connected to how the conversations developed, such as laughter, the support or challenge of claims, change of opinion, the reference to non-present others etc. (ibid.). As described previously, based on the initial content analysis where we identified the techniques used, it became evident that it is useful to organise them under topoi. Therefore we coded the material again, looking for different topoi.

In addition to providing a detailed description of the steps involved in making sense of our material, the following measures were taken to ensure reliability. We divided the task of transcribing the recorded material. Once one of us had finalised a transcription the other listened through the recordings and made sure that the transcribing was correct (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, by conducting independent codings based on a set of predetermined criteria and comparing their congruence, we were able to check the reliability of our categorisations and discuss our sometimes different interpretations of the material (Wibeck, 2010).

Beyond clarifying our bias it is important to elaborate on how it may influence how we approach the participants and our interpretations of the findings, since this may affect the credibility of our research (Silverman, 2015). Therefore, we revealed that we are both vegans only after the interviews in order to limit our influence on the participants (Madriz 2000; Cook and Crang, 2007). Moreover, we did not ask any follow up question in order to avoid the risk of our own values influencing the interview situation and at the expense of confirmability and validity of our research (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2015).

### 4.1.5   Ethical considerations

One of the advantages of focus groups is that the researcher has a comparatively small control over the process of gathering data since the discussions, to a relatively large extent, is carried out on the terms of the participants (Madriz, 2000). Also, the power balance between researcher and researched is more level as the participants are larger in number (Wibeck, 2010). Wibeck (2010) highlights that focus groups can in some respect be considered more 'ethically appealing' than data gathering methods in which the researcher has a more prominent role. In focus groups the participants can, to a large extent than in e.g.

individual interviews, express themselves on their own terms and choose to take a step back (p. 139).

All participants were asked to sign an informed consent (see Appendix 4), in which we stated that the information generated will be used as a part of our Master's thesis. We also stated that the discussions will be recorded and described how we will protect their privacy, e.g. with pseudonyms, and we gave the opportunity to read the written transcription from the interview they attended. (Wibeck, 2010; Creswell, 2014). We did not inform the participants about the purpose of our research, which can be seen as unethical choice (Cook and Crang, 2007). We were however truthful about the purpose of the group discussions but chose to leave out information that may shape how the participants view the discussed topic.

Finally, the fact that vegans and omnivores were brought together might also raise some ethical concerns depending on the extent of their potential disagreement and whether this leads to a hostile environment (see e.g. Madriz, 2000; Guerin, 2014). Such potential concerns puts responsibility on us as facilitators to ensure a non-threatening environment (Krueger, 2006). In order to address such ethical concerns we, to the extent possible, established groups with equal number of vegans and omnivores, in order to level potential power relations (Wibeck, 2007). Moreover, we clearly stated that no personal attacks were allowed and that they should respect each other's opinions.

# 5    Results: Presenting the techniques

In this section we present the most common techniques of neutralisation and affirmation (the ones that were used more than twenty times) and describe in what manner they were utilised by the participants. This is based on all of the four focus groups taken together where the broader context within which the techniques were employed is APC versus pro-environmental behaviour (c.f Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016; Piacentini et al. 2012). Our content analysis show that the techniques act as a foundation for the discussion and the arguments presented by the participants. Thus, it is evident that the techniques played a prominent role in the focus group discussions.

## *5.1*    Techniques of neutralisation

> That way you cannot blame people for not making the right choices, it's just the, um, system that it has been built upon. Not wanting to make people to make the right choices. In a way.
>
> (Judit, vegan)

When using *denial of responsibility* (Sykes and Matza, 1957) the participants acknowledged that we, as consumers, do to some extent have responsibility for reducing our APC. They did however tend to emphasise that due to societal norms that foster such consumption the agency of individuals is limited. Therefore, it is questionable whether they can be assigned responsibility for reducing their consumption. According to nearly all the participants there are circumstances under which individuals cannot be held personally responsible, such as limited financial means, limited time resources and lack of knowledge about the environmental externalities of APC. Therefore, a few participants even argued that it is unfair to put the responsibility on individuals.

Interestingly, only one vegan participant argued that we should abstain from consuming animal products altogether. Also, some participants argued that by approaching people and arguing that they do have a responsibility to reduce their consumption, this would only cause more harm than good. In that way, as we interpret it, this enables individuals to downplay responsibility.

> I don't think it's a bad thing to eat meat, I really don't.
>
> (Eugenia, omnivore)

Participants who *denied injury* (Sykes and Matza, 1957) commonly argued that as long as you consume animal products in a sustainable way, e.g. by consuming chicken instead of red meat, buying local products and by lessening your consumption, the harm is insignificant. Consuming animal products can be done in a sustainable way and is therefore not problematic in itself, it is rather the extent to which we consume it today and the way that it is done that is problematic. Thus, these participants downplay the harm that is done towards animals and towards the environment. However, the participants overall struggled to come up with positive environmental impacts of contemporary APC but still emphasised the benefits of small scale animal agriculture and of what they refer to as byproducts such as leather and wool. They also emphasised the health benefits of APC and that it is

necessary to consume some animal products. Five participants argued that it is not ethically wrong to consume animals and some even argued that it is tasty and good for you.

> [...] so to have like one day a week where you don't eat meat is a start, it's better than nothing. If everyone in the world would go one day without meat, it would make a big difference I think.
>
> (Nils, vegetarian)

Participants who *denied the victim* (Sykes and Matza, 1957) commonly acknowledged that we need to change our behaviour and that reducing APC, in the name of climate change, is desirable. The participants did not, however, see that it is necessary to stop consuming animal products altogether. Hence, they did not believe that becoming vegan would be the solution for the existing and future environmental problems. Many argued that APC is less problematic when done in a sustainable manner or in small scale. One participant suggested that agricultural subsidies should be removed in order to lessen the environmental impact from animal factory farming.

Here, the participants are denying a number of victims of APC. In this case the victims may be argued to consist of both the animals who are consumed and the environment that is impacted in a negative way due to that consumption, but also indirectly the humans who might be harmed in this process. In addition, the potential harm done towards farmers, if subsidies are removed, is denied.

> [...] I have met so many vegans that like religiously believed veganism would save the world and they would probably say that like... one of the questions was like going vegan would that pretty much save the world? They would go like; yeah. And be very superior like; yeah I live a cruelty free life and all that [...]
>
> (Rutger, vegan)

Participants who employed *condemnation of the condemners* (Sykes and Matza, 1957) argued that it is wrong to judge people for consuming animal products. Furthermore, they emphasised that such judgements can be counterproductive and result in them being less inclined to reduce their consumption. Therefore, you should encourage people rather than to push them. They referred to an image of vegans as judgmental and emphasised that vegans can engage in unsustainable behaviour by consuming e.g. soy, avocado and unseasonable vegetables and fruits. The participants argued that being vegan does not necessarily make you either more sustainable or a better person and they are therefore not in the position to judge others.

## 5.2   Techniques of affirmation

> It's not a completely private matter, never any behaviour is a private matter in a moment when it comes to external effects and consuming behaviour has strong external effects.
>
> (Borghild, vegetarian)

The participants who used *acknowledgement of responsibility* (Copes and Williams, 2007) generally argued that people have a responsibility to act and reduce their APC for the sake of the environment. Furthermore, they argued that those with knowledge of the

environmental impacts should act and set an example for other people who might not have the time, knowledge or financial means to change their behaviour. However, some of the participants did see that all human action that has negative external effects cannot be considered a personal choice and, therefore, everyone should at least try to reduce their APC. Hence, these participants saw that individuals are in control of their actions and that they should take responsibility for them. Finally, one of the participants argued that the only way to not contribute to any negative environmental impacts would be to not exist.

> I feel like climate change is going to kill a hell of a lot people. So I have to stop eating meat, try to save people from the other side of the world.

> (Lillemor, omnivore)

Participants who *acknowledged injury* (Copes and Williams, 2007) all agreed that animal factory farming has negative environmental impacts. When discussing the impacts of APC they raised the issue of i.a. methane emissions, deforestation, land degradation, water depletion and waste management. They also argued that a vegan diet may have negative environmental impacts aswell, due to e.g. soy production. Some participants also acknowledged the health issues related to APC. Furthermore, some emphasised the harm done towards animals, notably in the context of animal factory farming, but also local scale production. Finally, two participants argued that by making certain decisions, such as what you consume, you reduce the freedom of others.

> I think what bothers a lot people is like these are like live animals, you know what I mean, like soy is different because it's not… ok it is alive because it is a plant, but it's not like an animal.

> (Eugenia, omnivore)

Participants who *acknowledged the victim* (Copes and Williams, 2007) referred to both animals and the environment as being affected negatively by APC. Furthermore, some participants acknowledged that humans can be seen as victims. For example, some participants acknowledged that their actions, e.g. eating meat, has negative implications on a global scale and that they therefore should try to reduce their impact. However, some participants stated that consumers do not always have the means to make sound environmental choices due to e.g. the limited assortment in grocery stores. In a way these consumers can be seen as victims under such circumstances. These participants did however not argue that we should abstain from consuming animal products, but that it rather is a matter of reducing one's consumption.

