Skeptics and "The White Stuff"

Promotion of Cows' Milk and Other Nonhuman Animal Products in the Skeptic Community as Normative Whiteness

Corey Lee Wrenn

Lecturer of Sociology and Director of Gender Studies, Monmouth University

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2017-001-wren corey.wrenn@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article discusses a dairy advertising campaign featuring skeptic Derren Brown. I explore the various health claims made in the ads as well as a report Brown featured on his website that claimed consumption of cow's milk is linked to longevity. I discuss how dairy consumption is largely linked to race and ethnicity. It is a practice enjoyed primarily by European whites as most nonwhites are lactose intolerant. Lactose intolerance is a normal biological process associated with weaning, but it is medicalized and made deviant because it is not part of the white experience. I also mention comments made by Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins that normalize Western diets with unsubstantiated claims. This article takes a critical look at skeptic leaders who have failed to address misleading information perpetuated by exploitative animal product industries.

Keywords: advertising, colonialism, dairy, food, health, lactose intolerance, race, science, skepticism, veganism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Television personality Derren Brown is a British illusionist and skeptic known for divulging the secrets of magicians, psychics, and new age charlatans. Brown also devotes considerable attention to debunking bogus scientific and medical claims. In one program, for instance, Brown trained an amateur actor to impersonate a faith healer. He effectively convinced a Texan community that the man had special divine powers to cure the ill (Brown 2011). The danger with faith healers, of course, is that adults and children alike are encouraged (or forced) to forgo medical treatments

in the expectation that their chosen deity will cure them. This has led to the premature or unnecessary death of quite a few individuals (Brenneman 1990; Peters 2008). This "healing" is often performed in congruence with fevered solicitations for donations. Thus, projects like Brown's *Miracles for Sale* have fundamentally humanitarian intentions.

However, Brown appears unable to see through similarly exploitative and phony healing claims when it comes to more socially ingrained practices. Brown appeared in a "healthy living" campaign for cows' milk, or, "The White Stuff". The promotion was funded by the Scottish Dairy Marketing Company in association with the Milk Development Council. His advertisements state that the nutrients found in cows' milk (many of which are added during processing) (Gerdes 2009) are good for skin, teeth, hair, bones, and energy. Cows' milk is labeled as "powerful stuff" (Milk Development Council N.D.a) necessary for an active body to "unlock the power within" (Milk Development Council N.D.b). Inundated with appeals to vitality and healthfulness, we are encouraged to disregard reason and critical thought: "With facts like these, do you really need anyone to persuade you that it's good for you?".

2. Corporate influence on nutrition information

Hardly "facts" at all, these statements are concocted by the dairy industry to push potentially unhealthy and dangerous products onto unsuspecting and trusting consumers. Make no mistake, the Milk Development Council is not in the business of improving human health. Rather, they aim to "improve farm profits" and increase "demand for milk supplied by profitable British dairy farmers" (Milk Development Council 2008). The advertisements featuring Brown and other celebrities are intended to improve dairy's public image and market success. Thus, the industry plays up the potential nutritional benefits of particular ingredients, distorts the healthfulness of cows' milk, and diminishes the potential consequences of consuming the mammary fluids of another species. Not surprisingly, dairy campaigns have been slammed with false advertising complaints, specifically for promoting cows' milk as an aid in weight loss (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine 2007) and sports performance (Napoli 2001), a product of higher animal welfare (Weise 2002), and hormone-free (Leong 2007) (hormones occur naturally in cows' breast milk as it is intended for their growing calves).

Surely, Brown participated in the ad campaign for the same reason many celebrities do: as a public service to benefit consumer health and

promote national industry. Unfortunately, these campaigns may help industry, but could be hurting others. On July 27, 2009, an administrator on Brown's website a published a blog post (Abeodbart 2009) summarizing a university study that claimed the consumption of cows' milk could lessen chances of death from heart disease and stroke by as much as 20% (Elwood et al. 2010). This study turned out to be a meta-analysis of a scant eight reports, two of which lacked sufficient data for full analysis. This is a curiously small sample given that a search for "dairy" in the U.S. National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine turned up thousands of results in peer-reviewed academic and medical journals. A closer look at the studies chosen gives greater reason for concern.

