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# **What's Eating the Eater?**

## **Perspectives on the Everyday Anxiety of Food Consumption in Late Modernity**

**Jacob Östberg**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction: Food and Health

“Are You a Weekend Fatso?” (Aftonbladet, 2002-01-08) – this is merely one example of the type of suggestive messages we, as consumers, are fed with through the media on a day-to-day basis. Rarely does one single day pass by without consumers being faced with an endless stream of headlines suggesting do’s and don’ts that need to be acknowledged if consumers want to follow the path to a healthy life. There is a broad array of such messages of different types ranging from the usual ones telling us that the foods that we might have considered harmless are indeed bad for us:

“Barbecued hot dogs increase cancer risk” (Aftonbladet, 2001-06-28)  
“Coffee-lover? Watch out for incontinence” (Aftonbladet, 2001-12-11b)  
“20 hidden weight traps” (Aftonbladet, 2002-04-22) “Plastic wrappings around foodstuffs could cause cancer” (Aftonbladet, 2001-08-13)

Another kind of messages are the ones saying that the types of foods we have learnt to believe are good might not be as effective as we thought:

“Health foods not always healthy” (Aftonbladet, 2001-07-29) “The diet lunch is a fat trap” (Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 2000-10-27) “Green foods do not prevent cancer” (Dagens Nyheter, 2001-03-04)

Even more cunning are the features overthrowing the old ‘truths’ of what we thought was healthy by telling that the foods we have learnt to consider healthy might instead be downright dangerous:

“Olive-oil could give you cancer” (Aftonbladet, 2001-08-27, 2001-12-05) “Too much water could lead to death” (Aftonbladet, 2002-07-17) “Vitamins give you weak bones” (Dagens Nyheter, 2002-01-

01) “Diet soda could make you stupid” (Aftonbladet, 2001-12-17)  
“Diet products could make you fatter” (Aftonbladet, 2000-09-21)

The picture is not all that alarming though as there are frequent examples of articles featuring news of various foodstuffs having a positive effect on the state of our health:

“Eat broccoli – avoid cancer and gastric ulcer” (Aftonbladet, 2002-05-28a) “Eat fish and you will become healthy” (Aftonbladet, 2002-05-28b) “Go on a fruit diet – and become healthier!” (Expressen, 2002-07-22a) “Pasta and tomato sauce good for the prostate” (Aftonbladet, 2002-01-15) “Eat frequently – lower your cholesterol” (Aftonbladet, 2002-01-01) “Alzheimer’s could be prevented with curry” (Aftonbladet, 2001-12-11a) “At risk: more bananas, fewer strokes?” (The New York Times, 2002-08-20)

Sometimes the old ‘truths’ of what is bad for us is even radically altered. There are some examples of articles presenting findings showing that we can continue with the habits we have so long been told that we have to discontinue if we want to pursue a healthy life:

“Fast food could be healthy” (Expressen, 2002-07-22b) “Be a couch-potato and lose weight” (Aftonbladet, 2002-03-07) “Eat more frequently... and lose weight” (Aftonbladet, 2001-12-04)

Of course, it is not all news – many times the same old messages are trumpeted out over and over again:

“Federal diet study: Eat less to lose weight” (CNN.com, 2001-01-01)

But every once in a while something more radical comes up that consumers have to make sense of and potentially incorporate into the knowledgebase they use in dealing with their day-to-day food consumption:

“Scientist: Stop eating – become 150 years old” (Aftonbladet, 2002-07-22)

It seems from these introductory quotations from the media, that it is fair to say that most consumers are faced with vast array of different messages on the relations between food and health. Over the last decades, a seemingly ever-increasing emphasis has been put on health

related issues in various occasions (cf. Bell & Valentine, 1997; Shilling, 1993; Warde, 1997). This can be seen as virtually everyone involved in food, including food producers, retailers, farmers, governmental advisors, TV-cooks, cooking magazines, health magazines, et cetera, keep stressing potential health-beneficial qualities certain food products might have. In addition, no foods potentially harmful to consumers' health pass by unnoticed – health scares of different kinds have become part of our day-to-day life. Pasi Falk asserts that over the last decade there has been a change in the meaning structure given to food (Falk, 1996). He divides the messages about food into four dimensions: fuel, poison, medicine, and pleasurable, and claims that there has been a shift in the meaning of food giving an ever more emphasized role to the duality of medicine/poison (1996: 183). While there are indeed still a lot of messages in the media catering to the more hedonistic aspects of food – not least exemplified by the proliferation of TV-cooks over the last years – it is the medicine/poison aspects of food that get headline attention.

A reading of these different messages shows us that they are by no means homogeneous. Rather, they build on a large pool of different assumptions about how the body is affected by what we consume. On one end of the spectrum we have new-age influenced messages stressing the importance of having a holistic approach to well being, such as finding some natural balance and thus reaching your pre-destined comfort-weight (e.g. Amelia, November 2001). On the other side there are contemporary Western nutritionist ideas utilizing a cause-effect logic where solutions are offered to specific problems, such as cutting down on calorie-intake to lower the Body Mass Index (BMI) (e.g. Aftonbladet, 2002-04-14).

It is clear that there is not *one* idea of what the concept of health stands for. Instead, there is a multitude of different claims and counterclaims being made by various types of experts. In his book *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens, 1991) British sociologist Anthony Giddens takes a closer look at the types of advice given to individuals in self-help books and cites Vernon Coleman's book *Bodysense* in which he writes:

If you believed everything you read about foodstuffs these days, you'd probably never eat again. Turn on the TV or the radio, open a magazine or a newspaper and you'll see horrifying stories about the

dreadful things your grocer is doing to you. That in itself would be bad enough. It's not much fun sitting down a good-looking meal if you're worried that it might be your last. But the whole business has been made even more worrying by the fact that the information being offered now frequently conflicts with last week's data... so what is the truth about the food we eat? ... What is good for you and what is bad for you? What should you avoid and what can you eat with impunity? (Giddens, 1991: 101)

Giddens goes on to scrutinize the claims made in the book in which Coleman tries to provide authoritative answers to the questions posed. The problem with Coleman's book, and all other books like it, is that whatever answers they give, there is someone else disputing them, in an equally authoritarian manner, in another setting – e.g. in a dozen other books in the same self-help section in the bookstore where you could find Coleman's book. From Giddens' perspective it all boils down to the main problem that in circumstances of late modernity, many forms of risk do not admit of clear assessment, because of the ever-changing knowledge environment which frames them. Even risk assessments within relatively closed settings – such as the relationships between certain foods and health – are often only valid 'until further notice' (Giddens, 1991: 32, 99 pp.). Consumers wanting to find their way within these discourses on food and health and the connections between the two therefore stand before an arduous task. It can be argued, furthermore, that consumers in the Western world experience that it is necessary to take these different messages into account as studies have shown that there is a tendency for people to place ever more importance on the body – and thus the well-being of the body – as constitutive of the self (Giddens, 1991: 102; Shilling, 1993: 3). Food consumption is of utmost centrality to our sense of self-identity – the German saying 'Man ist, was man isst'<sup>1</sup> is, according to French sociologist Claude Fischler (1988: 279), true both in a biological and a symbolical sense. In light of the abundant availability and salience of nutritional information, consumers are forced either to acknowledge or to ignore the food and health related claims repeatedly in their day-to-day lives as the nutritive value of food has become a moral issue (Rozin, 1998: 23). Fischler (1988: 281) captures the essential features of this process when he writes:

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<sup>1</sup> You are what you eat

Each act of incorporation [of food] implies not only a risk but also a chance and a hope – of becoming more what one is, or what one would like to be. Food makes the eater: it is therefore natural that the eater should try to make himself by eating.

## Health in Late Modernity

It is my aim in this dissertation to show how consumers navigate between and make use of the cacophony of different voices of food and health in producing stories of their food consumption outlooks and practices. To be able to reach an understanding of the increased interest in food and health, the conditions that have formed the milieu in which this trend is thriving must be briefly laid out.

## Sketching the Contours of Late Modernity

Throughout the last centuries Western thought has been heavily influenced by what is generally referred to as the modern movement. This implies an emphasis on scientific rationality and logical reason giving a hegemonic status to natural science and an emphasis on material progress through the application of scientific technologies. Central in the project of modernity was that the irrationality of myth and religion should be overthrown by the accumulation of objective knowledge comprised by the extensive efforts to develop rational science, universal law, and absolute truth (cf. Firat & Dholakia, 1998: 63 pp.; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Shilling, 1993). As a consequence, (natural) science was seen as having the only tools available for understanding and presenting the world. The modern movement consists of several institutional dimensions concerning the modes of social life and organization which emerged in post-feudal Europe. Stephen Brown captures the essence of these developments:

The project of modernity, in short, embraced the idea of progress, rejoiced in the power of reason, lauded scientific discovery and technological innovation, espoused the ascent of man, anticipated freedom from oppression and held that, once its fundamental laws and mechanisms were understood, the physical world as we know it could be analyzed, planned and controlled. (1993, p. 21)

Even though the starting point of the modern movement can be disputed (as accounted for in Brown, 1995: 65 pp.), it can roughly be compared to the industrialization of the Western world from the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment, i.e. from the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, and onwards (cf. Giddens, 1990: 1; Giddens, 1991: 15).

Giddens has developed an account of modernity in which he describes modern institutions as radically altering the nature of day-to-day social life and thereby affecting the most personal aspects of our experience (1990; 1991). In characterizing the present time, Giddens uses the terms “*high*” or “*late modernity*”<sup>2</sup> to indicate that the institutions, and thereby the living conditions, in the contemporary Western world have changed and differ from all preceding forms of social order (1991: 4). From Giddens’ perspective, however, rather than entering into a period of postmodernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universal than before (Giddens, 1990: 3). Hence his use of the terms high or late modernity rather than the many times applied notion of postmodernity. Giddens identifies some postmodern tendencies in our present day living conditions but argues that it is too early to talk about a radical break from modernity and instead chooses to see the development as a radicalization of modernity (for a more elaborated discussion of this see Giddens, 1990: 45 pp.).

According to Giddens, modernity is separated from traditional social orders by a number of discontinuities (1990: 6 pp.). First, there is the *pace of change*, which, during modernity, is quite extreme compared to earlier times. This is especially true with regards to technology but it also pervades all other spheres of society. Second, there is the *scope of change*, which alludes to the tendency for different areas of the globe to be drawn into interconnections with one another. These globalizing tendencies can be seen as there is an intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice

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<sup>2</sup> Giddens (1991) terminology tells us that in the late modern age we are living under the conditions of high modernity. Confer with Firat & Venkatesh (1995) where modernity refers to the time period and modernism refers to the philosophical and sociocultural ideas and conditions marking this time period.

versa (Giddens, 1990: 64). What happens in one part of the world simply cannot be regarded as a local phenomenon any more. This becomes especially evident from a consumer perspective in these times of (supposed) free trade where agricultural policies in e.g. the US has consequences for the foodstuffs European consumers find on the shelves of their local supermarkets. Last, Giddens talks about how the intrinsic *nature of modern institutions* is altogether different from what could be found in prior historical periods. Especially the rise of *capitalism* – defined as a system of commodity production which is centered upon the relation between private ownership of capital and propertyless wage labor – and *industrialism* – defined as the use of inanimate sources of material power in the production of goods and the central role of machinery in the production process (Giddens, 1990: 55p.) – has led to the wholesale dependence of production upon inanimate power sources and the thoroughgoing commodification of products and wage labor (Giddens, 1990: 6).

The dynamism of modernity derives from what Giddens terms the *separation of time and space* and their recombination in new forms. This in turn leads to a *disembedding* of social systems – disembedding being the “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite tracts spans of time-space (Giddens, 1990: 21). In conditions of modernity, larger and larger numbers of people live in circumstances in which disembedded institutions, linking local practices with globalized social relations, organize major aspects of day-to-day life (Giddens, 1990: 79). The food and health phenomena looked upon in this study is an area where this becomes especially relevant considering such aspects as the recurrent more or less global food-scars that frequently challenge the authority of the expert systems.

One of the mechanisms behind the increased disembedding, which remove social relations from the immediacies of context, is the proliferation of expert systems. Expert systems are defined as “*systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today*” (Giddens, 1990: 27). For expert systems to be meaningful individuals must place trust in them. Trust is related to the absence in time and space brought forward by the separation of these two entities; there would be no need

to trust anyone whose activities were continually visible and whose thought processes were transparent, or to trust any system whose workings were wholly known and understood (Giddens, 1990: 33). Giddens defines trust as “*confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity [...] of another, or in the correctness of [...] technical knowledge*” (1990: 34).

The nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up with the mechanisms of trust in expert systems. The reliance placed by lay actors upon expert systems is not just a matter – as was normally the case in the pre-modern world – of generating a sense of security about an independently given universe of events. Rather, it is a matter of the assessment of benefit and risk in circumstances where expert knowledge does not just provide the means of calculating probabilities but actually creates (or reproduces) the universe of events, as a result of the continual reflexive implementation of that very knowledge (Giddens, 1990: 84). In his account of late modernity, Giddens focuses on the emergence of a reflexivity wherein technical knowledge is continuously reappropriated by lay agents as part of their routine dealings with various types of expert accounts they encounter on a day-to-day basis (1990: 144). This type of reflexivity is needed in order to ensure a sense of basic trust under conditions where we, as consumers, are constantly bombarded with messages of risks whose seriousness it is beyond our scope, as lay persons, to be able to assess. Due to the omnipresence of reflexivity, new mechanisms of self-identity that are shaped by – yet also shape – the institutions of modernity have emerged. In Giddens’ view, the self is not a passive entity determined by external influences. Instead the self becomes a reflexive project sustained through a revisable narrative of self-identity (Giddens, 1990, 1991). Self-identity, according to Giddens, is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. Rather, it is “*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*” (Giddens, 1991: 53). Self-identity, then, is not that is something that is just given and remains stable. It is something that needs to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. (Giddens, 1991: 52 pp.)

## The Body and Self-Identity

The radicalization of the general conditions of modernity has led to, among other things, an increase in the degree of control that nation-states in general, and Western medical professions in particular, have been able to exert over the bodies of their citizens (cf. Shilling, 1993). The authoritative knowledge of the medical complex is thereby turned into a means of exercising power. French scholar Michel Foucault has, throughout his works, in different ways dealt with the relationship between knowledge and power. In particular, he was interested in the knowledge *of* human beings and power that acts *on* human beings (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000: 301 pp.). In Foucault's line of reasoning, the social sciences, in which he includes medicine, *define* human beings at the same time as they *describe* them. When institutions, seemingly objectively, divide people into normal and abnormal, it is ideologically loaded as these definitions are then used to control and regulate behavior (Lindgren, 1998). In his book *History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self* (1986), Foucault looks at how, during the fourth century in Rome, the knowledge of how to take care of oneself to ensure medical healthiness is turned into an obligating regimen of how we are supposed to take care of ourselves. Medicine was conceived of not only as a technique of intervention in cases of illness, but it was also supposed to define, in the form of a body of knowledge, a way of living, a reflective mode of relation to oneself, to one's body, and to food. In this way, a form of regimen – a voluntary and rational structure of conduct – was proposed (Foucault, 1986: 100). The description of these regimens is strikingly similar to the aforementioned description of the reflexive monitoring of the body in late modernity described by Giddens (Giddens, 1991), and Shilling (Shilling, 1993). Foucault, not being oblivious to the presence of similar regimens in modern times, in concluding the book discusses how many of the regimens of this time became manifested in Christianity and how they, in a general way, have remained remarkably continuous since the classical period (Foucault, 1986: 235, 103). They have, however, as pointed out by Giddens and Shilling, become radicalized in late modernity leading to an even more emphasized degree of control.

With the emergence, ever since the rise of modernity, of science as the prime vessel of truth, the power of religious authorities to define and regulate bodies declined significantly. While modern society has

developed alongside a gradual desacralization of social life, it has failed to replace religious certainties with scientific certainties of the same order. In the vacuum created after the demise of the religious authorities there has been a gradual privatization of meaning. This has left increasing numbers of individuals alone with the task of establishing and maintaining values to make sense of their daily lives. This collapse of normative regulation, so-called anomie, is a basic feature of modern sociology following Durkheim. In the wake of the dislocation of authority, and the following weakened morality and society, Durkheim saw individuals left ever more exposed to circumstance and fate, which he characterized as a pathological state for society (Nisbet, 1993: 300 pp.).

When religious authorities and grand political narratives no longer provide meaning structures as blueprints for self-identities, at least the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world (Shilling, 1993). The increasingly reflexive ways in which people are relating to their bodies, and the parallel unprecedented individualization of the body, can be seen as one of the defining features of late modernity (Giddens, 1991). It can be argued that the idea of a reflexive culture is an idiom for the expression of a new type of consumer potential. In the late modern age, where national and transnational political-economic entities no longer hold the same legitimacy and power to socialize through the provision of integrating values with which citizens can affiliate, cultural reflexivity through consumption practices becomes the cultural response (Askegaard & Kjeldgaard, 2002: 15).

An increasing amount of people are concerned with the health, shape and appearance of their bodies as expressions of individual identity as expressed by Christopher Lasch:

As the world takes on a more and more menacing appearance, life becomes a never-ending search for health and well-being through exercise, dieting, drugs, spiritual regimens of various kinds, psychic self-help, psychiatry. For those who have withdrawn interest from the outside world except in so far as it remains a source of gratification and frustration, the state of their own health becomes an all-absorbing concern. (Lasch quoted in Giddens, 1990: 123)

An individual must find her or his identity among the strategies and options provided by the different available expert systems (Giddens, 1990: 124). In Lasch's view, this obligation is strong enough for individuals to make the search an all-absorbing concern. In this way, changes in intimate aspects of personal life are directly tied to the establishment of social connections of a very wide scope. Giddens even suggests that in late modernity, for the first time in human history, 'self' and 'society' are interrelated in a global milieu (Giddens, 1991: 32). This link between the globalizing tendencies of modernity and self-identity leads to a *transformation of intimacy* in contexts of day-to-day life. This transformation of intimacy involves a concern for self-fulfillment, which is not just a narcissistic defense against an externally threatening world, over which individuals have little control, but also part in a positive appropriation of circumstances in which globalized influences intrude upon everyday life (Giddens, 1990: 124).

There is somewhat of a paradox hidden in the search for healthiness; presently we are provided with large amounts of tools, in the form of e.g. so-called healthy foods, promising us an unprecedented degree of control of our bodies. This would, intuitively, point towards an increasing ability to exercise control. At the same time, there is so much information available about what tools to use and how to use them that the knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them is thrown into radical doubt (Shilling, 1993: 3). Thus, the increased availability of so-called tools and information does not lead to an increased sense of control but instead to an increased sense of not being able to stay in control. The doubt among consumers about what is the right path to follow in order to live a healthier life is not hard to understand considering peculiarities such as the fact that the curve depicting the number of food related diseases looks so strikingly similar to the curve depicting sales of so-called healthy foods (Heasman & Mellentin, 2001). This is somewhat of a false comparison as it might say nothing about the potential functionality of the products; the consumers actually consuming the products might not be the ones the products were initially intended for by the producing companies. Nevertheless, on an aggregate level, the example points to the inherent problems with fighting the food related diseases with increased consumption. Regulating ones body through food consumption seems

to be less of a straightforward autostrada than a winding road of hopes and possibilities.

## Food and Risk

Many of the messages about the connections between food and health stress the potential risk related to food consumption. Some would even claim that this development has gone far enough for some consumers to experience being constantly at risk. Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist, has coined the term Risk Society and shows how the consumer in the late modern age shapes risk profiles where they, based on different messages sent out by various experts, assess what they have to avoid in order to survive their day-to-day life (Beck, 1992). It should be stressed that consumers *experience* being at risk. To pose the question whether it is actually more risky to engage in food consumption today from a natural science point of view completely misses the point; the idea of the risk society is a social science concept - not a natural science concept. It is consumers' experience of being at risk that is central as that experience *de facto* changes the life conditions for consumers and influences their consumption behaviors. This experience of being at risk is fueled by reports of food related diseases as being one of the main threats to the well-being of the western world (Beck, 1992: 20; IASO, 1999; WHO, 2002c; WHO Europe, 2002; WHO Pan American, 2003).

In this line of reasoning the two concepts of health and risk are intimately connected and can be seen as two sides of the same coin. For consumers this becomes evident in evaluating different food products available on the market. As soon as a product is positioned as being healthy the relationships to all other products are simultaneously changed and their position is *relatively* more risky. For someone subscribing to the common belief that consumption of fat poses serious threats to the state of one's health, the introduction of low-fat milk on the market instantaneously moved the (previously) ordinary milk from its neutral position to a position as the 'fat' milk, and thus to a position as the unhealthy alternative. Despite the fact that the causal relationship between a product's attributes and its alleged function on the body are usually far from linear the messages about the products are usually simplified to such an extent that the consumers are led to believe that

such a linear causal relationship exists. This can be likened to what Roland Barthes calls modern myths (Barthes, 1969) wherein the dominating natural science/medical discourse has the power to define the relationship between a certain food product and its alleged function on the body.

A contemporary illustration of a product that has reached such a mythic level is olive oil. Over the last few years olive oil has been framed as an elixir of life (cf. Falk, 1996) that speaks directly to consumers' health/risk recognition (cf. Visser, 1999: 125). With olive oil, scientific studies showing a positive correlation between the usage of olive oil, as opposed to other cooking fats, and certain parameters usually connected, at least according to contemporary Western medicine, to the well being of consumers lurk somewhere in the background. In the everyday life of consumers this is turned into a simple heuristic saying that everything containing olive oil is healthy. When Göteborgs Kex, a Swedish manufacturer of crackers, recently introduced a new version of their classic 'Digestive' cracker named 'Digestive Oliv' where 30 percent of the fat used is olive oil<sup>3</sup> they are clearly alluding to olive oil's status as an elixir of life and the fact that consumers are making the connection between olive oil and health. As will be shown later there are ample empirical examples of such mythical heuristic constructions that consumers use to make sense of their day-to-day lives.

## The Research Project: Development of High-Value-Added Food Products and Services

The research project reported in this dissertation is part of a larger project aimed at looking at how the food industry responds to the recent developments amongst food consumers and in the food industry. The food market is in a state of rapid change as described by British sociologist Alan Warde:

...consider some of the trends that readily come to mind when reflecting on present day experiences of shopping and eating.

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<sup>3</sup> Göteborgs Kex's web-page <http://www.goteborgskex.se> gives more information about the 'Digestive Oliv' cracker.

Enormous numbers of products are constantly made available by food manufacturers, some of which fail, but others sell. Fresh produce from around the world is routinely available, the seasons and geographical distance apparently overcome by an increasingly concentrated retail sector. The proportions of income spent on food and on different kinds of foodstuffs continues to fall, as predicted by Engel's law<sup>4</sup> [...]. The component parts of the average diet are changing, driven partly by more prominent concern with health and nutrition, a process promoted in part by government and documented in attitude surveys, but resisted in part by manufacturers and consumers. Domestic routines are altering: cooked breakfasts and midday meals at home are in decline, and domestic kitchens display greater variety of equipment. The market has expanded for the commercial delivery of meals and snacks, at fast-food restaurants, in public houses, through home deliveries or take-away food, as indeed it has for complete, pre-prepared, chilled or frozen packages, purchased from the supermarket and reheated at home. There is burgeoning publicity for food and cooking, with new magazine titles, television programmes, sales of recipe books, eating-out columns in local and national newspapers. The character of food production and delivery is changing, subject to similar pressures for industrial restructuring that affect other major industrial sectors. Competition generates more advertising and promotion. Meanwhile signs of popular resistance are apparent as movements for protection of the environment, animal rights and vegetarianism become prominent. Food scares, eating disorders and obsession with body shape equally suggest enhanced concern, and often anxiety, about food. All these processes are widely acknowledged, recognized and discussed. Together they constitute *prima facie* evidence of rapid and fundamental change. (Warde, 1997: 23)

To be able to stay competitive under these conditions of rapid change, companies are devoting themselves to R&D projects. Many companies are, just like Göteborgs Kex in the olive oil example above, recognizing the potential profitability of the 'health market' and over the last couple of years there has been an outburst of products launched, or re-launched, claiming to be healthy in one way or the other. The dream of carving out a niche within the health domain with potential for high profits is flourishing as evidenced by suggestive titles like *Healthy*

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<sup>4</sup> Warde quotes statistics from the UK but similar trends can be seen both in Sweden and the US.

*People, Healthy Profits?* for bestselling management books directed to the food industry (Heasman & Mellentin, 2001).

There is a plethora of products on the market catering to the health conscious consumer ranging from the, by now, quite common diet products, such as diet-soda, to products making more specific claims, such as rose hip soup containing *Lactobacillus plantarum* 299v, a bacteria that, according to the company website, "*exist[s] in abundance in the body but which, due to the demands of a busy, stressful lifestyle are often depleted*" (ProViva, 2003). An increasing demand from the consumer side towards healthier food in general, and more easily accessible healthy food in particular, *supposedly* fuel the increasing supply of 'healthy' new products. This increased demand that the companies claim to be sensing does not emerge by itself but is an outcome of an intricate reciprocal process of consumer research both in and outside academia, promotional activities, and media. Companies sensing this increasing demand, or just following others in the field in order not to lag behind, are getting involved in R&D projects aimed at developing new products with a healthy profile.

Within academia there are also efforts to look into issues of how to develop healthier food products. This dissertation is part of a project titled 'Development of High-Value-Added Food Products and Services'. According to the research plan, the research project aims at analyzing '*...the matching of consumer needs, the new driving forces in the market and the options presented by new technology.*'<sup>5</sup> The research team combines efforts of researchers at the Department of Food Engineering at Lund Institute of Technology with efforts from researchers at the Department of Business Administration at the School of Economics and Management, Lund University. The logic behind this setup is that with an increased insights into business strategy and knowledge about consumers it would be easier for food engineers to develop products that will eventually be successful in the marketplace.

One of the goals of the project is to develop a product processed in such a way as to make it healthier and more convenient than other

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<sup>5</sup> From the LIFS-homepage, <http://www.lri.lu.se/lifs/>. LIFS (Lund International Food Studies) is a research program at LRI (Lund Research Institute) affiliated with the School of Economics and Management, Lund University.

similar products already on the market. As suggested by the title of the project, Development of High Value Added Food Products and Services, the goal is, in essence, to develop a high value added product. I would suggest that from the perspective of the project the product could even be framed as a *high value added healthy product*. The idea cited above, that an innovation should be matching any existing consumer needs 'out there' is highly doubtful since consumer 'needs' in themselves could be deconstructed and questioned (cf. Baudrillard, 1981). It is important to avoid making premature judgments about what is valuable for the consumers as that usually implies inferring an industry perspective on the consumers. High value added products is a definition given by the industry that does not necessarily have any counterpart in the consumers' universe. For whom do we mean that the value is added when we talk about high value added products? Usually when the term is used in management texts it refers to a product that in some way has been diversified from other products to gain a competitive advantage. In accordance with contemporary strategy literature it is important to gain sustainable competitive advantages that cannot easily be copied by competitors. Such diversification might indeed be of high value to the producing companies. However, it is often assumed that the differentiating features of the products are also of importance and value to the consumers. One should be careful in making an assumption that the value added by the companies is also the value perceived by the consumers. An illustration of a company passing judgement on what consumers place value on is provided on the website of Sweden's largest poultry producer (Kronfågel, 2000). Some of the chicken sold by the company feature a little pop up timer<sup>6</sup> stuck into the meat that pops up when the chicken is ready. The explanation on the website reads *'The pop up timer is worth 1.50 kronor to the consumer'*. After corresponding with the company my suspicion that 1.50 kronor was in fact the cost for the company was proven correct as evidenced by their answer to my e-mail enquiry: *'The 1.50 refers to the cost for the consumer: The cost for the pop up timer itself, the labor cost for applying the timer, the mark-up in the store and 25% VAT'* Still, the belief of the company was that since consumers pay for the

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<sup>6</sup> This is called 'Klarknapp' in Swedish; they are featured in the US on turkeys and are usually referred to as 'pop up timers' or 'the perfect timer'.

feature, it must be worth 1.50 to the consumer. The possibility that some consumers might not care at all about the pop up timer and that some consumers might be willing to pay more for the feature was not taken into consideration.

My part in the overall research project ‘Development of High Value Added Food Products and Services’ is to contribute with knowledge about consumer behavior; the project-description explicitly states: “...of key importance to our research is the development of high value added as experienced by the consumer”. The project-description goes on to suggest what might be important from a consumer perspective:

We take a special interest in the blend of various factors that influence the consumers’ appreciation of the unique qualities of products and services. In the creation of competitive products and services, the interaction between product- and technology based tangible qualities and the intangible qualities that brands, image, certificates, packaging design, and sales methods represent is crucial for the success and the competitive strength of the developed products. (LIFS, 2001)

By looking at these extracts from the project-description it is evident that one of the starting points of this project is that it is possible to identify what is of value to consumers and that a product can be developed where these valuable traits are added.

## Widening the Scope

To study consumers and consumer behavior from a managerial perspective with the specific interest to improve the efficiency of business operations has long been the explicit or implicit goal for much business research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Firat, 1999). From the early eighties and onwards, however, there has been a rise in discussions about extending the scope of consumer research within the marketing discipline to studying consumption as an important social phenomenon. The typical focus of research within the discipline has been criticized for being too narrow:

Business disciplines and academics have long damaged their respectability by limiting the audience for which they have produced knowledge and provided their services. This audience is, in general,

the organizations, but specifically, the business corporations. (Firat, 2001)

In efforts to get away from the solely business oriented approaches, efforts have been taken to find new outlets for more critical consumer research. There are even proponents calling for the study of consumption for furthering the interest of consumers as exemplified by the introduction of the online-journal *Journal of Research for Consumers* (JRC Homepage2001) in 2001. Much of the more critical research build on the idea that “*the consumer is a construction, not a phenomenon independent of the points of view human culture has developed and institutionalized*” (Firat, 2001) and therefore calls for a more thorough investigation of the relationships between the three phenomena consumption, markets and culture (Firat, 1997). Another new journal, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, serves as an example of this new focus and has been introduced in “*an effort to provide an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary forum for further and more radical discussion of these three crucial phenomena*” (Firat, 1997: 2). In this more critical view consumers do not exist ‘out there’ independent of the market(ing) system but is instead, reciprocally, both a product and producer of this very system. The taken-for-granted notions that it is possible to identify what is of value to consumers and that a product can be developed where these valuable traits are added must therefore be questioned. The point of departure in this dissertation is instead that food products stand in an arbitrary relationship to a more or less abstract idea of ‘health’ as defined by various different experts. These culturally defined ideas are disseminated by both media and marketing and as a result, health is never experienced as an objective quality of food, but, rather, is shaped by cultural understandings that construct how health is understood and experienced (cf. Askegaard, Jensen, & Holt, 1999: 331). How consumers make sense of the various available notions regarding health is thus shaped by the cultural setting in which they are situated.

It is my aim in this dissertation to show how globalized modern institutions permeate the daily lives of consumers. More specifically, I will look at how the various claims being made by different expert systems are reproduced in the language of consumers. Three areas will crystallize as important in showing this: how is *healthy* and *unhealthy*

*eating* conceived of and spoken about in consumers' consumption stories; how does living under the shadow of all the messages provided by various experts resonate in consumers' stories of *self-identity*; and how do the consumers deal with the notion of *risk* in stories of handling their day-to-day food consumption.

## Organization of Dissertation

In order to facilitate the reading of subsequent chapters and to invite the reader into my frame of reference, the following chapter, chapter two – *Theoretical Inspiration* – gives an introduction to my ontological and epistemological points of departure and discusses the field of interpretive consumer research in relation to this dissertation. Following that is a section of three chapters theorizing various aspects of food and health. In chapter three – *Reflexive Food Consumption* – different approaches to the study of food consumption are introduced. The changing conditions of contemporary food consumption are looked upon leading up to the recent focus on food consumption in relation to the body and health. Chapter four – *Food and Health* – looks more in depth at how health and risk is dealt with in relation to food. Focus is put on how various actors discursively construct messages of health and how this influences consumers. In the fifth chapter – *McDonaldized Food Production* – a closer look at the conditions of modern food production is taken leading to a discussion of the potential irrationality involved in modernized production techniques. The next section consists of four chapters presenting the empirical work. Chapter six – *Researching Food Consumption* – introduces the procedures of the fieldwork for this dissertation. Chapter seven – *Categorizing Food Consumption* – discusses how the informants categorize their food consumption activities according to how they perceive these activities with regards to health. In chapter eight – *Food and Self-Identity* – I look at how the participants place their food consumption into a larger narrative context of who they are. Then, in chapter nine – *Speaking of Food* – different ways of relating to the available expert systems are introduced and various strategies the informants use in motivating why their food consumption deviates from the health norms they have set up for themselves are discussed. The last section of the dissertation consists of chapter ten – *The*

*Everyday Anxiety of Contemporary Food Consumption* – wherein a condensed picture of the main findings are presented and related to the larger framework of late modernity.

## Chapter Two

### Theoretical Inspiration

As will be expanded upon in the next chapter, food consumption is a well-researched area within the social sciences. Also within marketing, research on food has been conducted and, perhaps not surprising given the last decade's focus on health issues, quite a few studies have been devoted to trying to figure out how consumers look at different types of healthy products or concepts. But, as has long been the tradition within the social sciences, these studies of *consumption* begin and end with the processes of *production* (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997: 3). The main part of the studies start in the product end of the line with some *a priori* definition of what is a healthy and unhealthy product or concept and then try to figure out how consumers will value or interpret this. Examples of such studies regarding food are: trying to find out how much healthier a product must be to justify a higher price or a less appealing taste (cf. Kilsby & Nyström, 1998); looking at whether adding certain substances beneficial to health will increase consumers' value perception of a product (Poulsen, 1999); experimentally testing how nutritional information is processed by consumers (Corney, Shepherd, Hedderley, & Nanayakkara, 1994) (Mazis & Raymond, 1997); evaluating how consumers' react to messages about unhealthy ingredients in food (Chipman, Kendall, Auld, Slater, & Keeefe, 1995); and looking at how trends in nutrition information have affected overall spending patterns (Ippolito & Mathios, 1994). Where these studies undoubtedly tell us something about how consumers view certain products or product features they do not really tell us anything about how consumers think about health in their day-to-day lives. One problem is that these studies deal with the concepts of healthy and unhealthy in a taken-for-granted manner as if the dichotomy of the healthy and the unhealthy with regards to food is

a God-given one with clear natural boundaries. This might very well be the case from a natural science standpoint, even though the natural scientists themselves so far have not been able to reach consensus – as a matter of fact the history of nutritional and medical research has been marked by many reversals and changes in received opinion (cf. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 146).