> [...] I remember this girl I used to work with was eating like three chicken breasts for lunch every day and she was like the same height as me, so I was like; what are you doing? You don't need to do that. I eat vegetables and I'm in better shape than you.

> (Greger, vegan)

Participants who employed *discounting condemners* (Copes and Williams, 2007) mentioned the condemnation that they either have experienced personally or believe is commonly exercised by omnivores. Three participants even described it as a defence mechanism, that meat eaters feel the need to defend their consumption. They addressed and discounted several prejudices that surrounds a vegan lifestyle, e.g. that it is more time consuming, that you cannot survive without meat and that it too comes with negative environmental impacts. They emphasised that these kinds of arguments are not valid and, in our understanding, they did so in a quite demeaning way. For example, some of the

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participants used hyperbolism, changed their voice when imitating those who condemn their practices and laughed at their expense.

> [...] just like meat consumption or consumption overall depends on what I think is more peoples' laziness. Information is there and there is communication going out, but that depends on the peoples' willingness to get it in [...]
>
> (Solbritt, vegan)

Participants who used *condemnation of individuality* (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016) described some people as uncaring, selfish and/or lazy. They argued that actions with external effects should not be considered a personal choice. They argued that it is hard to change the minds of people and that they do not want to be bothered about the consequences of their consumption, whether that is consuming animal products or unseasonable vegetables and fruits. However, such behaviour should not be placed in the realm of individuality.

# 6 Analysis

In this section we explore the implications of the use of neutralisations and affirmations for the evolving discussions. Here, we uncover the purpose that the techniques serve in the discussion and how they connect to topoi and the consequences of that process. We also uncover the discursive means they used to profess their claims.

Considering that topoi are 'context sensitive' (Barker et al. 2013, p.282), the topoi that we are able to identify could be seen as partly specific to the discourse of APC in relation to pro-environmental behaviour. Yet they are also products of (emerging) values that operate more universally in post-modernity or post-industrial societies, such as justice, emancipation from authority, personal responsibility and free choice and personal autonomy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

## *6.1* Topos of justice

Topos of justice (Zagar, 2010) refers to what the participants consider to be just or fair in the context of APC. We were able to identify two dimensions of justice, namely interspecies justice and generational justice. Interspecies justice is recognised by issues that address the relationship between humans and non-human animals and their moral standing (Matevia, 2016), while generational justice refers to the relationship between present generations.

The most frequently posed statements centered on that (i) it is not morally wrong to consume animal products; (ii) harm should not be inflicted upon animals; (iii) individual consumption has negative environmental effects, and finally (iv) individuals have different prerequisites or opportunities to change their consumption.

In what follows, we present one typical example of the line of reasoning presented by the participants whose argument and conclusion is connected by the topos of interspecies justice. The context from which this quote was extracted is characterised by a discussion about the compatibility between *meat* consumption and sustainability. The participants in this group argue that meat consumption does not stand in conflict with sustainability but we do however need to lessen our consumption. In the quote below Greger introduces an ethical dimension to the discussion.

> Greger: Yeah, again, like on an ethical level I don't have a huge issue with eating animals like humans are on top of the food chain, we have evolved into a specie that, ehm, has the…
>
> Svante: Animals kill.
>
> Greger: Animals kill each other, that's how the world works. But, we have taken it to a whole new level. But if we could do it in a sustainable fashion and in much reduced level…
>
> Svante: Yeah.
>
> Greger: And it's not as if I'm saying; I don't believe animal welfare not being an issue at all…
>
> Svante: Yeah.
>
> Greger: … you have to… I mean like factory farming like chickens or whatever, yeah cows and pigs held in huge factories not having a life. I mean it is…
>
> Svante: It is fucked up.

Greger: … unethical.

In our interpretation, vegan Greger and omnivore Svante are arguing that it is natural to kill and consume animals. What Greger and Svante are describing here is a hierarchical relationships between humans and animals. They seem to hold the belief that since humans are on top of the food chain it is ethically valid to kill and consume animals. This, however, should be done in a sustainable fashion and with the protection of animal welfare. They conclude that if APC can meet these two criteria, then it is justified.

By referring to a certain relationship between humans and animals, Greger and Svante seem to hold the value premise that it is justified for humans to consume animals. The topos of interspecies justice serves the function of legitimising human consumption of animals, i.e. it is fair due to a natural hierarchy. It connects to a common argument in political theory that only humans are recipients of justice and that it may be unfortunate when animals are harmed, but it is not an injustice per se (Garner, 2012; Matevia, 2016). Thus, the argument and the conclusion above is connected by topos of justice.

Greger claims that, on an ethical level, he does not have an issue with eating animals. By arguing that 'humans are on top of the food chain' Greger employs the naturalness argument, which is a neutralisation technique that appeals to human nature or instinct to justify the natural order of things (Bateson, 1989). By making this claim Greger is denying the victim, i.e. the animals we consume and the harm done towards them. He is also denying the injury done towards the animals being killed. The purpose of these neutralisation techniques is to enable continued behaviour since there is no perceived victim and no harm done by their actions.

At the same time, Greger acknowledges that factory farming is unethical. He recognises the victims (chicken, pigs and cows) and the injury done towards these animals. Hence, he employs techniques that, rather than neutralising, affirm that there are victims and these victims are harmed. Thus, he appeals to animal welfare issues, rather than animal rights in which the the main concern is to cease animal exploitation altogether (Freeman, 2010; Matevia, 2016).

Here we can see that Greger is using neutralisations and affirmations simultaneously, which stands in contrast with the research of Uba and Chatzidakis (2016). The use of these techniques seem to act as to support the topos of interspecies justice.

Furthermore, in the excerpt we can see that Svante is supporting and building upon the arguments posed by Greger and vice versa. None of the other participants in this group addressed this issue. The majority of the participants who invoked the topos of interspecies justice stressed the importance of protecting the welfare of animals, while at the same time arguing for a reduction of APC. However, in two of the other focus groups, vegan Lennart and vegetarian Nils rejected this position and argued that animals have the right not to be killed and consumed.

In what follows we present a typical quote that fall under topos of generational justice. At this point in the focus group discussion the participants were asked to discuss what characterises an environmentalist.

Lillemor: [...] I feel like climate change is going to kill a hell a lot people. So I have to stop eating meat, try to save people from the other side of the world. Because I also feel like in here we are going to be fine. It's other people, like the others, they are gonna be affected. And I feel like you [Judit], like how you cannot do something about it. But there is just so many people who just don't care, like they know this but, yes they also feel like you can do

something because a lot of people know about these issues but think that their actions don't matter [...]

Lennart: But what if I want to go to Thailand [ironic].

[Everyone laughs]


In our understanding, omnivore Lillemor argues that *meat* consumption contributes to climate change and that climate change in turn kills people across the globe. She concludes that meat reduction is necessary to prevent climate change and the death of people. In our interpretation Lillemor sees a clear connection between meat consumption and its negative effects, which environmentalists feel a responsibility for.

The topos of justice serves the function of delegitimising consumption of meat. It is considered Lillemor's opinion that it is not just consuming meat when it affects the lives of others. By placing meat consumption in the normative context of fairness she is framing the issue as a matter of justice, potentially with the aim of persuading others.

By stating that she has to stop eating meat, since her consumption affects others, Lillemor acknowledges that she is in control of her actions and that she needs to be responsible for them. Thus, Lillemor employs the affirmation technique acknowledgement of responsibility. She also acknowledges that there are victims and that her actions cause them potential harm. Furthermore, she refers to others as being uncaring. By rejecting this negligent attitude she employs the affirmation technique condemnation of individuality. This technique is used to condemn the notion that it is up to each individual to make their own choices and supports the act of making personal sacrifices. The use of these affirmations seem to reinforce the topos of justice.

Considering Lennart's statement above, we interpret that he agrees with Lillemor that people in general are uncaring. By posing the statement about Thailand and when referring to those who want to go to Thailand, using an ironic tone, he presents these actors as less credible. Lennart implicitly states that there is a difference between him and those people who travel to Thailand. He discursively constructs those people as implausible and argues that their actions are problematic. This causes the participants to laugh.

In general the participants who addressed topos of generational justice referred to structural factors that, to different extents, limit the agency of individuals. Some participants emphasised that individuals do in fact have limited agency due to structural factors such as time, education, information and money. Due to these structural factors it is not right to assume that these individuals will be able to reduce their APC. Furthermore, some of the participants argued that we need to acknowledge that in some regions animal product reduction is not an option due to e.g. famine. It is not considered fair, according to these participants, to demand that those people limit their consumption.