3. The bad science of dairy science

The Elwood et al. (2010) meta-analysis cited by Brown's public relations team comes to some rather surprising conclusions in favor of dairy consumption given the actual results reported by the studies included. One 1984 study included in the meta-analysis sampled 90 elderly participants and measured a multitude of fitness and food variables (which included dairy). Rather than promoting cow's milk, the study merely suggests that a high caloric diet and use of psychoactive drugs are associated with age-related cognitive deterioration in subjects (Fraser, Singh, and Bennett 1996). Another study included analyzed data from general health examinations of 2,605 Dutch civil servants between 1953 and 1954. It finds "[…] an inverse association between calcium intake and CVD [1] and CHD mortality, possibly mediated by blood pressure […]" (Van der Vijver et al. 1992). Another looked at 29,017 post-menopausal Iowan women and finds an, "[…] inverse associations of vegetable protein and legume food sources and positive associations of dairy and red meat food sources for CHD morality when substituted in place of a carbohydrate" (Kelemen et al. 2005). In fact, these researchers find that dairy consumption increases the risk as much as animal's flesh does. A study of United Kingdom "health conscious individuals" does find a positive correlation between dairy consumption and increased longevity – but, the participants were vegetarians and had therefore already reduced their risk of CHD significantly by eschewing animals' flesh (Mann et al. 1997). An analysis of diets consumed by diabetic persons in Greece suggests that an increased consumption of

[1] CVD is an acronym for cardiovascular disease; CHD is an acronym for coronary heart disease.

eggs and saturated fats (found in most dairy products) is strongly associated with increased mortality (Trichopoulou et al. 2006). In fact, of the eight articles analyzed, only *one* (produced by the very same authors of the meta-analysis) clearly stated that dairy consumption was not risky (Elwood et al. 2004).

Declaring that cows' milk improves longevity seems a farfetched conclusion given the results of the very studies included in the Elwood et al. meta-analysis. In most of these studies, the consumption of nonhuman animal products is included as only one of many variables. Many of these variables (education, socioeconomic status, fitness levels, etc.) are likely interacting with one another or suppressing hidden variables. Furthermore, some of the researchers were examining the impact of specific nutrients, such as calcium, which can come from a variety of non-animal sources. Hence, some of the conclusions paraphrased by the meta-analysis do not necessarily imply that dairy products are preferable to other calcium-rich foods like dark leafy greens. Another concern is generalizability: Elwood et al. (2010) explored only a select handful of available studies that address dairy and human health. Many of these studies focus on very specific or small populations (Seventh Day Evangelists, Dutch Civil Servants in the 1950s, and Diabetic Greeks for instance). More importantly, *none* of the sampled reports controlled for race or ethnicity. The race and ethnicity variable is important because studies like that of Elwood et al. (2010) run the risk of eurocentrism in presuming that the consumption of cows' milk is both necessary and normal.

4. Framing milk: white normativity and lactose tolerance

Lactose intolerance occurs after weaning in all nonhuman animals and in many human populations (Vesa, Marteau, and Korpela 2000). Indeed, over 50% of South Americans and Africans are lactose intolerant. Levels are closer to 100% in some Asian countries – a reality that seems to be lost on Canadian researchers who, in a 2012 study, suggest that Asian women living in the West should conform to Western dietary norms and increase their dairy consumption to obtain calcium and vitamin D (Yu et al. 2012). Importantly, another 2012 study of Asian women conducted by *Vietnamese* researchers found that a vegan diet does not have adverse effects on bones (Ho-Pham et al. 2012). In the United States, lactose intolerance is around 20% for whites. It is much higher in non-white populations, affecting over half of Mexican Americans, 75% of African Americans, and approximately

80% of Native Americans (Scrimshaw and Murray 1988). Yet, in a society that privileges the white experience, this natural weaning process is medicalized as deviant (Gaard 2013). Weaned individuals, mistakenly believing that dairy is essential to human health, suffer immeasurably when they continue to consume those products.