## Moving Away from the Traditional Perspective

The abovementioned studies all share some assumptions about how the consuming individual should be understood that shape their presented view of consumers, food, and health. Østergaard and Jantzen (2000) give some perspectives on the epistemological development in how consumers have been studied over the last 40 years. The authors suggest that there has been an evolution that can be described as four different perspectives: buyer behavior, consumer behavior, consumer research, and consumption studies. Under the first perspective, buyer behavior, focus was put on the buying process and the scientific foundation was behaviorist physiology leading to a view of consumption as mechanical and instinct driven. In this view human beings are said to be undergoing an ongoing stimuli-response process where ‘fundamental needs’ are the mechanisms directing behavior, hence the human being is seen as a pure physiological phenomenon. The second perspective, consumer behavior, put emphasis on the broader scope of consumers’ behaviors before and after the purchase of goods rather than just the purchase situation. The scientific foundation in this perspective was cognitive psychology and the interaction between the human being and the world is approached as ongoing information processing where the human being learns attitudes towards the environment. During the heyday of these first two perspectives, i.e. until the early eighties, logical empiricism thoroughly grounded in the positivist tradition was the dominant philosophical tenet behind virtually all consumer research (Anderson, 1986). This was not unique to the study of consumers within marketing but was also the case within most other social sciences (Hughes, 1990). Although few nowadays explicitly state that they regard themselves as positivists, positivism’s influence has inspired much of social research’s most used research instruments, such as the survey, statistical models, the idea of research as hypothesis-testing and

theory corroboration to mention but a few (Hughes, 1990: 16). A basic assumption behind these approaches is that consumers behave in a rational way and are able to react to the researchers' instruments in a proper and truthful manner. (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000: 11pp.)

The food and health related studies mentioned in the introduction to this chapter all belong to these two perspectives as they more or less assume that before making a choice, consumers collect and make use of all available information in order to make the best possible choice. As a result of this way of reasoning it is assumed that a consumer behaving in what the researchers believe is a sub-optimal way must lack either some information or an ability or opportunity to process this information. Thus, what the (natural) scientific community defines as, problems of unhealthy diets are reduced to being information problems, as perfect information is required to make correct choices in a market economy. Fürst (1988: 91) points out that even though there is usually not an explicit model of man in studies of food consumption, there is usually an implicit model showing striking similarities to the 'Homo Economicus' model. The assumption of homo economicus is to postulate an actor with dispositions to act rationally in a technoeconomic sense (Baudrillard, 1998: 69 pp.; Hughes, 1990: 99). As it is usually found that consumers do not act according to the hypothesized rationality, explanations for this must be found elsewhere. Sometimes explanations are sought in how consumers value other aspects of the products than the researchers had assumed. For example, a consumer not choosing to buy a healthy product alternative when she is aware that one is available must value some feature, such as a lower price or a more appealing taste, highly enough not to choose the healthy alternative. The unforeseen outcome of the consumer's action is thereby seen as an information problem. The conclusion of these studies all more or less suggest that if only the consumers could be informed that e.g. the higher price or the less appealing taste of a healthier alternative is 'justified', they would make a 'correct' choice as if they were adhering to a kind of internal cost-benefit analyses. In all these examples it is assumed that consumers make rational choices by processing, in a computer-like fashion, all the information they have stored in memory or are able to gather at the time of the decision-making.

In the beginning of the 1980s some researchers started to break away from these two traditional approaches on the basis that they were far too limiting and that many interesting and essential aspects of consumption were missed. Instead, what is referred to as an interpretive turn was taken (Sherry, 1991). For consumer behavior scholars to venture into interpretive research was in no way unique. Rather, this was a logical extension of the overall developments throughout the social sciences during the last century (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997: 96pp.). Throughout the philosophy of science, the hegemony of rationality as proposed by science and, perhaps especially, the church has been questioned ever since the late eighteenth century. Giddens suggests that, during the Enlightenment, when the sureties of the divine laws were given up in favor of science, it was not a move from one type of certainties to any form of nihilism. Rather, the divine laws were replaced by equally stable foundations of scientific reasoning. (Giddens, 1990: 47pp.) During this time philosophers such as Descartes, who held the belief that as long as we restrict ourselves to certain kinds of philosophical and scientific inquiry we can use our intellect to obtain infallible knowledge, dominated the intellectual arena (Robinson, 1999: 13). The influence of these types of claims remained unquestioned into the nineteenth century when Nietzsche started to examine them more closely. Nietzsche objected to the foundational claims of the Enlightenment and insisted that our modern Western belief systems were founded on a whole series of metaphysical assumptions that he found dubious. 'Knowledge' and 'Truth', from a Nietzschean perspective, are not transcendent entities but only effective instruments that human beings have invented. They can never be objective because they always serve some human interest or purpose. (Robinson, 1999: 15pp.)

But already before Nietzsche, ideas about how the proper study of human society could not be scientific in the manner of the natural sciences had emerged during the, as Hughes puts it, "*tremendous debates of the seventeenth century*" (1990: 89). At this time, the idea was launched that the study of man and society was very different from the study of inanimate nature in the sense that the former involves subjective understanding. From then on, and especially during the later parts of the twentieth century, it has been increasingly clear throughout (parts of) the social sciences that scientific truths are social constructs,

i.e. agreements to agree, which are culture bound, context dependent and relative rather than absolute (Brown, 1995). Even the philosophers who most persistently defend the claims of scientific certitude, such as Karl Popper, acknowledge that, as he expresses it, “all science rests upon shifting sand” (quoted in Giddens, 1990: 39).

Once these ideas are accepted, the idea of looking at the world as made up of a series of mutually exclusive dichotomies is increasingly hard to uphold. Instead, many of the modernist narratives – of which healthy and unhealthy foods is a prime example – must instead be seen as time-bound cultural and historical constructions. Nevertheless, such constructions are often portrayed as being the ubiquitous truth, which has fuelled criticism for being dehumanizing and irrational (cf. Beck, 1992, 1999; Brown, 1993; Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Ritzer, 1996; Thompson, 2000). These ideas were introduced full-scale into the field of consumer behavior by the publication of Firat and Venkatesh’s article “Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption” in *Journal of Consumer Research* (1995). In this article the authors show how the questioning of the universal and transcendental status accorded to such categories as reason, truth, science, knowledge, rationalism, progress, and the like has implications for consumer research. Instead, what is proposed is to view all knowledge to be a construction of one sort or the other and the product of language. In opposition to the traditional modernists discourse, what is constructed is a cultural and philosophical space that is both human and sensible. (Brown, 1995: 59 pp.; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). The central theme in much of the criticism is to regard ideas of culture, language, aesthetics, narratives, symbolic modes, and literary expressions and meanings as being important. In a traditional modernist view, these are all considered secondary to economy, science, concrete objectifications, analytical constructs, essences, and metaphorical representations (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

The proponents of the third perspective proposed by Østergaard and Jantzen, consumer research, widened the focus of their research to include general studies of how consumers live their everyday lives, including issues such as how individuals’ consumption behaviors influence their understanding of themselves. When the third perspective first was introduced, Holbrook and Hirschman called out

for an increased focus on the experiential aspects of consumption, focusing on consumers' fantasies, feelings, and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Researchers also started asking for an increased focus on the consumption process as a whole rather than just buyer behavior. Consumption, it was argued, is not a complex that can be meaningfully decomposed into isolated parts, as is the case in many traditional research designs. Instead consumption experience can be described as:

an emergent property that results from a complex system of mutually overlapping interrelationships in constant reciprocal interaction with personal, environmental, and situational inputs (Holbrook, 1987).

As part of the move into the consumer research perspective, consumer studies of the traditional kind were criticized for their ontological and epistemological foundations (see for example Anderson, 1986; Fürst, 1988; Holbrook, 1987; Sherry, 1991 for good overviews). Instead of the previously applied view of consumers as rational the consuming individual was assumed to be emotionally or narcissistically determined. Where consumption previously was viewed as a need-fulfilling activity it is under this perspective seen as an ongoing project for the consuming individual to construct meaning. This activity in turn is based on emotions and feelings where the single consuming individual tries to create a coherent life (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000). To understand this broader concept of consumer behavior there was an increased focus on qualitative research methods. The quantitative multivariate methods based on experimental designs that had hitherto dominated the research scene were not seen as giving much insight into consumers' day-to-day life. The dominating scientific approach of the consumer research perspective is existential psychology and the most commonly applied research method is in-depth interview as it is recognized that the consumers will talk about experiences and emotions in an ideographic and natural way (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000: 18). While the lions' share of consumer research is still very much dominated by traditional research designs, the so-called interpretive researchers are an accepted and integral part of the consumer research community.

Studies of consumers' relationship to food using this latter approach portray a richer and more complex picture of the investigated

phenomena than the previously mentioned studies of the more traditional type. Examples include Askegaard, Jensen and Holt's study of lipophobia in Denmark and the US (Askegaard et al., 1999), Ekström and Askegaard's study of genetically modified foods (Ekström & Askegaard, 2000) and Thompson and Troester's study of natural health consumers (Thompson & Troester, 2002). A core idea in this line of research is the recognition that consumers' ideas about what is healthy and not healthy and the ways in which these ideas are used, are grounded in consumers' social, cultural, and historical world. Being influenced by this stream of research this dissertation aims at digging into the consumer universe looking at the language consumers use in talking about their food consumption outlooks and practices rather than starting out in the product end of the line as in many of the traditional studies.

## The Social Construction of Healthy Foods

As was exhibited in chapter one, messages about the potential healthiness and unhealthiness of various foodstuffs have become an integral part of our day-to-day lives. One could say that this type of information is part of our cultural universe and is inscribed in our informal social knowledge, in the "*what-everybody-knows about the world*" (du Gay et al., 1997: 8). As social beings, we have access to shared frameworks or 'maps of meaning' which we use to make sense of the world and to communicate and exchange ideas and meanings about it. The ideas of food and health are inscribed in the language we use to talk about food; they are thereby so ubiquitous that we cannot speak about food without referring to them. The prevailing ideas about food and health take the form of, what Durkheim refers to as, 'collective representations' that are social in origin and refer to the shared or common meanings, values, and norms of particular peoples as expressed in their behavior, rituals, institutions, myths, religious beliefs and art. These 'collective representations' provides the shared understanding which bound individuals together in society. (cf. du Gay et al., 1997; Månsson, 1998)

Even though these modernist narratives, such as healthy and unhealthy foods, are recognized as time-bound cultural and historical constructions by certain researchers, they appear as factual and

omnipresent categories to consumers going about their day-to-day whereabouts. This is further manifested by the oftentimes taken-for-granted use of these categorizations in everyday language. To use the terminology of du Gay et al. we are all 'cultural beings', who are once and for all immersed in the 'sea of meanings', in this giving-and-taking of meaning which we call 'culture' (1997: 14 pp.). In order to try to figure out the world, make sense of it, and make it mean something, we use language and concepts. On a day-to-day basis it is virtually impossible to get out of this 'sea of meanings' as things and events simply do not make sense on their own but we have to make sense of them. The cultural meanings, therefore, do not arise in things themselves. Rather, they are a result of our social discourses and practices which we use to *construct* the world in a meaningful way. There is thus no point in turning to the thing itself to look for the 'right' meaning (cf. Brown, 1995: 94). We need to think of this process of 'making sense' or producing meaning as stretching far beyond the literal meaning of words used. The literal meanings only appear to be simple and obvious but they too work metaphorically. Over time some meanings acquire an obvious descriptive status because they are widely accepted. They therefore come to be taken as literal, or as Barthes (1969) would put it: they have become modern myths.

All the various lay and expert ways of addressing the issues of food and health have expanded to include several semantic networks, i.e. networks of meaning. Each of these semantic networks is associated with their own way of talking. When looking at the multitude of different ways of addressing the issues of health and unhealth with regards to food it becomes obvious that the concepts do not seem to have any inherent meaning. Instead, meaning is established within language by marking the relations of similarity and difference. It is by doing this that we can map a concept's positions in relation to, as well as to differentiate it from, the other concepts. To once again borrow from du Gay et al. (1997: 17) we can put the point more generally and say that in language, meaning arises by plotting the relation between what something is and what it is not – meaning is, in other words, relational; "*It is difference which signifies*" and meanings arise from differences *internal* to the sign system itself. Hence, as was pointed out earlier, the meaning does not arise directly from the object, the 'thing in itself', but from the way in which the object is represented in

language and in the ways we use language to make sense of the world around us.

Even though the idea that society is in some sense socially constructed and therefore cannot be studied in the same way as inanimate phenomena has existed in various forms for a long time, it was not until the publication of Berger and Luckmann's book *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in 1966 that the idea of the society as socially constructed really disseminated within the social sciences. In the book, the authors develop a sociology of knowledge that deals with what people 'know' is 'real' in everyday life, i.e. knowledge in the meaning of common sense and what common people take for granted in their day-to-day lives. The authors integrate Durkheim's idea that society is a kind of objective social fact with Weber's idea that society is structured around actions that are expressions of subjective meanings:

It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity *and* subjective meaning that makes its 'reality *sui generis*', to use another term of Durkheim's. The central question for sociological theory can then be put as follows: How is it possible that subjective meanings *become* objective facticities? (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 30)

The knowledge that we, as individuals, use to make sense of our day-to-day life is taken for granted and the world as it appears to us therefore becomes the only reality we can imagine. The taken-for-granted knowledge is the kind of knowledge we share with other people who also partake in the, seemingly natural, dealings of day-to-day-life. Interaction with other individuals is an important part of everyday life. It is through such interaction, and through the common language used (both verbal and other), that the knowledge is given its 'objective form'. It is thus liberated from its 'here and now' situation and becomes available for other individuals separated in time and space.

When such interaction takes place repeatedly it becomes habitual and eventually institutionalized. Characteristic for institutionalized actions is that they are common for the members of a social group or a society. The institutions that emerge in this institutionalizing process control human behavior by providing predetermined patterns for behavior in

different situations. Individuals will eventually look upon these institutions as having an isolated external existence, or to speak with Durkheim, to be 'social facts'. It is in this way that the socially constructed world is perceived as an objective social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; cf. Bäck-Wiklund, 1998: 79 pp.).

## Introducing Semiotics to Understand Food and Health

One premise of this study is that the meanings of healthy and unhealthy foods do not arise from the products but are socially constructed in the fashion described above. The meanings thereby come from the ways in which the objects are represented in language and in the ways the consumers use language to make sense of the world. These meanings, as was described above, arise from differences internal to the respective sign systems. A discipline developed to the study sign systems is semiotics, the "*science that studies the life of signs within society*" (Saussure quoted in Nöth, 1990: 3). In structuring the discussion in this dissertation I am influenced by structural semiotics and in chapters seven through nine I will utilize Greimas' semiotic square (Nöth, 1990: 318). Consumption studies grounded in structural approaches have been criticized for assuming an essentialist conception of meaning: they presuppose that meanings transcend the particular sociohistorical context in which the consumption is embedded and instead inhere naturally in individual objects or categories of objects (Holt, 1997: 327pp.). The objects are then viewed as vessels of meanings that consumers acquire when they consume the object (e.g. McCracken, 1988a: 72) and culture is viewed as a closed, idealist, and often universal system of meanings that has a direct symmetric relation to people and objects in the world. (cf. Holt, 1997: 328)

Being aware of the potential shortcomings and the types of criticism usually directed towards structural semiotic analyses I have tried to allow for more complexity in my use of structural semiotics. While structural models usually assumes that meanings exist fully formed prior to their expression in social life, I acknowledge, and try to account for, the ways in which meanings are significantly constituted by the ways in which people act in particular social contexts. Furthermore, structural models usually give the impression that meanings exist separate from history while, in the view adopted here, they are rather

continuously constructed and reconstructed. Finally, the choice to frame the analysis according to Greimas' semiotic square might suggest that meanings of objects and actions are structured by a single abstracted semiotic system while there instead are multiple and overlapping resources from which social actors select, combine, juxtapose various different meanings. (cf. Holt, 1997) By using structural semiotics one thereby runs the risk of missing the complexity of the empirical field in the necessarily somewhat simplistic and tentative picture being presented (cf. Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, & Brannen, 1999: 7). Despite these potential pitfalls and shortcomings, the strength of being influenced by a structural semiotic model in this dissertation is that it brings structure to the multifaceted area of food and health and affords for a lucid illustration of the empirical field. Necessarily, what is presented is one of the many pictures that could be painted of this phenomenon. However, by using structural semiotics as an analytical tool much of the dynamic character of the food and health field is brought to surface. I will here give a short introduction to some of the basic semiotic concepts that will be used through the course of this dissertation and in chapter six I will return to introduce Greimas' semiotic square in more detail.

Semiotics in its modern form was independently developed at the turn of the 20th century by both American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Peirce is the major figure of semiotics' philosophical branch that was aiming at epistemological and even metaphysical universality (Nöth, 1990: 39). The point of departure on Peirce's theory of signs is the axiom that cognition, thought, and even man are semiotic in their essence. He defended a pansemiotic view and held the belief that "*the entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs*" (quoted in Nöth, 1990: 41). Peirce developed a triadic model of the sign based on the idea that a sign is anything (a sign vehicle) that stands for something (its object), to somebody (its interpreter), in some respect (its context). Peirce also developed an elaborate typology of signs<sup>7</sup> of which the division based on the relationship between the sign and the object is the one most often referred to. He divided signs into iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs where the iconic signs relate to

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<sup>7</sup> According to Nöth, Peirce postulated 59 049 classes of signs (1990: 44).

their objects insofar as they imitate or resemble that object; the indexical signs relate to their objects by some correspondence of fact where the relationship frequently is causal; the symbolic signs relate to their objects in an entirely conventional manner and, as such, require the participative presence of and interpreter to create the signifying connection ( cf. Mick, 1986; Nöth, 1990: 44pp.).

Saussure, on the other hand developed a dyadic concept of the sign and focused solely on interpreting linguistic signs. The most general dyadic characterization of the dyadic sign is given in the medieval formula *aliquid stat pro aliquo* – something stands for something else (Nöth, 1990: 84). One of the fundamental tenets of Saussure’s semiotics is the principle of arbitrariness and conventionality of signs. It is therefore signs of the symbolic type, according to Peirce’s typology, that Saussure’s theory of signs refers to (even though Saussure was not aware of this at the time) (cf. Mick, 1986). According to Saussure, the linguistic sign is made up of two entities: the signifier, the word or sound; and the signified, the mental concept that is evoked when the sound or word is encountered, see figure 2.1.

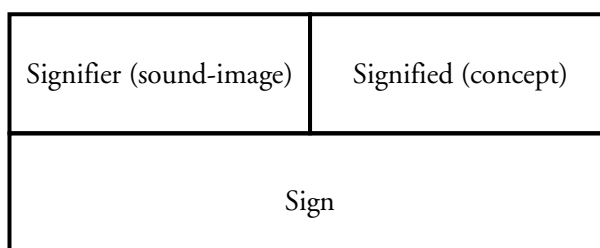


Figure 2.1: Saussure’s Dyadic Sign Model (Nöth 1990: 60)

Even though the two entities of signified and signifier may seem separable one cannot exist without the other. Saussure once likened the

relationship between the signifier and the signified to a piece of paper: “Thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time” (quoted in Nöth, 1990: 59). The relationship between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary but it is fixed by the conventions of ordinary language. Since languages are social phenomena, signs must be studied as social institutions; the signified and the signifier are not individual but collective concepts and sound images.

One last contribution of Saussure that needs to be mentioned is his distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Saussure’s primary interest was in language as a system or a code, and a social phenomenon. He called this linguistic system language (*la langue*) and opposed it to speech (*la parole*). Speech is the individual’s use of the social sign system in speech acts and texts. (Nöth, 1990: 63)

Many of the available messages about food and health have the character of myths. Ever since Lévi-Strauss introduced his structural analysis of myths the concept has held a privileged position in text semiotics (Nöth, 1990: 374). Different types of mythology frameworks have previously been applied to consumer research (e.g. Levy, 1959; Levy, 1981). Levy (1981) has even discussed food from a structuralist standpoint using Lévi-Strauss’ mythology framework. In the area of food and health, where so many different interest groups, such as the government, companies, and different scientific communities, are struggling over who should have the right to define the relationships food and health, Roland Barthes mythology framework (1969) is appropriate since it stresses the ideological aspects of the myth. According to Barthes it is the dominating forces in society that have the power to discursively define the myths. Beginning with Barthes, myth has been interpreted as a semiotic phenomenon of everyday culture. (Nöth, 1990: 374).

A myth, according to Barthes, is made up of two semiotic systems. The first is the basic dyadic Saussurean system depicted in figure 2.1 with a sign made up of a signifier and a signified. The second system uses the sign from the first system as the signifier in the second system as depicted in figure 2.2.

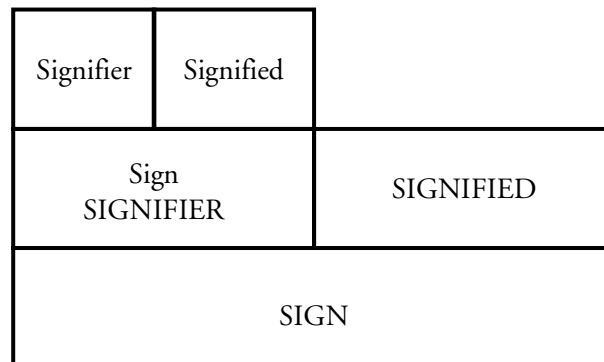


Figure 2.2: Barthes' Mythology Framework (Barthes, 1969: 211)

While the first system rests on the conventions of language and thus is of a denotative nature, the second system is politicized in that it is defined by its intentions rather than by its literary meaning – therefore it is imbued with value, it is of a connotative nature. Barthes explains that e.g. the mass media create mythologies or ideologies as secondary connotative systems by attempting to give the messages a foundation in nature, considered as a primary denotative system. At the denotative level, primary, 'natural' meanings are expressed. At the connotative level, they conceal these secondary, ideological meanings. By referring to a denotative level of content which cannot be questioned, "*myth does not deny things; [...] it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification*" (Barthes quoted in Nöth, 1990: 312). What the myth thereby does is to mask that the relationship between the signifier and the signified stems from historical conventions as defined by the bourgeois social institutions and structures of power and instead gives this relationship a sense of being natural (Barthes, 1969).

Barthes (1997) suggests, in his endeavor to construct a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption, that we need to reconstruct systems, syntaxes (menus), and styles (diets) no longer in an empirical but in a semantic way. We should therefore not concern ourselves with that "*which is*" but that "*which signifies*" because if we are interested in

human communication that always implies a system of signification, that is a body of discrete signs standing out from a mass of indifferent materials (Barthes, 1997: 23). Bearing this reasoning in mind, it is not interesting for me to discuss whether certain ideas about food and health and their interconnections are right or wrong. They are simply 'out there' and since they are 'out there' and individuals try to make sense of them they become real in their consequences – i.e. in the day-to-day lives of consumers. Others, such as dieticians, medical practitioners, and authors of self-help books, concern themselves with judging between 'right' and 'wrong' and thus play an extremely important role in forming the public discourses of food and health. For the purpose of this dissertation, however, it is enough for these ideas to be 'out there' as entities in the multitude of sign systems that make up the food and health arena.

## Methodological Considerations in Approaching the Food and Health Area

Following the discussion of the theoretical inspiration thus far, it should come as no surprise that it is my belief that consumers must be viewed as communicative subjects guided by language as much as by, what is usually thought of as, rational thought (cf. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Language is not merely a *reflection* of the social relations and institutions of society but rather is *constitutive* of society. Meaning is thus produced through language in signification processes. We give meaning to things by the way we represent them, and the principal means of representation in culture is language. It is important to look at the concept of language in its widest sense, meaning any system of representation – photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology, drawing – which allows us to use signs and symbols to represent or re-present whatever exists in the world in terms of a meaningful concept, image, or idea (cf. du Gay et al., 1997: 13). In this view, the consumption activity in itself can be viewed as a meaningful communicative act which we use to produce our self-narratives (Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Giddens, 1991). Consumption, then, cannot be viewed as an epiphenomenon of marketing; consumption is in fact a biobasic behavior whose significance antedates that of marketing (Sherry, 1991).

A guiding principle during the empirical work of this dissertation has been to try to reach the consumers' ideas about food and health as they use these ideas in their day-to-day lives. Hence, rather than starting out with a predetermined set of concepts as conventionally defined by industry, I have aimed at looking at how the available ideas about health and unhealth are reproduced by consumers when talking about food consumption. To dwell into how consumers navigate between and make use of the cacophony of different voices of food and health in producing narratives of their food consumption outlooks and practices, this dissertation is influenced by what is usually referred to as a hermeneutical approach to understanding social life (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). The hermeneutical approach has as its main idea that the meaning of one part can only be understood in relation to the whole and the whole only in relation to all the parts (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994: 116; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992: 30).

A foundational idea in the hermeneutical approach is that consumer behavior, e.g. food consumption, occurs within a multifaceted network of cultural influences: social settings, rituals, mass media images, product symbolism, cultural ideals, gender roles, and religious and ethnic traditions are only a few of the broad cultural factors that influence individual consumers (Thompson et al., 1994: 432). Further, a person's understanding of his/her life experiences always reflects broader cultural viewpoints that are implicitly conveyed through language (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1994). Thompson states that: "*From a hermeneutic perspective, the stories consumers tell about their consumption experiences are a prime locus of discovery.*" (1997: 439). Thus, consumers' views of the concepts of food and health and their interconnections are reflected in their consumption stories. Through these stories we get access to how the individuals use the social sign system in their speech acts, what Saussure refers to as *parole*. These individual stories are all idiosyncratic interpretations of the broader, shared linguistic system of food and health, what Saussure refers to as *langue*. (Nöth, 1990: 63)

Research on the narrative structuring of identity and the role of stories in constructing self-understandings proposes that human understanding

is organized in terms of culturally shared narrative forms, such as stories and myths (cf. Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Levy, 1959; Levy, 1981; Thompson, 1997). The personal narratives are themselves contextualized within a complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems (Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1997). The cultural background of a particular individual provides social categories, common sense beliefs, folk knowledge, and interpretive frames of reference from which personalized meanings and conceptions of self-identity are constructed. The relationship between this cultural background and the personal meanings can assume many forms. Cultural knowledge is by no means a monolithic and internally consistent system. Rather, it is a heterogeneous network that offers a multitude of interpretive positions and endless opportunities for context-specific combinations, juxtapositions, and personalized transformations of established cultural meanings. Personalized consumption meanings express a co-constituting relationship between the social conditions and identity issues salient to a given consumer and a broader legacy of historically available frames of reference, rather than being purely subjective or idiosyncratic. (Thompson, 1997: 440) Consumers' consumption stories must therefore be interpreted in relation both to a the individual consumer's sense of personal history and a broader narrative context of historically established cultural meanings (Thompson, 1997: 439).

Not only can consumption meanings be conceptualized as a type of narrative, but consumers are 'self-narrators' whose stories impose a meaningful historical order onto life events and who selectively highlight particular facets of these experienced events in their retrospective narratives (Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000). From this perspective, the meanings of particular life events are contextualized within a broader narrative of self-identity (cf. Thompson et al., 1989). Thus, personalized meanings emerge through a dialogical relationship in which a consumer's interpretive predispositions highlight salient aspects of his or her life-world and, reciprocally, these focal experiences can influence his or her interpretive standpoint. On a meta-level, these consumption stories can be connected to other consumers' stories as they draw from the same pool of culturally shared ideas.

The consumer stories forming the empirical material for this dissertation were produced during so-called long interviews (McCracken, 1988b) where conversations were held with consumers about various questions related to food consumption. The conversations have not explicitly dealt with health related issues, instead the analyses of the interview transcripts have sought answers to questions about how consumers reproduce the available health related discourses when talking about food consumption. While a preconception for me as a researcher has been that health is an important factor for consumers in their day-to-day dealings with food, I have tried, as best as I can, not to infer my own conceptions on the consumers during the empirical work. A more specific description of the method used during the fieldwork for this dissertation will be given in chapter six, Researching Food Consumption.

## Chapter Three

### Reflexive Food Consumption

There has been a rise in the interest of social science research on food during the last decades. Because food crosses so many conceptual boundaries, it has been interpreted from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. In the first part of this chapter I will briefly review some of the fundamental theoretical approaches to the study of food consumption. As a consequence of food consumption having been studied from many different research perspectives, this review is rather eclectic in character, discussing various standpoints that are not necessarily always fully compatible. Despite this eclecticism, I believe that inspiration for the study of the area of food and health can be drawn from the various traditions. The focus on the latter part of the chapter is on issues relevant to self-identity showing ways in which the issues of food and health are profound building blocks in individuals' construction of a coherent narrative of the self.

#### Classical Approaches to the Study of Food Consumption

Anthropology has always taken interest in food research – there is even a sub-field called nutritional anthropology – but other academic disciplines, such as history, philosophy, literary criticism, and perhaps most notably sociology have recently taken a deeper interest in the area (Counihan & van Esterik, 1997; Fischler, 1988; Fürst, 1988; Lupton, 1996). While some notable classical sociologists have said enough about food and eating in passing to suggest that there is a topic potentially of considerable sociological interest, it has in the past been far from a central focus of sociology. When food and food habits were mentioned by the founding fathers of sociology (cf. Giddens, 1990: 7), they were generally taken as indicators of something else closer to the focus of traditional sociological interest: Marx and Engels discussed food as it was the basic means of subsistence for the workers to gain control over, Durkheim discusses food in the context of totemic exclusions, Veblen goes into more depth in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* where he discusses food as a

means to conspicuous consumption, Simmel analyses the consequences of the socialization of the meal, and Weber briefly touches upon food in various places throughout his works (Mennell, Murcott, & van Otterloo, 1992: 2 pp.). Since then, food and eating has emerged as a more substantial area of research in sociology. This can be traced to the shift in analytical and empirical attention from the sociologies of industrialized production to those of industrialized consumption. According to British sociologist Alan Warde, consumption is what today structure society on a day-to-day basis rather than production. In other words, productive work outside the home has lost its role as the prime characterizer of who and what a person is; instead consumption, formerly seen as a destructive activity, has moved into first position. While the classical sociology of e.g. Marx, Weber and Simmel considered consumption a function of production, and consumption patterns merely a consequence of class positions, much contemporary social theory puts forward new social forces and a reorientation of personal motivations which underpin modern consumer culture. (Brown, 1995; Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Warde, 1997: 7) Food consumption, including both cooking and eating, is closely intertwined with many aspects of social life and therefore plays a particularly important structuring role. Food is also a significant means of cultural expression and, as Warde points out, is often used as a general means of commentary on contemporary culture. In addition, food is a matter of considerable psychological and emotional significance – as a whole range of phenomena, from the meaning of Mother's cooking to illnesses like anorexia nervosa indicate (1997: 22). The move toward studying food consumption more closely in relation to self-identity thereby seems highly motivated.

Since the rise in interest to research food within the social sciences, a number of theoretical approaches have been employed of which the dominant ones will be briefly laid out here. Before the social sciences took an interest in the area, researchers in experimental psychology, physiology, physical anthropology, and nutrition were busy analyzing the human relationship to food in terms of behavior, metabolic regulation, and nutritional requirements. These scientific disciplines looked upon food consumption in terms of 'wants', 'needs' and 'beliefs' whereas the social scientists instead started speaking of 'representations' or 'meanings' (Fischler, 1988: 275). *Functionalism*, started to look at how foodways expressed or symbolized a pattern of social relations. Mennell et al. point out that a vaguely functionalist orientation unconsciously underlies much collaboration between sociologists and nutritionists, a many times authoritative research stream aiming to influence consumers. This line of research usually tries to evaluate, from a

nutritional standpoint, the results from survey-like studies of what people eat (Mennell et al., 1992). This way of meshing the traditional ‘hard’ sciences with e.g. sociology was seen, from the traditional scientific viewpoint, as useful in only one respect: to help nutrition and medicine rationalize food habits so that ‘wants’ were shaped in accordance with ‘scientifically defined needs’ (Fischler, 1988: 276). The legacy of these approaches still dominates public policy makers, leading much of the nutritional information to being set in a functionalistic tone. The aim of nutrition policy is to influence people to change their eating habits in order to improve individual and, thereby, public health. There is a problem in this however as pointed out by Fürst who writes that human beings are not merely physical beings but that the “*very essence of humanity lies in the fact that we are social and human beings as well*” (1988: 90). She continues with quoting Mary Douglas who says: “*People do not eat nutrients. They eat food*” (ibid.)

Later on, the *structuralist* tradition, including highly influential researchers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas, recognized that taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled and thus avoids the biological reductionism and implicit ethnocentrism found in most of the functionalist work. The structuralists then put the focus on what the biologists and behavioral scientists had showed little interest in, namely that, to use Fischler’s (1988: 276) words, “*in Homo sapiens food not only nourishes but also signifies*”. In this tradition, food is considered to have an extraordinary ability to convey meaning as well as to nourish bodies which makes it a particularly interesting topic of investigation. Scholars have noted how food presents a rich symbolic alphabet through its diversity of color, texture, smell, and taste. Furthermore, food has an ability to be elaborated and combined in infinite ways.(cf. Counihan & van Esterik, 1997) According to Lévi-Strauss, the cuisine of a society is the language into which that society unconsciously translates its structure, and from which its hidden contradictions can be discovered (1997: 35). In his ‘Culinary Triangle’ Lévi-Strauss builds a grammar of food upon the three corner-pillars of the raw, the cooked, and the rotted and claims that, analogous with the vowel and the consonant triangle of linguistics, this system can be used to analyze food throughout the world as “*cooking [...] is with language a truly universal form of human activity*” (Lévi-Strauss, 1997: 28). Douglas shares Lévi-Strauss’ general hope that research into the cultural aspects of food habits will eventually enable us at least to discover the principles and ranking of tastes and smells – but the actual segmentation and ranking will differ from one society to another (Mennell et al., 1992). By looking at how meals are organized, as in the article ‘Deciphering a Meal’, Douglas (1997) identifies how the food system is built

of certain elements and how these are linked together in a rather strict fashion. Food categories then, according to Douglas, express hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries. Common for the structuralist traditions is that they look at food as having a given meaning structure that is inherent to the food. To be able to decipher a meal, as Douglas is very instructively doing, the meaning of the food must be thought to reside in the particular foods that are being deciphered. The critique raised in the previous chapter against structural models is again applicable here. An essentialist conception of meaning is presupposed where meaning inhere naturally in individual objects rather than being grounded in a particular sociohistorical context (cf. Holt, 1997). More recent, post-structuralist, accounts of the meaning structures of food applies a localized read and response way of understanding the phenomena. The meaning is thereby not seen as inherent in the food but rather in the subject-object relationship. This is not to say that there are no commonalities in how consumers relate to food but less emphasis is placed on finding these (as it is hypothesized nonexistent) universal structures.