## 6.2   Topos of responsibility

In post-modernity, relationships to animals and APC is arguably grounded in greater intimacy and personal responsibility. To Franklin (1999), they represent one of several things in post-industrial societies that form an object for human responsibility and moral imperative at a time when such qualities are otherwise destabilised. As personal autonomy and freedom from authority increase, imperatives on how to act are gradually moved into the realm of personal responsibility.

The topos of responsibility (Zagar, 2010) attributes to the kind of responsibility the participants assign different individuals. When participants refer to topos of responsibility they commonly argued that (i) those who have the knowledge of the environmental implications of one's actions also have the responsibility to act accordingly; (ii) many problems lie on structural levels which discourage people from taking responsibility for their actions and finally; (iii) everyone has a great deal of agency and therefore they are responsible for their own actions.

In what follows we present two typical quotes that fall under the topos of responsibility. The participants were asked to discuss APC in the Western world in relation to the increasing trend in APC in countries such as India and China. The participants discussed the belief that meat consumption equals status or development.

> Lennart: We have also set a certain kind of norm, we show like where you are supposed to go. So our consumption of animal products definitely paves the way for developing countries to go. And if we don't think that they should do that, we kind of have to change what we are doing.
>
> Eivor: Hm.
>
> Lennart: Not that I think that we should be such a great example, I don't think that we should be so proud of ourselves. But that is how it kind of works. Like developing tends to lead towards this, and...
>
> Eivor: Yeah, I mean meat consumption has like, for... it's nothing new that it's a sign for wealth and status. I'm kind of bothered that the problem is not our meat consumption, since we have lead the way of, how has rich countries lived and how has rich countries consumed, I think that we have even greater responsibility probably to show that like the next thing to do, when you are rich, you don't consume as much meat, you  yeah, do it differently.

Omnivore Eivor argues that rich countries have lead the way when it comes to meat consumption. Therefore, we are responsible not only to reduce our own meat consumption but also to lead by example. Eivor discursively constructs rich nations and developing nations as actors that have different types of agency. By arguing that developing nations follow the example of rich countries Lennart and Eivor can be said to downplay the agency of developing countries. Eivor concludes that rich countries have greater responsibility since they have greater agency.

The topos of responsibility serves the function of legitimising the claim that developing nations do not have the same responsibility as rich countries. In this sense, it is an extension also of the topos of justice and, in particular, environmental justice which focuses on differential duties on the part of disadvantaged nations to combat climate change (Dobson, 2007).

By employing the affirmation technique acknowledgement of responsibility, and correlating responsibility with the means you have and how much of an impact you have, Eivor is, in our interpretation, making a stronger case for meat reduction. She emphasises the benefits of reduced meat consumption, i.e., not following the example of rich countries. Thus, she also employs the affirmation technique recourse to contrary necessity by highlighting that developing countries beneficially follow an alternative route to increased meat consumption (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016). The affirmation techniques acknowledgement of responsibility and recourse to contrary necessity seem to support topos of responsibility.

In our interpretation, Eivor builds on the arguments posed by Lennart. Eivor agrees with Lennart that developing countries tend to follow the example of rich countries and adds that

we therefore have an even greater responsibility. After this quote, Lillemor does not address the issue that Lennart and Eivor brought up, but went back to address the statement.

The next quote addresses the tension or interplay between agency and structure. Here, the participants discussed whether consumption of animal products can be considered a private matter or if individuals should be held responsible for reducing their consumption. Eivor took a strong stance arguing that it is 'ridiculous' to argue that what you choose to consume is a private matter, since this affects other people. Vegan Judit builds on this line of argumentation by stating that 'I cannot see how we could, um, develop in a meaningful way [if] it's up to, like private decisions or individual decisions'.

> Lennart: Many people are also just very selfish.
>
> [People, hmm]
>
> Lennart: And we also been taught to be selfish.
>
> Eivor: Yeah, we are really lazy. Even though I would have all of this information, I wanna do what is easy.
>
> Lennart: Yeah.
>
> Lillemor: Hmm.
>
> Eivor: Um, and that's sticking to what I know already and it didn't hurt me as far as I can see. Um, or didn't hurt others as far as I can see or as far as I want to take this moment anyways.
>
> Judit: That way you cannot blame people for not making the right choices it's just the, um, system that has been built upon. Not wanting to make people to make the right choices. In a way.

Judit argues that there are systems that limit the agency of individuals and therefore individuals cannot be blamed for not being able to make the right choices. Thus, topos of responsibility is applied with a different purpose and serves the function to downplay individual responsibility for meat reduction.

In the excerpt above it is evident that the participants are referring to non-present participants ('many people'), which can be seen as a way of distancing oneself from the discourse and not to be held personally responsible for what is said (Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki, 2014; Rubin and Rubin, 2011; von Essen and Allen, 2017). They talk about other actors and portray their agency as limited, while they also acknowledge that they themselves are actors with agency. The participants are problematising agency in two ways; structures limit agency but, even though you have agency it does not mean that you will act.

By suggesting that some things are beyond individual control, that there are structures that limit the agency of individuals, Judit is employing the neutralisation technique denial of responsibility. In contrast to Lillemor, who acknowledges responsibility, Judit denies responsibility due to limited agency. Thus, the topos of responsibility serves another function. Here, the notion of responsibility is further problematised in relation to agency and structure.

After the quote above, Lillemor asked us to repeat the question and moved on to say that she thinks that she agrees with the other participants about the difficulty to put the responsibility on individuals. In the excerpt above we can see how the participants build on each other's statements by e.g. jointly elaborating on the perceived casual attitude of some people.

The majority of the participants who addressed topos of responsibility referred to structural factors that affects the agency of individuals. They did however arrive at a different conclusion than those who addressed the topos of justice (see above). The participants frequently argued in line with Judit, i.e. that structures and different kind of prerequisites limits agency of individuals, and such statements were predominantly supported. At times, the perceived limited agency of individuals was however challenged by participants who paint a picture of a more active individual that has a responsibility, or even an obligation, to reduce their APC. These participants argued that those who have the knowledge also have the responsibility to reduce their consumption.

## 6.3 Topos of authority

One of the most strongly defining features of post-modernity is an increased value placed on individual autonomy, freedom of choice and the decline of traditional authority (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Here, topos of authority (Zagar, 2010) denotes what the participants consider being appropriate when trying to foster pro-environmental behaviour in social situations. The common ground here is the perceived tension between the protection of the autonomy of individuals and their obligations towards their surroundings.

The topos of authority highlighted two main arguments. The participants commonly argued that (i) individuals do not wish to be told what to do since it can be perceived as limiting their agency. This argument was usually followed by the conclusion that individuals should be encouraged to change their habits in a subtle way instead of in a forcing manner. Secondly, they argued that (ii) when trying to get individuals engaged in pro-environmental behaviour one should refrain from passing judgement. This line of argument was followed by the conclusion that judging or pushing individuals is counterproductive and will discourage them from engaging in pro-environmental behaviour.

The participants were asked to discuss the potential negative environmental impacts of a vegan diet and the claim that a vegan diet does not necessarily equal a sustainable consumption. The participants discussed the environmental impacts of different consumption behaviours and emphasised that no matter if you are vegan, vegetarian or omnivore, your consumption can still harm the environment.

> Eugenia: [...] I think that sometimes people think that the way they are acting is superior and I have met a lot of vegans that are like 'I'm vegan, I don't do that', kind of gives themselves a superior status because they don't eat meat like you do. I think that this is problematic, even as vegetarians do it, to make other people guilty about what they are eating or about what they are consuming. I don't, it's just a counterproductive feeling to act sustainable way, there has to be some kind of, like again I don't want to say that all vegans are bad, of course it's not true, but like my cousin is like pushing like don't eat any, you know if you want to be holy don't eat all these bad stuff. Like, my entire grocery list, you know what I mean, like I...

> [People laughing]

> Torkel: Don't eat, period.

> Eugenia: Yeah exactly, and I'm like...

> Torkel: The best thing is to die.

> [People laughing]

Torkel: That would be the most...

Eugenia: Sustainable, yeah.

[Laughing]

Torkel: Alot of billion, it would solve a lot of problems.

Eugenia: I think it would be nice to have a productive conversation to be vegan and choosing to live the way they do doesn't make them guilty just because they pushes them a further away from wanting to do anything. You know, and...

In the quote above omnivore Eugenia argues that some vegans act in a superior and judgemental way. She concludes that such behaviour is problematic and counterproductive. Here, the topos of authority serves the function of delegitimising the authority that some vegans claim to have.

In our interpretation, when referring to non-present vegans as judgemental and superior Eugenia discursively constructs the agency of vegans as being too prominent. She claims that they are taking too much freedom to interfere with the habits of others and their agency should be limited since the demands they make are unreachable. By bringing up this extreme example Eugenia is, in our interpretation, distancing herself from those vegans (Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki, 2014; Rubin and Rubin, 2011; von Essen and Allen, 2017). Omnivore Torkel picks up on this example by arguing that we all might aswell die. In our interpretation, Torkel seems to believe that if you have to meet the demands of vegans, it is better to not eat at all. By making this hyperbolism he seems to aim to produce the effect that vegans are not credible actors in this discourse. This causes the other participants to laugh.