Contrary to the Elwood et al. findings, other research supports the benefits of a vegan diet (one that includes *no* products from other animals) (Marsh, Zeuschner, and Saunders 2012). Products made with nonhuman animal milk are significant sources of cholesterol and contain no fiber (USDA N.D.). Dairy (and other nonhuman animal products for that matter) has been linked to obesity, atherosclerosis, cancer, diabetes (Robbins 1998; Marsh et al. 2012) resistance to antibiotics (Oliver, Murinda, and Jayarao 2011), and even *osteoporosis and bone fractures* (Cumming and Klineberg 1994; Feskanich et al. 1997). The dubious health claims promoted in the Milk Development Council's advertisements, then, have successfully obscured this scientific debate. Statements made by industries that exploit nonhuman animals are often legitimized when they are promoted by those state, medical, and educational institutions that are regularly bombarded by political pressure, free "educational" material, and funding from these immensely wealthy corporations (Robbins 1998; Nibert 2002).

5. Short-sighted skepticism

Brown has built a career on dismantling the harmful and exploitative claims-making of religious leaders, mediums, and scam artists, so his collaboration with Big Dairy is an anomaly, but worrying nonetheless. Unfortunately, it seems that skeptics often overlook the nonhuman animal industry's blatant pursuit of profit that so often obscures consumer awareness and may be jeopardizing human safety. Brown may as well be wearing a foamy brown Coca-Cola mustache, celebrating soda as "powerful stuff" – which is a real possibility given that Coca-Cola (2012) claims their soda products contribute to hydration and have marketed Vitaminwater (a product containing 33 grams of sugar) as a "healthy" beverage (Robbins 2010).

Again, Brown is not the only skeptic overlooking the misrepresentation of Nonhuman Animal products as healthful and necessary. Critical thinker Sam Harris stated in one interview that he supports extending moral consideration to other animals. In fact, he was once vegetarian, but he gave it up because he felt he "wasn't getting enough protein". This is an interesting problem given that much of the world's population abstains from the flesh of other animals for cultural reasons or for lack of resources. I am unaware

of any sound research that has located a correlation between Hinduism and protein deficiency, for instance [2]. However, research on the health of rural Chinese poor, conducted before and after the Westernization of their diet, does clearly indicate a correlation between veganism (or near-veganism) and reduced rates of diet-related diseases (Campbell 2006). Really, Harris need not worry. Protein is literally in just about everything from popcorn to pumpkin and from mushrooms to mustard greens. The beans, nuts, lentils, pasta, and grains comprising a large percentage of many vegan diets do not simply provide adequate protein, but are protein *powerhouses*. While it is true that certain vitamins and nutrients may require supplementation in the vegan diet, protein is not one of them (Craig 2009).

Richard Dawkins has also addressed the moral question of veganism in an interview with ethicist Peter Singer, though he ultimately chooses to remain a "reluctant" participant in nonhuman animal exploitation. Granting moral consideration to nonhuman animals, Dawkins postulates, is unrealistic given the pressure of societal norms (Dawkins 2008). Again, we must question *whose* society is being privileged in constituting that norm. Many non-European cultures have nurtured vegetarian or vegan traditions for thousands of years until colonization efforts imposed Western values and destroyed local cultures (Harper 2010; Wrenn 2011; Gaard 2013).