Another theoretical approach to the study of food consumption is to focus on how broad social, political and economic changes shape the expression of emotion, manners, taste and lifestyle through food consumption. Historical outlooks are taken looking at what happened as food supply became richer and more stable following industrialization and the rise in trade. Mennel et al. (1992: 14) call this stream of research *developmentalism* and points out that while many of the scientists belonging to this field are dissatisfied with the structuralist legacy, there is a common ground between the two as the developmentalists acknowledge the power of symbolic meanings of food in shaping and controlling social behavior. One of the main themes of this stream of research is to show how the higher social classes had to distinguish themselves from the lower classes by something else than their “*brute capacity to stuff*” (Mennel et al., 1992: 17) as food supply became less scarce. An example is Bourdieu (1984), who is concerned with mapping how consumption behavior is an expression of class positions. Taste, knowledge, the desire for particular commodities, and, in connection to food consumption, for particular bodies, are necessary elements in the process of class formation and class reproduction and are means whereby social classes display their ‘cultural capital’. Bourdieu taps into the area of consumer resistance when he asserts that eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living:

In the face of the new ethic of sobriety for the sake of slimness, which is most recognized at the highest levels of the social hierarchy, peasants and especially industrial workers maintain an ethic of convivial indulgence. (Bourdieu, 1984: 190)

Bourdieu thus shows how there are multiple different ethics of how one is to take care of oneself with regards to food. The more internalized self control that has become valued among the bourgeoisie, and which is dominating the official public policy messages in contemporary western societies is thus not the only possible position to take.

One last research topic concerning food is to look at the meanings of giving, receiving, and refusing food. Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist, made food exchanges a central topic in his classic book *The Gift*, a sociological study of gift giving. This theme was later elaborated on in Sahlin's book *Stone Age Economics*. Anthropologists, such as Malinowski in his studies of doing Kula among the Trobriands, have long noted the key role of food in feasts of communal solidarity and political ranking. Food-sharing is the medium for creating and maintaining social relations both within and beyond the household.

## Changing Food Habits

In his book *Consumption, Food & Taste*, Warde (1997) maps different tendencies in contemporary food consumption according to a scheme originally developed by Emile Durkheim to analyze different types of suicides. According to this scheme there are four simultaneous directions in which consumption is developing when social class is declining in importance as an organizer of consumption (Warde, 1997: 11-21). Two trends that can be isolated are *individualization* and *informalization*. The former suggests that pressure towards uniformity of consumption within large groups of the population have been reduced recently. Personal expression through consumption therefore becomes detached from affective communal norms and ideals, thus becoming socially disembedded. Informalization can be described as a process where rigid, conformist, established and routinized patterns of consumption dissolve. Warde points out that though individualization and informalization are usually considered as dominant trends there are counter-tendencies. When consumers lack rules guiding them to a 'proper' consumption behavior they seek to compensate for the lost social attachment to a larger social grouping by creating imagined communities. Warde chooses to call this quest for social embedding *communification*. The

last tendency identified is *stylization*, which reintroduces a kind of discipline or regulation over self-presentation through consumer practice. Various types of so-called lifestyle groups with disciplined purchasing habits exemplify stylization. These groups are smaller than traditional groupings, like classes, generations or religious followers, but nevertheless observe highly regulated patterns of appropriate consumption.

Warde maps contemporary food consumption practices according to these four tendencies as exhibited in figure 3.1. Warde goes on to scrutinize ‘mainstream’ sociological food research and criticizes it for being too indeterminate and not thoroughly grounded in empirical evidence. Instead, he suggests that there are several parallel trends indicated by the four arrows in figure 3.1.

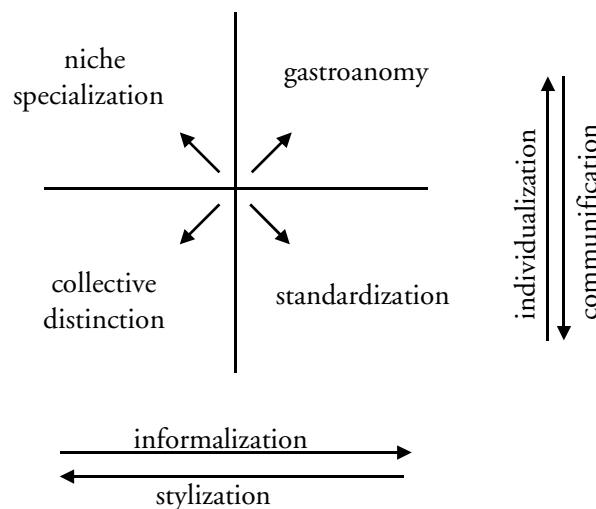


Figure 3.1: Forces influencing food selection (Warde 1997: 42)

The first and dominant trend, *gastroanomy*, with a simultaneous increase in informalization and individualization builds on the argument by French sociologist of food, Claude Fischler, who claims that the modern western societies are experiencing a crisis over food choice. With the desacralization of social life that followed along with the modern development, and particularly the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, there has been a crisis in many western cultures over food consumption choices. Traditionally, food choices were governed by *gastronomy*, i.e. knowledge of the rules of food. Today, we are living under conditions where the rules no longer seem self-evident. The *gastronomy* has been replaced by *gastroanomy*, a condition bereft

of rules (Fischler, cited in Warde, 1997). As a result, consumers are experiencing anguish, obsession, anxiety and suspicion, as they no longer can look at the traditional and authoritative external rules about what should be eaten. That we have reached a situation of gastroanomy is evident when looking at e.g. the ways snacks are replacing meals. Instead of eating three proper meals in a day – breakfast, lunch and dinner – we are living in a grazing-culture where it is many times socially accepted to snack throughout the day instead of sitting down and eating a meal. As a result, food consumption becomes less of a social and more of an individual activity.

Under the condition of gastroanomy, a basic feature of human food consumption is brought to surface – the omnivore’s paradox (Fischler, 1988: 277 pp.); humans, being omnivores, need to eat a great variety of different foods in order to get all the different vital nutrients<sup>8</sup>. The problem is that in order to get the necessary variety one has to expose oneself to a great variety of foodstuffs and thereby risk eating something potentially harmful. Two basic and contradictory human drives are neophilia, i.e. a striving towards trying new things, and neophobia, i.e. a hesitation towards trying new things. Food is thus always a source of anxiety, but this is heightened in the modern period. When there was a more limited choice of what foods to consume, either because of religious dictums or scarcity of food, these issues were kept in check by tradition and habit. Today, there is such a large pool of foods to choose from and so little, or at least polyphonic, guidance toward what to choose that these concepts are more essential than ever. The gastroanomic development is such that it tends to increase the anxiety of the paradox instead of regulating it (Warde, 1997: 30).

When individuals lack reliable criteria to make these decisions they experience a growing sense of anxiety, as food selection and intake are increasingly a matter of *individual*, not social decisions. In the absence of consistent and authoritative rules people behave in unpredictable, unregulated, and idiosyncratic ways. Under these conditions, organizations and occupations like nutrition, official medicine, alternative medicine, food manufacture and their advertising offices offer many kinds of advice. Fischler describes the result of all the different sources of advice as a ‘dietetic cacophony’ (Fischler, quoted in Warde, 1994b: 31). Consumers react to this anomic condition by searching for distinct dietary regimens:

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<sup>8</sup> Note that it is far from self-evident what those vital nutrients are and what one needs to consume in order to assimilate them.

Other substitutes for traditional gastronomies arise from individuals particularly anxious to find and cling to valid criteria for food selection. Food fads, fad diets, food sectarianism, even new trends in culinary aesthetics and the generally growing interest in cooking, may be better understood in the light of the aspiration for new individual dietary goals and norms. (Fischler, quoted in Warde, 1994b: 32)

As a consequence of the increased individualization and deregulation, consumers lack a basic confidence in foodstuffs, in expert advice and in their own abilities to select what to eat. Considering this, the current period is not one of flourishing styles, plural market niches, or the aestheticization of everyday life, but a mire of personal uncertainty and discomfort. This stands in contrast with some more optimistic accounts of the potential for liberatory consumption in the late modern age (e.g. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Furthermore, it deserves to be pointed out that the increased individualization is in itself somewhat of a myth. Most foodstuffs available on the market (the *farmers'* market perhaps being the exception) are commodities produced under highly regularized forms (see discussion of Ritzer (1996) in chapter five). The increased individualization is thus created using the same commodities made available on the market by transnational companies. Due to the individualization and deregulation many consumers try to control what they consume to such a degree that they engage in more or less rigid dietary regimens where they limit the number of different foods they consume. Even though the idea behind this is to eat as healthily as possible, the result is many times the opposite where consumers actually jeopardizing their own health. Steven Bratman (2001), a physician specializing in eating disorders, has even coined the term Orthorexia Nervosa to describe the medical condition when a patient suffers from trying to eat healthily. Examples include fruitarians whose diets include only fruit, nuts and some vegetables. The most extreme cases, according to Bratman (2001: 25), are hard core whole-foods people trying to survive on only brown rice and people trying to live on air alone, so called breatharians.

Where Fischler sees the different dietary regimens as a mere reaction to the anomic condition, Warde suggests that these can also be seen as a more thorough commitment. He proposes that there is also a trend towards an increased stylization and individualization leading to *niche specialization* as depicted in figure 3.1. Consumption in this scenario is subject to a process of greater stylization whereby people become more capable of appreciating perceptible differentiation on the basis of observing the behavior of others (Warde, 1994b: 32). Evidences of this type of consumption include vegetarians, vegans, consumers of organic foods, the whole foods movement

as well as less health-oriented alternatives such as supporters of various ethnic cuisines, e.g. the Mediterranean cuisine. There are efforts from different groups, such as journalists, marketers, nutritionist and politicians, to provide information in order for consumers to form coherent food styles. It is not clear, however, that consumers are sufficiently active, discriminating, knowledgeable, and self-reflexive to do so despite the fact that contemporary consumers are skilled and sophisticated readers of signs and styles. What should be taken away is that the gastroanomic condition is not necessarily the only consequence of the ongoing individualization of food styles as consumers effectively group themselves according to their consumption styles.

The last two trends, *standardization* and *collective distinction*, builds on the idea that consumers seek to compensate for the lost social attachment to a larger social grouping by creating imagined communities. This quest for social embedding is shown in figure 3.1 by the arrow labeled *communification*. While individualization is generally considered the main trend in consumer studies, the manufacturers and retailers of food retain an interest in selling their products to as many people as possible. There is thus a strong force leading to the persistence of a relative homogenization. Standardization is a strong trend even on a global scale as evidenced by multinational corporations such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola. But even if there is a tendency towards standardization, the old stratifying dimensions such as nationality, class, gender, ethnicity, generation and life-course stage might still influence food consumption behavior. Warde suggests that these structural features might be more salient than conventionally thought as exemplified in the trend towards collective distinction. He warns that there is a tendency to treat these features as though they have totally withered away even though they still influence consumers. The fourth thesis depicted in figure 3.1, collective distinction, suggests that there remains very significant structural differentiation in eating behavior such as those suggested by Bourdieu (1984). This indicates that consumption of foods is still socially embedded and thus socially regulated, this is primarily manifest as hierarchical class difference (Warde, 1997: 41).

Evidence can be found for all four forces influencing dispositions in food selection shown in figure 3.1. The complexity of food selection prevents any trend from becoming all-encompassing. However, the increase in variety of foodstuffs available provides a key to understanding contemporary food consumption as it poses a perpetual practical dilemma for consumers, of what and how to select.

## Reflexive Consumption

The different conditions archetypal for the world in which we live in leave consumers faced with a wide variety of choices about how and what to consume. Two social theorists that provide similar frameworks on this issue from a social psychological perspective are Ulrich Beck (1992; 1999) and Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991). While both authors deal with a broad range of consumption activities rather than just food consumption, they both use numerous examples related to food consumption. A reading of their books makes it apparent that food consumption brings to surface many of the hardships consumers face while living in the late modern age. Central to both theories is that, today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices they possess and display. To create and sustain a self-identity consumers manage appearances and actions in order to produce a coherent self-narrative (1990; Giddens, 1991). To view consumers as identity seekers is common theme within many parts of the social sciences as expressed by Gabriel and Lang:

Debates on Western consumption rarely stay clear of the theme of identity for long. Identity is Rome to which all discussions of modern Western consumption lead, whether undertaken by Marxist critics or advertising executives, deconstructionists or liberal performers, advocates of multiculturalism or radical feminists. The consensus of otherwise irreconcilable perspectives appears to be that in late capitalism, consumption is the area where personal and group identities are fought over, contested, precariously put together and licked into shape (1995: 81)

To view consumption objects as serving as important inputs in the staging of our lives is commonplace today as objects are thought to situate an individual's character of personality in a context (Levy, 1959; Mick, 1986). Objects convey our connection to others and help our sense of self (McCracken, 1986) but we also use objects to remind ourselves of who we are (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Belk (1988) suggests that we derive our self-concept from objects in that we use objects to convey and extend our self-concepts to others as well as to demonstrate the self-concept to ourselves. Fischler (1988) places food consumption as an especially important aspect of this identity construction in that we literally construct ourselves both in a physical and symbolical way by the food we choose to incorporate into our bodies. Since there is an increasing number of commodities available to act as props in this process, identity becomes more than a matter of the personal selection of self-image. Increasingly, individuals are obliged to choose their identities, even a choice not to care about choosing is, and will be interpreted as, a choice. For the consumption of many consumer goods this obligation to

choose is indeed a risky business where the outcomes of one's choices will be scrutinized in the public setting. This holds true for food as well but in this case yet another factor is at play. Consumption of food is a potentially risky business in an additional manner since bad consumption choices can lead to direct physical harm. The blend of these two risks, the risk of making a bad choice potentially harmful for one's self-identity, and the risk of making a bad choice for one's own health, makes food consumption a peculiar activity to study from these theoretical points of departure. It should be noted, however, that there are no clear boundaries between the two risk areas from a consumer perspective. On the one hand a choice of a set of consumption alternatives regarding one's food consumption based on health rationale is a choice that will be scrutinized in the public eye. On the other hand, choosing a lifestyle where one does not care at all about health rationales might, perhaps not surprisingly, have effects on one's health.

An understanding of food consumption as part of the individual's reflexive construction of self-identity forms a good basis for understanding the link between the available discourses on food and health and consumers' consumption patterns. In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens seminal work on identity formation under late modern social conditions, he combines the sociological contextualization with the psychological process of identity formation to form a social psychology contextualized in contemporary social change. As was discussed in chapter one, Giddens argues that new mechanisms of self identity have emerged, which are shaped by – yet also shape – the institutions of modernity (1990; 1991; cf. Shilling, 1993; Warde, 1994b who also build their arguments on the idea of a reflexive self). A central aspect of Giddens' theory is that self-identity is reflexively understood by the individual in terms of the individual's biography in form of a coherent narrative about the self. This narrative is in turn reflexively monitored over time and tested out in different circumstances. There are a seemingly endless number of choices that a person has to make and a lot of these choices, especially concerning food, are between a huge selection of commodified products available on the market. The handling of choice thus becomes critical as little, or too much and polyphonic, help is offered as to which options should be selected.

## Conditions for the Self in Late Modernity

There are a number of conditions that, according to Giddens (1991: 16), explain the “*peculiarly dynamic character of modern social life*” and that make the process of choice such a delicate one. As was introduced in chapter one,

the separation of time and space in late modernity creates a certain dynamism. In the past, time and space were mediated through the common denominator of a physical place. In the late modern age these have been separated to allow for social relations across wide spans of time-space (1991: 20). While the separation of time and space might not seem directly relevant to food consumption it has consequences that are crucial for consumers' everyday food consumption experiences. The reason is that the separation leads to an increased sense of disembeddedness where social relations are lifted out from local contexts and rearticulated across indefinite tracts of time-space (1990: 21; 1991: 18). The disembedding mechanisms are of two kinds, symbolic tokens and expert systems, together referred to as abstract systems. The latter of the two – the expert systems – are especially relevant in this context since there are large numbers of contrasting expert systems at play regarding the connections between food and health. The expert systems function by deploying modes of technical knowledge that has power to bracket time and space. Consequently, they have validity independent of the practitioners and clients who make use of them. Such systems penetrate virtually all aspects of social life in conditions of modernity – including knowledge about the food we eat.

According to Giddens (1990; 1991) late modernity is characterized by an institutional reflexivity wherein there is a susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and maternal relations with nature, to chronic revisions in the light of new information and knowledge. The sureties of tradition and habit that might have existed before have not been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge but rather with doubt. In late modernity the principle of radical doubt is institutionalized as all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses that are always open to revision (Giddens, 1990: 39). These tendencies can be seen clearly in the case of food and health where it seems like consumers, as well as various institutions, have caught on to the dominating ideas of the close connections between food consumption and the overall state of healthiness. It has also become increasingly clear that there are many opposing views of what constitutes health and healthiness. Rather than being two fixed categories of healthy and unhealthy food products there are numerous different claims being made and they tend to be gradually or sometimes even radically changed from time to time.

For the expert systems to be meaningful to people they have to invest trust in them. This trust eliminates the need to have a deeper technical knowledge of the information sent out through the expert systems. It should be noted that the distinction between experts and laypeople is not as clear as it might appear

at first sight, there is no clear delimitation between the two groups. Since no one can have expert knowledge about more than a tiny part, trust in expert systems is not confined to laypeople. As a matter of fact, since experts so frequently disagree, even professionals at the core of a given field of expertise may well find themselves in much the same position as a layperson (Giddens, 1991:141). Most people only have very superficial knowledge of the technicalities of the expert systems that affect their day-to-day lives. Trust in various expert systems is used to build a 'protective cocoon' around the self, which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality. The protective cocoon is *'the mantle of trust that makes possible the sustaining of a viable Umwelt'* (Giddens, 1991: 129). It 'brackets out' potential occurrences which, were the individual seriously to contemplate them, would produce paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment. In this sense the protective cocoon helps consumers deal with the abstract systems of knowledge that surrounds us and are especially prevalent in the case of different claims about foods' inherent qualities.

Attitudes of trust, as well as more pragmatic acceptance, skepticism, rejection and withdrawal, uneasily coexist in the social space linking individual activities and expert systems. Few individuals sustain an unswerving trust in the systems of technical knowledge that impinge on them. However, all are forced, knowingly or not, to choose among the many contrasting expert systems available. To make this bearable, consumers engage in a sort of 'effort-bargain' – i.e. a pragmatic acceptance of some expert systems and a more all-encompassing trust in others. Even though the world we live in might seem apocalyptic at times, due to the array of global dangers we are facing, an individual might feel that governments, scientists or other technical specialists can be trusted to take the appropriate steps to counter them. Or else he feels that 'everything is bound to come out all right in the end' – almost a fatalistic approach. Thus, skepticism and antagonism coexist with a taken-for-granted confidence in others. Giddens (1991: 23) gives the example of a person that goes to great lengths to avoid eating foods that contain additives. But, if that individual does not grow everything he or she eats, trust must necessarily be invested in the purveyors of 'natural foods' to provide superior products.

The flipside of the heavy reliance on trust in various expert systems is a doubt, sometimes even a radical doubt, in these very systems. The protective cocoon is constantly bombarded with claims that challenge its very foundation – risks. On the one hand there are challenges in the form of high-consequence risks, such as a potential breakdown of the eco-system due to new 'rational'

agricultural production methods<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand there are a large number of more small-scale, but potentially more self-relevant risks, such as the ones reported in media as either health scares or just ordinary dietary guidelines. As suggested by Beck (1992), risks are becoming an increasingly large part of everyday life and more effort might be devoted to avoiding risks than to search for something positively good.

One way of dealing with these seemingly endless possibilities of choice is to adopt a set of guiding principles in form of a lifestyle. A lifestyle, according to Giddens (1991: 81), is:

A more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity.

By adopting a lifestyle two things are accomplished. First, the consumption set of which to choose from is reduced by what is compatible with that lifestyle. Second, a blueprint for the narrative of the self is provided. The term lifestyle normally implies a more all-encompassing way of structuring ones life suggesting that most lifestyle choices concerning food should perhaps be called food-related lifestyles. The most vivid examples of such food-related lifestyle choices are vegetarians and vegans that in a strict fashion limit the consumption choices available. There are also numerous other groups that provide guidelines such as religious groups or environmentalists. Despite the fact that adopting a certain lifestyle can reduce choices, consumers are still faced with a large number of choices on a day-to-day basis, especially for such a regularly occurring activity as food consumption. One should thereby be careful in taking for granted that the consumers adapting such a food-related lifestyle experience being ridded from the hardships of having to make choices in our abundant consumer society.

## Food and the Body

If one feels unable to exert influence over an increasingly complex society, at least one can have some effect on the size, shape and appearance of one's own body. The body has been given priority lately which, according to Beck (1992) depends on the condition that at a time when our health is threatened increasingly by *global* dangers, we are exhorted ever more to take *individual*

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<sup>9</sup> For a deconstruction of the 'rational' production methods see the discussion of George Ritzer's McDonaldization argument in chapter five.

responsibility for our bodies by engaging in strict self-care regimens. By eating the right foods and otherwise living healthy lives, individuals are told that they can avoid heart disease, cancer and a host of other diseases. To accept this idea of engaging in self-care regimens, individuals must accept the notion that the body is a project whose interiors and exteriors can be monitored and maintained. The body thus becomes an “*island of security in a global system characterized by multiple and inescapable risks*” (Beck, 1992). The body is not just a physical entity which we ‘possess’. Rather, it is an action-system and its practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity (Giddens, 1991: 99). In late modernity, identities are formed reflexively through the asking of questions and the continual re-ordering of self-narratives which have at their center a concern with the body (Giddens, 1991). Self-identity and the body therefore become ‘reflexively organized projects’ which have to be sculpted from the complex plurality of choices offered in late modernity with little moral guidance as to which should be selected (Shilling, 1993: 181). The body is seen as an unfinished entity that requires constant care and thought in order to be developed in the right direction or at least halted in its deterioration (Askegaard, Gertsen, & Langer, 2002; Baudrillard, 1998; Catterall & Maclaran, 2001; Shilling, 1993). Bauman (1992) even argues that the loss of meta-narratives in the form of religion has left us without tools to deal with our future decay and death. A key feature of the modern project was to control our surroundings and, perhaps especially, our bodies through the use of rational scientific techniques. But not even the refined techniques of plastic surgery, functional foods and gene therapy have been able to halt the deterioration of the ageing body to any substantial extent. The body still seems to be out of control which creates grave anxiety among consumers having given up the traditional means of preparing for death and decay by religious means and living in a society where signs of ageing is a social stigma (Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of *becoming* as the body’s appearance, size, shape and even its contents, are always potentially open to reconstruction. For consumers this can be seen, as they are being conscious of and actively concerned about the management, maintenance and appearance of their bodies (Shilling, 1993: 5). The particular body project that this dissertation is concerned about is health, which is portrayed by Shilling (1993) as the most common example of the body as a project.

To regulate bodyweight through regulating one’s diet has been the prime self-care regimen ever since undertaker William Banting started dieting on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1862 (Groves, 2001; lowcarb.com, 2002). He later published

*Letter on Corpulence* (Banting, 1869) in which he shared his remarkable diet with the public. It seemed as if he, perhaps in a moment of clairvoyance, could predict that dieting would be a trend of monumental proportions as he wrote “*I do not recommend every corpulent man to rush headlong into such a change of diet (certainly not), but to act advisedly and after full consultation with a physician.*” This was probably sound advice, as many would probably have a hard time coping with Banting’s strict regimen:

For breakfast, at 9.00 A.M., I take five to six ounces of either beef mutton, kidneys, broiled fish, bacon or cold meat of any kind except pork or veal; a large cup of tea or coffee (without milk or sugar), a little biscuit, or one ounce of dry toast; making together six ounces solid, nine liquid.

[...Dinner...Tea...Supper...]

For nightcap, if required, A tumbler of grog – (gin, whisky, or brandy, without sugar)-or a glass or two of claret or sherry.

This type of diet is currently experiencing a revival as diet low in carbohydrates and high in protein has become a dominant diet fad following Dr. Atkins best-selling diet books (cf. <http://atkinscenter.com/>, 2002). Banting is even celebrated as a hero on the [lowcarbing.com](http://lowcarbing.com) webrings featuring slogans such as ‘It’s not the butter that makes you fat... it’s the bread you put it on!’ ([lowcarbing.com](http://lowcarbing.com), 2002). Regulating the shape and appearance of the body is not only accomplished by regulating the diet; Shilling gives the example of body-building and plastic surgery as other means of controlling the body (Shilling, 1993: 7).

In this way, the body is less and less an extrinsic ‘given’, functioning outside the internally referential systems of modernity, but becomes itself reflexively mobilized. What might appear to be a monitoring of the mere appearance of the body might in fact be an expression of a concern lying much deeper – to actively ‘construct’ and control the body (Giddens, 1991: 8). However, Giddens also argues that appearance in itself becomes a central element in the reflexive project of the self (1991: 100). In the late modern age the body is increasingly becoming a phenomenon of choices and options. Choices are wide ranging, from full incorporation of the latest ‘rational’ techniques, be it genetic engineering or medical interventions, to a hardheaded rejection of anything seemingly too far away from the ‘traditional’ way of doing things. Even though it might be relevant to look at the body as an action-system open for reflexive monitoring it should be remembered that it is also a physical organism that has to be cared for by its possessor. Shilling stresses that neither the biological reductionism nor the pure social constructivism view of the body is satisfactory. While the body clearly is not merely a location for the

mind, the body cannot be explained without reference to its 'natural' properties and dispositions. In Shillings view, the mind and the body must be viewed as inextricably linked as a result of the mind's location within the body (Shilling, 1993: 13).

Modes of providing food and other basic organic necessities are best regarded as *regimens*, i.e. learned practices that entail tight control over organic needs. How far these regulations are standardized and closely regulated, or left open to individual inclination, depends on the nature of a given culture (Giddens, 1991: 61). However, there are already substantial limits as to what can be consumed since what is chosen has to be within what a certain culture defines as edible and according to the specific syntax and grammar of a meal (cf. Fischler, 1988; Rozin, 1998). Regimens are modes of self-discipline, but are not solely constituted by the orderings of convention in day-to-day life. They are organized in some part according to social conventions, but being personal habits they are also formed by personal inclination and dispositions. Regimens are of central importance to self-identity precisely because they connect habits with aspects of the visible appearance of the body. Thereby, habits of eating are ritual displays in themselves in that, as we have pointed out before, food not only nourishes but also signifies (Fischler, 1988: 276). According to Giddens, bodily regimens are the prime means whereby the institutional reflexivity of modern social life is focused on the cultivation, or even the creation, of the body (1991: 100). This regularized control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained. Yet at the same time the self is also more or less constantly 'on display' to others in terms of its embodiment (Giddens, 1991: 58). Cultures rely heavily on the separation between proper bodies, to be glorified and imitated, and improper bodies, to be scorned and excluded (Cavallaro, 1997: 20). Therefore, self-care regimens are not only about preventing disease; they are also about making us feel good about how our bodies appear to others and ourselves.

## Individual Responsibility for Healthiness

It is clear in the Western world that healthiness is not viewed as a gift that comes for free. In order to get, and maintain, this much-aspired asset we have to engage in purposive action. For those socialized in a Western worldview it is, as Shilling just pointed out, more or less self-evident that each of us has a mind that is housed in a material body (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 139). As was discussed in chapter two, the tendency to reduce the world into seemingly simple dichotomous categories, such as, in this case, mind vs. body (the so-called Cartesian split) is symptomatic for modernist thought

(Giddens, 1991). Critics of the modernist movement regard these dichotomies as unsuccessful attempts to legitimate partial truths and hold that they should instead be regarded as time-bound cultural and historical constructions (cf. Beck, 1992; Brown, 1993; Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Giddens, 1990; 1991). Regardless of whether these categories actually reflect states of reality or not they can be viewed as social constructions that have been formed, perpetuated, and transformed through cultural discourses and the activities they motivate. In this sense they have influenced the dominant view of a mind that is housed in a material body. Some even claim that there is a kind of 'somatophobia', i.e. a fear that a person's essential nature remains trapped in the body (Greco, 1995). The Western intellectual tradition expresses a longing for a disembodied transcendence and thus an ideology of 'mind over body' has emerged. This ideology is made visible today through various means to control the body, e.g. weight-loss and self-help programs, and the products and medical procedures promoted as means to enhance the appearance of the body. (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 143) The modern projects striving towards controlling the world around us to perfection in order to create a better life for ourselves has come to include the body. Most people are absorbed in their bodies, and feel themselves to be a unified body and self. However, even though we are not living in a world inhabited by schizophrenics, there is an increased feeling of disembodiment among consumers (Giddens, 1991). The disembodied person may feel unimplicated in bodily desire, and experience dangers as though they were threats to another person. This type of disembodiment causes a lot of anxiety but can also be seen as an attempt to transcend dangers and be safe. Giddens (1991: 59) notes that feelings of unreality on the part of the schizoid individuals frequently have a similar form.

When looking at how consumers view the connections between food and health it becomes central to get an understanding of the dominant views of how we are supposed to take care of our bodies. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) identify three primary sociocultural values and beliefs that follow from the ethic of control implicit in the above-mentioned dualistic concept of mind and body. The first one is the long-standing idealization of youthfulness. As discussed above, the strivings to be young forever are often portrayed in media, commercials et cetera (cf. Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). In a sense these strivings expresses a desire to transcend the limits of the body. Many studies suggest that cognitive age, or the age a person feels, rather than chronological age, better reflects an individual's identity and behavior (see Catterall & Maclaran, 2001 for a review and critique). It has been suggested, however, that the demographic power of the baby boom generation might

significantly alter attitudes to aging removing the present social stigma of aging (Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). Still, Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer (2002: 805) show that, among their informants, who had undergone plastic surgery, ageing was perceived as something intrinsically problematic. In their view, the marketing of health products as well as medical developments has inspired a view of ageing as an, at least partially, curable disease. This in turn leads many ageing people to report feeling like a young self trapped in an old body suggesting that ageing is the abnormality whereas the real self has stayed young (Askegaard et al., 2002). The second value is the dualistic view of the individual as an essential self whose true identity is not constrained to the body in which it is housed. This is a prerequisite for the 'mind over body' ideology that has emerged. As mentioned above, it is, put bluntly, the task of each individual's mind to make sure that the body is taken care of in a correct manner to prevent it from changing in unwanted ways and eventually deteriorate. To be able to exercise this type of control requires the body to be seen as a material object to be worked upon, a body in process of *becoming* (cf. Shilling, 1993). Third is the ideal that knowledge not only allows the world to be controlled by the rational realm, but also liberates the transcendent self from various forces of nature. This logic is evidently present when looking at the means available for exercising self-control over the body that is seen as a natural object to be controlled by reason, knowledge, and technology.

Throughout the Lutheran Western world there is also an ethic of self-control emphasizing a moralistic obligation to control the body through discipline and rationality (Bauman, 1992; Greco, 1995). Rationality today encapsulates the use of knowledge for the productive purpose of managing the destructive forces of nature – especially on the body. In traditional modernist thought it is conventional to view knowledge and technology as empowering and liberating forces. In this view the knowledge claims offered by scientific research are readily viewed as guidelines to which rational individuals should adhere (cf. Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). This technocratic legacy and the desire to control nature through technical intervention is prevalent in the medical and health-food industries, where a more fundamental change process is sought for, as well as in the cosmetic industry where the focus is more on hiding the results of the natural processes. The ethic of self-control combined with the dominant protestant/Lutheran ethic leads to the notion that there should be no excess in eating or drinking – thus there is often some degree of asceticism combined with the self-control (cf. Giddens, 1991: 104; Lupton, 1996: 137). Obesity and bodily dysfunction have traditionally been regarded as a result of a weak mind. Throughout the history of Western culture, the state of one's body has been interpreted as a

material sign of the moral character “within”. (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 144) Many times the pursuit of religious values stipulates following of certain kinds of bodily regimens such as asceticism, involving fasting and other forms of bodily deprivation (Giddens, 1991: 62; Lupton, 1996; Shilling, 1993).

In contemporary Western consumer culture the moral responsibility does not end with monitoring the physical appearance of the body. There is also a moral obligation to carefully control what foods, substances, and environmental conditions to which the body is exposed (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995, 144). Some report that consumers have such elaborate knowledge of the digestion system that the more mythical part of the notion that “you are what you eat” (Fischler, 1988: 279) is sometimes denied by adults in developed countries (Rozin, 1998: 14). However, the belief still seems to be present in both the anthropomorphic features given to food and the reversal when persons are caricatured by what they eat or are portrayed as eating. Contemporary cultural discourses, be it scientific texts or marketing promotions, that articulate an association between illness and personal responsibility have engendered a form of self-understanding. It has become natural to experience feelings of guilt for eating ‘incorrectly’, not exercising, and being overweight, and, reciprocally, to view these behaviors as signifying a lack of will, discipline and self-control (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 144). Many consumer actions are motivated by culturally sanctioned knowledge claims regarding how consumption can be used in order to control the health and/or appearance of the body.

As has been pointed out in this section there are a number of different rationales behind the messages about how we should take care of ourselves. There are numerous knowledge claims of the medical and social sciences, as well as from the food industry and the government. These are translated into a vast system of linguistic categories, bureaucratic documentation, normative prescriptions, and prohibitions against certain activities, in sum what Giddens (1990; 1991) refers to as expert systems. There is an intricate network of cultural discourses at play concerning the authority of science and the social construction of ‘good’ foods that can be freely consumed and ‘bad’ foods that symbolize a threat to health. Over the last years a great emphasis has been put on the connections between what we are eating and the state of our health. Combining the ethic of self-control with the fact that there is an increasing emphasis on the connections between food and health have forced consumers to engage in what Beck (1992) calls ‘nutritional engineering’. This implies that consumers, in order to eat a well balanced diet, have to be very

knowledgeable and up to date on what is healthy and not healthy and how these different entities should be combined. Beck (1992: 35) sheds light on this phenomenon from the point of what should *not* be eaten, thus, "*Cooking and eating are becoming a kind of implicit food chemistry, a kind of witch's cauldron in reverse, meant to minimize harmful effects*". In this sense good food is defined negatively by a logic of risk avoidance. The aim is not so much to find positively good food as it is to avoid the food that is potentially harmful.