By arguing that some vegans approach others in a judgemental and superior manner she, in our interpretation, attempts to neutralise the situation by condemning the condemners. To recall, the technique condemnation of condemner is used when the interlocutor wants to shift the focus of attention from his/her actions to the ones who reject his/her actions by focusing on the wrongdoing of that individual. Furthermore, Eugenia claims that she as an individual has the right to choose, which is also a neutralisation technique, namely claim of individuality (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016). The topos of authority, as it is understood here, supports these two notions and strengthens them.

In the excerpt above we can see how Eugenia and Torkel are building on each other's statements. Torkel supports Eugenia's argument, i.e. that vegans are acting superior, when developing this claim by bringing up an extreme example. Overall, the claim that you should meet individuals with an non-judgmental attitude were supported.

In the next excerpt the participants were asked to discuss whether or not APC should be considered a private matter. The discussion developed from focusing on individual responsibility to a discussion about the usefulness of economic incentives to change consumer behaviour, which in turn lead the participants to discuss the pace of societal change.

Nils: [...] it's super hard when you talk to someone else and you are like why do you do this, and then whenever you like attack someone's diet or like what they believe in, people will just get super defensive and then like, you just may as well not bother because it does more harm than good. And so I think it's more about like lessening consumption not saying; hey you should ultimately be vegan or vegetarian, just say; hey let's educate people on how to cook without meat being a big factor, so you would cook without meat without like telling them that it's good or that like reducing meat consumption is good, so to have like one day

a week where you don't eat meat is a start, it's better than nothing if everyone in the world would go one day without meat, it would make a big difference I think.

Folke: [...] you kind of just need a really vocal minority to push government and industry to make some changes and if you can get like you know 50, 70 percent of society along with those changes then you are making a huge huge difference, like, just because of you know the numbers that you are… not like a big radical change like in habits maybe but so many people are changing that, that those impact government campaigns…

In the quote above Nils highlights the difficulties associated with trying to convince people to consider changing their consumption. He argues that when you 'attack' people they get defensive and will not change their behaviour. Therefore, you should approach people with a gentler message by asking them to reduce rather than to abstain from consuming animal products.

The topos of authority serves the function of highlighting the complexity of who has the right to interfere with individual choices. People do not like to be told what to do and they disapprove other people who claim to have the authority to tell them so.

Nils is referring to non-present others, individuals that get defensive when their consumption is questioned. We find it interesting to note that it seems like Nils is suggesting that you should keep these individuals in the dark. He seems to believe that their agency is limited to the extent that you have to trick them to consume less meat. At the same time Nils emphasises that people have the agency to make a difference. Deciding not to act is also a way of using your agency.

The quote above can be interpreted from two different angles. While Nils seems to argue that individuals have the right to choose, thus invoking the neutralisation technique claim of individuality he, in our interpretation, does it in a condemning way. He argues that people do not want to listen, so you may as well not bother since this does more harm than good. Furthermore, Nils suggests a different way to approach these uncaring people, an approach that would push them gently towards change without them knowing it. He does not seem to believe that some people have the capacity or the willingness to change their consumer behaviour and is thereby using the affirmation technique condemnation of individuality.

The techniques employed by Nils supports the notion of topos of authority understood as a tension between personal autonomy and social obligations. Vegetarian Folke does not address this tension. Instead he discusses the potential change that can become reality if people lessen their consumption. Folke seems to accept the argument that people can exercise their agency and that it would make a difference.

In comparison to the other topoi, the participants who used topos of authority to support the argument that you should not push people was overwhelmingly endorsed by the participants. However, vegans Solbritt and Lennart provided arguments that challenge this line of reasoning. They argued that if people will not be pushed in that direction then nothing will change.

## 6.4  Topos of utilitarianism

Topos of utilitarianism attributes to different actions that the participants present as being the preferred option or acts of goodness. Under the topos of utilitarianism we identified two main arguments; (i) it is better, from an environmental perspective, to consume animal products and what the participants referred to as byproducts (e.g. milk, leather and wool)

that would otherwise go to waste. Secondly, the participants argued that (ii) it is favourable to consume and kill animals that you know and have interacted with.

Preceding the quote below is a discussion centered around the statement that being an environmentalist, while at the same time consuming animal products, is incompatible. At this stage in the discussion the participants kept the discourse relatively open but Folke emphasised that a high meat consumption at least cannot be considered compatible with being an environmentalist.

> Nils: Maybe even at least vegetarian… it's hard to tell.
>
> Douglas: [...] I have a vegan friend and she doesn't buy leather and wool and we were in a second hand store and she was checking the leather jackets and then she says to me; after consumption leather so I can use it and then I'm like yeah you are right and then I thought about it in the first place, but then you are using it and you are wearing it it's kind of… you create this kind of lifestyle that people tend to look upon and then, I don't know. And the same thing I have a friend who say I don't eat meat but when it's a discount in the store they are gonna throw it anyways so it's big waste so prefer to consume it than throw it which makes sense absolutely, but, yes, then you are the same. But what is wrong or right or who has the right. Yeah that's my perspective.
>
> Folke: Many shades of grey.

In the excerpt above, vegetarian Douglas gives discursive room for his two friends and problematises actions that they view as good deeds or the preferable option. By emphasising that their actions have implications on a structural level, i.e. by perpetuating a certain lifestyle, he problematises their agency. Douglas argues that his friends may actually be part of the problem and that they do not realise that their actions can be problematic.

By referring to his friends, Douglas seems to argue that consuming animal products can be considered unobjectionable, but still you stimulate that type of consumption. Douglas concludes that there is no evident line between what can be considered right or wrong when it comes to APC. The function of topos of utilitarianism, as illustrated through the example of Douglas' friends, is to justify the consumption of animal products that would otherwise go to waste.

By arguing that one's consumption may influence the consumption of others, Douglas is acknowledging the harm that is done. He is saying that even though his friends believe that they are doing something good, they do not realise that they are still perpetuating the issues associated with this lifestyle. Hence, he is also posing a counter-argument against the claim of relative acceptability by saying that, in fact, their actions are not necessarily acceptable in comparison (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016). Thus, by using topos of utilitarianism Douglas delegitimises actions that are perceived as acts of goodness.

Douglas concludes by arguing that what can be considered right or wrong is not self-evident. Folke supports this notion by saying; 'many shades of grey'. Manfred builds on Folke's argument by arguing that it is hard to do everything right and that you can only act within your capability.

Preceding the quote below is a discussion surrounding the place of APC in an environmentally sustainable society. The participants in this group argued that APC in not incongruent with such a society, but that a serious reduction is needed. This discussion was dominated by Greger and Svante.

Svante: [...] well for me, if I knew the animal like I would be more inclined to eat it. It would be sad but it would be more spiritual, like, my sister said, before they killed it she went up to it and pet it [a goat], thanked it, you know. I mean you could connect, you could appreciate more, uhm, like the animal gave its life for you so…

Greger: Yeah.

Svante:… I think in situations like that the intelligence or even like the emotions that you gain from that experience can lead to a more sustainable society, a more sustainable like culture. So I think our relationship with food or our relationship with animals, uhm, it could definitely help that… I definitely see that role for animals to play like they can teach us a lot.

Greger: It's good to have that connection, like I went to this ecological farm in Southern Chile and our diet was a vegan diet, they had animals on the farm and one day we killed a sheep. And, um, I helped to kill the sheep and it was, like horrible experience but also really a good experience at the same time, and I'm really glad I did it.

Svante: Murderer! [ironically]

Greger: … yeah feel the connection with the food you eat, it was, I don't know it was good. And this farm was like six hundred acres farm and the sheep lived a pretty good life. And it was also their time to die, it would have been eaten by its animal counterparts if we didn't eat it, so. I didn't feel bad about eating it at all. Yeah, alright. [...] I buy vegan but I go dumpster diving like two or three times a week and whatever I find there I eat like, meat, dairy, whatever, because it is already waste, it's already been signed off by the supermarkets as waste so I'm not perpetuating the market [...]. So I feel that's ok to do that on a moral and ethical level.

Svante: Don't let the poor animal die in vain.

Both Svante and Greger are arguing that it is justified to eat animals you know and to kill them yourself. They conclude that this is a learning experience that can lead to a more sustainable society. Here, the topos of utilitarianism serves the function of legitimising the act of killing animals by yourself in a small scale.

Svante gives discursive room for people who judge others who kill the animal themselves. By calling Greger a murderer in an ironic way, he refers to others who may see Greger's act as an act of murder. By doing this Svante, in our interpretation, creates a distance between him and those people. He expresses himself in this manner in order to make a point, the point being that their accusations are not credible. Furthermore, Svante seems to talk about animals as actors with agency. Consider the claim that 'the animal gave its life for you'. Here, Svante seems to assume that the animal had a choice, rather than its life was taken from it. Moreover, he views animals as actors that we can learn from.