6. Conclusion

It does seem strange that some leaders in the skeptic community can't see through one of the greatest corporate-sponsored scams against humanity ever successfully conducted: the taken-for-granted notion that human animals require or otherwise greatly benefit from the dietary intake of the flesh or lactations of other animals. It is an even greater disappointment when influential skeptic leaders like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins openly acknowledge the moral worth of other animals, but retreat into familiar ethnocentric (and speciesist) social schemas. Brown's collaboration with the Milk Development Council and Harris's reference to a tired vegan-phobic stereotype suggests that science and rationality are ultimately embedded in prevailing social structures and dominant cultural norms. Promoting nonhuman animal breast milk and casting doubt on the healthfulness or utility of veganism positions anthropocentric European white

[2] Interestingly, Western colonizers did make this argument as a means of naturalizing British rule over Indians, as physician and vegetarian advocate John Harvey Kellogg explores in his 1923 publication, *The Natural Diet of Man* [*sic*].

culture as the unexamined norm. The experiences of nonhuman animals, African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and billions of people world-wide are generally ignored. "The White Stuff" that industry is peddling is undeniably *white* stuff.

References

Abeodbart. 2009. "Milk Drinkers Live Longer". *Blog*. http://derrenbrown.co.uk/milk-drinkers-live-longer/.

Brenneman, Richard. 1990. *Deadly Blessings: Faith Healing on Trial*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.

Brown, Derren. 2011. *Miracles for Sale* [Film]. United Kingdom: Channel 4.

Campbell, Colin T. 2006. *The China Study: the Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted and the Startling Implications for Diet, Weight Loss, and Long-term Health*. Dallas: BenBella Books.

Craig, Winston J. 2009. "Health Effects of Vegan Diets". *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 89 (5): 1627-33.

Cumming, Robert G., and Robin J. Klineberg. 1994. "Case-control Study of Risk Factors for Hip Fractures in the Elderly". *American Journal of Epidemiology* 139 (5): 493-503.

Dawkins, Richard. 2008. "Peter Singer". *The Genius of Darwin* [Film]. United Kingdom: Channel 4.

Elwood, Peter, Janet Pickering, Ann Fehily, Janie Hughes, and Andy Ness. 2004. "Milk Drinking, Ischaemic Heart Disease and Ischaemic Stroke I: Evidence from the Caerphilly Cohort". *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 58 (5): 711-7.

Elwood, Peter, Janet Pickering, Ian D. Givens, and John E. Gallacher. 2010. "The Consumption of Milk and Dairy Foods and the Incidence of Vascular Disease and Diabetes: an Overview of the Evidence". *Lipids* 45: 925-39.

Feskanich, Diane, Walter Willett, Meir Stampfer, and Graham Colditz. 1997. "Milk, Dietary Calcium, and Bone Fractures in Women: a 12-Year Prospective Study". *American Journal of Public Health* 87 (6): 992-7.

Fraser, Gary, Pramil Singh, and Hannelore Bennett. 1996. "Variables Associated with Cognitive Function in Elderly California Seventh-Day Adventists". *American Journal of Epidemiology* 143 (12): 1181-90.

Gaard, Greta. 2013. "Toward a Feminist Postcolonial Milk Studies". *American Quarterly* 65 (3): 595-618.

Gerdes, Sharon. 2009. "Fortification for Milk and Beverages". *Dairy Foods* (February).

Harper, Breeze. 2010. *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*. Brooklyn: Lantern Books.

Ho-Pham, Lan T., BQ Vu, Thai Q. Lai, ND Nguyen, and Tuan V. Nguyen. 2012. "Vegetarianism, Bone Loss, Fracture and Vitamin D: a Longitudinal Study in

Asian Vegans and Non-Vegans". *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 66 (1): 75-82.

Kelemen, Linda, Lawrence Kushi, David Jacobs Jr., and James Cerhan. 2005. "Associations of Dietary Protein with Disease and Morality in a Prospective Study of Postmenopausal Women". *American Journal of Epidemiology* 161 (3): 239-49.