For consumers it is virtually impossible to keep up with what is in vogue concerning food and health from day to day and from one source of information to another. The intricate web of contrasting expert systems is constantly at move and for a consumer to be able to uphold certain principles is not an easy task. As an illustration, many Scandinavian consumers are quite skeptical towards genetically modified foods, or genetically modified organisms (GMO) as they are usually referred to (Ekström & Askegaard, 2000; Poulsen, 1999; Wibeck, 2002). A Swedish consumer, who, as a part of her self narrative, only wants to consume so-called natural products and thus wants to avoid GMOs might have a hard time living up to her principles. In Sweden, we have long been taught that the GMO issue is a distant and largely American issue. A couple of years ago it was discovered that many products sold in Swedish supermarkets contained GMO; a revelation that caused much resentment among the Swedish consumers. Matters got even worse when it was discovered that retailers couldn't guarantee that they did not sell any products containing GMO – there was just no way of tracking whether a certain product contained GMOs or not. This is a good example of how the global movement of goods makes it virtually impossible to keep up with all that is going on. Giddens suggests that in order to make sense of this stressing situation, and to get some ease in their day-to-day lives consumers build so-called protective cocoons, which filters out potential dangers impinging from the external world (1991). Although different issues challenge the protective cocoons, such as the GMO-issue accounted for above, it offers a relative stability. The relative stability offered allows consumers to use heuristics in screening out some of the information that can be used in deciding how to act. If we return to Beck's notion of risk avoidance and the notion that it is hard for consumers to keep up what is the most healthy solution at each time, one possible heuristic is to at least stay away from the 'bad stuff'.



## Chapter Four

### Food and Health

From this more general discussion of self-identity and the body we are now going to move over to focus more directly on the topic of health. A screening of various media on a day-to-day basis provides plenty of evidence of the central role that health plays in contemporary society as exhibited in the opening chapter. Virtually every type of media reports on health related issues on a regular basis, and, in the interest of ‘creating news’, they tend to focus on various fads either regarding the latest fatal risks or the latest elixir of life (cf. Falk, 1996). Some of the more serious newspapers feature articles written by doctors and professors on topics like the ‘truth’ about the connection between food consumption and fat (Dagens Nyheter, 2000-10-21). The Wall Street Journal features a column named Health Journal every week in its Marketplace section, The New York Times features a Health & Fitness Section in its Science Times Section, Sydsvenska Dagbladet has a weekly health feature, and Dagens Nyheter<sup>10</sup> has a special weekly supplement called ‘Food and Health’. Some tabloids, such as Aftonbladet in Sweden, also have special weekly health supplements. These sections cover topics such as healthy fast food (Aftonbladet, 2000-11-08b) and diet products that make you fatter (Aftonbladet, 2000-09-21). Also, both Women’s magazines (e.g. Elle or Amelia) and Men’s magazines (e.g. GQ or Café) feature articles on health related issues and the topic is brought up frequently in both TV and radio shows. The topic is so frequently addressed that some general interest magazines, such as US News & World Report, have started to write articles about how to assess the trustworthiness of so-called health information (US News & World Report, 2000). There are also books written by dieticians and doctors trying to sort out the different messages such as the book entitled *Eat Everything! Rather almost right than entirely wrong* catering to the confused readers of contrasting messages about food (van der Ster Wallin & Lindskog, 2000). In a sense, things have come to a second level at which health messages

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<sup>10</sup> Sydsvenska Dagbladet is the main newspaper in southern Sweden and Dagens Nyheter is a Swedish national newspaper.

on the first level are discussed – we do not only find articles about health related issues but also articles and books about how to read articles about health related issues. The last couple of years there has also been an explosion of web sites devoted to health related issues. The number of sites have grown at such a speed that the so-called E-health industry has felt it necessary to make an attempt at regulating and providing a ‘seal of approval’ for ‘good’ sites (The Wall Street Journal, 2000-11-03). A reading of the material in these various sources provides a picture of the Western society as having a shared meaning that happiness is living a long and healthy life. Often this is combined with a glorification of youthfulness and the seemingly careless, vivid, unproblematic lifestyle young people are able to live. This is not only true for the editorial material but can also be seen in commercials as marketers repeatedly reinforce the cult of the youthful body, which, according to Catterall and Maclaran, has become the “*leitmotif of today’s consumer society*” (Catterall & Maclaran, 2001: 1119). A recent example from the Swedish market is a commercial for pension funds (AMF-pension) showing retirees around their seventies riding dirt bikes and boxing. The message in this, as well as numerous other commercials and magazine articles, is clearly that the goal is, in some sense, to survive life. The underlying assumption is that in order to have lived a successful life you have to arrive at retirement being healthy, wealthy and hungry for life. Even though the pension fund example given here is directed towards older people the health messages are also directed to younger people. Living a healthy life is an investment for the future. Many times this is a rather risky investment as it is uncertain whether even a radical change in health-awareness will bring with it any short term effects. As Pasi Falk (1994) points out, the success for many so-called health products might be explained by the fact that their proposed healthiness cannot be falsified in the short term.

## Four Antinomies of Taste

Warde (Warde, 1994a; 1994b) provides a good overview of the different messages available about food in his study of food recommendations in women’s magazines. Warde conducted a content analysis and identified eight key principles of recommendations that give meaning to food items. These eight categories embrace general, substantive and socially relevant themes and can be divided into four pairs of antinomies which structure contemporary food consumption. Even though Warde’s study was conducted in Britain the same themes can be identified in the Swedish as well as the US domain and the themes present real, contradictory appeals, representing social pressures

that operate on food choice. As was described earlier, one dominant trend in food consumption is towards gastroanomy, a condition bereft of rules. These four antinomies provide consumers with new rules to adhere to when engaging in food consumption under the anomic condition as they are the context of cultural reflection about what it is proper to eat. Their contradictory nature makes food selection a difficult, anxiety-provoking and under-regulated, activity.

The first pair is *novelty* and *tradition*. Novelty can be connected to the neophilic tendencies described in the previous chapter. In contemporary social life there is a positive value attached to new experience. At the same time, there is an appeal to the certainties of 'traditional' food and the social belonging associated with well-tried practices. A nostalgic longing for 'the good old days' can be found as exhibited by the frequent display of key words such as 'homemade', 'Mom's', and 'old-fashioned', on different types of food products. These kinds of messages are also being voiced in media as exemplified by a recent article in the Danish newspaper Politiken calling for a return to traditional food rituals. The logic is that if we get back to traditional gastronomy with its routinized way of eating many of the contemporary problems with food consumption can be eliminated (Politiken, 2002-04-25). The second antinomy is between *health* and *indulgence*. Various experts increasingly tell us what is good for us to eat. A day-to-day reading of newspapers, magazines and consumption of TV and radio gives plenty of examples of this as evidenced by the exposition in the introductory chapter. While the main messages are those of health concern there is a simultaneous messages about the necessity to, at least sometimes, indulge. Gabriel and Lang (1995: 100) suggest that enjoying life means consuming for pleasure, not for survival or for need and continue with saying that if we fail to enjoy life, it may be that we are failing to look after ourselves, weighed down by self-inflicted hang-ups and inhibitions. Weight Watchers newly introduced a new diet plan called '6+1', where they try to resolve this tension between health and indulgence, stating in their advertisements:

Nothing is forbidden – even alcohol, pastry, snacks, and candy is allowed! Everything you like can be built in to the program without impaired weight-loss. Here comes 6+1 that allows you to, if you want, devote one day a week to enjoy life without thinking about your weight<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The 6+1 diet plan was introduced in Sweden through a national campaign during the summer of 2001.

On Weight Watchers (ViktVäktarna, 2002) homepage there are frequent references to the importance of sometimes 'letting loose' in order to stay sane. *Economy* is also a relevant factor and surveys of inexpensive retail outlets and recipes that 'go a long way' are frequently appearing in the media. At the same time, foods ability to be *extravagant* is perhaps an even more frequent topic. Such food is portrayed as being appropriate when in need of personal comfort or in order to give the family a 'treat'. Also, special occasions such as holidays and entertaining calls for use of more flamboyant ingredients. The tension between economy and extravagance make up the third antinomy. The last antinomy is made up of the pair *convenience* and *care*. Convenience is no doubt a value considering today's fast paced lifestyle. Ready made meals, take-out and other quick solutions are frequently reported on as being viable alternatives. However, there is also a strong tendency to load food with connotations of personal, emotional, and domestic significance (cf. Warde, 1999).

Warde's content analysis of how food is written about in women's magazines is useful in that it brings order to the various types of messages available. The advice about what to eat comes from many sources: from the government, mass media, and social contacts. This information many times assume the form of what Giddens (1990; 1991) refers to as expert knowledge. At first, the advice might seem incoherent and inconsistent. But Warde provides us with the four 'antinomies of taste' and thus gives us a systematic basis for these contradictory messages. The antinomies are widely applicable as they correspond to principal institutional forms, such as the ambivalence of modern experience and fetishism with body maintenance. For a consumer, these oppositions are values that can legitimize choices between foodstuffs. Since most are familiar, people can appreciate the attractions of both poles of each antinomy. But this is the crux of the matter as they therefore become a source of anxiety about the best course of action.

## Production of the Public Health Discourse

As has been mentioned repeatedly, there is not *one* picture of what constitutes healthy and unhealthy foods but rather a mosaic of sometimes unrelated, sometimes complimentary, and sometimes contrasting pictures. These pictures consider virtually everything from what is appropriate to eat, with what to eat it, how to eat it, when to eat it, and with whom to eat it. Not only are there many different pictures with various objectives, they also stem from a wide variety of different sources and tend to change over time. With the

increasing globalization of media, a vast number of different mosaics can potentially be put together by anyone who cares to assemble the relevant information. The collage effect of television and newspapers gives specific form to the juxtaposition of settings and potential lifestyle choices (Giddens, 1991: 84). Bearing this in mind it is not surprising that so many different views exist among consumers about what constitutes healthy and unhealthy food. It is sometimes assumed that there is an 'objective' definition of what constitutes healthiness and health and that individual or 'cultural' idiosyncrasies make up for the different 'subjective' views (cf. Svederberg, 1997: 38 for an example of such view). I would argue that no such clear-cut 'objective' truth exists 'out there'. On the contrary, there are plenty of examples of instances where experts disagree widely on even the most serious diseases such as coronary heart disease and cancer. These scientific facts are therefore more readily viewed as hypotheses constantly open for revision in the light of new findings (cf. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) or as put by Brown: "*Scientific 'truths' and 'falsehoods' are social constructs, agreements to agree, which are culture bound, context dependent and relative rather than absolute*" (1995: 94). Far-reaching disagreements exist both within traditional medicine and between the more orthodox traditional school and so-called alternative medical practitioners. (Giddens, 1991:121) The key issue in this section is in no way to assess the potential correctness of the knowledge claims of the different actors but to show how consumers are served with a wide variety of available discursive formations that can be used in making sense of their food consumption habits (cf. Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 145).

There are numerous contrasting truths available in the form of multiple public discourses and consumers use these in different ways in forming their own ideas about food consumption. The most dominating public discourse is the medical/nutritional/scientific advocated by the governmental agencies such as Livsmedelsverket (2000) in Sweden and the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA 2002) in the US. As these agencies are highly influential, e.g. in issues of legislation around what claims can be made about foodstuffs and about the information that have to be placed on the nutritional panels, they decide what is brought up on the public agenda (Roos, Lean, & Anderson, 2002). There are other influences, however, such as a more holistically influenced messages of naturalness as a means to bodily balance (cf. Thompson & Troester, 2002) and various 'health and fitness' messages proliferating in special interest magazines and tabloids. Consumer faces an arduous task in keeping up to date with and judging what are good and credible sources of information and how this information should be used together with what was previously known. In some instances consumers

might choose to appropriate certain types of information that goes well with their pre-established habits. They obey the principles of the avoidance of cognitive dissonance. The plethora of available information is reduced via routinized attitudes that exclude, or reinterpret, potentially disturbing knowledge. This avoidance of dissonance forms part of the protective cocoon which helps maintain the ontological security (Giddens, 1991: 188). Giddens (1991: 121) also suggests that some consumers might not be able to face such complexity but instead choose to withdraw trust from all authorities and stick stubbornly to whatever established habits they have formed for themselves. In a similar stream of thought, Rozin (1998: 17) asserts that the frequent concerns among consumers about particular dietary items has promoted tendencies to ignore it all, or overact to it all, or to develop simplifying heuristics that take the uncertainty “*out of every bite*”. He continues with stating that one unfortunate heuristic is that foods are either good or bad and that the level of intake thus drops out of the equation. As a consequence, a substantial percent of Americans are said to think that fat and salt are toxins: even a trace of each in food is considered unhealthy (ibid.). The reflexive monitoring of risks is built in to the day-to-day whereabouts in the late modern age; it is fundamental for life chances and life-planning (cf. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993). The regular and detailed monitoring of health risks provides an excellent example of the interaction between the expert systems and lay behaviors in relation to risk. Risk profiling – analyzing what, in the current state of knowledge and in current conditions, is the distribution of risks in certain area – is a significant part of expert thinking and public discourse. What is ‘current’ in each of these respects is constantly subject to change. Consequently, such profiles have to be chronically revised and updated. Medical specialists and other researchers produce the materials from which risk profiling is carried out. This material does not stay in the possession of the experts but is incorporated into the knowledge domains of lay actors. These actors are often aware of the expert notions, even if it is often only in a rough and ready way, and indeed medical profession and other agencies are concerned how to make their findings more readily available to laypeople (Giddens, 1991: 120). Yet, the consensus of expert opinion – in the cases where there is such consensus – may switch even as the changes in lifestyle they called for previously become adopted. Given the rich number of sources available to collect information from, it becomes rather arbitrary what consumers pick up. They might pay attention when a certain change in diet is proposed and change their behavior accordingly. If this recommended change is later refuted by another study it is not at all certain that the same consumers will once again pay attention and change. Also, once a set of practices regarding food consumption is set up it may be quite difficult to break since it

is likely to be integrated with other aspects of a person's behavior. The more or less constant, profound, and rapid momentum of change characteristics of modern institutions, coupled with structured reflexivity, mean that on the level of everyday practice as well as a philosophical interpretation, nothing can be taken for granted. What is acceptable/appropriate/recommended behavior today may be seen differently tomorrow in the light of altered circumstances or incoming knowledge-claims. Yet at the same time, so far as many daily transactions are concerned, activities are successfully routinized through their recombination across time-space.

## Food Scares

The Swedish consumers have been shook by a number of food-scares over the last few years. A few of them include: the artificial sweetener cyclamate was reported as a threat to health in 1969; during the seventies researchers reported that margarine was made of small plastic balls; in 1988 it was reported that several food products such as ice-cream, lemonade, and salad dressing contained dioxin; in 2000 dioxin was found again, this time in Belgian meat; when the microwave oven was introduced several reported that 'nuked' food could cause cancer; in 1999 soy sauce was reported to contain chloropropanol, a carcinogenic substance; in 2001 olive oil was reported to be carcinogenic; the artificial sweetener Aspartame is reported to be carcinogenic from time to time; barbecued hotdogs have also been reported as carcinogenic; high levels of mercury has been found in fish, *Listeria monocytogenes* in chicken, cadmium in grain, *Salmonella enterica* in chicken, and recently it was found that the carcinogenic substance acrylamide somehow forms in certain carbohydrates after they are baked or fried at high temperatures making fried potatoes, French fries, chips and bread potential risks (Aftonbladet Hälsa, 2002-07-09; ICA-kuriren, 2002-06-03). While all these alarms were reported as full-scale threats in media, most of them have been revised by others in the scientific community, either as highly exaggerated or as completely ungrounded. There is usually some kind of connection to mainstream scientific findings in the alarms, e.g. dioxin, mercury, and chloropropanol are agreed upon by virtually anyone to be hazardous. But in all the above examples, it has been shown that they appear in far too small doses in the foodstuffs to cause any damage. An example is provided by the follow-up studies conducted after the dioxin-scare in 1988 where it was shown that one had to eat about 2000 ice-creams a day to be in any serious risk. We have now reached a level where food-scares are reported frequently enough by the tabloids that the (perhaps more serious) morning newspapers are criticizing them for creating a situation similar to the story

about the boy who cried wolf – if you call out for help too many times without needing it, no one is going to listen to you when you really need it (Svenska Dagbladet, 2002-07-31). A related issue raised by Rozin (1998) is that many scientific findings are reported ‘as they happen’, on the basis of singular experimental or epidemiological studies and raises the concern that:

This availability of information has not been accompanied by education of the public on risks and benefits, basic concepts of probability, and on the gradual and rocky road, in science, from ignorance to knowledge. Hence, the public<sup>12</sup> often takes findings to be facts. (1998: 17)

One of the main actors influencing what is put on the public agenda is the government. In Sweden there is a governmental agency called Livsmedelsverket<sup>13</sup> that is responsible for giving out directions of what is a nutritionally correct diet, what is the recommended intake of certain vitamins, minerals, et cetera. They cater to the public and try to put their information in an easily accessible way. They stress the direct links between food and health as in an example from the brochure *Good Advice About Food and Health* (Livsmedelsverket, 2001) in which they write:

Fat in food is essential. It gives us energy, protects our inner organs, builds cells, creates hormones, and supplies vitamins A, D, E, and K.

The amount of fat we eat is important, but it is also important what kind of fat we eat. Many eat too much fat and fat of the wrong kind. This increases the risk for obesity, high blood pressure, and hyperlipidaemia. These diseases and states of unhealthiness can turn to the better with the right kind of food. (2001: 10)

Livsmedelsverket also publish warnings when there are scientific reports of certain food products being hazardous. Livsmedelsverket thus plays an important role in setting the agenda of what foods are discussed and what is regarded as healthy and unhealthy. Also other governmental authorities such as Läkemedelsverket<sup>14</sup> ((Medical Products Agency - Sweden) 2000) send out directions of what is healthy and not. Similar roles are played in the US by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA 2002) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA 2002). Livsmedelsverket publishes ‘Swedish nourishment recommendations’<sup>15</sup> and USDA publishes ‘Dietary Guidelines for Americans’

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<sup>12</sup> This seems to be true not only for the public but also for many of the reporters employed by tabloids and newspapers.

<sup>13</sup> Equivalent to the food part of the US FDA.

<sup>14</sup> Equivalent to the drug part of the US FDA.

<sup>15</sup> Svenska näringsrekommendationer

that is available online. The public is not always reached directly by messages from the governmental agencies. Instead the government works in close collaboration with media who report on the different messages sent out.

On a global scale the main actor in giving out recommendations about food and health related issues is the World Health Organization (WHO web page2000). WHO recently issued a document called *Process for a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health* (WHO, 2003) reinforcing the dominating view that the reason for the increase of so-called noncommunicable diseases can be found in a combination of unhealthy diets and lack of physical activity. The goal for WHO is to issue a global strategy for its member states (Sweden and the US are among WHO's 192 member states) about how to prevent and control the 'global epidemic' (WHO, 2000) of such diseases. In order to boost their trustworthiness they emphasize their scientific rigor by explicating that "*sixty experts were involved in assembling and reviewing the latest scientific evidence on diet, physical activity, and prevention of chronic diseases*" (WHO, 2003: 2). Clearly the official view both by the transnational organization WHO and by national actors Livsmedelsverket in Sweden and FDA in the US is that there is a direct link between diet, physical activity and the state of an individuals health. Furthermore, it is the goal of WHO to get their member states to communicate this goal to their citizens.

To show how arbitrary the governmental recommendations about consumption of certain foods might work a brief example will be given of how Livsmedelsverket and media work in influencing the public debate. In the summer of 1999, during the usual news-draught, a reporter from one of Sweden's leading newspapers was surfing the Internet looking for information on mushrooms. The reporter had just put himself on a mushroom diet where he was eating half a kilo of mushrooms each day in order to loose weight. The reporter found a report dated several months earlier on the Livsmedelsverket homepage warning that eating high amounts of fresh mushrooms might have carcinogenic effects. As there was not very many other news stories available at the time this was blown up as a cover story and all of a sudden a new hazard was created. Mushrooms had been moved from being a 'good' product to being a 'bad' one because of one reporter's random surfing on the Internet. A couple of weeks following the first newspaper article there was extensive coverage of mushrooms in media. The public was influenced by the media attention as could be observed by a sharp drop in sales of mushrooms. A few months after the 'mushroom bomb' detonated in the Swedish media sales

were up to the same level as prior to the health-scare. Interesting to note is that no reports refuting the first one have been published<sup>16</sup>.

The moral of the story is that the public is easily influenced by reports in media, especially with a credible source such as Livsmedelsverket behind the story. However, once the media attention has decreased things tend to get back to normal. Instances like this constantly bombard consumers' protective cocoons and thus shake consumers sense of basic trust (cf. Giddens, 1991: 40). Even though these isolated incidents of food scares, and the following fear of certain products, tend to be forgotten after a while, the aggregate effect of the seemingly endless stream of more or less serious food scares is likely to be an increased sense of anxiety. Anxiety in this context should be understood as a more generalized state of emotions disregarding the object, whereas fear in itself is directed towards an identifiable object (Giddens, 1991: 44).

Thompson and Hirschman (1995) reports on another way in which reports from governmental agencies influence consumers' lives, which suggests that a quite similar process is going on with the FDA and media as the one described for the Swedish livsmedelsverket. In their study a respondent expresses agony over the shifting of the recommended cholesterol levels. The interviewee gives an account of a visit to the doctor where a test showed that her cholesterol was within the recommended levels according to the standards at the time. At her next visit her cholesterol levels were at the same level but due to a change in recommendations the person's levels were now over the recommended levels. Consequently, she was all of a sudden transferred from being a healthy person to being a person at risk without there being any actual change in her cholesterol levels (1995: 146). The authors report that the respondent perceived this as highly enervating.

These are just a few examples of the powerful role media and other agencies have in influencing the views of what is an appropriate diet. Most newspapers and magazines, especially so-called lifestyle-magazines, regularly contain information and recommendations about what is healthy and not healthy and what is a well balanced diet. There is also a large self-help-book market that provides more or less 'scientific' guidelines for how to eat in a healthy way, not to mention the vast array of diet- or weight-loss books available (cf. Shilling, 1993). Giddens (1991: 101) gives a good example of how one such self-book even deals explicitly with how to steer between different expert

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<sup>16</sup> Story presented by representative from Livsmedelsverket at Svenska livsmedelstekniska föreningen's (Swedish food tech association) annual meeting in Tylösand, September 1999.

advise in putting together a well balanced diet and the previously mentioned Swedish book *Eat Everything! Rather almost right than entirely wrong* (van der Ster Wallin & Lindskog, 2000) serves the exact same purpose. It should be noted that while the view of a direct link between diet, physical activity and the state of an individual's health is clearly dominating there is an almost endless array of suggestions, and great dispute, about what exactly should be deemed a healthy diet and what kind of physical activity one should engage in and to what extent.

Finally, I will make comment on the influence of various consumer groups such as GreenPeace (2002), Sveriges konsumenter i samverkan<sup>17</sup> (2002), and Physicians and Scientists for Responsible Application of Science and Technology (2002). These groups are usually the only ones working in opposition to the large companies and the only ones questioning the hegemony of natural science in the public debates. They are often ridiculed for this position until their issue is brought up in a more 'sanitary' environment. A recent example is the debate about so-called GMO in the US. As long as consumer groups were the only ones opposing GMO the issue was hardly ever addressed in media. As the differences in opinion between Europe and the US became apparent and the GMO issue became one involving accusations of potential trade barriers between EU and the US, the matter was dealt with more seriously. All of a sudden, the arguments used all the time by the environmentalist groups were seen in the main newspapers and taken as serious parts of the discussion. There are of course a vast number of other important actors, such as family and friends, active in constructing a public discourse of health and food. But, as previously mentioned, this section is only intended as a brief introduction in order to show on the complexity involved for consumers in forming a view of what is an appropriate diet.

## A Traditional View of Healthiness

Looking at the exclusive media coverage of health related issues it seems evident that healthiness is seen as important today. But what are we actually talking about when we discuss healthiness? When looking at how the demographic trends in the Western world is presented it looks like we are indeed healthier today than we have ever been before. According to statistics from Statistiska Centralbyrån<sup>18</sup> (SCB homepage 1999), the overall state of the

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<sup>17</sup> Swedish consumer group, their name roughly translates to 'Consumers in Collaboration'

<sup>18</sup> The Swedish National Census Bureau

population's healthiness is getting better. Especially the elderly have never been as healthy as they are today and never have the ageing population been as large<sup>19</sup>. However, the definition of healthiness in these cases deserves some more attention. When is a person defined as being healthy and who is to decide where the border between healthiness and unhealthiness should be set?

A feature of much modernist thought, connected to the view of natural science as the dominant paradigm, is that only conditions that can be observed, measured, and monitored are considered real (cf. Greco, 1995; Ritzer, 1996). This has severe implications for what is defined as healthiness as it delimits when certain conditions are regarded as medical disorders or not. Since only that which can be measured can be recorded, an emphasis is put on the quantifiable terms of healthiness rather than the qualitative aspects. Within modern medicine there is an emphasis on what can be observed and where causal links can be made to a specific cause. The result is a fragmentation of the body where a more holistic view is lost to the advantage of a view of the body as a number of isolated problems that all have their particular solution. The medical sciences are fueling these fragmenting tendencies, as their scientific method is one of isolating problems and finding solutions for them in isolation. When meta-analyses are conducted the individual is the unit of analysis and all potential factors influencing an individual's health are looked at. The results of these studies are much less clear-cut and many of the old 'truths' are questioned such as the role of unsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids in cardiovascular disease (Ravnskov, 1998). Studies of this kind have been widely criticized, as individuals with their idiosyncratic lifestyles are seen as 'too fuzzy' for scientific investigation. Hence, the fragmented view is dominating with the result that the symptom-cure logic is ruling the discourses on food and health. Furthermore, psychosomatic diseases are not seen as 'as real' as strictly somatic diseases (Greco, 1995). The implication is that it doesn't really matter how a person feels, what matters is if modern medicine classifies the condition as a disease or not. So, indeed, we live longer and are able to cure many more diseases than a few years ago but that might not say very much about the quality of life. An example is the Swedish trend towards living longer and healthier lives. The higher life expectancy is often framed as a proof of the great success of the Swedish system providing good care for the elderly enabling them to live long happy lives. Also, this is many times portrayed as a dream among the not (yet) so old as they state that they wish they would

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<sup>19</sup> The ageing population is even portrayed as one of the main threats towards the economy as health care and pension costs are forecasted to rise significantly over the next few years.

become old and stay in good shape. However, the ones living this dream to the max, i.e. persons around 100 years of age in good health often claim that they are not really happy with the way things have turned out. Instead they claim that they feel that they are obliged to be thankful for growing as old as they have but that they lack friends and feel that they are a burden to society (Aftonbladet, 1999-03-01). There is somewhat of a contradiction here since the emphasis is only on the easily quantifiable aspects, i.e. more persons are growing old and are not using much medication. These statements do provide us with neither the full picture nor a very interesting one. It is not taken into consideration whether the individuals actually live good lives in a qualitative sense or not. This focus on the quantifiable, 'scientific' facts is symptomatic for the discussion of health as a whole. Especially when the status of health is discussed on an aggregate level, discussing the health status of e.g. countries or continents, the focus on quantifiable aspects might not be very revealing. Of course measures such as life expectancy are important and can tell us something. It is probably fair to say that the general state of health is higher in a country such as Japan with a life expectancy of 84,3 years (females, 1999) than it is for Sierra Leone with a life expectancy of 35,4 years (females, 1999) (World Health Organization (WHO), 2000). But many times measures such as life expectancy are taken to more directly mirror the state of a country's health. An article in the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet states that: "*The length of life shows how we feel*" (Aftonbladet, 2000-11-08a). There is probably reason to believe that individuals living a comfortable and enjoyable life live longer. However, one should be careful in reversing the argument, as is done in the Aftonbladet article, and assume that people living longer also feel better. I would argue that the length of life shows how long we live – how we feel is something quite different.

Again, the hegemony of modernist rationality shows in putting an emphasis on quantitative rather than qualitative aspects. If we take Beck's assertion seriously, individuals might actually be experiencing a lower quality of life as they are constantly having to think about being at risk and taking measures to avoid exposure to these risks (Beck, 1992). The sense of being constantly exposed to risks is reinforced by frequent reports on how the population of the Western world is becoming increasingly plagued by certain types of noncommunicable diseases, the so-called lifestyle diseases caused by poor diets and lack of physical activity. These tendencies are increasingly spreading across the globe, which is attributed by WHO (2002a: 1:1) to the globalization of the market for food. These changes in the world food economy have contributed to shifting dietary patterns, for example, increased

consumption of energy-dense diets high in fat, particularly saturated fat, and low in fruit and vegetables (WHO, 2002a; WHO Europe, 2002).

The seriousness of the consequences of the alleged poor diet and lack of physical activity is furthermore reinforced in *The World Health Report 2002: Reducing Risks, Promoting Healthy Life* (WHO, 2002c) where it is reported that, in the Western world, 3.9 % of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs<sup>20</sup>) are lost due to insufficiently low fruit and vegetable intake and 7.4 % of DALYs can be explained by overweight. (WHO, 2002c: Annex table 16). It is furthermore reported that in Europe around one third of cardiovascular disease cases are related to eating a poor diet and that better diets could prevent around 30-40% of cancer cases (WHO Europe, 2002). These numbers are transferable to the US where similar developments are taking place (WHO Pan American, 2003).

## The Relational Aspects of Healthiness

When health qualities in food are discussed, the point of departure is predominately the natural sciences. The fact that we need some basic nutritional substances to stay alive tends to obscure the fact that what is deemed 'necessary', 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' in a diet is far from self-evident. Human beings do not desire to consume certain substances deemed essential by natural scientists because of some biological need to do so. The needs themselves are valorized by our consciousness of them; what people are after is the sensation of doing something healthy rather than the healthiness *per se* (Bauman, 2001). The immediate satisfaction that consumers might feel from consuming products they believe to be healthy should thus not be understated but that has nothing to do with an inherent healthiness in the products. The ability to fulfill some need is not inherent in the object as such but rather in the meaning ascribed to the objects by the help of natural science. Consumers desire these products not because of their immediate gratification but rather because of the possibility of a certain potential satisfaction that might appear in the future. There is thus no *direct* link between the healthiness of a product and a consumer's choice of that product. I am not denying that there are some levels of certain substances that must be consumed and certain substances that should not be consumed in order for an individual to stay

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<sup>20</sup> DALYs (Disability Adjusted Life Years) are a time based indicator of health outcome, that are composite measures of the overall burden of disease due to losses from premature death and non fatal disability ([http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/RHT\\_98\\_28/RHT\\_98\\_28\\_chapter2.en.html](http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/RHT_98_28/RHT_98_28_chapter2.en.html))

healthy. Neither am I denying that natural scientists are able to quite accurately describe and prescribe what these substances are and in what kind of products they might be found. It should be added, though, as was pointed out in the introduction, that there is not one scientific voice but rather multiple contrasting expert systems (Giddens, 1991). A causal interpretation must be added when things that are spatially and temporally disparate are drawn together. The implied causality always remains more or less uncertain and tentative. Thus we are dealing with a theoretical and hence scientized consciousness, even in the everyday consciousness of healthiness. Beck (1992: 27) states that while things like income and education are consumable goods that can be experienced by the individual, the existence and distribution of risks and hazards are mediated on principle through argumentation. A parallel argument can be pursued for healthiness; that which impairs health is usually not recognizable to one's own feeling or eye; it escapes human powers of direct perception. Even where healthiness can seemingly be observed, as in the case with much traditional Asian medicine, experts are still needed to determine it 'objectively' in the Western world. What is problematic is when the natural scientific knowledge of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' substances is transferred to food products and these products are treated as standing in some clear relationships to something called consumers 'true needs'. Again, what we see is the dominating natural scientific discourse constructing a myth of these relationships as being natural (cf. Barthes, 1969). There is no direct link between the 'scientific facts' of what is healthy and consumer's choice of these products. Rather, these 'scientific facts' are one part in a larger semiotic system, a system that is not fueled so much by 'need satisfaction' as by the roles different ideas play as signs in an arbitrary relation to more or less abstract ideas about healthiness (cf. Baudrillard, 1996). A clear distinction cannot be drawn between true and false needs in this (or other) case(s). Baudrillard states that a theory of needs is in itself nonsensical; there can be only a theory of the ideological concepts of need, i.e. of need as an expression of a specific social system and that we commit the fundamental mistake of naturalizing social processes of exchange and signification (Baudrillard, 1981).

The scientific definitions of healthiness in various products are of a social, cultural, and political character. Furthermore, as a consequence of the medico-scientific methods, the 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' are held at an average level and moves exclusively within statistical probability statements. This is the only way in which the traits can be stably placed in the products. But investigations that start from an individual product can never determine the concentration in an individual consumer. What may seem insignificant for a single product is perhaps extremely significant when collected in the

‘consumer reservoir’ (Beck, 1992: 26). Many times it seems like a unit of analysis error is made when we forget that the relevant domain for a single consumer is not the average but the particular consumer. What is ‘on average’ is of limited interest to the victimized subject. The licorice-loving girl from Stockholm provides an illustrative example of how an ordinary ‘harmless’ product deemed safe ‘on average’ could be far from safe for an individual consumer. Two doctors report in *Läkartidningen*<sup>21</sup> (Lehtihet & Nygren, 2000) that a 24-year-old woman came in to the emergency room unable to walk and suffering severe pain in her legs. She reported that she had had similar problems over the last two years but nothing as severe as her present condition. The usual tests were taken and it was discovered that the woman was suffering from hypokalaemia, i.e. a lack of potassium. The doctors searched in vain for an explanation and finally figured out that the patient had been eating 100 grams of ‘salta grodor’, a Swedish licorice candy, every single day for several years. This ‘abnormal consumption behavior’, as it is referred to in the article, had transformed a seemingly ‘safe’ product to a ‘dangerous’ one. The point to be taken away is that for a single consumer the ‘average’ is perhaps of little interest. The relational aspect of both healthy and unhealthy products is essential. It is absurd to claim that these qualities reside in the products as they clearly only exist in the power of moving a consumer from one point to the other – it is the particular subject-object relationship that is of interest rather than the mythological characteristics given to a particular object. Consumption of the same products can have quite different implications for different people according to age, gender, eating habits, type of work, information, education, and so on (cf. Beck, 1992).