Greger introduces market economics to the discussion. He argues that even though he consumes animal products when dumpster diving, his actions does not contribute to sustaining the economic structure of demand and supply for animal products. By posing this argument, Greger seems to claim that he has agency that is not restricted by economic structures.

Svante and Greger are, by saying that it is valid to eat animals, both denying the victim and the injury done towards these victims. We can also see that Svante and Greger are using the neutralisation technique appeal to higher loyalties, i.e. the connection with animals can lead to a sustainable society and when killing the animal yourself you are doing a greater good (Sykes and Matza, 1957). In that sense, their 'offenses' were for the greater good and the normative claim of not inflicting harm upon sentient beings is preceded by other values (Matevia, 2016). They also use the neutralisation techniques metaphor of the ledger and justification by comparison when arguing that it is a good deed

to pet the animal before you kill it. In addition, they argue that they spared the sheep by killing it humanely rather than having its animal counterparts killing it and by consuming animal products that are wasted by supermarkets you do not let the animal die in vain. (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016; Cromwell and Thurman, 2003). These actions are, in our interpretation, perceived by Greger and Svante as utilitarian acts. It seems like Greger and Svante want to prevent loss of face and create the effect of approvement by implicitly framing their actions as acts of goodness (Zagar, 2010). The techniques they use act as a support for topos of utilitarianism.

Greger and Svante are clearly building upon each other's arguments. They are continuously confirming each other. Following the quote above vegetarian Barbara is emphasising that she would not be able to eat an animal she has seen alive before, even though she eats meat. Then Solbritt claims that she cannot see herself eating meat. However, neither Barbara nor Solbritt are explicitly challenging the act of killing an animal. Also, they do not address the merciful acts that Svante and Greger describe in the excerpt above. Thus, they are, in our interpretation, in a subtle way expressing that they do not hold the same opinion when it comes to killing animals.

In general, the participants who used topos of utilitarianism employed it in order to highlight that some actions are justified since they are perceived as being done for the greater good. They seem to balance between different values and norms, in order to answer the question; which action or option is more valid in this situation? Hence, the topos of utilitarianism seems to be used in order to solve moral dilemmas where what is perceived to be the greater good is the lodestar. Thus, the discussion revolved around the common notion that the end justifies the means. Finally, it should be noted that in the discussions, animal rights was not included in this calculation of value or benefit maximisation.

## *6.5*  Topos of culture

In post-modern liberal democracies, there is a reported growing tolerance for diversity across multiple axes (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). One such context is multiculturalism, which is seen to be an important hallmark of liberalism and modernity at large. Rollin (2007), for example, declares that we have never been so accommodating toward culturally diverse animal relations, as part of a supposed neo-relativistic tolerance for a 'multiculturalism' (Rollin, 2007 p. 129).

Topos of culture (Zagar, 2010) refers to cultural aspects that the participants chose to bring into the discussion. The participants commonly argued that some cultures should not be asked to reduce their APC since they cannot survive without meat. Moreover, they assigned Western countries and the Western culture as bearing the larger environmental burden. Their examples were frequently hyperbolic, ranging from 'starving Inuits' to Europeans ordering forty tonne meat steaks.

Preceding the excerpt below is a discussion focusing on the place for APC in an environmentally sustainable society. Svante and Greger argue that there is a place for APC, but not to the extent we see today.

> Greger: I could easily get by on a plant based diet it's [meat] completely unnecessary. Ehm, so it's just about… we need a change to come away from our hedonistic values, it's like seen as a macho thing. Especially in UK, you go to a particular bar or a restaurant and they have like an all you can eat thing…

Svante: Fat steak [expressed in an ironic and macho way].

Greger: Yeah yeah, you eat this forty tonne steak or whatever and it will be free, like it's a challenge, it's a macho, it's fucking ridiculous…

Svante: Yeah.

Greger: … why does that matter?! And it adds into the food waste thing, you go and go and yeah it all ties into, it's all heavy related to a sign of prosperity…

Solbritt: Mm.

Greger argues that a high meat consumption is seen as macho, which he believes to be 'ridiculous'. He concludes that this high level of consumption is questionable. By invoking the topos of culture Greger delegitimises heavy meat consumption. He does not question this consumption per se, but questions the kind of consumption that is done in the name of masculinity and prosperity embedded in Western culture.

It is worth noting the ways in which Greger and Svante discursively constructs the macho meat consumer. By using hyperbolisms such as 'forty tonne steak' they seem to aim to produce a certain effect and to delegitimise this excessive consumption. Moreover, these exaggerations can be seen as a way of distancing themselves from the issue, by bringing up extreme examples and giving the impression that they are not like those people. They are also questioning the value of meat consumption as a sign of prosperity and as reflecting hedonistic values.

In the quote above Greger provides counter-arguments to the neutralisation technique claim of entitlement, i.e. the claim that you are entitled to reward yourself from time to time (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016). By arguing that we need a transition from a hedonistic lifestyle, and by questioning excessive consumption, Greger challenges this technique. Furthermore, Greger also employs the affirmation technique discounting condemners. This technique is used when the interlocutor wants to emphasise that they have no wish to follow the people they believe condemn their practices. Greger emphasises the difference between him and those who indulge in high meat consumption by portraying them as macho.

The macho culture and hedonistic values can be seen as cultural phenomena. By portraying meat consumption as a cultural phenomenon, and by using these techniques when referring to this, they reaffirm that they do not wish to be part of this culture. The topos of culture thus acts as a way to delegitimise these cultural phenomena.

Again, we can see that Svante and Greger are supporting each other's arguments, as they did throughout the focus group discussion. After this excerpt, Svante continues to question high meat consumption and argues for a reduction, which Solbritt agrees with.

Preceding the quote below was a discussion in which the participants were asked to discuss APC in the Western world in relation to the increasing trend in APC in countries such as India and China. The participants agreed that the increasing trend in such nations is problematic, but emphasise that it is not a valid argument for continued high APC in the Western world. Vegetarian Conny also emphasised that non-Western countries do have a high meat consumption albeit in a 'more sustainable and community based way'.

Borghild: We also have to allow certain areas in world to consume meat especially in those areas where crops are highly dependent on soil quality [...] And therefore I think there's areas where they don't really have a choice to change their diet as radically as we have.

Torkel: I mean, the Inuits will not be vegans. It's ridiculous, [laughing] they can just eat meat that's everything they have. I mean traditionally anyway. But they are not the problem [laughter], we are.

Bert: But you can always say if Inuits cannot eat meat, Argentineans haven't eat meat that long time ago and it's their culture to eat cattle [mumbling], so I think, yeah.

Conny: But traditionally they haven't eaten meat the same amount as Western countries.

Torkel: But, even here in the Western world that we have the illusion that this is the tradition but even you go thirty forty years ago like back in time, people didn't eat as much meat as they do now.

Conny: Yeah, no.


Torkel argues that some populations have to consume meat and therefore those populations should be considered an exception. The topos of culture is used to emphasise cultural differences; it serves the function of justifying APC in certain cultures.

In three out of four groups this kind of argumentation was presented. The participants referred to Inuits, Samis, Ethiopian sheep herders and indigenous people in general to emphasise that there are exceptions to the rule of a reduction of APC, a rule that was endorsed by all the participants. By bringing in these actors, which we argue represents extreme cases, the participants are distancing themselves from the issue. At the same time they are giving these populations agency to continue their consumption.

In the quote above we argue that Torkel is denying the victims and the harm done towards them, i.e. the animals being killed by Inuits. However, he can also be interpreted as arguing that Inuits are victims under their own circumstances. He argues that it is necessary for them to consume animals and uses the neutralisation technique defence of necessity. This technique is employed when the speaker wants to emphasise that some acts are necessary in order to prevent something worse from happening, e.g. starvation (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016). Furthermore, when posing this argument he also appeals to the natural order of things; the Inuits have a long tradition of living this way, an argument that connects to the naturalness argument. At the same time, Torkel emphasises that the Inuits do not have a responsibility to stop consuming animals, since they are not the problem. He acknowledges that we are the problem thus we have the responsibility to reduce our APC.

In contrast to previous quote, topos of culture act as a justification for continued APC for some people or cultures. Here, the interplay between agency and structure becomes relevant. In this excerpt Torkel gives discursive room for Inuits, individuals that he views as more credible than Western people. Furthermore, he discursively constructs the agency of Inuits as being limited due to natural factors, a message that was largely successfully advocated in the discussion.

The successfulness of this message is however challenged by vegetarian Bert. Bert problematises where to cross the line when it comes to culture; to what extent it can be considered justified to refer to cultural aspects. Conny questions Bert's critique by arguing that the Argentinians are not as bad as Western countries. Torkel emphasises that there is a difference between the tradition of Inuits and the tradition of Western countries; our meat consumption cannot be considered traditional the same way as that of Inuits. Thus, claims of cultural exceptions applies to people like Inuits but not for Western countries.