Leong, Grace. 2007. "Hormone-Free Milk Ad Is False". *Daily Herald*. http://www.heraldextra.com/news/hormone-free-milk-ad-is-false/article_98d1cf4d-2f37-5f5f-90ac-e632a0b5aec8.html.

Mann, Jim, Paul Appleby, Timothy Key, and Margaret Thorogood. 1997. "Dietary Determinants of Ischaemic Heart Disease in Health Conscious Individuals". *Heart* 78: 450-5.

Marsh, Kate, Carol Zeuschner, and Angela Saunders. 2012. "Health Implications of a Vegetarian Diet: a Review". *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 6 (3): 250-67.

Milk Development Council. 2008. *Annual Report and Accounts 2007/2008*. London: Crown.

——— N.D.a. "Powerful Stuff". *Healthyliving* [Image]. United Kingdom: Milk Develoment Council.

——— N.D.b. "Unlock the Power Within". *Healthyliving* [Image]. United Kingdom: Milk Development Council.

Napoli, Maryann. 2001. "False Advertising Complaints against 'Milk Mustache' and 'Got Milk'? Ads Validated". *HealthFacts* 26 (10): 2.

Nibert, David. 2002. *Animal Rights / Human Rights: Entanglements of Oppression and Liberation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Oliver, Stephen, Sshelton Murinda, and Bhushan Jayarao. 2011. "Impact of Antibiotic Use in Adult Dairy Cows on Antimicrobial Resistance of Veterinary and Human Pathogens: a Comprehensive Review". *Foodborne Pathogens and Disease* 8 (3): 337-55.

Peters, Shawn Francis. 2008. *When Prayer Fails: Faith Healing, Children, and the Law*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. 2007. "PCRM's Complaint Halts Misleading Dairy Advertisements". *Good Medicine* 16 (3): 15.

Robbins, John. 2010. "The Dark Side of Vitaminwater". *Huffpost Healthy Living*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-robbins/the-dark-side-of-vitaminw_b_669716.html.

——— 1998. *Diet for a New America: How Your Food Choices Affect Your Health, Happiness, and the Future of Life on Earth*. Tiburon: H.J. Kramer Inc.

Scrimshaw, Nevin, and Edwina Murray. 1988. "Prevalence of Lactose Maldigestion". *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 48 (4): 1086-98.

The Coca-Cola Company. 2012. "Beverages & Health". *Beverage Institute for Health & Wellness*. http://www.beverageinstitute.org/en_us/pages/ahl-beverages-health.html.

Trichopoulou, Antonia, Theodora Psaltopoulou, Philippos Orfanos, and Dimitrios Trichopoulos. 2006. "Diet and Physical Activity in Relation to Overall Mor-

tality Amongst Adult Diabetics in a General Population Cohort". *Journal of International Medicine* 259 (9): 583-91.

USDA. N.D. "Dairy and Egg Products". *National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference*. http://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/search/list.

Van der Vijver, Lucy, Marieke van der Waal, Karin Weterings, Jacqueline Dekker, Evert Schouten, and Frans Kok. 1992. "Calcium Intake and 28-Year Cardiovascular and Coronary Heart Disease Mortality in Dutch Civil Servants". *International Journal of Epidemiology* 21 (1): 36-9.

Vesa, Tuula, Philippe Marteau, and Riitta Korpela. 2000. "Lactose Intolerance". *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* 19 (2): 1655-755.

Weise, Elizabeth. 2002. "PETA: 'Happy Cows' Ad Is a Lie". *USA Today*. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/2002-12-11-happy-cows_x.htm.

Yu, Yan Han, Anna Farmer, Diana Mager, and Noreen Willows. 2012. "Dairy Foods Are an Important Source of Calcium and Vitamin D among Canadian-Born and Asian-Born Chinese in Edmonton, Alberta". *Nutritional Research* 32 (3): 177-84.

Wrenn, Corey. 2011. "Resisting the Globalization of Speciesism: Vegan Abolitionism as a Site for Consumer-based Social Change". *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 9 (3): 9-27.