The specific traits ascribed to products are not of a definitive kind. Rather, *health* is relational in that it bridges a person’s existing state with a favorably looked upon future state. Similarly, *risk* is relational in that it bridges a person’s existing state with an unfavorably looked upon future state. What can be said to be healthy or risky is therefore dependant on the difference between the present and the future state. It should be pointed out, however, that the future state might be status quo. With the glorification of youthfulness discussed above, many people seem to nurture a dream of being forever young and are not reluctant to employ all available means of reaching that goal (cf. Askegaard et al., 2002; Bauman, 1992; Catterall & Maclaran, 2001; Shilling, 1993). It is this trait of providing a link with a future state that is perceived as being the health or risk attribute of the actual product. It is thus not something constant and inherent in the particular object but rather

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<sup>21</sup> The official publication of Swedish Medical Doctors

a relation, a means of building a bridge. The knowledge about these relationships is many times so widespread that they are taken-for-granted by virtually everyone including dieticians, medical professionals, and consumers, and these relational traits are magically transferred to be residing within the products rather than in the subject-object relationship – they have become modern myths (cf. Barthes, 1969).

In some cases the substances consumed can have a very direct effect on the consumer's health. This is most obvious if the effects are negative as any one having suffered from food poisoning can easily identify with. If we move to the positive domain the examples are not as easy to find. Gould (1991) shares some insights of the very direct positive (!) effects consumption of salt and herbal teas has on him in a rather revealing fashion. To examine one's bodily reactions to consumption of certain mundane substances with Gould's scrutiny is perhaps an exception to the rule. In everyday talk when someone talks about consumption of healthy food it seems common to do so in terms of 'It feels good to eat it' rather than in terms of 'I feel good when I eat it'. This indicates that the feeling of well-being is on the mental stage rather than on the actual bodily stage. To the despondency of Professor Nils-Georg Asp, one of Sweden's authorities on dietary guidelines, there are even examples of the opposite when consumers do not feel good at all after consumption of the foods deemed healthy by the medical community. Asp laments over the fact that consumers don't understand that all the activities in the bowel area that occurs after eating a diet rich in fiber is a good thing. Instead they claim that they are intolerable towards fiber since their stomachs react in that way. They thus shy away from foods rich in fiber because they cannot read the body's signals in the way advocated by the medical community (Allt om Mat, 2001).

Furthermore, there must be a distinction between already beneficial consequences and the potential element of benefit. Most healthy products essentially express a future component. Either in the sense of a positive future which is to be achieved or a negative future which is to be prevented. The meaning of these products have something to do with anticipation, with benefits that have not yet happened and thus the center of health consciousness – the flip-side of risk consciousness – lies not in the present but in the future (cf. Falk, 1994). What we see is therefore something presently non-existent, invented, fictive as the 'cause' of current experience and action. Consumers feel forced to become active today in order to prevent, alleviate or take precautions against the problems and crises of tomorrow. Risks and the products potentially capable of steering away from these risks have to successfully pass through a process of social recognition. Risk positions, as

well as health positions, first have to be born scientifically in scientized civilization. (Beck, 1992: 33pp.)

## Food as Health

As has been mentioned repeatedly, food has come to be seen as an increasingly important factor in consumers' strivings towards healthiness (cf. Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993). These tendencies are very much fueled by the food industry's realization that selling food products with more or less explicit health claims is a profitable strategy (cf. Heasman & Mellentin, 2001). For example, lots of products have been released the last few years giving remedy for upset stomachs. Scientific investigations have shown that particular products can effectively lower the degree of stomach problems if eaten regularly and thus, in the modernist scientific view, the problem is solved (see the Probi web page (Probi AB, 2001) for numerous examples of such products). An alternative view, that is not given very much attention in mainstream media, is that the reason for the upset stomach is to be found elsewhere. Some claim that the much-aspired fast-paced modern lifestyle, where no time is given for relaxation and where individuals do not take proper care of themselves is the real cause of the problem. The tendency to try to find solutions in increased consumption is illustrated by the following quote from the promotional material for PrimaLiv, a yogurt product developed by Skånemejerier:

In today's society it is hard to live and eat like we are really supposed to. As a result we see welfare diseases like type II diabetes, high blood pressure, hyperlipidaemia and obesity.

To alter one's habits is easier said than done. To help you, we have developed 'Primaliv i balans', a yogurt low in fat with a delicious granola in the lid. In doing this, we help you reduce the risk of getting type II diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. (Skånemejerier, 2002)

Marketing of food products claiming to be beneficial for health provides a good example of the tendency to isolate one problem and portraying the product as standing in a direct cause and effect relationship to eliminating the problem. Both in Sweden and in the US there are regulatory forces working towards restricting the kind of claims you can make about health qualities in products. But companies keep coming up with cunning plans to get their message through to consumers. The breakfast cereal Cheerios<sup>22</sup> (see figure 4.1)

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<sup>22</sup> Cheerios was recently introduced on the Swedish market by Nestlé.

by General Mills provides a good example. The package features the text “*Cheerios may reduce the risk of heart disease*” in large fonts running across the front of the package. Above this message in considerably smaller fonts “*In a low-fat diet, whole grain foods like [Cheerios]*” is written. Furthermore, on a different part of the package the text “*Diets rich in whole grain foods and other plant foods and low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease*” is shown.

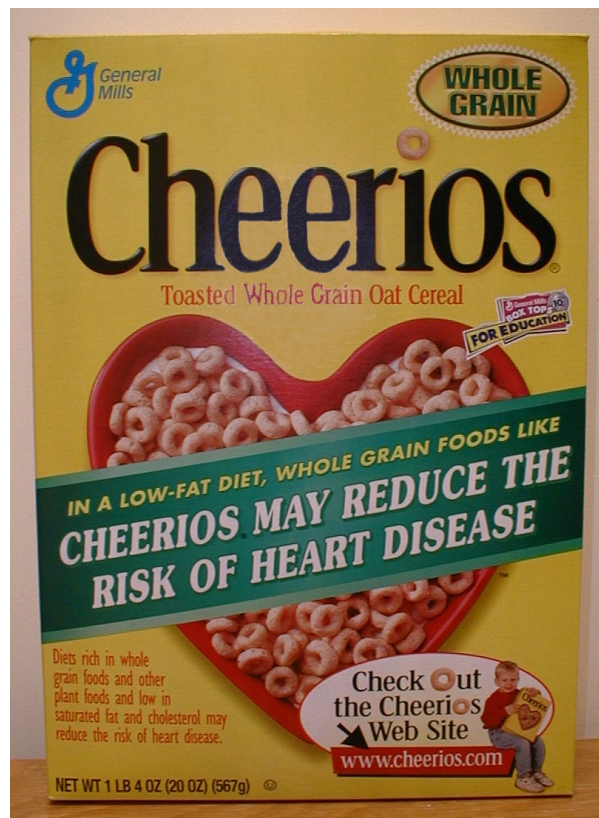


Figure 4.1: Box of Cheerios

What we see here is clearly an ongoing battle between, on one side the regulators trying to limit the health claims companies can make, and on the other side the companies trying to say as much as possible. The little word *may* that is used is significant since the logical consequence of that word is that the opposite – *may not* might be equally true. Also, the text “*In a low fat diet, whole grain foods like*” is important. This implies that Cheerios in itself does not do the trick; you have to eat a low-fat diet as well. This leads to another question, what is a low-fat diet? To my knowledge there is no clear-cut definition of what constitutes a low-fat diet. Furthermore, the little word *like* suggests that any whole grain food can do what Cheerios might do. Moving on to the last piece of text “*...and other plant foods and low in saturated fat and cholesterol*”, we learn that whole grain foods alone is not

enough, the diet must also contain other plant foods and be low in saturated fat and cholesterol. Hence, a closer reading of what is stated on the package gives us a more nuanced picture suggesting that Cheerios alone is not at all the solution to avoiding heart diseases despite the suggestive text “*Cheerios may reduce the risk of heart disease*” in large fonts. By looking at how the message on the box is written one gets the impression that Cheerios tries to send a somewhat simplified message to its potential consumers implying that a direct link between consumption of Cheerios and reduced risk of heart disease exists. Also, which perhaps deserves to be pointed out, nowhere on the package are there any messages pertaining to the potential gastronomical qualities of Cheerios breakfast cereals. The whole market communication is held on a purely functional basis.

In Sweden there is a peculiar legislation where health claims on ordinary products only can be made in a two-step process (Asp, Laser Reuterswård, & Liljeberg, 1998; Bruce, Becker, Hammerling, Nilsson, & Sjölin, 2001). First, one of eight approved statements about the connections between a certain ingredient and its impact on health can be made, e.g. ‘Consumption of fibers is good for digestion system’. Second, a statement about the marketed product containing the beneficial ingredient can be made, e.g. ‘Extra High in Fiber’. A direct statement about a certain product being beneficial for health is not allowed unless it is scientifically proven. In the cases where products pass these tests they are legally defined as Functional Foods (hp-info.nu web page, 2003). The scientific testing is very similar to how drugs are tested and thus very costly both in time and money (Wikström, 1998). An example of this type of two-step approach is given by The Wasa Crisp Bread Company in their marketing of its line of ‘Wasa Vital® Fiber+’ products (Wasabröd Homepage, 2000). Parallel to the above Cheerios example it seems like Wasa is stretching the limit of how bold a statement they can make about their products without crossing the line set up by the regulators. Wasa calls their fiber-enhanced products Fiber+ and on the package they feature the statement ‘fiber is good for the digestion system’ – that comes awfully close to making a statement about the actual product!

So, while there are different forces fighting over what kind of statements can be made about certain products it seems like consumers are caught in the crossfire in trying to make sense of what the products are all about. There are numerous examples of instances like these where companies as well as scientific reports in various media stress the positive connections between some food products and their effects on healthiness: red wine, garlic, carrots, and cod-liver oil are but a few examples.

## Food as Unhealth

While the focus above has been largely on foods potential as a means to healthiness, it is necessary to point out that food is also being portrayed as one of the main threats to healthiness. Needless to say, the result of the food scares accounted for above is sometimes the immediate state of unhealthiness, as in the case of salmonella, or the more slow moving threat of cancer, as in the acrylamide case. While modern science has no doubt come to grips with many of the health hazards we faced just a few decades ago, new ones, potentially more apocalyptic in their scope, emerge at the same pace as old problems are solved (cf. Beck, 1992, 1999; Giddens, 1991; Warde, 1994b). Quite ironically the Worldwatch Institute reports that at the turn of the millennium for the first time in history the number of overweight people rivals the number of underweight people (Gardner & Halweil, 2000). The developments in the Western world are many times described as automatically better than the development in other parts of the world. Bearing this in mind it is interesting to note that in the less developed countries (according to the Western trajectory) the welfare diseases that are caused by unhealthy food habits and promised cure by so-called healthy foods, are virtually unknown. But, as these countries develop they many times move directly from a state of hunger to a state of excess and consequently from a state of undernourishment to a state of overnourishment, which in turn leads to a shift from diseases of poverty to diseases of excess. (Gardner & Halweil, 2000: 37; cf. Mead, 1997: 14). The Worldwatch Institute point out that the salvation of the rational 'civilized' Western world is not necessarily a salvation at all. Rather it is recognized that the century with the greatest potential to eliminate malnutrition instead saw it boosted to new record levels (Gardner & Halweil, 2000: 34). Rozin (1998: 16) leads a similar argument where he starts out by saying that the frightening part of food in the past was largely the prospect of no food. In the developed world, we now have an excess of food and the worry has thereby shifted form having too little to eat to having too much (cf. Murcott, 1999; Sokolov, 1999).



# Chapter Five

## McDonaldized Food Production

Food production has undergone vast rationalization processes over the last century which has severe implications for most food products that ordinary consumers find on the shelves of the supermarkets on a day-to-day basis. The developments in the food industry and business have undergone various phases: In postwar America, during the ‘Golden Age of American Food Processing’ (Levenstein, 1993), the focus was put on the efficient processing of food. When Ray Kroc acquired the first McDonald’s restaurant in 1954 it was not long before the entire restaurant business was undergoing far-reaching changes in the name of rationality and functionality (Gladwell, 2001; Ritzer, 1996; Schlosser, 2001). The result of the automatization and rationalization of the food industry was extraordinary in two ways. On the first hand, the new production methods were highly functional in the ways they made fairly priced and convenient food available to the masses. On the other hand, they were extraordinary in their dysfunctionality. A shortcut to producing food in the new, fast and convenient ways and still make it tasty is to make products that are high in fat, sugar, and salt (Ritzer, 1996; Schlosser, 2001). Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the nutrition information regularly reported in various media will recognize that these three ingredients are the same one’s that public policy makers repeatedly tell us to stay away from. So, while the fast food industry changed our eating habits radically and perhaps has some traits that could be dubbed functional<sup>23</sup>, the industry is also being blamed for playing a large part in the rapid deterioration of the public health (Gardner & Halweil, 2000). During the last decade, the focus in the food industry has increasingly shifted towards making healthier foods, or high value added healthy foods as they were referred to in the opening chapter. In this chapter some dimensions of modern large-scale food processing will be discussed.

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<sup>23</sup> This is far from uncontroversial, see the homepage of the organization Slow Food (<http://www.slowfood.com>) who actively tries to preserve the world from every aspect of what they conceive of as “the fast food plaque”.

## The Four Dimensions of McDonaldization

In the book *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer, 1996) sociologist George Ritzer discusses modern society and rationalization processes using McDonald's as an illustration. His ideas about McDonaldization are an extension of Weber's theory of rationalization. Where Weber used bureaucracy as the model for his discussion, Ritzer uses the fast-food restaurant McDonald's. Ritzer (1996: 31) stresses that McDonaldization does not represent something new, but rather a culmination of a series of rationalization processes that has been occurring throughout the twentieth century. Ritzer uses Weber's concept of 'formal rationality' as a model for his work. By formal rationality, Weber means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. As a result, people are not left to their own devices in finding the optimum means to an end; rather, optimum means had already been found and institutionalised in rules, regulations, and structures (Ritzer, 1996: 18 pp.). The formal rationalization processes as described by Weber rests on four dimensions: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, which Ritzer in term uses in building his McDonaldization argument (1996: 19). Ritzer stresses that rationalization processes are not always as efficient as they might seem at first glance; there is also a fifth element at work, 'the irrationality of rationality', which is an unwanted consequence of the four dimensions. This is not unlike Weber's idea of the 'iron cage of rationality' where he warns that bureaucracies are cages in the sense that people are trapped in them, their basic humanity denied (Ritzer, 1996: 21; Törnqvist, 1998). Ritzer's four dimensions of McDonaldization, as well as the last dimension, the irrationality of rationality, will be used as a framework for looking at some aspects of modern food production.

Food producers have been forced, by the logic of our modern market economy, to constantly strive towards being as effective as possible in order to be competitive. The constant strivings toward *efficiency* have forced food manufacturers to incorporate a large portion of modern technology into even seemingly simple food production systems; virtually no areas are untouched. As Ritzer puts it the goal is to find "...the optimum method for getting from one point to another" (1996: 9) in the different processes involved from farm to fork. Results of this efficiency striving can be seen in e.g. the increased use of growth hormones in cattle production. The strivings toward efficiency has also led to more large-scale farming; the logic of mass production nowadays has a dominant position within modern food production. A prerequisite for the emergence of industrial mass production was the rise of science and the

logic of industrial capitalism (Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Industrial capitalism and mass production brought with it at separation of the sphere of production from the sphere of consumption. The modern project has emphasized a division between the different spheres of life, and especially the private from the public domain (Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995: 247). Traditionally, the private domain was devoted to consumption activities and the public domain was devoted to production activities. The disconnection of the sphere of production from the sphere of consumption has led to an increasingly harder time for consumers to control where the food they are eating is coming from. Also, a larger portion of the preparation of food is nowadays taken care of outside the home as the products bought in the stores are usually processed to some degree (or, to use the industry jargon introduced in the introductory chapter, value is added). The degree of processing can be seen as a continuum beginning with very basic steps like washing vegetables on one end and very highly processed products like ready-made meals to heat in the microwave oven on the other.

It has been a long time since the majority of food products were bought directly from the producing farmers, instead consumers have gotten used to various intermediaries. In the past, a consumer shopping for food would meet the producer or someone close to the producer in the marketplace and could make an assessment of whether this person seemed trustworthy or not. This enabled the consumer to somewhat stay in control of what was taken into the kitchen. The ability to control what is in the food might have been somewhat illusory in the past but the present market situation has no doubt made it harder (cf. Ljungberg, 2001). Today, the relations between producer and consumer are increasingly detached, they have, to use Giddens' terminology (1990), become disembedded. To offset the sense of disembeddedness and give consumers a sense of trust in the producers, the relations have to be reembedded in the context of the present market situation. Reembeddedness means the reappropriation or recasting of disembedded social relation so as to pin them down to local conditions of time and place. Giddens distinguishes between facework commitments requiring circumstances of copresence, and faceless commitments building on faith in expert systems (Giddens, 1990: 80). An example of a company trying to reembed their relations with their consumers is Kronfågel, Sweden's largest poultry producer. To offset the potential detachment between consumers and producers Kronfågel tries to reinstitute a feeling of closeness. All fresh chicken is provided with a 'farmer label' showing a (mug-shot-style) photo of the chicken-farmer and providing his or her phone number, see figure 5.1. Even though this is clearly an instance of faceless commitment, Kronfågel is mimicking facework

commitments by providing photos and providing a means for the consumers to almost meet the producers. They are thus alluding to the nostalgic feeling of ‘the good old days’ when the consumers could meet the producers in person and thereby were given a sense of being more in control (see Kronfågel, 2000 for more information). It would be interesting, however, to further investigate the mechanisms by which consumers are made to feel at ease by looking at the provided pictures of chicken-farmers Conny and Åke in figure 5.1.



Figure 5.1: Would you buy a used car from these men?

The strivings toward *calculability*, where an increased emphasis is put on things that can be calculated, counted, and quantified, is also prevalent in contemporary food production. Many times it seems like “...*quantity (especially a large quantity) tends to become a surrogate for quality.*” (Ritzer, 1996: 59). Examples of this includes developments in the crop-area where scientists have tried to develop crops that mature quicker. In some cases this has led farmers to being able to harvest two times a year instead of the usual one and thus a large increase in the produced quantity has been achieved. Another example is the (in)famous type of cattle named Belgian Blue; a type of cattle bred so large they can’t even deliver their own calves. The dimension of calculability is intertwined with the dimension of efficiency as the quantification makes it easier to assess the level of efficiency. If efficiency were to be measured in qualitative terms the task would be a lot harder.

Strivings toward *predictability* can also be seen in modern food production as it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that the output of the production processes is compatible with certain industry standards. With the increased consolidation of the retail sector producers have to live up to the standards set by the large actors in the retail sector in order to break into or stay on the market. Another important actor in setting standards is EU, whose

work with standards for different vegetables according to some commentators sometimes borders on obsession. EU regulates what shape and weigh certain vegetables can have in order for the packaging and logistics processes to be able to be coordinated between the member countries. Consequently, farmers wishing to participate in trading with or within the EU must produce vegetables that conform to these standards. Sometimes these standards might seem a bit odd from a consumer standpoint as a recent example from Sweden illustrates. In order for a cucumber to be sold within the EU it has to have a certain shape without too much curvature. These standards were much ridiculed in Swedish media in the debate prior to the referendum concerning Sweden's membership in the EU. The agony over this rule was heightened as it became clear that some of the cucumbers grown in Sweden would not fit the regulations. At some points in the debate the cucumber-issue even seemed to be one of the core issues in peoples decision whether to vote 'yes' or 'no' to Sweden's membership (cf. Jordbruksverket, 2002). It should be pointed out that predictability also has the potential to bring peace of mind in the day-to-day dealings of consumers, as it is easier to 'know what you get' (Ritzer, 1996: 79). Combined with the efficiency and the calculability, however, it is far from certain whether this predictability actually increases the quality of the output or not. For the industry, the pressure to provide output of the same quality every time has meant that the processes must be more rigidly controlled by e.g. heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides. As the produce has to be of the same quality every time there can be no lows in quality, the backside is, consequently, that there is little room for highs in quality, resulting in that the predictable quality is forced to be somewhat of an average quality. An illustration of this is the fast food business; you rarely get either disappointed or excited when dining at McDonald's since you know exactly what you are going to get beforehand.

In order to uphold efficiency, calculability, and predictability there has to be different forms of *control* — the fourth dimension of Ritzer's McDonaldization. By limiting all potential sources of fallacies a perfectly rational system can be incorporated. People are seen as the weakest link in the perfectly rational system as they bring in uncertainty, unpredictability and inefficiency. Hence, measures are taken to decrease the risk of people disrupting the rational system. (Ritzer, 1996: 101) In the food industry many forms of control are exercised. Ritzer (1996: 112) describes the technological control systems: "*In one food industry after another, technologies in which humans play little more than a planning and maintenance role have replaced production processes dominated by craftspeople*". But control is also exercised through bureaucratic rules and manuals, which prescribe accepted procedures

and techniques and thereby function as a form of control technology. Often these are in the form of laws and regulations from the government but private enterprises are increasingly setting their own standards. An example is retailers who pressure their suppliers to follow certain standards. ICA, Sweden's largest retailer organization, describe on their homepage in the publication "Report 2001: Quality – Environment – Health – Ethics & Society" that the 'BRC-standard' (British Retail Consortium) should be used by their suppliers of food products whereas suppliers of other products can suffice with the ISO 9000 (ICA, 2002).

## The Irrationality of Rationality

Through the use of the four dimensions of McDonaldization (efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control) every chance to rationalize the food production system has been taken advantage of. No doubt, modern high-tech food production is more effective than before but Ritzer shows that it is becoming increasingly clear that there are some major fallacies with the modern rationalization processes causing them to sometimes become irrational. For example, the dysfunctionality of fast food has been put in the spotlight, as illustrated by e.g. numerous newspaper articles with suggestive titles such as Malcolm Gladwell's (2001) New Yorker article *Fast food is killing us. Can it be fixed?* or Eric Schlosser's (2001) revealing book *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. The shift towards emphasizing the dysfunctionality of many McDonaldized food products is largely due to the increased focus on the connections between food consumption and health. To focus on these issues is not exactly something new; Dr. Kellogg, the inventor of Corn Flakes, preached his wisdoms about this back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when he promoted a regimen of 'biologic living', which in addition to his visionary ideas about diet and exercise, included five daily enemas and radium therapy (The New York Times, 2002-09-01); during both the world wars the issue was high on the public agenda; and the cry for a return to natural foods resonated far outside its origins among the hippies during the late sixties (Levenstein, 1993). But it was not until the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that these messages were widely spread in magazines and cooking books and truly reached the masses (Warde, 1997: 80). In previous chapters I have also pointed to the various food scares we have seen over the last decades. So far when these incidents have gotten media attention they have usually been treated as the result of a few mistakes. There is a tendency, however, to start looking at these scares to be of a more systematic kind. Beck's (1992) thesis of the risk society suggests that the industrial society has indeed

produced an enormous amount of goods and a society of enormous affluence. But, as an unwanted byproduct of industrial mass production, new risks and dangers have also been produced. Beck suggests that under these conditions, where it is becoming increasingly clear that there is an augmented production of risks, there has been a change from the logic of wealth distribution in a society of scarcity to the logic of risk distribution in late modernity. Thus, according to Beck (1992: 49), in the developed Western world where we are no longer producing primarily for the sake of satisfying hunger, the food industry is today to a large extent producing to eliminate risk rather than to eliminate scarcity. This risk-eliminating tendency can be exemplified by the recent buzz-word 'traceability'. Companies are investing large amounts of money in systems that will enable any ingredient to be traced back to its original source should any potential risks be discovered. ICA (2002: 3) envisions building a system that will "*enable tracing of particular cuts of meat to the cutting-up plant, the slaughter-house, and the place where the cattle was raised*".

Because of this change suggested by Beck, that we are today producing to eliminate risk rather than to eliminate scarcity, we are concerned no longer with merely making nature useful to release mankind from traditional constraints, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with problems arising from the techno-economic development itself. Modernity is thus becoming reflexive; it is becoming its own theme in that the industry is producing to eliminate 'its own' risks, its unintended consequences (cf. Beck, 1999: 109 pp.). The fact that we are perhaps no longer producing to eliminate obvious material needs is obscured as the 'dictatorship of scarcity' rules the thought and action of people (ibid.). The distribution of socially produced wealth and related conflicts are occupying the foreground even in the food industry. This is true even though, as Rozin (1998: 16) pointed out before, the most stressing problem in the Western world is that we might have too much to eat rather than too little. If we were to realize, as Beck (1992: 20) suggests we should, that the struggle for one's daily bread no longer is the principal problem in the Western world, the legitimising basis for the modernization process, the struggle against obvious scarcity, would be removed and thus the legitimization for accepting a few (no longer completely) unseen side-effects. Things are further complicated by the fact that these effects are usually both spatially and temporally detached from the production. As a consequence, the causal relation therefore becomes harder to grasp and the protection of economic recovery and growth continues to enjoy unchallenged first priority (Beck, 1992: 44).

In dealing with risks, the task of establishing maximum tolerance levels for certain substances becomes a key issue. Every new production technique, be it a new pesticide, irradiation, genetic engineering, freeze-drying, or anything else, is tested to see if it is appropriate for food production. Maximum tolerance levels for different variables, deemed important by scientists, are decided upon and products or techniques passing these limits are considered suitable for food. As was discussed in chapter two, modernist thought has a tendency to look for dualistic relationships such as good and bad or, in this case, risky and not risky. In the striving to build broad, overreaching theories every difference therefore becomes a battle among contraries rather than a difference of degree along a continuum. What is crucial here is that once these limits are decided upon, they become the ubiquitous 'truth' of what is good and bad in the case of food production and the question is taken off the agenda. A hegemonic status is given to scientific rationality wherein risks are seen as minimal and manageable. The social rationality, wherein individuals feel that they do not want to live with whatever risk there is, is not given much attention. The maximum tolerance levels are hard to question as the risks are not perceptible to our senses but escape perception and are localized in the spheres of physical and chemical formulas. In the old days hazards, at least to a large degree, assaulted the nose and the eyes but today's risks are of a much more elusive character (Beck, 1992).

The risks of today, as opposed to the old risks that were more in the form of tangible hazards that more directly affected the body, are based on causal interpretations, and thus only exist in terms of the knowledge about them. It is thus open for the authoritative bearers of knowledge, i.e. the mass media and the scientific and legal professions in charge of defining risks, to change, magnify, dramatize, or minimize risks. Consequently, they are particularly open to social definition and construction. (Beck, 1999: 50 pp.) With the definition of risk, the social and economic importance of knowledge grows, and with it the power of media to structure and disseminate knowledge. It is thus the information society, in the dissemination of 'scientific facts', that creates the risk society. The ones who have the power to define risks also, as a consequence, define the number of people afflicted by the risks. From an industry perspective this opens up a market with an absolutely insatiable scope. Traditional markets – even for food – can be satiated. But since this new type of risk is not perceptible to the senses in the same way as hunger or thirst, new risks can be fabricated as the old ones are laid to rest and the economy becomes self-referential. (Beck, 1992: 22 pp.) The market for various types of healthy foods rests solidly on this logic of defining risks. As long as science deems high cholesterol risky, products containing cholesterol-

lowering substances are big business and as long as a lack of certain vitamins is deemed risky, firms providing those vitamins are thriving. Ordinary consumers lack the tools to assess the relevance of the claims and they are usually hard to refute in the short term (cf. Falk, 1994).

Furthermore, the debate on pollutant and toxic elements in food, as well as on the destruction of nature and the environment in general, is being conducted primarily in the terms and formulas of natural science. It is up to the scientific community to set the limits and decide what criteria should be used in order to estimate what should be deemed suitable for food. In this way the scientific community is playing two parts at the same time, they are both responsible for the development of new production techniques and for setting up the criteria by which their developments are judged. Quite evidently the scientific community is far from homogenous but the point is that the discussions are completely held within the community (cf. Beck, 1992: 24; 1999). This creates a system that gives little room for critique from outsiders of the developments as such as no one else is let into the arena. The ones trying to criticize the system, e.g. environmentalist groups, are often ridiculed and said to be naive and not able to grasp the totality of things; they are being defamed as alarmists and risk-producers (Beck, 1992: 45). Critique of science and anxieties about the future are stigmatized as irrationalism, which indeed follows logically from Ritzer's (1996) rationalization argument; if you question rationality you must, logically, be promoting irrationality. It is with a sense of irony that Beck states that risk research follows with some embarrassment in the footsteps of 'technophobia' (1992: 30) and that the researchers themselves have actually received great support from those groups. A recent example in the food industry involves the environmentalists who have long been opposed to feeding cattle bone-meal. The mocking of this group all of a sudden silenced as researchers discovered that the use of bone-meal might be connected to the outbreaks of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle or, as it is usually referred to in lay-terms, 'Mad Cow's Disease'. Consumption of beef infected with BSE is "*strongly linked*" to the fatal human neurodegenerative condition Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (WHO, 2002b).

There seems to be a fundamental difference in how Europe and the US deal with the issues related to food and risk. In the US the logic is one similar to contemporary Western legal systems; any production system is considered not guilty of any charges until proven guilty beyond reasonable belief. Within the EU the case is the opposite; any new production technique has to be proven not to be harmful in any way, neither to consumers directly, nor to the eco-

system – the so-called ‘precautionary principle’ is used (Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund, 2002). The most striking example where the difference in attitude towards new technologies and risk come to surface between the two continents is GMO (Beck, 1999: 105 pp.). In the US half of the soy and a quarter of the corn is genetically modified and approximately 70 percent of the semi-manufactured products contain some sort of GMO. In the EU, on the other hand, most countries are very restrictive and the products containing GMO has to be labeled (Dagens Forskning, 2002-08-28). A possible explanation for the difference in stance towards these questions might lie in Europe’s history of relatively frequent and severe food-scares, a phenomenon that has not plagued the US to the same extent. Regardless of the reasons it is likely that these different policies will affect the way that consumers view food production and the ‘healthiness’ of highly processed foods. Such a difference is suggested by Askegaard, Jensen, and Holt (1999) who found that Americans seemed to fear a variety of different ingredients that are naturally occurring in the food products, but which are deemed ‘bad’ by medical science: cholesterol, saturated fats, sugar, et cetera. The Danes on the other hand seemed much less concerned about those issues and instead worried about various manipulations with natural food-products, such as hormone-growth, radiation, genetic manipulation, and some even the removal of fat or sugar. (Askegaard et al., 1999: 336) Rozin (1998: 20), who looks at the food attitudes of French and US consumers, pursues a similar argument when he talks about the food-pleasure attitude of the French and the food-poison attitude of the Americans leading to the popularity of all types of foods modified to be ‘healthier’ in the US whereas the French are more focused on the (supposed) gastronomical superiority of ‘natural’ products.

## Chapter Six

### Researching Food Consumption

In chapter two I talked about how the stories consumers tell of their food consumption reflect their views of the concepts of food and health and their interconnections (Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Thompson, 1997: 439; Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1994). Given the focus on consumers' stories of food consumption, a central question becomes how one, as a researcher, is to get access to those stories. Dingwall (1997: 53) claims that there are essentially only two ways of conducting studies within the social sciences; either by 'hanging out' or 'asking questions', or as he puts it "*interviewers construct data, observers find it*" (1997: 55). While there might well be plenty of food consumption stories naturally occurring 'out there', finding those stories without explicitly asking for them might be hard. Hence, in order to gain access to consumers' stories of their food consumption for this study an 'asking questions' approach was opted for.

As was discussed in chapter one, during late modernity, an increasing number of people live in circumstances in which disembedded institutions, linking local practices with globalized social relations, organize major aspects of day-to-day life (Giddens, 1990: 79). Modernity, according to Giddens, is inherently globalizing, where globalization is defined as "*the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa*" (Giddens, 1990: 64). In order to try to capture the globalizing structures of modernity that permeate different localities, a two-site data-collection approach was opted for to see how the different messages given out by various expert systems are reflected in consumer stories in different locations. While

there is virtually an endless possibility of sites to conduct research in, the empirical sites southern Sweden and Nebraska were chosen both for reasons of convenience, i.e. being able to actually spend an extended amount of time at both locations, and for reasons that will be elaborated upon below. The fieldwork was initiated by a series of three pilot interviews as part of a PhD seminar in Narrative Approaches in the fall of 1999. Drawing from the experiences of the pilot study, the present study was designed to consist of 20 interviews in a middle-sized town in southern Sweden and 20 interviews in a middle-sized town in Nebraska, USA. The fieldwork in the US was conducted during the spring of 2001 and in Sweden during the fall of 2001.

## Empirical Work in Sweden and the US...

The choice to conduct research both in Sweden and in the US merits some further explanation. My interest in food, and perhaps more explicitly the peculiarities in different individuals' approaches to food, was born when I, as a 15-year-old, spent a year as an exchange-student in Port Angeles, WA. Until then, I had enjoyed my father and mother's cooking more or less taking for granted that what we ate was basically 'normal stuff' that most people ate. Sure, I had gathered from American TV shows that meals in the US probably consisted of some things that we did not eat very much of in Sweden, primarily fast food, of which hamburgers was one of the few I was familiar at the time. In fact, my imagined high consumption of fast foods was one of the reasons why I decided to try my luck as an exchange student. Further, I had reckoned by the time that even in Sweden everyone was not quite the same, e.g. my father's fondness for cow's tongue was probably a bit on the far side, and most kids would not start a riot should sweetbread<sup>24</sup> be missing from the Christmas dinner. But I had no idea at what profound level individuals' approach to food could differ. Coming to the US, I realized that the three-meals-a-day-regiment I had grown used to was far from self-evident. All of a sudden I was ridiculed by my American host family for wanting to postpone eating until dinner in order not to spoil my appetite; instead I was told that in a civilized country, no one should have to go hungry. This was hard to digest for someone who

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<sup>24</sup> For the culinary illiterate: sweetbread is the thymus or pancreas of a young animal used for food, kalvbräss in Swedish.

had been told that waiting until dinner and building up an appetite was the epitome of civilization. Furthermore, I was frequently reminded of e.g. the importance of eating plenty of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in order to satisfy my body's craving for protein. Upon telling them that despite the fact that we did not have such a thing as peanut butter in Sweden, I had not one single time heard my body's craving for protein, they shook their head in disbelief murmuring about the poor undernourished boy from the third world country of Sweden. Suffice it to say that it was being made very clear to me that what I thought was normal was by no means so in this part of the world. I collected mental notes of the peculiarities of the strange Americans I met during my year abroad and was quite happy to return home to, what I thought at the time to be, the world's most normal country, the kingdom of Sweden, to be able to once again socialize with people eating in a nice, ordered, and sensible manner. Upon returning home, I was shocked to see that the Swedes no longer appeared as normal as they had done before. It was as if a veil had been lifted from before my eyes and I all of a sudden noticed peculiarities among my fellow countrymen in much the same way as I had done with the Americans. I could even afford myself to be sometimes skeptical towards the food practices I had thitherto been accustomed to thinking about as normal.