In general, the participants argued that some cultures have always consumed animal products and it would be difficult for them to abstain from such products, since they would not have any other options. It would be ridiculous to ask them to become vegans, since they are not the problem. Thus, they employed topos of culture in order to support the claim that there are exceptions to the rule of reduced APC.

*6.6*   Topos of burdening

The topos of burdening (Zagar, 2010) evolves from the common notion that everything should be done in moderation. Rather than holding an abolitionist attitude, this topos highlights that all actions have an impact and it is therefore a matter of how much of an impact and in what way. It can be understood in terms of burdening the environment (in the form of environmental impacts) or as burdening people (problematising what you can ask of people when it comes to APC). The participants argued that (i) small scale and/or local farming is, from an environmental perspective, preferable since it does not harm the environment to the same extent as current factory farming and (ii) the amount of animal products consumed is central and people should strive to lessen their APC rather than to become completely abstinent.

Preceding the quote below is as discussion centered around the tension between APC as a private matter, versus individuals having a responsibility to reduce or stop their consumption. Some of the participants argued that it is not a private matter since it has external effects, while others tended to emphasise that you should not force anyone. Vegan Rutger even argued that it is, and should be, a personal choice.

> Torkel: [...] I think it's very important to stress it's not just like either you eat meat or meat products or you don't. It's the amount of meat products people eat. So people shouldn't be too pressed to sort of; now you should stop completely, you know, because it can be hard for people. Especially if they don't have the money or the information. Furthermore, it's also important if people do eat meat products, what kind of is it?...
>
> [Mm]
>
> Torkel: … Where does it come from? How much of is it? So it's a lot of different things, ehm, so there's a lot of sort of… grey shades between the black and white.
>
> [Yeah]
>
> Torkel: And people of course, people do have a choice in a way, ehm, but not all the choices might be morally equivalent [...]
>
> Conny: [...] to me it's not so much about eating meat or not eating meat it's about being aware of why or being aware of my choice, being aware of the choice to eat meat when I decide to eat meat or the choice to eat vegetables when I decide to eat vegetables and if more people just were aware of what they're choosing and the consequences of it…
>
> Torkel: Cause it's not about labels, it's about the fact that every single choice that you make…
>
> Conny: … yeah, has an impact.
>
> Torkel and Rutger: Yeah, yeah.
>
> [Few seconds silence]

Torkel argues that *meat* consumption is a matter of quantity and quality, rather than a matter of abstinence, a conclusion that the topos of burdening supports. Torkel leaves discursive room for individuals that may have a hard time to change their consumption. He emphasises that people do have a choice to some extent, but that these choices are not equal. He mentions some factors that limit the agency of individuals who may want to change their consumption behaviour. By referring to non-present others he uses this as a source to support his argument that reduction is enough. According to Torkel, becoming

vegetarian or vegan is, in our interpretation, a burden that reduce one's agency, rather than being an opportunity. None of the participants described becoming vegetarian or vegan as a win-win situation.

Torkel argues that some people do not have the means to give up their meat consumption. Furthermore, this is not what we should expect of people, rather we should encourage them to lessen their consumption and to choose other alternatives. Thereby, Torkel is using the neutralisation technique claim of relative acceptability by comparing and contrasting the meat consumption of non-present others (Uba and Chatzidakis, 2016). He is also employing the neutralisation technique denial of responsibility, by arguing that some people do not have the means to abstain from APC. Thus, he denies the responsibility of some people by implicitly stating that those people cannot be held responsible for actions that they, according to Torkel, cannot control.

We argue that the claim of relative acceptability supports the topos of burdening, since this technique justifies the common notion that every little helps. In addition, by denying the responsibility of those people whose behaviour is relatively acceptable, Torkel is further supporting the topos of burdening. In addition, when arguing that you should approach people in a gentle way and acknowledge that change is difficult, he is also professing his claims with the help of topos of authority.

In the excerpt above we can see that Conny neither challenges nor explicitly supports what Torkel says, but rather builds on and develops his arguments. She seems to argue that as long as you are aware of your choices then it is justified. The majority of the participants throughout the focus groups actively supported the argument of lessening consumption and taking into consideration what kind of products that are consumed. Thus, the topos of burdening was predominantly supported.

In the excerpt below the participants were asked to discuss the same statement as in previous quote. Folke was surprised to hear that some believe that APC has positive environmental impacts. However, vegan Manfred and vegetarian Douglas were able to give a few examples of positive impacts. For example, Douglas argued for the benefits of a local production.

> Nils: Ehm, but in terms of like localised, now we're talking about having a local scale meat production instead of like global scale. Australia has, like it's about first or second biggest export, except we export it [animals] live to Indonesia and they kill them, like question on how ethical that is, but I think that even if you do it on a local scale, like the end result for the animal is still death. Like, I don't care how well you treat them, you're still killing them whether you euthanize them or whether you like hit them over the head with a hammer. I think that's, you're either for or against it.
>
> [Four seconds silence]
>
> Folke: What was the question?

Nils questions the argument for a local animal production by emphasising that in the end animals are killed, which you either see as an ethical problem or not. Nils concludes that the small-scale argument is not valid from an animal rights perspective. The function of topos of burdening is to show that framing APC as a matter of scale or geography is not credible.

Nils acknowledges that no matter if you produce animal products on a local or global scale animals are victims of injury. Thus, he employs acknowledgement of injury and victim to highlight the harm done towards animals. With the help of these techniques and

the topos of interspecies justice Nils aims to delegitimise claims connected to topos of burdening.

As we can see in the excerpt above, Folke is neither challenging nor supporting the arguments posed by Nils. No-one in this focus group build upon Nils' argument. The large majority of the participants who addressed the topos of burdening used it in order to emphasise that, when it comes to APC as an environmental issue, it is a matter of reduction and not a matter of cessation. Nils and Lennart are the only ones who challenge this argument by emphasising the ethical and animal rights issues APC brings, albeit in different manners.

# 7 Discussion

This study has, through the analytical framework of DDA, explored the interpersonal role and implications of neutralisation and affirmation techniques - both on dialogue itself and the discourse of APC. In this section we attend to the research questions presented in section 1.5 and address the research problem central to this thesis (see section 1.2).

## 7.1 Micro-deliberations: The interplay of internal and external framing

Despite of the potentially divisive topic of APC, the focus group discussions were overall characterised by an inviting and friendly atmosphere. The participants listened to each other's opinions and, as evident in the analysis, often built on each other's arguments, reformulated them, made concessions and adjusted their opinion. Furthermore, the participants engaged in highly coordinated activities, without being specifically asked to do so, such as jointly problematising the definition of different concepts (e.g. the concept of environmentalist), managing turn taking (e.g. actively including quiet participants in the discussion) and jointly reasoning about ethical concerns that pertained to non-human animals and the environment. Furthermore, the participants collectively scrutinised the statements posed by us as researchers and even provided some self-objections. For example, under the topos of responsibility Douglas highlights the damaging norms that we perpetuate in the Western part of the world. They also anticipated potential arguments and counter-arguments from non-present others and presented these in the discussions. (cf. Marková et al., 2007, pp. 57-58). Thus, the dialogical interdependence between the internal and external framing or context of the focus groups resulted in discussions that were characterised by a number of micro-deliberations.

The coordinated activities and micro-deliberations described above were carried out in a social setting in which neutralisations and affirmations were used extensively. Thus, the participants were able to engage in these collaborative activities while at the same time employing discursive strategies aimed at convincing or persuading others in a dialectical process.

As mentioned previously (see section 4), we initially believed that the use of the techniques would, due to their dialectical relationship, undermine a collaborative dialogic process. However, the use of the techniques does not seem to impede such a process, considering that the participants employed these dialectical concepts and were still able to foster a dialogic process. When, e.g. challenging each other's statements they did so in a dialogical manner, in other words, they let different perspectives co-exist without necessarily trying to reach a conclusion or compromise on the issue of APC and pro-environmental behaviour (Linell, 1998). For example, when discussing the appropriate behaviour of vegans under the topos of utilitarianism, participants Douglas and Folke emphasised that it is difficult to decide on what is appropriate and that there are 'many shades of grey'. Consequently, the use of neutralisations and affirmations, or the clash of these opposing forces if you will (Inglis, 2012), have the potential to foster a relatively open discourse rather than to close it, as we initially suspected. (This is developed further in section 7.3).

However, the establishment of these discursive processes may to some extent be attributed to the qualities of the focus group context, in that the participants may have felt

the need to please each other and to be accepted by the group members (see section 4.1.1). The social interactions developed in the focus groups are to some extent influenced by the particularity of this social setting and there is reason to suspect that the participants may argue differently among friends (Wibeck, 2010). The external and internal framings did, however, not seem to foster 'group-think' (see section 4.1.1) as they let a multitude of perspectives on the issue co-exist, which we explore in more detail in the upcoming section.