Now, after reading a little bit more about conducting qualitative research than I had at the age of 15, I realize that what happened to me was by no means unusual or strange. What I experienced was merely that I was ridded of some of my 'cultural blindness' (Berg, 1998). When looking at one's own culture it is easy to take many things for granted, as they appear to be just 'normal'<sup>25</sup>. Conducting research in the culture where one normally resides therefore poses some particular problems. McCracken writes:

Scholars working in another culture have a great advantage over those who work in their own. Virtually everything before them is, to some degree, mysterious. Those who work in their own culture do not have this critical distance from what they study. They carry with them a

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<sup>25</sup> Remember the discussion of social constructions in chapter two, we are so deeply embedded in the everyday knowledge of the world that it is hard to escape and think outside of the taken for granted knowledge.

large number of assumptions that can create a treacherous sense of familiarity. (McCracken, 1988b: 22)

It is therefore necessary to create a critical awareness of matters which we have a deep and blinding familiarity of – distance must be manufactured (McCracken, 1988b). As I had already experienced earlier, upon returning from my year as an exchange student, spending time in the US opened my eyes to many new aspects of Swedish culinary culture. To go off to another culture over an extended period of time and then return to one's own is dubbed by McCracken (1988b: 23) as the 'classic method' of manufacturing distance. When an opportunity arose for me to once again spend a year in the US as a doctoral exchange student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln I therefore saw an excellent chance to do research both in Sweden and in the US.

I opted for beginning my fieldwork with doing interviews in the US as I would therefore, as pointed out by McCracken (1988b), have the benefits of doing research in another culture. Prior to conducting the interviews in the US I spent five months living in the area. This greatly facilitated the fieldwork as a certain acculturation took place and I gained a somewhat more informed knowledge of the particularities of the Nebraskan cuisine. I also had a chance to develop a more proficient common language with the respondents, getting familiarized with concepts such as the mock-Polish fast food outlet Runza and the supposed superiority of Nebraska corn-fed beef, which further helped in the communication process. A further advantage of doing research in another culture was that it allowed me to ask a different type of questions without seeming uninformed or even downright stupid. The relative 'cultural ignorance' (Spradley, 1979: 62) I have from being a Swede in the US allowed me to question and ask for explanations about 'ordinary' things that would otherwise seem to trivial to dwell further into. I believe that I, being Swedish, could pretend not to be familiar with the Americans' relationships with food to a higher degree than would a native researcher. I even overplayed my unfamiliarity with the American food culture in order to elicit more elaborate explanations of the conducts my informants deemed 'normal'. In this way, my ability to seem uninformed and ask for explanations of relatively ordinary things helped the respondents articulate their own beliefs and give

accounts of their actions. McCracken points out that most respondents have difficulty in giving full accounts of what they believe and what they do. The investigator therefore must help the respondent recover his or her beliefs from the taken-for-granted state. (McCracken, 1988b: 23)

A couple of months after returning from Nebraska I continued with the Swedish interviews. Upon doing these interviews, I had the advantage of having manufactured distance from my own culture at length by both living and doing research in another culture. I would therefore like to claim that I suffered less from 'cultural blindness' while doing the interviews in Sweden than I otherwise would (cf. Berg, 1998). Furthermore, by somewhat overstating the influence the visit to America had had on me, the respondents in Sweden were willing to give rather elaborate explanations to the seemingly trivial everyday experiences I had them account for during the interviews.

### ...But Not a Cross-Cultural Study

Despite the fact that the fieldwork was conducted in two different countries, I refrain from placing this study under the general category of 'cross-cultural studies'. The aim is to see how the globalizing structures of modernity are played out in the two different research locations rather than to, as is common in cross-cultural studies, find the most conspicuous disparities. Conducting 'cross-cultural' research is fashionable within the marketing field. Oftentimes the goal is to assess the degree to which certain established marketing strategies or tactics presently used in one nation state would be applicable in a the cultural context of another nation state. Askegaard and Kjeldgaard (2002) point to the inherent weakness of that approach in today's globalizing environment. They state that:

Strategies for understanding ethnically or geographically located consumer culture should move away from modernist efforts to describe (presumably) temporally or spatially stable, cultural identities or even lifestyles. Instead, we should move toward a strategy more appropriate to the emergent, globalized situation, one focused on analyzing strategies and processes, whereby meaningful but inherently malleable and unmanageable consumer identities are created, legitimated, contested, and resisted. (2002: 31)

Taking this critique seriously, I opt for not falling for the temptation of focusing on finding the most striking differences between the interviewees from Sweden and the US. While, without doubt, great differences could be identified between the two locations, my approach is to neither put the focus solely on these issues nor to ignore them. Instead, differences and similarities is looked for both within and between the empirical material from the two locations as I believe that a more interesting picture could be painted doing this than having an *a priori* assumption that differences will be found and, perhaps more crucially, will be interesting. It is far too easy to overstate the differences between the interviews conducted at the respective locations in order to create spectacular dichotomies. It should also be remembered that the relatively small sample of 20 Swedes and 20 Nebraskans does not lend itself to broad generalizations of the type generally sought for by cross-cultural studies.

In favor of not focusing primarily on the cross-cultural issues it could also be argued that Sweden and the US belong to the same mediascape (Appadurai, 1990). Mediascape is a term coined by Appadurai to describe the global cultural flow of information which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world; and to the images created by these media. What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide large and complex repertoires of images and narratives to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of 'news' and politics are profoundly mixed. In the terminology of Giddens (1991), the mediascapes build the institutional foundation for the proliferation of the messages from global expert systems. These narratives offer, to those who experience and transform them, a series of elements out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live (Appadurai, 1990: 299). A common discourse, or rather a common set of discourses, are thereby available for consumers residing in both empirical sites. In certain respects, one could argue that consumers in the two countries also belong to the same consumptionscape (Ger & Belk, 1996), sharing many of the same features of today's global consumer culture; the same transnational companies produce many of the products available in the supermarkets and much of the food available in Nebraska is available in Sweden and vice-versa; both

countries are influenced by basically the same model of global capitalism; the same globalized consumption ethic is infused wherein shopping and consumption permeate daily life such meaning that the meaning of life is sought, identity is constructed, and relationships are formed and maintained more and more in and by consumption. In other words, the two countries show many of the homogenizing tendencies necessary for talking about them as belonging to the same global consumer culture (Ger & Belk, 1996: 274 pp.). Furthermore, the extent to which American mass culture has affected everyday life in Sweden is in many ways significant as exhibited by O'Dell in his dissertation *Culture Unbound: Americanization and Everyday Life in Sweden* (1997). I am not arguing, it should be starkly pointed out, that food consumption in Sweden will be exactly like food consumption in America. What I suggest, however, is that food consumption, and especially the manner in which messages about food consumption are reflexively used by consumers to construct stories of food consumption as a brick in the building of a coherent narrative of the self, have become what Wilk (1995) calls global structures of common difference. Wilk's idea is that the new global cultural system promotes difference instead of suppressing it, but only difference of a certain form. The relative discursive homogeneity, due to the standardized vocabulary for describing difference and the syntax for its expression, has formalized a particular set of distinctions and placed them in the foreground, while moving others into the background and have thereby narrowed our gaze to particular kinds of difference (Wilk, 1995: 120 pp.). Given the multitude of available forms of food consumption practices, the Swedish and American differences in food consumption are cast in a relatively narrow and similar format of production and consumption (cf. Askegaard et al., 2002: 809).

My choice not to focus particularly on the cross-cultural aspects that could potentially be found between the empirical sites should thus not be read as an argumentation for homogenization. This is especially true with regards to the supply of foods where the two locations differ substantially. The aim of the study, however, is not so much to focus on what products the consumers use in playing out their consumption game, rather it is to look at how the consumers speak about their food consumption and thus give voice to the various strategies they use in

making sense of their food consumption in regard to the available ideas about food and health.

## Recruitment of Participants

In choosing the consumers to interview for this study I aimed at finding a variety in such variables as age, gender, education and occupation. This was done intentionally to take the opportunity of manufacturing distance within the participant pool as suggested by McCracken (1988b: 37). The diversity amongst the participants was sought out to maximize the possibility of finding interesting stories through the inclusion of people from all walks of life. It should be pointed out that these participants are not a 'sample' created to mirror some larger population; therefore their selection was not governed by sampling rules.

Another deliberate choice was to only interview consumers that do not adhere to any predefined dietary lifestyle-like regimen such as vegetarianism or veganism. In the cases with consumers following such, many times ideologically or pseudo-ideologically influenced, blueprints for how to act as a consumer, we know beforehand that we will find scripts for how to act. These consumers had most likely been able to produce fascinating stories of their food consumption and the types of health rationales they were considering. This might indeed be interesting but instead I wanted to uncover the less clearly articulated blueprints that 'ordinary' consumers use, perhaps without knowing so, to structure their everyday food consumption.

The particular locations of the empirical work deserves some more attention to further emphasize the fact that Nebraskans do not represent Americans and, although the country of Sweden might not show the same great diversity as the US, Swedes from the South do not represent all Swedes. Nebraska is located in the midst of the so-called 'American Breadbasket' where the main industry has traditionally been farming, primarily of corn and beef and, combining the two, the much-avowed pride of the state – corn-fed beef. Nebraska is a rather traditional state where the Republicans have a firm grip over all state-positions and non-churchgoers are regarded as suspicious heathens

subject to potential Christianization. As a result of the closeness to traditional farm life and the conservative values held by both Christians and Republicans, I believe it is fair to say that traditional values of holding the nuclear family in high esteem holds Nebraska in a steady grip. As for the south of Sweden, it is also traditional farmland but, which is not the case in Nebraska, fishing has traditionally been another large food-related industry. Even though Sweden is a highly secularized country, traditional Lutheran values, and among them family values, are still very much proliferating.

The participants were recruited in a number of different ways. Initial contact was made with some acquaintances of people I had gotten to know in Nebraska. These consumers were given a letter briefly describing the study I was asking them to participate in (a copy of the letter can be found in Appendix A). After giving them a couple of days to think things over I contacted them by phone to ask them if they wanted to participate and possibly schedule the interview. Other participants were recruited in a local grocery store where I stood at a booth asking people to participate. The same procedure was followed where I gave them a letter and then phoned them a couple of days later. The last way of recruiting participants was through so-called 'snowballing', i.e. after having conducted the interviews I asked the participants if they knew anyone who they thought would be willing to participate in the study. I was clear to point out that upon asking their friends to participate they were not allowed to tell anything about what we had spoken about during the interviews in order to start out each interview in an equally uninformed fashion. Using these different ways of recruitment, I managed to gather a diverse group of consumers to interview in the US. In Sweden I basically used the same techniques of recruitment except for the in-store technique. The reason for this is that in Sweden I have a much larger social network whose acquaintances I could ask to participate. Hence I could get the same diversity in the participant pool without recruiting participants in a grocery store. A key feature that should also be pointed out is that all of the participants were perfect strangers to me as strongly advised by McCracken (McCracken, 1988b: 37). A list of all the participants and some of their characteristics is provided in Appendix B. I have given the Swedish participants Swedish-sounding pseudonyms in order for them to be easily recognized when quoted in the following chapters. Similarly, I

have named the Nebraskans with, what I perceive to be, typical Yankee-names.

## Interview procedures

The participants were interviewed between one and one and a half hours. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. As advised by McCracken (1988b) and Thompson et al. (1989), the interviews sought to create a context in which the participant felt at ease and comfortable in discussing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the topic of discussion, in this case food consumption. To achieve this relaxed atmosphere the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes which further had the benefit of creating a somewhat naturalistic setting as the home is the place where much food consumption takes place. During some interviews the participants brought out magazine articles, books, and products to exemplify what they were talking about which further reinforced the positive effects of the in-home setting. Even though the focus rests heavily on the interviews, the two approaches of 'hanging out' and 'asking questions' (cf. Dingwall, 1997: 53) were thereby somewhat combined as is many times suggested (cf. Dingwall, 1997; Miller & Glassner, 1997; Silverman, 1993). Denzin and Lincoln even takes things far enough to say that what characterizes qualitative researcher is that they study things in their natural setting and attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them there (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 2). However, I am aware that depth interviews provide perspectives of action which are distinct from actions observed (cf. Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991: 15). Depth-interview accounts are about how things are remembered – not about how they are or were (Thompson et al., 1989).

Prior to each interview an ethics protocol (influenced by McCracken, 1988b: 69) was signed by the researcher and the participant in order to assure the participants of the professional intentions of the interview. The ethics protocol explained the academic affiliation of the researcher, gave contact information, assured the participants of anonymity, and explained the potential uses of the interview material (a copy of the ethics protocol can be found in Appendix C). By starting out with the

signing of the ethics protocols an initial rapport was created that I believe generated a sense of trust in the participants facilitating an open and relaxed conversational mode. To set the right tone at the outset of the interviews is crucial for the remainder of the interview and thus the usability of the empirical material (McCracken, 1988b).

## Thematic Organization of Interviews

Inspiration for the conduct of the interviews was drawn mainly from McCracken's book *The Long Interview* (1988b) in which he advocates the use of a relatively open interview format while still using a questionnaire to somewhat structure the dialogue. The interviews were also influenced by other loosely structured interview formats that stress the crucial element of letting the participants speak about their own life-world using their own terms (cf. Spradley, 1979; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1994). Key issues in the execution of the long interview is to acknowledge the strength and weaknesses with using the researcher as an instrument, keeping a balance between obtrusive and unobtrusive questioning and manufacturing sufficient balance. In order to reach maximum potential in eliciting interesting accounts during the interviews, analytical categories related to food consumption and health were reviewed prior to conducting the interviews. This review was based on both academic works in the field of food, such as the types of works referred to in the preceding chapters, and a screening of contemporary reports in media about various food and health related issues, such as the ones referred to in chapter one. The review of these categories was then used to construct a questionnaire. It is important to point out that this questionnaire was not presented to the participants or used to structure the interviews in a rigid way but rather as inspiration for posing relevant probes and follow-up questions, keeping the interviews fluent, and making sure that the same general areas were covered in each interview (cf. McCracken, 1988b: 24). Even though a questionnaire was used, the primary objective of the interview was to allow each participant to articulate the network of meanings that constitutes his/her personalized understanding of food consumption (cf. Thompson et al., 1989) or as put by McCracken:

The questionnaire that is used to order data and free the interviewer must not be allowed to destroy the elements of freedom and variability within the interview (1988b: 25).

The goal is to make the interview resemble an ordinary conversation and to follow up on the different paths taken by the participants in an unobtrusive manner. Hence, the interviews were characterized by a conversational quality in which the participant set the course of the interview dialogue. My questions were formulated in concert with the participant's reflections and were directed at bringing about more thorough descriptions of specific thoughts and experiences.

The interviews began by attaining general background information about the participants, such as age, education, occupation, and civil status. Following these background questions, I shifted to the first theme of the questionnaire where I wanted to get a sense of each participants' own way of speaking of their food consumption in broad terms. This topic was introduced using the grand-tour question (cf. McCracken, 1988b): "Could you tell me a little bit about what you eat on a day-to-day basis, perhaps starting out with what you eat in the morning and then throughout the day?" In keeping with various qualitative interview techniques (cf. McCracken, 1988b; Spradley, 1979; Thompson et al., 1989), this opening question was designed to begin the dialogue in an open-ended manner. Staying within this broad opening question, follow-up questions were then posed to get a richer account of the various categorizations made by the respondent in responding the question. The logic of the interviews followed McCracken's suggestions of venturing into a new topic by using a broadly defined grand-tour question and then sustain the participant's accounts by using various types of floating prompts (1988b). To follow up on the participants' accounts two main types of planned prompts were used. The first type is category questions where the emic terms used by the participant is explored in more detail. E.g. if a participant talked about junk-food I would ask "What are some types of junk-food?" or "Would you say that pizza is a type of junk-food?" The second type of prompt used is so-called key-incident questions where I would ask a participant to describe an actual experienced situation such as "Could you tell me about the last time you visited a junk-food restaurant?" These types of probes were meshed into the flow of the conversation in order to get rich accounts of the participants lived

experiences. During the course of the interviews the participants were encouraged to describe actual experiences related to their food consumption rather than keeping the interviews on an abstract, experience-distant level.

For each participant, the interviews then funneled down from the very broad opening question about day-to-day food consumption, to other more specific areas I wanted to talk about. The next theme for discussion was about what potential considerations the respondents made when deciding what to buy and/or eat. At this point in the interview the respondents usually brought up the topic of health spontaneously. I made sure, however, not to prompt too heavily on this topic in this early stage of the interview to avoid getting the respondents in a mood where health was all that was talked about.

The next theme for the conversations was about what others eat that the respondents found peculiar and about other things that the respondents themselves did not eat. If the interviews had dealt only with what the respondents eat themselves the important aspect of what the respondents define as edible and inedible, and what they think should be excluded from a diet would have been missing. To talk about what others eat that they do not eat and what they exclude from their diets more generally was a way of getting into this area. In connection to this theme I also had the respondents talk about what they used to eat in the past, what they thought they would eat in the future and what they wished that they would eat less or more of at the time of the interviews.

Another theme that was introduced during the interviews is that of the participants' snacking habits. Many times snacking is not thought about when the topic of conversation is food consumption, but it is still an important part of the participants' overall food consumption habits. In the instances where I had to introduce this topic without snacking having been previously mentioned the respondents many times reacted with surprise. They were astonished that they had been able to talk about food consumption without talking about snacking.

The last main theme of discussions dealt with where the respondents had learnt what to eat and what not to eat. As has hopefully been made

clear thus far it is a basic premise of the research project presented in this book that there are quite a few different messages about food and health that consumers are faced with on a day-to-day basis. I wanted to hear more about which ones of these the respondents paid attention to and hear what they had to say about the others and the overall exposure to food and health related messages. It should be pointed out that the respondents of course cannot account for exactly what messages and what sources they are influenced by and to what extent. Nevertheless it is interesting to talk about where they experience that they find ideas about what and what not to do and raise issues about trustworthiness and good and bad sources of nutritional information.

To round up the interview and to move in to the area of nutritional information and messages on food packages, I brought a box of Cheerios (see figure 4.1) to the US participants and a box of Kellogg's All-Bran to the Swedish participants. This highly obtrusive method of bringing objects to the interviews to fuel the conversation, i.e. auto-driving, is suggested by McCracken (1988b) as a way of igniting the discussion. During the interviews the technique proved to further deepen the discussion and served to, at the end of the interviews, reintroduce many of the topics covered earlier.

## No Explicit Focus on Health

A key feature of the empirical work in this project is to study health aspects in the accounts of the participant's food consumption without explicitly asking about health at the outset of the interviews. The participants were thus not informed about the focus on health prior to the interview and the opening question does not ask for health. The reason for this is that I did not want to impose my *a priori* categorizations on the participants but strived for keeping the conversation as much as possible in the participants' emic terms and categorizations (cf. Fontana & Frey, 1994: 336). As the interviews unfolded, I probed more heavily on health issues even though the participants in every single interview brought up the topic spontaneously. Explicitly asking what the respondents consider healthy and unhealthy is more likely to produce an answer that list all the kinds of commonsensical knowledge about healthy and unhealthy food without any connection to the participants lived lives. These answers

will most likely mirror what the respondents know they are supposed to eat rather than what they actually eat. Another issue with probing too heavily on health related issues is that the participants might feel forced to take a defensive stance and feel that they have to justify their eating habits. Most of the respondents gave accounts of having difficulties in mastering their food intake and felt guilt for not being able to cope with it at all times. When talking about sensitive matters like these it is crucial not to be too obtrusive and keep a professional distance in order for the participants to feel comfortable in opening up (McCracken, 1988b).

While efforts were taken not to impose a health focus on the participants, one should be aware that there probably is a social pressure to appear aware of the potential healthiness or unhealthiness of certain food consumption practices. Mary Douglas (1987: 76) once wrote: *“Ask people foods they eat and they will answer what they think you think they ought to eat”* referring to how the inevitable social stigma of not caring about one’s health steers consumers to telling certain types of stories. I am not making the claim, therefore, that the interviews in any way provided a ‘mirror reflection’ of some social world outside the interview and that the fact that health issues were brought up spontaneously automatically leads to the conclusion that health issues are important. Instead, one must be aware of the highly reciprocal nature of the interview setting wherein the participant aims at making sense to the interviewer. It is thus important to be aware of the fact that an interview is guided by the same basic conventions of how people communicate as any other social event (cf. Kvale, 1997; Miller & Glassner, 1997; Silverman, 1993). Dingwall expresses this in the following way:

Social order is constituted through interaction by a dance of expectations. I produce my actions in the expectation that you will understand them in a particular way. Your understandings reflects your expectations of what would be proper action for me in these particular circumstances which, in turn, becomes the basis of your response which, itself, reflects your expectation of how I will respond. And so on. (1997: 56)

The stories produced during the interview are therefore shaped according to how the participants view the interviewer and it is likely

that the participant tries to say something that he or she feels the interviewer will find interesting and understand. As a matter of fact, some of the respondents (e.g. Hildur in chapter eight) even explicitly suggested that some of the things they told me might be especially relevant and interesting for me even though I had not specified the overall goal of the study. This “dance of expectations” must, evidently, be accounted for in the analyses of the interviews. Still, as will be suggested in the following chapters, the inability of the participants to speak about food without bringing in health related notions suggest that health issues are salient in consumers’ day-to-day food consumption.

## Representing Consumers

The following three chapters will in different ways present the findings from the empirical study and invite the reader into the spoken world of the participants. In interpreting the textual data generated from the interviews a process influenced by hermeneutics has been employed. One of the main features of this process is that the interpretation of textual data proceeds through a series of part-to-whole iterations (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997) which stems from the logic of hermeneutics wherein the whole only can be understood in relation to all the parts and the separate parts only can be understood in relation to the whole. An understanding of a text, by way of such iterative processes, always reflect a fusion of horizons between the interpreter’s, in this case my, frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). As a consequence the researcher’s interpretive orientation (i.e., background knowledge, underlying assumptions, and questions of interest) enables him or her to become attuned to specific characteristics and patterns afforded by the textual data. But it is not a one-way process as the engagement with the textual data also sensitizes the researcher to new questions which can bring about sudden revisions in his or her initial interpretive standpoint. Thus, in analyzing the material I have sought to be open to possibilities afforded by the text rather than projecting a predetermined system of meanings on to the textual data (cf. Thompson, 1997: 441). A moderate share of the theoretical inspiration

for the analysis has therefore been gathered during the ongoing process of interacting with the empirical material.

Basically, the first stage in the interpretation of the texts dealt with understanding the separate parts of a singular text in relation to the totality of the text, e.g. parts of an interview transcript as a part of the interview at length. In analyzing the empirical material, I therefore started out by developing a holistic understanding of each interview transcript where the analysis was kept on an intratextual level. While doing this, it was unattainable not to also note similarities and differences across transcripts that had already been analyzed. Thereby the analyzes gradually shifted to also include an intertextual level (cf. Thompson et al., 1989). In this fashion, earlier readings of the texts informed later readings, and, reciprocally, later readings allowed me to recognize and explore patterns not noted in the initial analysis. During this first reading of the transcripts I developed notations regarding potential thematic areas using emic terms. Next, patterns were sought in between separate texts; the transcripts were re-read and reanalyzed to further develop thematic areas and to identify relationships among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their day-to-day consumption experiences of food. A guiding principle during the interpretive work has been to try to discern what the participants have to know, or take for granted, in order to speak about food and health in the way they do (cf. Silverman, 1993: 37). It is thus, to a large degree, these underlying meaning-structures that are in focus in the analysis throughout the following chapters rather than what the individual consumers explicitly say about food and health.

After these first stages of the analysis, consisting of my theoretically inspired reading and re-reading of the data material, three main themes emerged from the data material. The first theme deals with the respondents' categorizations of healthy and unhealthy food consumption practices and is presented in chapter seven. The second theme, presented in chapter eight, is about questions of food consumption and self-identity. The last theme brings up questions about how the respondents deal with the experienced risk involved in food consumption and is presented in chapter nine. These themes are then presented in the respective chapters with a number of sub-themes that brings out the nuances inherent in the thematization. The main

structure of the analysis and the different themes is thus inspired by the entire data material. In illustrating the different themes in the next three chapters I have chosen to give 'voice' to only a subset of the participants. Over the next chapters, 19 of the 40 participants will be quoted, some more frequently and some only once or twice. The interviews with the participants not explicitly quoted in the dissertation were in no way redundant. On the contrary, they have provided an empirical richness necessary for eliciting the presented themes without which the following analyses could not have been conducted. I have chosen, however, to illustrate the themes with the quotes from the participants whose interview accounts most clearly illustrate the various points I am trying to make.

There is also an additional benefit with giving some of the participants more voice as that enables the reader to place the different accounts presented over the next chapters in a somewhat larger narrative context of each consumer's life history as a food consumer. Central to Giddens' (1991) idea of self-identity as being the narrative of the self as well as Edson Escalas and Bettman's (2000) suggestions for using consumption narratives to discern self-identity, is that the particular consumption stories must be placed in a larger context of the person's history. In order to both grasp and be able to communicate how consumers intermingle ideas of health and healthiness in their stories of food consumption I found it more rewarding to give more space to a few of the participants rather than trying to let them all 'speak'. The focus on a subset on the consumers and the necessity to let the consumers 'speak' more at length is most clearly shown in chapter eight that deals particularly with the issue of food and self-identity. It should be pointed out, though, that I am not primarily interested in just looking at individual consumption stories, as this is not a psychologically oriented dissertation. Instead, the presented interview extracts are illustrations to the themes that I believe capture the essence of how the participants talk about the issues of food and health. These themes are the central focus of the dissertation rather than the life-stories of the individual consumers.

It should also be pointed out that although the participants in this study exhibited a fair degree of diversity in terms of their demographic profiles, all were grappling with a number of similar issues. For my

purposes, the omnipresence of these personalized considerations were useful because they served to heighten the relevance of food and health related phenomena in the participant's lived lives. Nonetheless, the applicability of the present study based on these particular participants to other social contexts and to other social groups remains a question that will have to be addressed by future research.

## Structure of Thematization

In structuring the analyses of the themes in each of the chapters I will utilize Greimas' semiotic square depicted in figure 6.1 (Nöth, 1990: 319).

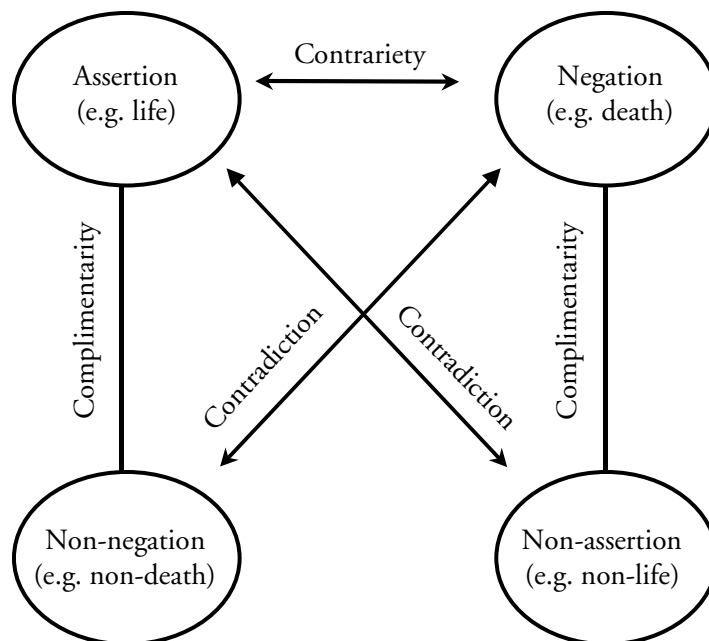


Figure 6.1: Greimas' Semiotic Square

The model is a simplified version of Greimas' very elaborate theory of the signification process and builds on binary oppositions (cf. Mick et al., 1999). Greimas noted that there are different types of binary oppositions, including contrarieties and contradictions. The model takes its point of departure in these two types of oppositions: The contrariety between an assertion (e.g. life) and its negation (e.g. death), and the contradiction between an assertion and its non-assertion (e.g. life versus non-life) and negation and non-negation (e.g. death versus non-death) respectively. The signification is created through these

oppositions which capture the essential structure of many semantic categories (Nöth, 1990: 317pp.).

The relations of contrariety have elements that are equal but opposite on a continuum, and the relations of contradiction are elements that are mutually distinguished by the absence of some information or quality. Even though a semiotic square analysis is always somewhat simplistic and tentative it helps in displaying the nuances of meaning in a semantic category through the organization of oppositional elements (cf. Mick et al., 1999: 7).

In presenting the empirical material, I will be simultaneously moving on two different levels of abstraction. On the one hand, there is the institutional level where the different discourses of food and health can be said to be created, recreated and sustained. It is on this level that we can identify e.g. the different expert systems talked about by Giddens (1991) or the four antinomies of taste that Warde found in analyzing women's magazines (Warde, 1997). On the other hand there is the social psychological level where the institutions of late modernity have a direct effect on the consumers' day-to-day lives. The particular discourses produced at the institutional level structure the ways in which the individual consumers can construct coherent narratives of their lives as consumers (cf. Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Giddens, 1991). The focus in the next three chapters is more on this last level as that is the place where the modern institutions' effect on consumers' day-to-day life can be studied. However, the social psychological level cannot be looked upon without also referring to the institutional level, as the particular discourses reproduced in the participants' stories of food consumption emerge at that level. To capture this dynamic, the institutional level will again become more prominent in chapter ten where the commonalities of the different themes presented in chapters seven through nine will be elicited and placed in a larger institutional context.

## Chapter Seven

# Categorizing Food Consumption

In this chapter I will analyze how the participating consumers categorize different food consumption activities from a health perspective in producing stories about their food consumption. The categorization aims at placing acts of food consumption in a system of signification where they gain their meaning in relation to other food consumption activities. The focus on *consumption acts* is important, as the goal is not to construct a typology of healthy and unhealthy foods based on some inherent qualities of the food products, rather the focus is put on the particular subject-object relationships and not on the objects *per se*. The categorization from this chapter will then be used in the next chapters when different strategies used by the participants to explain the rationales behind their food consumption is discussed.

The concept of categorizations is in no way unproblematic even though categorization is fundamental to human understanding of the world, or as put by Lakoff (1987: 8): “*in moving about the world, we automatically categorize*” (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The inevitability of categorizations sometimes leads to the impression that we just categorize things as they are, that things come in natural kinds, and that our categories of mind naturally fit the kinds of things there are in the world. Lakoff problematizes the ‘classical theory’ of categorization, in which categories must be seen as existing in the world independent of people and defined only by the characteristics of their members and not in terms of any characteristics of the human. He instead suggests something called the ‘prototype theory’ in which human categorizations is essentially a matter of both human experience and imagination. To further show on the fuzziness of categorizations, Lakoff uses an example from philosopher J. L. Austin who, appropriately enough, discusses the concept of health:

The adjective ‘healthy’: when I talk about a healthy body, and again of a healthy complexion, of healthy exercise: the word is not just being used equivocally... there is what we call a primary nuclear sense of ‘healthy’: the

sense in which 'healthy' is used of a healthy body: I call this nuclear because it is 'contained as part' in the other two senses which may be set as 'productive of healthy bodies' and 'resulting from a healthy body'... Now are we content to say that the exercise, the complexion, and the body are all called 'healthy' because they are similar? Such a remark cannot fail to be misleading. Why make it? (J. L. Austin cited in Lakoff, 1987: 18)

Albeit the intention of Lakoff's use of Austin was not to discuss health, the quote brings out some interesting features of the inherent problem of the categories of healthy and unhealthy. Sometimes there is talk about healthy products, sometimes there is talk about healthy people, sometimes there is talk about an healthy approach to eating, sometimes there is talk about healthy cooking, and so on. Sometimes there is also talk about the relational aspects of healthiness wherein the supposed healthiness of certain products or eating pattern rests in its ability to move a consumer from a present state to wished upon future state which was discussed in chapter four.

In the empirical material it is possible to find three different levels at which the concepts of healthy and unhealthy were discussed: healthy products, healthy cooking, and healthy eating. The first one, which probably intuitively comes to mind, is talk about healthy and unhealthy products where the participants in a rather conventional manner let the meaning of the products rest solely in the objects. As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, Falk (1996: 183) has detected a change in meaning structure of food over the last decade giving an ever more emphasized role to the duality of medicine/poison. When the consumers spoke about food products it was clear that they many times placed them along such a distinction and thus talked about, what they deemed, healthy foods and unhealthy foods. The boundaries are not that clear however and one could imagine there being a fluid scale of foods ranging from elixirs of life on one end of the spectrum to poison on the other hand of the spectrum, with various more or less healthy/unhealthy alternatives in between. One brief example of talking along these lines is given by Mary, who, in the following quote, attributes health qualities to onion and green peppers whereas the potatoes are given a more neutral role:

Mary: I like to fix potatoes and fix them with, you know like, I'll fry them with onion and green peppers and try to get it a little more nutritious.

Mary, having caught on to the oftentimes communicated idea that almost everyone would be better off if they only ate more vegetables, is constantly struggling to find ways to effortlessly add vegetables to her meals. From this quote we can see that she talks about potatoes as needing green peppers and

onions to be “a little more nutritious”. Hence, onions and peppers must, in Mary’s consumption universe, be further towards the elixir of life side of the spectrum than potatoes. Only staying with this first way of attributing health qualities to certain products would give the false impression of the meaning of the products resting steadily in the products themselves. What I would instead like to put forward here is to focus on the subject-object relationship and thus the *consumption* of the products rather than the products in themselves.