## 7.2   Non-present others

In the processes described above the participants broadened the discursive arena and brought in a variety of perspectives by referring to non-present others. As evident in the analysis, the participants predominantly referred to virtual participants when making their claims; they tended to address and problematise the agency of non-present others, rather than their own behaviour. Hence, the dialectical relationship between neutralisations and affirmations were largely explored and negotiated by giving discursive room to virtual participants. This is the principal mechanism through which they implicitly negotiated their stance and challenged each other's arguments. This is also the mechanism the participants utilised to gain support for their justification accounts, i.e. by presenting sources and actors that they view as credible or less credible (see Wibeck, 2010). Hence, the exploration or negotiation of the tension between these opposing forces, an inherent quality in their dialectical relationship (Inglis, 2012), is done on a meta level; the techniques were mainly used to deflect or affirm on behalf of others, rather than the participants themselves.

This 'meta level dynamics' highlights the way in which the participants create a distance between themselves and their claims or statements (Marková et al., 2007). This feature of imparting distance between speaker and opinion is common predominantly in criminological or morally sensitive research, and may serve the purpose of shielding against actual or moral self-incrimination before others. This 'proxy' way of speaking allows the interlocutor to profess or advance claims without having personal ownership of them (von Essen, 2016; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki, 2014; Nuno and St. John, 2015). Hence, this kind of distancing may be seen as yet another discursive strategy aimed at deflecting potential blame from others.

However, it needs to be emphasised that we as researchers were also distancing ourselves from the issue by letting the interview questions revolve around a number of potential and virtual actors and their behaviour (see Appendix 5). By doing this, we may have encouraged the participants to address potential actors aswell rather than their own opinions and behaviour. An encouragement that may represent a limitation of this study (Rubin and Rubin, 2011).

## 7.3   The dialectics of neutralisations and affirmations

Previous research on neutralisation and affirmation theory conveys the impression that the use of the techniques is quite fixed and that neutralisations are restricted to persisters and affirmations to desisters. However, through the application of DDA we discovered that the participants used the techniques in a more dynamic way. In contrast to Uba and Chatzidakis (2016) and Piacentini et al. (2012) the employment of neutralisations was not reserved for omnivores (persisters), and the employment of affirmations was not reserved

for vegans (desisters). For example, when elaborating on the ethical issue of consuming animals vegan Greger employ denial of victim and acknowledgement of victim simultaneously. Thus, we discovered that neutralisations and affirmations are not necessarily incompatible but can be used in combination by the same speaker and sometimes even in the same utterance, as the previous example illustrates. In other words, both can be used to profess claims of (dis)engagement; neutralisations do not necessarily act as the point and affirmations as the counterpoint with the aim of reaching a solution that has primacy over others (dialectics) (Inglis, 2012). They can, based on our study, be used to weigh between different perspectives and to initiate a dialogic process, letting a multitude of perspectives and solutions co-exist.

However, this brings to the fore a limitation of the present study as the participants could not be divided strictly into groups of persisters and desister, since some of the participants identified themselves as vegetarians (see section 4.1.2). Consequently, it may not be surprising that the majority of the participants were able to argue from both point of views, i.e. persistence in and desistance from APC, finding a middle ground. Furthermore, the ability of the participants to argue in this manner may be due to the fact that they mainly spoke from the perspectives of non-present others and does therefore not run the risk of being personally questioned by the other participants (see previous section).

## 7.4   The structuration dialectic of topoi

As mentioned previously, neutralisations and affirmations appeal to normative contexts (see section 3.3). When individuals provide justification accounts in order to neutralise or affirm their behaviour it is done in relation to a set of normative expectations in a certain context, i.e. trying to deflect blame from self and from others when you do not meet these expectations and affirm when you do. The normative contexts in the present study consist of pro-APC and pro-environment. As evident in the analysis, these are the two normative contexts that the participants weighed between. A weight that tended to lean towards a middle path between the two; you can be considered an environmentalist and still consume animal products as long as you reduce your consumption and buy 'sustainable' products. Thus, in spite of our effort as researchers to create a normative context in which being an environmentalist and consuming animal products stands in conflict (see section 3.3) the participants generally explored a middle ground.

Beyond exploring these normative contexts, the analysis addresses how the techniques resonate in the focus groups through the theoretical resource of topoi. Here, we have responded to the exhortation made by Zagar (2010) by presenting topoi with an explanation of their function in the discussion. Based on our analysis, topoi make neutralisations and affirmations work on an argumentative level; they get their discursive and cognitive power for the sake of argumentation, not only by appealing to normative contexts but also by referring to topoi. By invoking topoi when providing a justification account it resonated with the other participants to a larger degree. As we can see in the analysis, the purpose or function of topoi is to make one's argumentation stronger and/or to delegitimise the claim of others by introducing a ready-made argument to the specific context in which they find themselves in the discussion. Thus, when justification accounts, pertaining to APC are invoked, they are successful in resonating with others because they connect to topoi. That is, they do not blindly grasp at random arguments or restricted values held by only a few, but appeal to culturally shared storehouses of common arguments and values.

With reference to the above, we suggest that the dialectical relationship between the techniques and topoi can be understood as a chair. We argue that neutralisations and affirmations help to interactively co-construct topoi in the first place. Thus, insofar as topoi are 'the seat on which rhetoric arguments are placed' (Barker et al., 2013), the techniques provide the legs of the chair. This metaphor informs us that while the legs (the techniques) supports the seat (the topoi), the seat also act as to uphold the legs, hence the structuration dialectic of topoi. Moreover, the legs are not only restricted to neutralisations or affirmations, but could consist of both (see previous section).

Building on this metaphor, we suggest that not only dialogism and the interplay of naturalisations and affirmations, but also topoi should be understood in terms of a structuration dialectic. More specifically we argue that topoi can be understood as a discursive structure that frame speakers' justification accounts at the same time as these accounts also contribute to interactionally generate, change or reinforce established topoi (cf. Linell, 1998, p. 60). This is especially the case, one can argue, when a neutralisation has been discursively 'successful', i.e. it has not only alleviated the cognitive dissonance of the individual, but resonated as a sound argument also with the other participants. Thus, the different topoi that the participants considered useful to invoke when posing their justification accounts are at once co-constituted and reinforced, but potentially also challenged and transformed, in these discursive settings, in a typical structuration dialectic (Linell, 1998; Giddens, 1984).

## 7.5   Implications for the discourse of animal product consumption

As emphasised previously, the findings of the present study should be considered more than mere products of the evolved interactions (see section 3.2.1). When talking on behalf of non-present others, the participants gave discursive room to members of various groups in society. The way in which they discursively (co-)constructed the opinions and behaviours of these non-present others denotes, not only which messages that the participants view as credible or less credible, but also what characterises the societal discourse pertaining to the issue of pro-APC versus pro-environment (Wibeck, 2010; Marková et al., 2007). Considering that topoi are ready-made arguments that the interlocutors are familiar with, they can be said to reflect a more general societal discourse (Zagar, 2010). Moreover, and in line with a double dialogicality approach, the topoi that the participants considered useful to invoke in order to justify one's' claim or to delegitimate others', can also be said to reflect a more general discourse. This is so, since the relationship between the in-situ interactions in focus groups and broader sociocultural practices should be understood in terms of a structuration dialectic (Linell, 1998). Here, we have identified topoi in part by connecting them to widely held values in post-industrial liberal democracies like Sweden, the setting for the focus groups and for much of the APC discussion generally.

Due to the structuration dialectic of topoi, we argue that topoi may serve the purpose of reproducing the discourse surrounding APC and its role in environmental problems. That is, if recurrently retrieving one's argument from the same storehouse, and thereby framing the subject matter in a particular way, the interlocutor may consequently exclude other frames. Topoi may therefore run the risk of becoming hardened through such communication practices, making it difficult for new types of arguments to be tried and professed (von Essen, 2015). However, considering that topoi are, at least in theory, 'malleable entities' (ibid., p. 15), there is reason to suspect that topoi will change in the future as values continue to change and diversify in general. An argument that worked well hundred years

ago, for example, human dominion over nature or appeals to family values, is not necessarily as effective today or in the future. So not only do the topic of debates change (APC as a new topic), but the rhetorics of the arguments changes as people find new topoi to link to. Also, due to the dialectical relationship discovered here between topoi and the techniques there is reason to suspect that when topoi change so will the techniques relevant to that specific topic/situation. In other words, neutralisations and affirmations have to adapt accordingly and they in turn co-constitute topoi, hence the dialectic. In addition, new or different topoi applied to this context may also foster the development of new discursive strategies and devices.

# 8 Conclusion

The present thesis went beyond the current understanding of neutralisations and affirmations as cognitive processes that mainly serve cognitive functions, by placing them in an interpersonal dialogue context. Doing so renders the structure and use of these techniques more transparent and able to be studied by observers, as in e.g. a focus group. Through the application of a dialogical discourse analysis we have been able to discern a number of interpersonal and discursive implications of the techniques when these are used in a social setting discussing animal product consumption (APC) as an environmental issue. In other words, we have explored *how* the techniques were used and *what* implications they had on the discussion.

By 'how', we uncovered that some techniques, like denial of responsibility, were used more than others and that neutralisations and affirmations can be used simultaneously to profess claims of (dis)engagement in APC. In terms of implications on the discussion, our study showed that certain techniques were more successful as argumentation strategies when connected to an established topos, such as topos of justice or culture. The concept of structuration dialectic was essential in understanding this mechanism. A structuration dialectic informs us that when neutralisations and affirmations draw from topoi in order to persuade others in the discussion, they are simultaneously drawing from, reinforcing and co-constituting these topoi and in turn potentially also the discourse of APC.

Thus, this study provides a theoretical contribution in developing existent neutralisation and affirmation research by revealing their dialogic functions. Future research should continue in this vein and potentially explore additional dialogic and social interaction functions than the ones uncovered here.

This study not only rescues these techniques from the individual domain, in which previous research has placed them, by illustrating their dialogic character, but make visible the structure of argumentation individuals use when deliberating the pros and cons of APC. By accentuating the sorts of validity contexts (topoi) that serve to legitimise or delegitimise APC in today's society, we come closer to apprehending the structure or form of the societal discourse(s) on APC as an environmental issue.

Based on our research, when addressing APC as an environmental issue it is important to uncover the neutralisations and affirmations used when professing claims of (dis)engagement as they are key factors in shaping this discourse. Furthermore, we argue that there is a need to put more emphasis on the interpersonal role of these techniques since, surely, the use of the techniques has implications for how we communicate with each other about environmental issues. Moreover, the way we communicate with each other about these issues needs to be understood if behavioural change in APC is desired, given that communicative practices co-constitute values, which is the central premise of this study. Future research can apply a similar approach as the one applied here to other environmentally related behaviours, as e.g. flying behaviour. Therefore, future research should continue to study neutralisations and affirmations in dialogic settings to reveal more of their functions in social interaction and the co-construction of discourse.

To conclude, neutralisation and affirmation theory proved to be a useful framework for understanding the interpersonal co-construction of discourse pertaining to (dis)engagement in APC. That is, this framework is not only useful to apply when investigating behaviour and (dis)engagement but discursive processes and in understanding in what manner discourse is co-constructed in interaction. Finally, the findings provided in this study offer insights into the complexity of pro-environmental behaviour in the area of APC, insights

that are of value for practical and policy interventions aimed at reducing APC by organisations and governments.

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# Appendix 1

**INVITATION TO FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION**

Dear green people of Uppsala,

We would like to invite you to take part in a focus group discussion on the topic of animal product consumption (consumption of meat, dairy, leather and other animal derived products). We are seeking omnivores (allätare) and vegans who care about the environment. These focus group discussions are a part of our master's thesis in Environmental Communication and Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). *The aim with the focus group discussions is* to discover what kind of views environmentally minded vegans and omnivores have on animal product consumption. This is an opportunity for those of you who want to learn more about this topic and share your thoughts with people who are interested in environmental issues.

The discussion will last for roughly 1,5 hours and we will talk about the environmental impact of our diet and consumption. The results will be used as a part of our thesis. You can be anonymous.

Focus groups will be held either in the morning (10:00) or in the afternoon (18:00) during these dates:
Week 9: 27/2, 28/2, 1/3 and 2/3
Week 10: 6/3, 7/3, 8/3 and 9/3

You are asked to attend on *one* of these dates and we will meet at a public university in central Uppsala. (Specific location will be notified later on).

We would be so grateful if you would like to participate in the focus group. Please contact either Tea or Therese before 22/2 (if attending week 9) or 1/3 (if attending week 10) and let us know which date you will be able to attend. More information will be sent to those confirming attendance. Amazing fika will be provided!

# Appendix 2

**FOCUS GROUP CONFIRMATION LETTER**

20th of February

Dear …...

We are so happy that you are willing to participate in our focus group discussion on the topic of animal product consumption. You will be discussing this topic with 4-6 other participants. We will ask a few questions on this topic that we would like you to discuss as a group. These questions do not aim to test your knowledge on the topic and there are no right or wrong answers. We want to create a relaxed environment in which you will feel comfortable enough to share your thoughts, even if you might disagree with the other participants. We would like to record the discussion but your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in our thesis. The discussion will be held in English and take maximum 1,5 hours (including fika). We will provide delicious fika and coffee/tea.

In this email we have attached a demographic survey which we ask you to fill out an email us before the session. We also ask you to have a look at the attached consent form which we will ask you to sign before the discussion.

Date: 27th of February
Time: 18:00
Place: Ekonomikum library room G205 (entrance 10B)
Contact details: Therese Åhlvik (phone number), Tea Tawast (phone number)

If you have any questions, comments, allergies or if you will not be able to attend, don't hesitate to contact us.

Looking forward to see you!

Tea Tawast and Therese Åhlvik

# Appendix 3

**DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

Please fill out this form. The information you provide us with here is confidential and only Tea Tawast and Therese Åhlvik will take part of it. We will use this information to get an overview of the basic characteristics of the participants in our study. Again, you name will be replaced by a pseudonym.

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

If student, then which university and program?

Are you vegan or omnivore?

What are your expectations of the focus group discussion?

# Appendix 4

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

   You have been asked to take part in a focus group discussion on the topic of animal product consumption. The purpose of the focus group discussions is to discover what kind of views environmentally minded vegans and environmentally minded omnivores have on animal product consumption. The results of the discussion will be used as a part of our master's thesis in Environmental Communication and Management and if requested the transcript of the discussion will be shared. The final thesis will be available to the public through SLU:s open archive Epsilon. The discussion will be recorded, however, these recordings will only be listened to by the researchers of this study (Tea Tawast and Therese Åhlvik). Your privacy will be protected and your real name will be replaced by a pseudonym in the thesis. We ask you to not share what will be said during the discussions to protect the privacy of the other participants.

You can *stop* your participation in the discussions at any point.

I understand the meaning of this information and agree to participate under all the conditions outlined above.


Signature:                                                    Date:



Tea Tawast and Therese Åhlvik

# Appendix 5

**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Introduction and agenda**

Welcome everybody to today's/tonight's discussion about animal product consumption. My name is Therese/Tea and this is Therese/Tea and we will be *guiding* you through the discussion today/tonight. We are both master's students at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences where we are studying Environmental Communication and Management. As we have informed you previously we will be recording the discussion and use the recordings for our master's thesis. This information will however be kept confidential and your real name will in no way appear in the thesis.

**Explanation of rules**

I will guide you through the discussion and Tea/Therese will be taking notes, notes that are only for us as researchers. We will ask you 8 questions and we want to emphasise that we will not be part of the discussion. We are not experts on the topic and what we think is irrelevant here. We are interested in your opinion and want you to talk and discuss amongst yourselves. So please share your thoughts and speak up if you do not agree with each other. We ask you to speak one at a time and respect the views of the others. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions and if you do not understand the questions, or want to hear them again, please let us know. We also ask you not to share what is said in this room and respect the privacy of the others.

The session will last for roughly one hour and if you have to go to the toilet, please let us know and we will take a short break. If you have any questions not related to the discussion you will have the opportunity to ask them at the end of the session.

**QUESTIONS**

**Introductory question**

- Can you please introduce yourself and tell us about your interest in environmental issues?

**Transitioning questions**

- What are the main characteristics of an environmentalist in your opinion?

**Key questions**

Some would argue that contemporary animal product consumption (that is consumption of meat, dairy, leather, wool and other animal derived products) has a negative environmental impact, while others would argue that it has a positive impact on the environment.
- What are your thoughts and opinions on this?
- Would you say that there is a place for animal product consumption in an environmentally sustainable society?

Some would argue that we as consumers have a responsibility to reduce or even stop consuming animal products due to environmental reasons while others argue that it is a personal choice and a private matter.

- What are your thoughts and opinions on this?

We are now going to pose a few common statements, which does not reflect our personal opinions and there are no right or wrong answers, and we ask you to share your thoughts and feelings with the group.

- A vegan diet has severe environmental impacts due to for example rice avocado and soy production and a vegan diet does not solve our environmental problems.
- The problem is not our animal product consumption in the Western countries, it is those people in China and India. If they increase their consumption, we are in real trouble.
- In the documentary Cowspiracy it is argued that you cannot call yourself an environmentalist and still consume animal products.

**Ending questions**

- Are there any questions that you would like to ask other participants regarding what you have discussed today?
- What kind of feelings did the discussion bring up? (If you don't want share with the group, you can talk to us afterwards).