This can be detected in the second and third levels at which the concepts of healthy and unhealthy were discussed as these levels deal with practices rather than with the products. The second level is based on accounts of healthy and unhealthy cooking practices where the preparation of an individual product could alter that product’s status as being either healthy or unhealthy. Cooking, according to Lévi-Strauss (1997), is a means of turning nature into culture in that it transforms the raw into the cooked. Let us return to Mary who previously talked about onions as something nutritious and thus healthy. Later on in the interview, Mary tells a story of a dish called ‘blooming onions’ where the preparation of the onions moves them from being a healthy product to being something rather unhealthy:

Mary: ...those blooming onions where they, they take the onion and they cut it apart and then they dip it in batter and then they deep fat fry it and then they put cheese on top of it and, you know, those kind of things and they said 'How many fat-grams are in one of those?' you know and you just go, I think it was, there was like an enormous amount, like a thousand fat grams or something, in one of those you know.

The cooking, or the preparation of food thus plays an important part in whether a certain product should be deemed healthy or not as what goes on on the second level alters the relationships on the first level. It is thus necessary to also encompass this level when talking about healthy and unhealthy consumption practices.

The third, and last, level at which the concepts of healthy and unhealthy were discussed is at the level of eating. A product that the participant talks about as being a good choice from a health perspective and prepared in a healthy manner could thus still be consumed in an unhealthy manner if eaten in the wrong quantity as in the example below:

Noel: Yeah... I probably wish I would cut back a little bit because I, like steaks and stuff, when I have them, I usually have them pretty, they're usually 16-ounce [450 grams], like that, I don't

know, like that big [motions with his hands] hmm, I probably wish I'd knock that back a little bit, but, like I said it's not a big priority [laughter], so...

In other parts of the interview, Noel talked about how he usually cooked his meat in an electric 'George Foreman Grill' which allowed him to cook meat without adding any extra fat. In Noel's world this was a good thing as he sometimes envisioned himself cutting back on his fat-consumption. Still, by eating too much of the product, i.e. "*steaks and stuff*", the consumption practice turned out to be somewhat unhealthy from Noel's perspective. This quote also reinforces the idiosyncratic ways in which these categorizations work as a 16-ounce steak would probably be considered far too big for most participants. From Noel's perspective, however, it would be sufficient to "*knock that back a little bit*" to again be consuming in a healthy manner. Other examples of where otherwise healthy foods cooked in a healthy manner were consumed in an unhealthy way was provided by, e.g. food eaten too late in the evening.

Conceptually one could then construct a three-dimensional two-by-two-by-two matrix with healthy and unhealthy products, cooking and eating respectively. This would create eight cells with possible combinations of the 'healthy products – healthy cooking – unhealthy eating' type. Such a matrix would possibly, just to take one example, shed light on Warde's antinomy between health and indulgence. For a consumer valuing indulgent behavior to such an extent that it is needed to remain mentally healthy, consumption of, e.g. chocolate mousse, could possibly be placed in the 'unhealthy products – unhealthy cooking – healthy eating' cell. A consumer being stuck in the widespread lipophobia of contemporary Western society, however, would find any other consumption practice than non-consumption of the same product unfeasible and is therefore more likely to place actual consumption of chocolate mousse in the 'unhealthy products – unhealthy cooking – unhealthy eating' cell. Furthermore it is hard to come up with examples of the 'unhealthy products – healthy cooking' combination other than for products that are potentially harmful when cooked in the wrong manner. What is more, this type of conceptualization creates an illusion that the different levels could be meaningfully separated and are stable over time. The matrix-endeavor will therefore end here. The intent with this discussion of the food – cooking – eating triad is instead to reach beyond the healthy – unhealthy food dichotomy that is so prevalent in the media landscape that it tends to be many times taken for granted. What I propose is to look at the consumption practice instead where these three levels are integrated and thereby contextualize the consumption to move away from a too object-focused view.

## A Relational Model of Healthy Food Consumption

The different food consumption practices to be described in this chapter are depicted in figure 7.1 that will be used as a frame of reference to facilitate and structure the discussion in this chapter. As was discussed in the previous chapter, this model, which is an adaptation of Greimas' semiotic square, takes its point of departure in two oppositions: The contrariety between an assertion (Healthy Food Consumption) and its negation (Unhealthy Food Consumption), and the contradiction between assertion and negation (Not Healthy Food Consumption) and non-assertion and non-negation (Not Unhealthy Food Consumption) respectively (cf. Nöth, 1990: 317 pp.).

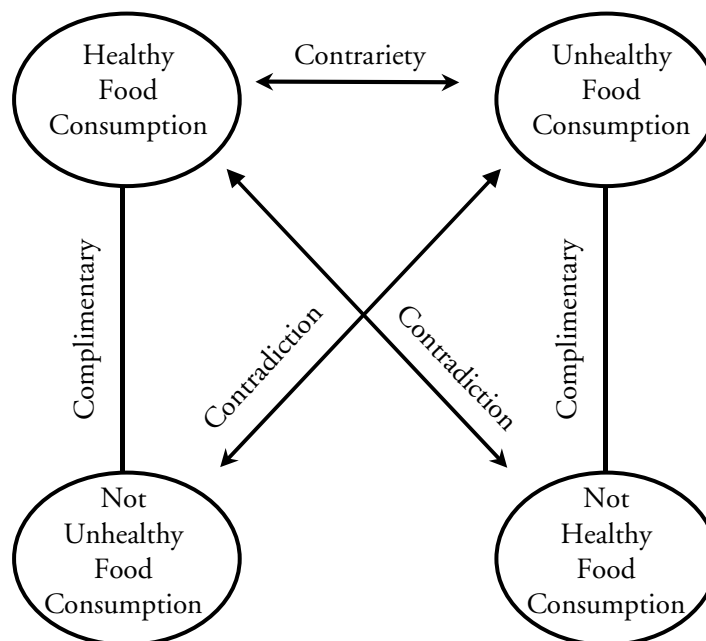


Figure 7.1: A Relational Model of Healthy Food Consumption

In chapter one I introduced the idea that health and risk are intimately connected and can be seen as two sides of the same coin, which is the basic idea of the model; one could not meaningfully be conceptualized without the other. The meaning of a certain product is therefore not something static but is influenced both by new messages about the product itself and about other products. This openness to change in the meaning of a product is discussed by Mick (1986) who uses a food and health related example:

The emergence of advertising product tags like 'all natural ingredients', 'lite', and 'low fat content' imbue competitors' products with meaning-by-implication like 'few or less natural ingredients', 'high caloric levels', and 'high fat content' – this despite the fact that the competitor's products have not been changed.

In accord with basic semiotic theory in Saussure's tradition, as introduced in chapter two, emphasis should be shifted from the longstanding philosophical treatment of the nature of things in and of themselves to a relational world view whereby meaning derives from the priorities human beings construct and perceive among signs in a system. According to Saussure's chessboard metaphor, moving one piece alters all the relationships between pieces on the board (Mick, 1986: 197). A way in which the ephemerality of the categories was surfaced during the interviews was that many consumers talked about things they used to eat and considered OK at one time that they no longer eat – a food consumption practice had hence been moved from one category to another. It is likely that the categorizations they accounted for during the interviews will also be open for revisions in the future in the light of new media-reports, medical findings, rumors, et cetera. The relationships between the different consumption practices are thus in no way static but in a constant flux depending on the types of stances the consumers take in their reflexive treatment of the various available health messages. It follows logically then, that the meaning of such a concept as 'Healthy Food Consumption' gets its meaning in the oppositional context of what it is not. By talking about food consumption rather than food products the meanings relate to the market context, to competitors and alternatives as well as to the usage context in which the product is inserted (cf. Askegaard & Ger, 1997). The discussion held here should therefore be put in contrast to grand static structuralistic schemes aimed at classifying cultures, such as Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle (introduced in chapter three) or Mary Douglas attempts at deciphering a meal (Douglas, 1997) wherein the 'secret meaning' of the food is hidden in the products. The framework presented here is on a much less abstract and more consumption near level than, e.g. the broad categories of the raw, the cooked, and the rotted used by Lévi-Strauss (1997).

One last thing that should be pointed out before moving on to the participants' accounts of their food consumption is that the categorizations discussed and described in this chapter are not necessarily ones that the participants themselves *explicitly* used. Instead, the classificatory scheme depicted is constructed from the analyses of the texts and is based on how the participants implicitly categorized their food consumption in their narrations. These categorizations are, so to speak, present in the empirical material even though they are hidden below the surface as the consumers themselves did not openly use them.

## Healthy Food Consumption

As has been discussed repeatedly, food has become an increasingly important factor in consumer's strivings towards healthiness (cf. Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Thompson & Troester, 2002). It is frequently pointed out, not least from marketers, that consumers have to take the faith of their health in their own hands and many companies try to portray their particular product as being the prime means to this end. It comes as no surprise then, that the main assertion in figure 7.1, 'Healthy Food Consumption', is best described as an *idealized* category. When the participants talk about healthy food in this absolute sense they tend to do so in terms of how they should ideally eat and what consumption practices they experience are lacking from their present behaviors. The following quote from Jeff exhibits this tendency to idealize what he believes are healthy foods which is further reinforced by him romanticizing about the good old healthy food he used to eat at the farm where he grew up:

Jeff: ...there seems to be a certain body of knowledge out there that says the more natural foods, and... and to get them closest to the source, and to eat it closest to the source rather than all this process, process, process... And bread may be an example where you have the processed bread as opposed to the, you know, the wholemeal or the kosher breads kind of thing. You know, the raw vegetables as opposed to those that have been cooked or whatever else. A baked potato rather than instant potatoes, and all that processing kind of thing... And again, I would have to somewhat believe it even though we had some bad eating habits... on the farm [where Jeff grew up] everything was very, very close – nothing was processed! We seldom bought any kinds of so-called purchased foods. And, and, of course, I thought it was the activity and the work too, but my grandparents and my folks lived long and relatively healthy lives. But I think that was the exercise factor... working on the farm. But the fact that everything was cooked in butter and, and so forth, hmm... but I think there is probably something to, you know, to the fact of, of trying to eat the raw foods and vegetables...

In this quote Jeff focuses a lot on the available knowledge claims about food products in themselves. Jeff starts out by saying that the more natural foods are probably better and explains that by natural he means foods that are close to the source and have not been processed. The positively healthy trait of naturalness is thus defined both positively as being close to the source and negatively as not having been processed. Here, it seems like Jeff has been inspired by the natural health value system described by Thompson and

Troester (2002: 553) as a distinct subset of cultural meanings that are generally available in the American popular culture.

Even though no such study is available, I believe it is fair to assess that this type of value system is one of those global structures talked about in chapter one that permeate the daily life of consumers and hence is an integral part also of Swedish popular culture. In the natural health value system view, the modernist project of improving nature through technological innovation and intervention has invoked potential danger and pollution in the foodstuffs. When Jeff talks about processed foods he clearly shows his disapproval by repeating the word "process" while shrugging his shoulders in a gesture of resignation. The quote illustrates how dependent the definition of healthy foods is on being set apart from the supposedly unhealthy foods. Jeff uses four dichotomies in this short excerpt to set apart healthy foods from unhealthy ones; processed bread as opposed to wholemeal or kosher breads; purchased foods as opposed to homegrown foods; baked potatoes as opposed to instant potatoes; and raw vegetables as opposed to cooked vegetables.

To reinforce the fact that the food he is talking about is actually healthy, Jeff provides evidence of the food's superiority by stating that his grandparents and folks lived long and relatively healthy lives. But his reminiscence of the 'good old days' is suddenly disturbed when he also comes to remember that everything was cooked in butter, which, according to Jeff's present beliefs, is supposed to be bad. To offset this disturbing fact, Jeff attributes the relative healthiness of his family to the fact that there was a lot of manual labor going on at the farm and returns to the statement that eating raw foods and vegetables probably is the key thing after all. Cooking things in butter is not the only cooking method mentioned by Jeff; he also talks about baked potatoes being better than instant potatoes and raw foods overall being better than cooked. The method of cooking thus seems to play an important part in Jeff's account of healthy and unhealthy cooking practices.

Sometimes, as in the following statement from Cheri, there almost seems to be a hierarchy among different cooking methods similar to Lévi-Strauss' (1997: 30 pp.) discussion of how boiling and roasting of meat is placed in different hierarchical order by e.g. Caingang of Brazil, the Guayaki of Paraguay and the Poconachi of Mexico. Prior to this statement Cheri has been talking about how she tries to put together a healthier diet now that she has a child and is somewhat more knowledgeable about nutrition than she was when she was younger:

- Cheri: I think it just should be a mix. I don't think it should totally, you know, be carrots and celery and... [laughter] baked chicken every night. I think you need a mix of, you know, everything in your diet.
- Jacob: So would you say that carrots and celery and that, is that the good stuff so to speak?
- Cheri: That's the good stuff in my eyes!
- [...]
- Jacob: Yeah, you mentioned before that celery and carrots and so on...
- Cheri: And anything baked! You know your meats that you can bake.
- Jacob: That's good stuff too?
- Cheri: ... and grill...
- Jacob: OK
- Cheri: Like I said, don't get me wrong. It's not that we don't eat steaks and grill, and again, I'm just not, I'm just not a fryer person...

To Cheri, baking things automatically makes them healthier than if you would use another type of cooking method. But as the interview emerges it seems more like baking in itself is not really healthy but gains its status as a health marker from being the 'non-frying' method of cooking – we will return to this later in the chapter when discussing 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption'. For now, we will stay with illustrating how dependent the definition of healthy foods is on being set apart from the supposedly unhealthy foods.

What can further be taken away from the above statement is the tendency to stereotype certain foods as being healthy and let these particular foods refer to a whole group of foods. This is what Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 36) refer to as synecdoche, a special type of metonymy where the part stands for the whole. Cheri uses such a synecdoche when she lets carrots and celery stand in for the whole group of vegetables. Cheri is aware of her somewhat idealized stereotyping as she gives away a little laughter when she talks about carrots and celery having to be included in the diet. Even though Cheri says that she focuses on creating a "good mix" of healthy foods the only examples she gives are carrots and celery, which turn out to not be consumed very often. Again, what is seen is that the healthy food category is used as an ideal category where the foods that one wishes to consume more of is placed.

The following quote from Lovisa is another example where healthy food consumption is spoken about as something idealized that the participant wishes to do more of rather than something that they actually do. Lovisa is a student who has been living on her own for a couple of years and she expresses that she constantly feel guilty for not taking proper care of herself. She justifies this with the type of hectic life style she is forced to lead as a

student but now, however, she was determined to turn a new page and she was quite aware of what she should ideally be doing:

Lovisa: I believe that I'm at least well aware of what is good to eat anyway... and what I ought to eat... and if I was a little bit more motivated right now I would probably prepare some 'husmanskost'<sup>26</sup> and stuff...

Lovisa talks about what she ought to eat and husmanskost is brought up as the healthy contrariety to all the bad things she said she had been eating before. Lovisa clearly exhibits that she has an ideal picture of what she would like to consume more of – husmanskost. Just like with Jeff above, Lovisa is showing tendencies to romanticize about the 'good old days' when healthier foods were eaten. Lovisa keeps coming back to how healthy her mother's traditional Swedish cooking is and that she would be happy if she could sometimes find the time and motivation to cook like that. The connotations given by taglines such as 'homemade', 'authentic', and 'traditional' that were discussed in chapter four seem to be disseminated among the participants as they positively valued the 'good old days' where everything was 'homemade' and things were, in some vague sense, probably better. To hold husmanskost in high esteem was an almost ubiquitous trait among the Swedish participants although none of them really claimed that they eat, or had ever eaten, a pure husmanskost diet.

Pär, a middle-aged father of three, gives another example of talking about the food he would like himself and his family to consume more of. Pär first talks positively about how his family likes to grill in the summer but then realizes that it probably causes them to eat more meat than fish, which Pär finds problematic. Consumption of meat, in Pär's consumer universe, is not at all as healthy as consumption of fish:

Pär: Yes, we do eat more meat in the summers... because we barbecue. We really barbecue a lot so, so it's pretty obvious that we eat more meat then. Compared to fish and stuff. But that has really changed too, we ate that, we ate... they [the kids] used to like fish finger a couple of years ago... but that's a no-no now! We can't present fish fingers [...] But we do eat a little bit too little fish. I think we can agree on that.

Jacob: Do you have any thoughts...

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<sup>26</sup> Husmanskost roughly translates into "homely fare" or "plain food". In the Swedish cuisine it stands for something quite specific, I have therefore chosen to use the Swedish term.

Pär: Well, the kids probably don't agree but Rut [his wife] and I probably agree... Yeah, but that has to do with the supply too, you know. I mean, the cod, that has become a luxury. When I grew up here in [city], cod was something they would throw at you... So like, like the supply of fish, the variety was a lot bigger then, you know... [...] I think it's pretty much a question of the availability. But when we're dieting, we eat those Norwegian, like different kind of frozen fish...

Pär does not explicitly state that consumption of fish is healthy but to speak about fish in the way Pär does he must have bought into the discourse proclaiming that fish is healthy. He appears to be valorizing fish as something positive; something one should consume plenty of. This is not surprising as fish's potential benefit of being, lean, rich in omega-3 fatty acids and so on is one of the most consistent themes played out in the media. Fish's superiority to meat is even explicitly stated in Livsmedelsverket's brochure Good Advice About Food and Health in which they strongly suggest that we should eat less meat and more fish (Livsmedelsverket, 2001: 11). Pär, trying hard to be a sensible family father, finds some really convenient ways in this interview extract to show why he does not include more fish in his diet although he thinks he should: The kids do not like it, it is expensive, there is too little variety, et cetera. Different discursive strategies for justifying why one does not engage in the consumption practices one deems as healthy will be dealt with in the following chapters.

The 'Healthy Food Consumption' Category, to sum things up, is made up of idealized consumption practices, i.e. when, what, and how the participants think they *ought* to eat. Usually the what-to-eat question is answered in terms of what the participants stereotype as healthy food products, e.g. carrots, celery, fish, husmanskost, this food should furthermore, to be included in the consumers' idealized 'Healthy Food Consumption' category, be cooked in the best possible manner, usually meaning not fried, and eaten in the right proportions at the right time of the day.

## Unhealthy Food Consumption

The practices labeled 'Healthy Food Consumption', i.e. the main assertion in figure 7.1, was, as we have seen, not really the food consumption practices that the participants engaged in on a day-to-day basis but rather a more or less abstract, idealized goal of what the participants would like to do. With the practices placed in the category 'Unhealthy Food Consumption', i.e. the

negation of the assertion in figure 7.1, the same idealization takes place even though it is on the negative end of the spectrum.

Food consumption that can be placed in the unhealthy category is usually referred to when the respondent talk about how they used to eat or how they eat on special occasions or when they once in a while deserve a treat. For example, Lovisa describes how her eating habits changed when she first moved away from home to attend the University and faced living on her own for the first time. In the beginning she tried to cook, what she refers to as, proper food, which in this case equaled the husmanskost her mother used to cook. After a while she decided that she was only fooling herself pretending to be an adult and thus opted for indulging in all the stuff she was longing for but had hitherto deprived herself of for health reasons. She was thereby, in her own way, rebelling against her mother's strict cooking regimen and decided to go for, what she herself referred to as, the "bad stuff":

Lovisa: ...[I] got really sloppy...bought O'Boy... toasted bread and stuff... snabbmakaroner<sup>27</sup>...

To do like Lovisa, and rebel against tradition cooking – and especially our mothers cooking – is, according to Fürst (1988: 95) a natural phase in most persons struggles to create a separate identity. For Lovisa, the rebellion consisted of indulging in foods that she regarded as unhealthy and she now struggles to limit her intake of them. Similarly to the food products described as stereotypically healthy above, e.g. carrots and celery, the unhealthy foods are also stereotyped as the 'what everybody knows' one should limit one's consumption of if one adheres to the mainstream recommendations about healthy and unhealthy food.

In the discussion about consumption of healthy food above, a hierarchy of cooking methods was mentioned in which frying is portrayed as being the worst type. It was even suggested that the other cooking methods gained their relative 'health aura' from being the 'non-frying' method of cooking by the logic of being semantically set apart from the supposedly unhealthy foods. Cheri goes on to critique "everything fried" as being unhealthy and also mentions some stereotypically 'unhealthy' foods:

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<sup>27</sup> O'Boy is a Swedish brand of chocolate milk. Snabbmakaroner is a type of pasta that only takes three minutes to cook; consumed together with nothing but ketchup it has come to symbolize the stereotypical student meal.

- Cheri: Unhealthy is gonna be everything fried, sugary, fattening food, like your desserts and the Baklava that your friend brought<sup>28</sup> [laughter].
- Jacob: Yeah, those... [laughter]
- Cheri: Oh my god! That is unhealthy! That is like putting on the weight and the calories like you wouldn't believe. That would make your sugar level go up! ... Stuff like that.

As can be seen, Cheri points to sugar and fat as being two other means of making food unhealthy. These two tag-words are the most frequently used and they come up spontaneously in every single interview. This is not surprising as most of the media reports about the declining state of the healthiness in the Western world is due to over consumption of fat and sugar. Fischler asserts that it is a seemingly general characteristic of modern societies that they are profoundly lipophobic – they hate fat (Fischler in Askegaard et al., 1999). Other foods being stereotyped as being ‘bad’ are fast foods, candy, chips, and snacks in general as in the example below:

- Pär: [his oldest son] he got a flat stomach just in time for the summer and he hasn't eaten a pizza since. He hasn't bought any candy, he never eats chips, no peanuts and none of that stuff. It was like an alarm went off for him... So he really sticks to it.
- Jacob: Is that something that you've been doing at home, that thing about not eating chips and peanuts and that stuff?
- Pär: No, chips maybe, that... now that we come to speak of it, it's way too often at the weekends that chips is bought, you know. But we try to have pop-corn instead because Linus [youngest son] doesn't like it, but Åsa [daughter] and I do! And he's gone most of the time anyway so he doesn't miss it all that much probably... He's out running around with his buddies at night, you know. Or running around, I don't know, they play network games and stuff like that... [pauses for a while] They probably buy coca-cola and chips there anyhow so we really don't need to have it at home...

His way of speaking about his oldest son shying away from candy, chips, peanuts, and especially pizza reveals that he is proud of his son's perseverance being able to uphold this strict regimen. From his way of speaking it becomes clear that he places these products in something like an unhealthy food category and that he thinks that consumption of these foods should be limited as suggested by him saying that chips is bought “way too often”. The rest of

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<sup>28</sup> I recruited Cheri as an informant at a pot luck-style social gathering at a mutual friends house, hence the reference to my friend who brought the Baklava – a traditional Greek desert.

the family does not really show the same stamina as the oldest son and cannot resist having these products from time to time. When Pär speaks of that it is clear that he feels that he is not really in control as suggested by him using the passive voice when he explains that "chips is bought". This signals that he does not really want to take responsibility for bringing these products into the home. Pär's account taps into the rich area of household consumption decisions. Households, rather than being single units of food consumption, can be sites of multiple and sometimes contradictory consumption practices (Valentine, 1999). Pär, to clear his conscience explains that the family tries to eat pop-corn instead, a product that in Pär's product universe is seen as relatively more healthy than the other snacks mentioned. Pär also reveals how he secretly tries to discipline his youngest son Linus who he believes is overweight. He realizes though that he probably cannot fight that battle on the home turf as Linus probably eats chips and drinks coca-cola when he is away from home.

## Risk-Profiling

When the participants talked about food consumption practices they described as healthy they many times did so without explicitly going into details about what made it healthy. For unhealthy food consumption they were many times much more verbally explicit in pointing out what made consumption of certain products unhealthy. This can be attributed to what Beck refers to as risk profiling, where consumers, based on different messages sent out by various experts, assess what they have to avoid in order to survive their day-to-day life (Beck, 1992). An example of how a participant uses expert knowledge gathered from media to order his food consumption is given by Jörn who describes how his preferences has changed over the years as a result of reading in the newspaper about certain things being unhealthy:

- Jörn: And that's for sure that the public debate and... it's a little bit like that also when it comes to chicken, because a couple of years ago one could buy more semi-manufactured products, Stinas Kyckling<sup>29</sup> or what it was called, that would like never happen now. We do all of that ourselves. So we, like, never buy, we never buy pre-seasoned food. And if there are like marinated and seasoned steaks for barbecuing, you know, we don't do that. We hardly ever buy those steaks anyway...
- Jacob: What is it that has caused you to change?
- Jörn: No, we just do it ourselves. Seasoning and marinating that is. It, there we've been influenced by the media attention and it's a

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<sup>29</sup> Translates to Stina's Chicken, a Swedish brand name for pre-marinated chicken.

darn rubbish with those... there is just endless amounts in those... Not in the meat itself but in the seasoning and the marinade. And they get to lie in there too long or the herbs are bad, and the meat goes bad, so...

Jacob: And what is it that's in there... I mean, do you have any concrete examples of what's in, in the marinade that shouldn't be very good?

Jörn: Yeah, I suppose it's bacteria of various kinds. That's what I've gathered anyway. I don't think it's the marinade as such, well, yes if it's, I mean, it's the seasoning in the marinade, I mean the herbs. It's the same thing here at home, like I can sometimes be baffled by that old can of herbs that has been standing there for years, if one really should use it, you know, because... and you don't even know how they've done it, the marinade and the seasoning...

Jörn clearly exhibits how he reflexively uses the knowledge he gains from the media in building new routines for his food consumption behaviors. After reading reports in the media about these type of pre-marinated products being unhealthy, he stopped buying them. He does not talk about ever being ill from eating any of these products or of knowing of anyone having been ill but he reacts solely to the reports in media that has made him aware of the potential danger. His actions are thereby guided more to avoid something potentially harmful tomorrow than to achieve something potentially beneficial today – he acts according to the logic of risk-avoidance (cf. Beck, 1992). He uses strong words like "darn rubbish" and "endless amounts" when he explicates what the potential problem is. But when he is to further the explanation he searches for the correct words to use and is not quite sure what the problem really is. As Giddens points out, the actors are often aware of the expert notions, even if its only in a rough and ready way (Giddens, 1991: 120). Jörn also goes on to extrapolate the information he has gained from the media about pre-marinated meats to include the herbs he has at home. By doing this, a rip in his protective cocoon is created when not even home cooking is safe. To restore this he quickly returns to talking about how, with the semi-manufactured foods, you "don't even know how they've done it" and gestures that with his home cooking, at least he is in charge and can make sure that the ingredients seem good.

Ingbritt exhibits another way in which the so-called protective cocoon helps her in sorting out and not having to deal with all health messages:

Ingbritt: Well, I think I usually, with these types of sudden peculiarities on the newspaper placards I'm usually pretty cool... It could happen, if I find it especially interesting, it could be that I

actually buy the paper. But then usually, usually I'm kind of disappointed I think. But it does happen...

By, as Ingbritt herself puts it, staying “pretty cool” with regards to most messages and only reading when it is “especially interesting” Ingbritt manages to obtain a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991: 188) wherein she does not have to reevaluate her food consumption behavior every time she finds more information about different food products. Ingbritt has gained this self-confidence in being able to judge between different messages in media from her experience of the newspaper business where she has written occasional articles. Guided by this experience, she believes that she safely can be skeptical towards much of the information, as she believes to have figured out the logic behind much that is written:

Ingbritt: I'm obviously very critical and critical towards the media since I know pretty much how it works. So I'm not, I don't buy in to every damn thing...

Jacob: How do you mean, you know how it works?

Ingbritt: Well, they need on 'News' per day... that it doesn't need to be true just because they choose to cover something big. But some things then, I just find them weird enough that I want to find out more about what's going on. Or on the contrary, some things just seem so plausible that I want to know what's going on...

Ingbritt also shows how she has her own internal 'cut-off point' where she finds some particular news feature to be either weird or plausible enough that she wants to read more about it. By setting up the new information she is bombarded with against her old knowledge of the particular area she reduces the plethora of available information she has to process. In a way, Ingbritt gives voice to the tendency that Giddens suggests of consumers choosing to appropriate certain types of information that goes well with their pre-established habits. She thereby obeys the principles of the avoidance of cognitive dissonance which forms part of the protective cocoon that helps her maintain a sense of ontological security. (1991: 188)

## The Fast Food Metonymy

A metonymy is a semiotic concept in which one entity is used to refer to another that is related to or associated with it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 35). E.g. the name of one thing is used for the name of another, or a part of something is used to represent the whole (cf. Lakoff, 1987: 19; Mick, 1986: 206; Thompson & Haytko, 1997: 23). The participants frequently use

metonymic constructions in order to simplify their consumption stories by grouping various types of products together and take a collective stance toward consumption of all the products they place in that category. For Pär, Pizza serves as a metonymy for all the bad foods the family eats – pizza refers to a whole category of bad foods. In the following quote he discusses the family’s pizza consumption but it turns out that pizza works as a collective description of all food not cooked at home:

Pär: If you look at it over the year it is probably one too many times that they do it [buy pizza] but, you know...

Jacob: Too often because...

Pär: Well, it’s like a way to get out of having to cook that day, that’s really the main argument, but we never do it now when Jörgen [oldest son] is at home since he refuses to eat pizza, so that never happens... As a matter of fact, now the last year we buy, when we have ordered we order less. That is, given the same amount of people we, it is less that we order. So we probably eat a little less now! Also, Linus and Åsa, they used to be able to guzzle down a pizza each before. They can’t any more. A family pizza will do for all of the family, and there is even leftovers, now that we are only four at home...

Jacob: So there has been some kind of a...

Pär: Yeah! It really has, it’s like, it’s less gluttony!

Again, like in the chips example with Pär above, he does not want to take the responsibility for, what he believes is, the excessive consumption of pizza. Therefore he says that ”they do it” and blames his children for the pizza consumption. Pär claims that the only reason they buy pizza is to get out of cooking, but since the children in the house never cook at home, the ones benefiting from not having to cook would be Pär and his wife – still the children are put to blame. Serving pizza at home is highly stressing for him in yet another way as he shows tendencies to believe that it is morally wrong not to cook a proper meal at home for the kids. He is thus torn between the antinomy between convenience and care suggested by Warde (1997) (see chapter four). But, as can be seen in the quote, Pär, being a responsible father, goes on to explain that they really do not eat as much pizza as one could be led to believe. So even if Pär believes that they might be eating pizza a little bit too frequently, they do not eat very much of it from time to time. He strongly disavows the family’s pizza eating behavior from the past which he characterizes as gluttonous, which is, as we all know, one of the deadly sins.

For Pär, pizza is the metonymy that stands in for all foods not cooked at home. The concept of metonymy is useful for many of the participants as most have some kind of typical food, brand, or food outlet that they used as a

stand in for everything they believed was bad. For Bärne, consumption of what he labels "McDonald's-food" is the worst kind and he could quite specifically describe why:

Bärne: McDonald's-food is just stodge, it fills you up for the moment but the energy content is too low.

Bärne, working as a fireman and being a hobby-triathlete, is very much focused on the energy content of different foods. Therefore, as opposed to Pär, Bärne considers Pizza to be a relatively good alternative and points to its high energy content as something good. He even compares it directly to the McDonald's-food that he so clearly dislikes:

Bärne: Pizza isn't like McDonald's-food – it has great energy content!

So, for Bärne McDonald's-food, is used as a collective term for all fast food type foods he can think of. Cheri uses the slightly more imprecise metonymy 'fast food' to describe all the foods she does not like. She goes on to explain in what ways fast food differs from other types of foods you can order at restaurants:

Cheri: The difference, in my eyes of fast food, is, a McDonald's, a Burger King, a Taco Bell, a Taco John's, Runza<sup>30</sup>, as opposed to going in to Ruby Tuesday's, or Lazlo's, or La Paz<sup>31</sup>, and sitting down and getting a meal. You know, usually when you order your meal you can enjoy a conversation or have a drink and then your meal is served to you as opposed to just pulling up going 'wanna have some fries' and you pull up to the next one and you pay for it and you have your meal. And it's out and your sack is full of grease!

Jacob: OK so it's... You don't get that grease thing in the other places?

Cheri: Oh, sure you do! You just... Again, I think it's all psychological, I really do! You know, when you stop and think about it they're gonna prepare their food the same way that the McDonald's, Burger Kings, Taco Bells, Taco John's are probably preparing theirs. They just don't maybe do it as quickly and serve to you immediately, you know...

Jacob: So it's almost like they are disguising it?

Cheri: Oh yeah, yeah! [enthusiastically]

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<sup>30</sup> Runza is a local fast food franchise in the part of the Midwest where the US fieldwork was carried out.

<sup>31</sup> Names of local restaurants

As exhibited in the quote, Cheri is not quite clear what it is she finds problematic with the fast food. First she suggests that the short time it takes to cook the food might have something to do with her dislike of fast food but then she immediately turns to making a connection between fast food and grease. When asked if it is less greasy in other places she seems to recollect that it is not really any less grease in the other places she frequents. She even implies that they probably cook their food the same way in 'proper, sit down restaurants'. When I suggest that the other restaurants might be disguising that they are just as 'bad' as the fast food outlets, Cheri becomes very enthusiastic and seems excited to have revealed this secret of the restaurant business.

### Unhealthy to the Extreme: Mountain Dew

As was previously mentioned, unhealthy food consumption, just like healthy food consumption, was mostly spoken about as something idealized – either in a positive manner as with healthy food consumption or in a negative manner as with unhealthy food consumption. Most participants thus talked about their unhealthy food consumption as something marginalized, either by being infrequent or being something that one tried to abstain from. In some cases, the participants gave especially vivid accounts of past consumption where they described behaviors that resemble stories about drug-addiction. What is interesting with these stories is that they are both told in such a way as to uphold a picture of nothing-extraordinary going on. The two most explicit stories deals with the soft drink Mountain Dew; Cheri starts out by telling about her husband:

- Cheri: I firmly believe that when my husband worked nights when we first got married, and I think he would even tell you, he was addicted to Mountain Dew for the caffeine.
- Jacob: OK but he managed to get away from his addiction?
- Cheri: Yeah, because we had Courtney [daughter] and then he got switched to days and he couldn't sleep at night because his body was used to being fed all that Mountain Dew and caffeine that he couldn't sleep. And he finally decided that, you know, I need to really quit drinking Mountain Dew, cause he couldn't even then drink it during the day and then he was awake at night and, you know... Yeah, he don't drink Mountain Dew any more, I mean that's very seldom if he'll ask, you know, for Mountain Dew or grab one at a Quick Shop or something.

So, apart from salt, sugar, and fat being stereotyped as bad food, caffeine was also portrayed as a something potentially dangerous that one needed to

control one's consumption of. This was the only substance that the participants talked about as being addictive and hence rather strict regimens had to be ventured into in order to get out of this addiction. The stories about Mountain Dew consumption was the only stories in which the *direct* physiological effect on the body was discussed. In the other examples, e.g. Jörn's talk about his hesitance towards pre-marinated products, the actions were based on what the participants had read in the papers, and not something they had experienced themselves. In the Mountain Dew examples the participants talks about how they, or the person they described, could physically feel that they were consuming something they experienced as not good. Noel gives a particularly stunning example of how his previous Mountain Dew consumption had a very direct effect on his life:

- Noel: I used to drink Mountain Dew quite a bit...
- Jacob: Ok, that's caffeine too, right?
- Noel: Yeah caf! It's caffeine and sugar thrown in there, and I kind of, just tried switching. Even here at home I don't even drink diet coke. But what I drink here doesn't have caffeine because, I don't know, I found that I kind of, you know, when I'm at home if I drink too much caffeine in the evening, you know, I don't sleep very well, so... And, you know, it kind of makes you a little... If you drink it throughout the day I think it tends to make you a little bit jumpy. I used to be when I drank Mountain Dew all the time I couldn't, when I was working as a drafts-man, I couldn't hand-draft in the afternoon, you know. A lot of the drafting work we do is done on computers but it used to be, you kind of get a mix of both, and I kind of found that on the, when I was, you know, when I was working I'd probably drink like six or eight Mountain Dews a day and I could not hand-draft in the afternoon because I couldn't keep my hands steady enough to...
- Jacob: Oh, so you really felt the caffeine kicking in?
- Noel: Yeah, you know, that's how, that's how jumpy it made you! And like I said, I guess when I'm here at home, you know, I pretty much try and stay away from the caffeine, so, just, just out of force of habit, you know, it's a suggestion my doctor made, something like that...

In this quote Noel seems to recognize his former consumption of Mountain Dew as perhaps a bit on the excessive side even though he does not make a big deal out of the fact that he could not keep his hands steady enough to hand-draft. We can remember from the beginning of the chapter that Noel talks about his consumption of 16-ounce steaks and how he wishes he could “knock that back a little bit”. In both these examples recommendations from his doctor was needed for him to place the consumption behavior as

unhealthy. Noel's doctor seems to be the only authority Noel listens to as he claims that there is just "too much talk" about what one should and should not do. Noel seems to be doing what Giddens describes as sticking stubbornly to whatever established habits one has formed for oneself in order to not have to face the complexity of all available messages (1991: 121) or what Rozin dubs as the ignore it all approach (1998: 17). The only one who seems to be able to break through Noel's protective cocoon is his doctor who he claims to be listening to even though he is reluctant and finds it hard to change as suggested by the following quote:

Noel: ...sometimes I visit the doctor, hmm, you know and we talk about that [eating more vegetables and less meat] and like I said that's probably, probably the reason why I said, you know, I try and expand my [diet], you know, with the, one special with the gardens growing, try to expand my diet a little bit but for some reason I just, whenever I buy vegetables, like in a grocery store I just, I don't know, they either go stale or I don't use them or something. So I just, I don't know, hmm...

From the interviews we can see that the categories of 'Healthy Food Consumption' and 'Unhealthy Food Consumption' are talked about in terms of what *ideally* should be done or not. This poses an interesting question: If the participants on a daily basis are not regularly consuming in either a healthy or an unhealthy manner, in what way are the participants actually eating? Noel's account of his present soft drink consumption in comparison with his prior Mountain Dew consumption gives us a hint towards the answer. When he talks about his present soft drink consumption he tells us that he now drinks the caffeine free type of soft drink (as a matter of fact, Noel was drinking two cans of caffeine free diet coke during the interview). The caffeine free coke only gets its meaning from what it is not – there is thus not something positively healthy about consuming this product. But nor is there something unhealthy about it since the 'bad stuff' – the caffeine – is taken out. This product gains its status entirely from what its not – it is not an unhealthy food.

## Not Unhealthy Food Consumption

When the participants talked about their food consumption they neither seemed to be the idealized healthy food consumers, nor did they seem to be careless daredevils eating in a fashion described as unhealthy food consumption. Rather, when the respondents talked about how they usually ate they talked in terms of not unhealthy food consumption, which, in figure

7.1, is the contradiction of unhealthy food consumption and thus the compliment to healthy food consumption.

The 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption' category consists of food consumption that is not talked about in the positively healthy and idealized way that food in the 'Healthy Food Consumption' category is talked about. Neither does it consist of food consumption behaviors that are talked about as something bad that should be avoided as the behaviors in the 'Unhealthy Food Consumption' category. When the respondents talked about how they ate on a day-to-day basis they did so in terms of eating in a way characterized as being "not too bad" or "not unhealthy". The respondents rarely talked about any positively healthy features but rather stressed the fact that they did not consume too much fat, salt, sodium or some other ingredients that the respondents thought of as being harmful. In this way, the consumption practices resemble what Beck (1992) refers to as 'nutritional engineering' in which good food is being defined negatively by a logic of risk avoidance. The aim is thus not so much to find positively good food as it is to avoid the food that is potentially harmful.

The respondents each had a number of food features that they tried to avoid in their consumption as expressed in the following quote:

Katrin: Chicken is healthy since it's not very fat, isn't it? ...and one shouldn't eat very much fried food, and one really shouldn't, even though I really like salt, one shouldn't eat that either.

Katrin here talks about chicken being "healthy since it's not very fat". There is thus nothing positively healthy about consuming chicken. It gains its meaning in contradictory to consumption of foods containing, what Katrin considers, too much fat, a substance deemed unhealthy by Katrin. She thereby subscribes to the dominating fear of fat discourse that proliferates in most modern societies that, according to Fischler, are profoundly lipophobic (cf. Askegaard et al., 1999). In her way of speaking, there is thus nothing healthy about consuming chicken except for the fact that one does not consume too much fat. To further reinforce this connection she goes on to give examples of other things she tries to stay away from – fried foods and salt – even though she does not give any concrete examples of foods lacking these features. Cheri provides another example of describing the food she cooks for her family in terms of what it is not:

Cheri: I try to avoid a lot of fried foods and it's hard to avoid fried foods you know 'cause... fried hamburger, to make whatever you know. Like, I did make taco-sallad this weekend and you have to

fry the hamburger to make that. And I'm not really big on doing fried chicken, I'd rather bake it. And chicken is a big thing of ours. Pork-chops is another thing, I try not to fry those, I try to bake them or grill them. I just, I do, I take fried foods into huge consideration.

For Cheri, consumption of chicken and pork-chops is something that she can do for her family as she then gets away from the experienced dangers associated with frying. As discussed earlier, frying is often portrayed as the unhealthy cooking method and, consequently, all other methods of cooking, such as baking or grilling in this example, are hailed as being not unhealthy. Cheri does not speak of these ways of preparing the food actually bringing anything positive with it but merely sets it apart from frying. Serving of the baked chicken and the pork-chops thus qualifies as 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption' without being portrayed by Cheri as positively healthy.

In figure 7.1 the 'Healthy Food Consumption' category is connected to the 'Not Unhealthy Food' category suggesting that they are complimentary. For the participants, these two categories together make up the alternative ways in which it is acceptable to eat. One way of showing the distinction between these two groups is to look at how the consumers talk about them. When they speak of food consumption being healthy, they do so in terms of what they ought to eat more of as in the example above with Lovisa who said that she was aware that she probably ought to eat more 'husmanskost'. When the participants instead spoke of the ways they eat on a day-to-day basis, they many times used small markers to indicate that this way of eating was indeed OK but not quite the positively healthy way in which they knew they 'ought' to eat. One of the ways in which the positively healthy food consumption behaviors are distinguished from the not unhealthy food consumption behaviors is that when the respondents are talking about how they eat on a day-to-day basis they many times say that they eat 'just' so as opposed to 'the real thing'. Ralph illustrates this in talking about his breakfast habits:

Ralph: Well, usually... just a cup of coffee. The kids you know [...] grab a doughnut somewhere. It's all they've got!

Ralph uses the word "just" to denote that the coffee he is drinking for breakfast is somehow inferior to some ideal picture he has of what a proper breakfast should consist of. The ideal breakfast in this case consists of cereal with milk, a sandwich, orange juice, coffee, et cetera. But instead he is "just" having a cup of coffee. Again we see that consumption of coffee is not bad in itself – it is even part of the proper breakfast, but drinking "just a cup of coffee" is not as good as Ralph would like it to be. Lovisa also shows how her

food consumption habits do not really live up to the standards she has set up for herself:

Lovisa: I have become one of those sandwich-girls, maybe cook some pasta... It is not like I'm standing there preparing casseroles or having things in the oven.

As we can remember from one of Lovisa's quotes above, Lovisa was at one point of time rebelling against her mother's strict cooking regimen by being "sloppy" and eating O'Boy, toasted bread, and snabbmakaroner. When Lovisa at a later point of the interview talks about what she usually eats she produces the above quote in which she again talks about how she does not really eat what she knows she is supposed to. The difference between this quote and the one above is that she does not talk about sandwiches and pasta as something bad, it is just food that she eats to survive. The problem, for Lovisa, is that in her universe one really *should* cook for oneself everyday and for real cooking you have things in the oven or on the stove for a *long* time or perhaps you are even making a casserole. Although Lovisa lives on her own, she too seems to be torn between the convenience and care antinomy suggested by Warde (1997). For Lovisa, it is convenient to make sandwiches but she believes that if one wants to behave like a grown-up one really should be cooking a proper meal because that is what grown-ups do. This, according to Fürst is rather unique as, in her (empirically grounded) opinion, those who have no one to share the meals with oftentimes just skip them, as meals are primarily a symbol of fellowship (1988: 97). But due to, as Lovisa puts it, lack of time, interest, and motivation, she is eating sandwiches or pasta instead of preparing, what she herself considers, a proper meal. She is thereby not only jeopardizing her chances of being regarded, if by no one else then at least by herself, as a grown-up but is also putting at stake the possibility of serving a positively healthy meal which would allow her to consume in a manner belonging to the 'Healthy Food Consumption' category. Unlike Ralph, Lovisa does not explicitly use the word 'just' but it is there in spirit –she eats 'just' sandwiches and pasta. She is even doing this to such extent that she is identifying with the behavior by proclaiming that she has become "one of those sandwich-girls". In both the Ralph and the Lovisa excerpt it is clear that the participants has set up for themselves an ideal way of eating that they are not adhering to.

In the section about healthy food a quotation from Jeff was presented in which he hailed consumption of unprocessed or preferably raw foods as being the healthy alternative and processed foods as being somewhat inferior from a health perspective. When Jeff starts talking about what he and his wife, Betty,

eat on a day to day basis he talks in a less idealized way and makes distinctions between the different types of processed foods they eat:

- Jeff: Betty [Jeff's wife] is, hmm, a little bit more concerned about her weight than I am, hmm, so she will frequently eat at night, have some kind of TV-dinner, weight watchers TV-dinners, like a healthy meal, hmm, she probably eats a lot more, a lot better balanced meal than what I do...
- Jacob: So, TV-dinners, that's like the frozen type?
- Jeff: The frozen type, yeah, and so she gets those that have low fat, hmm, so she watches that pretty, pretty carefully.

What we see here is that Jeff starts out in a very idealized way and categorizes processed foods as being comparatively unhealthy. When he gets down to talking about their day-to-day food consumption he starts making other distinctions wherein some types of processed foods are portrayed as being relatively healthy. When Jeff talks about his food consumption he frequently returns to statements about him needing to cut down on his fat consumption suggesting that he too has bought into the lipophobic discourse (, cf. Askegaard et al., 1999). Based on the very salient feature of fat, Betty's consumption of ready-made meals is seen as healthier than Jeff's food consumption of other types of ready made meals or semi-manufactured meals that he describes as "something out of a box". But Jeff has already disqualified these highly processed foods from being positively healthy so whereas Betty's choice of TV-dinners is relatively healthy compared to Jeff's consumption it does not seem to reach the status of being healthy food consumption in Jeff's consumer universe.

By looking at the way the participants talk about their food consumption from the perspective of identifying not unhealthy food consumption behaviors it becomes clear that they rarely speak about their food consumption as being healthy. Instead, they many times expressed that they were striving towards engaging in more healthy food consumption behavior. For several different reasons that we will be looking at in the next chapters, the participants expressed a feeling of being stuck in having to eat in ways that were not "too bad" for them instead of eating in a manner that was described as positively good.

## Not Healthy Food Consumption

The participants mainly talked about their own food consumption behaviors in terms which would fit the complementary categories 'Not Unhealthy Food

Consumption' and 'Healthy Food Consumption', which, as we can see in figure 7.1, together make up the complimentary categories of what is good to eat. However, they also talked about how they sometimes consumed food in a manner that they described as being “not healthy”, i.e. the contradiction to the category 'Healthy Food Consumption' in figure 7.1. For a consumption behavior to be placed in the not healthy category it must be connected to the healthy food consumption category in one way or the other but it must also have been disqualified as healthy food consumption to belong to this category. The following quote from Greg illustrates a way in which food consumption can be talked about as not healthy. Greg, who has altered his food habits substantially over the last couple of years, reminisces about how and what he used to eat:

Greg: I wasn't eating bad things too much but I was only eating one time a day so I was starving my body. And then I would eat for quite a bit at night and then I wasn't burning any calories or anything because I was holding on to it because I knew I was gonna starve the next day, so... I was, I may have been eating some of the same things, but, like I said, I gave up candy and things like that. But once I started eating more during the day – that got my body started and then probably the biggest change for me was lifting weights. That really keeps your body going too, so, hmm... It was more, not what I ate but how much and when I ate it. If that makes sense?

For this quote to make sense, it has to be recognized that Greg has an extremely functionalistic view of his food consumption. For Greg, food is merely the fuel needed to get the well-tuned machine, that he regards his body as, going. According to Visser (1999: 123) the tendency to see food as fuel to be ingested with dispatch so as to make time for something else is a common tendency in modern culture. For Greg, healthy food consumption is consumption that gives him enough energy to be able to work out without adding extra weight. In the beginning of the quote Greg mentions how he was not eating “bad things” in themselves. Rather, it turns out, he was eating things that he considers to be quite good. The reason why he is not happy with the way he ate was that he was eating in the wrong manner – it is thus neither the product, nor the cooking that is the problem but the eating. During the interview, Greg talked about how he had struggled with losing weight ever since he was a kid (he was 42 at the time of the interview). In the quote he is describing how he previously had tried to lose weight by engaging in a strict eating regimen – he was only eating once a day. At the time of the interview he had left this dietary regimen and had now lost half of his body weight due to a rigid eating regimen in which he was eating three

meals a day with a snack between each of them and how he had chosen to include only healthy food in the diet. What is interesting is that, as he states himself, he “may have been eating some of the same things” before, i.e. the same foods was included both in his present eating behavior and in the way he used to eat. The problem for Greg, and the reason why the food consumption belongs to the ‘Not Healthy Consumption’ category is not in the products themselves but in “how much and when [he] ate it.”

Lovisa gives a similar account of how eating too much of some particular food could move that food from being healthy to being not healthy. At this part of the interview Lovisa has been talking about how she believes that her mother’s cooking is really healthy and how much she enjoys eating that food when she is visiting her parents during the vacations. A little bit later she returns to her eating during the vacation at her parents house and expresses that maybe her eating during the trip was not altogether healthy:

Lovisa: [...] or when you have been eating a lot, you know... You’ve been on vacation and just yummy, yummy, yummy! And then you think: No, that’s it – now it’s time to go on a health-spreel!

Lovisa even describes how eating in this way is not healthy to such a degree that she has to discipline herself by going “on a health-spreel” – a directly compensatory behavior. Mary gives a similar example when she talks about the consumption opportunities available at her workplace. She first talks about how she really enjoys that different vendors are invited to sell their different types of food at her workplace at different times giving the employees a chance to buy, what she deems, good varied food. She then goes on to explain why she continues to bring her own food:

Mary: So there's always a vendor in there that we can go and buy something from. I try to stay away from them because that's way too much food. I don't wanna eat that much...

Again, it is not the food in itself but the quantity that is addressed. All these quotes move towards illustrating that there is nothing inherent in the food product, i.e. the object in itself, making it naturally healthy. Rather, the potential healthiness lies in the subject-object relationship. The category of ‘Not Healthy Food Consumption’ should be seen as a complement to the category ‘Unhealthy Food Consumption’ on the right side of figure 7.1; together these two categories make up the food consumption behaviors that the respondents try to avoid.

Healthiness and unhealthiness with regards to food can thus be placed in this model trying to simultaneously capture the dynamic character of consumers' views on food products, cooking and eating. As we have seen, consuming in ways belonging to the 'Healthy Food Consumption' category is hailed as a, perhaps unattainable, ideal that the participants express that they ought to strive towards. However, on a day-to-day basis they seem to suffice with consuming in ways that can be placed in the 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption' category applying the logic of risk-avoidance. Consuming in ways portrayed as 'Unhealthy Food Consumption' was, similarly to the 'Healthy Food Consumption', seen as an idealized, albeit negative, way that one benchmarked one's eating away from. The last category, 'Not Healthy Food Consumption', contains the dark stories of these consumers' food consumption behavior. In this category, the stories of indulgent behaviors such as eating too much or too late, were contained. These behaviors had the power to move otherwise healthy products from one of the categories on the left side of figure 7.1 to this negatively loaded category

## Chapter Eight

### Food and Self-Identity

In the previous chapter, we looked at how the participants talked about their food consumption practices in ways that were categorized with regards to their potential healthiness or unhealthiness. In this chapter, we will instead deal with how the participants, in their stories of food consumption, place their current food consumption practices into a larger narrative context of who they express they are or want to become. In the opening chapters, we discussed that today, when we are living under the conditions of late modernity, self-identity is reflexively understood by the individual in terms of the individual's biography (Giddens, 1991). The self-identity thus produced and sustained through the construction of a coherent narrative of the self is then 'tried out' in various social settings. There is thereby a social reflexivity in which the self-identity is created in interaction with other human beings and with the institutions of society (cf. Askegaard et al., 2002). A large part of the construction of self-identity is formed through the messages consumers transmit to others through the goods and practices they possess and display (Beck, 1992; Slater, 1997; Warde, 1994b). In fact, the body is in itself such a reflexive project that is on display to the public gaze (Shilling, 1993). We hereby deal with both consumption practices, i.e. eating, and the actual bodies of the consumers being in the focus of the public gaze.

Consumer stories can be seen as self-narrations that impose a meaningful historical order onto life events. In retrospective consumption narratives, such as the ones presented here, particular facets of the experienced events come to be highlighted that are particularly important to the overall picture (Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000). A person's understanding of his/her food consumption always

reflects a multifaceted network of cultural influences, e.g. the abovementioned expert systems about what different individuals should eat and ideas about what individuals from different parts of the world, of different ages, occupations, et cetera, should and should not eat. The narratives of personal identity are themselves contextualized within this complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems. Food is an especially important aspect of this identity construction as, traditionally, the way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization. Food consumption simultaneously asserts the oneness of the ones eating the same and the otherness of whoever eats differently (Fischler, 1988: 275). On a more individual level food consumption is central since any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he or she chooses to incorporate. The German saying introduced in chapter one – ‘Man ist, was man isst’ – captures many of the facets of the self-identity construction phenomena (Fischler, 1988: 279).

The theme of this chapter, i.e. defining oneself through food consumption, is of a more general kind and serves not so much to highlight consumers’ views on food and health as to give some insights into the pivotal nature of food consumption to consumers’ definitions of themselves. It is, however, highly connected, and thus important, for our understanding of how consumers navigate within the available expert voices of food and health. Given the importance placed today on looking after one’s body and being aware and up-to-date on how to do that health related food consumption practices seem to play a significant role in consumers’ overall definitions of who they are.

## A Relational Model of Self-Identity

Figure 8.1 captures, with the help of Greimas’ semiotic square, the dynamic of the stories of self-identity that appear in the participants’ consumption stories. As was mentioned above, one function of food consumption is to assert the oneness of the ones eating the same (Fischler, 1988: 275), this is what is described as ‘Like Others’, the negation in figure 8.1. Another main function of food, according to Fischler (ibid.), is that it asserts the otherness of whoever eats differently

which is represented by ‘Not Like Others’, the contradiction to the negation ‘Like Others’ in figure 8.1. Food consumption, however, is not only about defining oneself towards or from various groups, it is also about being unique which is a basic aspect of our sense of self-identity (cf. Fischler, 1988: 287; Giddens, 1991). The notion of being unique or being true to oneself when it comes to food consumption is represented in figure 8.1 by the assertion ‘Like Myself’ which stands in contradiction with the notion of being ‘Not Like Myself’.

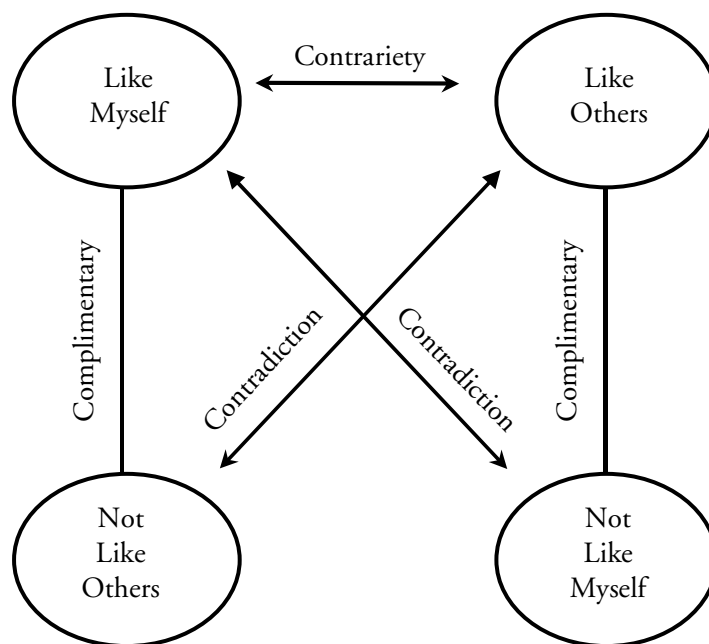


Figure 8.1: A Relational Model of Self-Identity

The self-identity positions described in this chapter are not as stable as might be suggested by figure 8.1. Rather, the consumers can describe certain of their food consumption practices as being just like others’ and at the same time be sure to point out that in some respects their food consumption practices are quite unique. Also, the participants wish to describe their food consumption behaviors as being like certain specific groups of others while they are sure to point out the differences from other others. So, rather than grouping individuals into the four positions in figure 8.1, the model should be used to map different positions of meaning that consumers hold with regard to their various consumption practices. The fluidity of the meaning positions displayed in figure 8.1 is furthermore reinforced in that consumers, in structuring their food consumption, to a large degree act like *bricoleurs*, who

appropriate and reassemble available cultural resources into meaningful patterns to produce and sustain their self-identities (cf. Hebdige, 1979: 103; Slater, 1997: 165; Thompson, 2000: 131). Given the sheer mass of commodities available to act as props in this process, there are multiple heterogeneous networks of possible combinations. This, in turn, offers a multitude of interpretive positions and endless opportunities for context-specific combinations of established cultural meanings.

The different themes presented in this chapter are divided into three parts. First, under the heading ‘Defining Oneself Through Consumption’ a more overarching presentation of how the consumers use food consumption stories in building their self-identity is given. Then, in the section ‘Dietary Regimens’, some ways in which the participants structure their food consumption according to particular rules that help in sustaining a coherent narrative of the self are presented. Finally, in ‘The A-sociality of Gastroanomic Food Consumption’ section, a reflection is made over how some of the participants downplay the social aspects of food in favor of a functionality-based way of speaking of food.

## Defining Oneself Through Consumption

In chapter three, we looked at Warde’s assessment that food consumption is developing in a number of different directions. Warde structured his argument around the two dimensions informalization/stylization and individualization/communification (see figure 3.1). Warde suggests that the dominant trend is towards simultaneous informalization and individualization and argues, with support from Claude Fischler, that Western societies are experiencing a crisis over food choice and thus are in a state of gastroanomy (Warde, 1997). Translated to figure 8.1 we can say that what Warde is discussing is that it is less evident today for consumers to decide whom ‘the others’ are that they are to define themselves in relation to. This is true both regarding whom to be like and whom not to be like. Warde is clear to point out that individualization is not the only tendency – there are groups of consumers leaning more towards both the communification and stylization side in figure 3.1. In the former case,

consumers seek to compensate for the lost social attachment to a larger social grouping by creating imagined communities. This can be traced among the participants in them referring to themselves as specific *types* of food consumers by, as described by Fischler above, either trying to connect themselves to larger groups of consumers – being ‘Like Others’ in figure 8.1 – or delimit themselves from other types of food consumers – being ‘Not Like Others’ in figure 8.1 – or even from their past selves – being ‘Not Like Myself’ in figure 8.1. In the case that Warde (1997) calls stylization, consumers seek to structure their consumption in distinct ways in order to create a sense of orderliness in the experienced chaotic situation. This type of stylization also appears to be central to the formation of a coherent narrative of the self.

## Like Others

In the empirical material there were examples of participants who, in line with Fischler’s (1988: 275) statement that food consumption asserts the oneness of the ones eating the same, connect their eating pattern to larger groups of people, or, in the terminology of figure 8.1, talked about themselves as food consumers as being ‘Like Others’. These others that they are referring to usually consist of people who they feel are following a tried and tested pattern of structuring their diet. The participants thereby seem to want to affirm their closeness to these groups of people.

Cheri provides an especially striking example of this tendency to want to assert her oneness with the ones eating the same as she thought she was more or less the same as everyone else in Nebraska. When I called to ask her if I could do an interview she responded that she indeed was willing to participate but that it would probably not be very interesting for me as she was just a “basic meat-and-potatoes kind of person”. By that, I later came to understand, she meant that she was so plain and basic that if I had talked to any other ‘normal’ Nebraskan<sup>32</sup>, that person would have exhibited every single food consumption behavior she could possibly exhibit. She thus downplayed the left side of figure 8.1 by not expressing any types of unique features to her food consumption. She

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<sup>32</sup> Though I only have limited experience of living in Nebraska I dare to say that there is no such thing as a normal Nebraskan.

thereby neither positioned herself towards the 'Like Myself' position nor towards the 'Not Like Others' position as Cheri perceived most other Nebraskans to be more or less like her. In talking about her food consumption as being similar to most other Nebraskans she also revealed that she thought about Nebraska as more or less homogeneously populated by white middle-class families. Later on in the interview when we came to talk about different immigrant groups she strongly set herself apart from these groups by assuring that her food consumption habits did in no way resemble that of *those* groups.

The meat-and-potatoes theme that Cheri came to mention already in the first telephone contact was present throughout the course of the interview as exhibited in this quote where Cheri, in the beginning of the interview, is telling me what she eats on a day-to-day basis:

Cheri:       Dinner is when we have our main meal - our meat and potatoes... and vegetable. And that's probably pretty much about it. I mean, we're really basic...

This sense of being really basic and sticking to the meat-and-potatoes regimen is, for Cheri, a means of connecting to a larger group of middle-class Nebraskans who hold traditional family values. It is important to point out that the social attachment she thereby feels is perhaps more to an imagined community than to an actual social grouping, just as predicted by Warde (1997: 36). Cheri and her family lives in a typical suburban white middle-class home, which might explain her view of Nebraska as more or less homogeneously made up of people like herself.

Connecting to the meat-and-potato eaters is also a means of connecting to her own past, as was illustrated later on in the interview when Cheri talked about growing up and romanticized about the 'good old days'. As can be seen in the following quote, especially considering the use of the word *always*, meat and potatoes plays a significant role for Cheri also in remembering the past:

Cheri:       And we *always* had dinner at the table and it was *always* the meat, potatoes... vegetables... and mom *always* had a dessert. And we all sat at the table to eat.

During the interview, Cheri kept on talking about how her mother would *always* have dinner ready when her father came home from work and how they would *always* eat together as a family. Cheri in many ways regretted that she could not uphold her mother's ways of always serving a home-cooked dinner for everyone to partake in. In this way, Cheri shows how she is torn between wanting to do what others, in this case her mother, does and what she herself is able to do. She is thus striving towards taking a position towards the right side of figure 8.1 while her living situation forces her to be less like the others and more like herself. In many ways, Cheri exhibited the kind of tension referred to by Warde as the antinomy between convenience and care (Warde, 1997). Due to her (allegedly) hectic lifestyle, she felt that she had to resort to convenient solutions like semi-manufactured products, take-out food or eating out. In doing this, she was thereby not acting as caringly about her family as she ideally would have liked to do and that she reminiscences about her mother doing. To somewhat make up for this, Cheri was proud to at least uphold the tradition of sticking to, what she herself referred to as, the meat and potato regimen. She is thereby able to connect certain facets of her food consumption to others she regards highly while in other parts of her food consumption she is not being as successful in doing this which creates a certain unease. Cheri's way of reasoning about her everyday food consumption echoes the types of stories told by the participants in Wallendorf and Arnould's investigation of thanksgiving rituals. In the study they found that a "*surprisingly common response*" to the question of what the respondents served on their holiday table was to say that "*theirs [was] the same as everyone's*". The authors point out that the consumption of foods regarded as traditional is a means for consumers to partake of their collective past (1991: 23).

Cheri also seems to be stuck in the tension between another one of Warde's antinomies, namely novelty and tradition (Warde, 1997). On the one hand she exhibits a longing for the 'traditional' food and the social belonging associated with the well-tried practices of 'the others', the meat-and-potato eaters and she also seems to be nurturing a nostalgic longing for the 'good old days' as illustrated above. On the other hand she feels forced, partly by the fast pace of life she experiences to be living in, to give up these traditional ways and give into, the many times convenient solutions of, novelty. She thereby voices concern that

she cannot uphold the traditional family meal as she is forced to incorporate these new products/meals into her and her family's diet. At the same time, she gladly, and seemingly without reflecting on their status as (probably) not belonging to the traditional meat-and-potato regimen, incorporates other novelties, such as taco-salads and quasedillas, into her food consumption practices. During the interviews she does not express any concerns that these, also novel, dishes might undermine the old traditional meat-and-potato regimen she, at least in her own words, tries to conserve.

## Like Myself

Although Cheri affiliates herself with a (perhaps imagined) larger traditional group of meat-and-potato eaters she also points out that she and her family are in many ways unique. In figure 8.1, some of her consumption practices can thereby be placed in top left corner in the 'Like Myself' section. Uniqueness is an important aspect of our overall sense of self-identity (Giddens, 1991) and uniqueness in relation to food practices is especially important as discussed by Fischler (1988) who brings out the point that, traditionally, the unique way of cooking marked the *"irreducible maternal singularity of [the mother's] work"* (287). As Cheri expresses that she finds it hard to be able to cook for the family, this uniqueness has to find other ways of coming into play. In taking a step away from the meat-and-potato regimen she uses a health rationale to be able to find a unique twist to her and her family's food consumption practices. More precisely, Cheri talked about how eating the old-fashioned way was probably a little bit too "fattening" for, as she expressed it, "today's pace of life" and how her family has discovered salads as a good alternative. Eating salads is an eating pattern Cheri imagines most people had not gotten familiar with:

Cheri: We eat a lot of salads when we go out. Lots of salads! Like my main favorite place to eat is Lazlo's, have you eaten at Lazlo's yet? Downtown, in the Haymarket by LaBrisco's?<sup>33</sup>

Jacob: Yes, that was really good...

Cheri: Well, their salads are the best. We'll go there just to order their salads. Now who is... who on, you know, the earth

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<sup>33</sup> Lazlo's and LaBrisco's are local Nebraskan eateries.

is just gonna go out to dinner to order lettuce? We will!  
[laughter].

For Cheri, consumption of salads belongs to the idealized group of 'Healthy Food Consumption' described in chapter seven. When ordering salads, Cheri distinguishes herself from the meat-and-potato eaters by being an up-to-date, health conscious consumer who eats salads instead of always opting for the heavy meat-and-potato meals. She manages to do this while she simultaneously in many other respects affiliates herself with this larger group whose values she sympathizes with. She thereby maintains a sense of being unique and connected to a larger group at the same time. Given the dominance of health-related claims in media and from governmental advisors concerning our alleged under-consumption of vegetables it is interesting that Cheri finds it so particularly unique to just order salad when they go out to eat. Still she finds that so highly unique that she suggests that it might not be common practice on "the earth". While Cheri in some ways pointed to the uniqueness of her and her family's eating patterns, the main theme of her way of talking about herself as a food consumer was still that she was just a basic meat-and-potatoes eater. It seems like many of the participants experience being drawn between the different meaning positions exhibited in figure 8.1. In the example with Cheri we can see that she tries to connect to 'The Others', the white middle-class Nebraskans who stick to the meat-and-potatoes diet. At the same time, she tries to exhibit that she is not like 'The Others' in all respects but have reached a higher level of sophistication in some domains, particularly the health domain, where she consumes in a highly unique way that must be characterized as 'Like Myself'.

It should be noted here, however, that most of the time, the participants did not mainly define themselves as being 'Like Myself' in terms of food consumption as food consumption all the time is placed in a social context. The cases where the participants talked about themselves as being uniquely 'Like Myself' is oftentimes of a more asocial character that will be brought up later on towards the end of the chapter where I will talk about the asocial traits of food consumption in late modernity.

## Not Like Others

When Cheri warned me that she might not be a good person to interview as she was just “basic” she exhibited the exact opposite behavior of many other participants who said that they were probably not a very good choice to interview since they were quite unique and did not really fit in as the stereotypical American/Swedish food consumer they assumed I was looking for. They thus positioned themselves toward the contradiction of the negation ‘Not Like Others’ in figure 8.1. This is in line with Warde’s (Warde, 1997: 30 pp.) suggestion that pressure towards uniformity of consumption within larger groups of the population have been reduced recently (see figure 3.1). As was briefly touched upon above, there is not only less pressure today to be like everyone else but rather the opposite; the tendency to stress one’s unique self-identity is a key feature in late modernity (Giddens, 1991). The tendency to point out one’s uniqueness by defining oneself as ‘Not Like Others’ was common among the participants. Jeff, who started out the interview by telling me that he was “atypical”, gives one illustration:

Jacob: If you could start by telling me what you eat on a day-to-day basis?

Jeff: Ah, in fact, when you called it was almost kind of a joke, because we think we’re... hmm... rather atypical in the sense. For example, I eat while my wife is still at work and... so, hmm... We, we pretty much, right now, what I say, catch as catch can, hmm... I come home, I fix up something and she’ll come home later and fix up something, hmm... Probably, hmm, and, you know, to some degree as we go back and even as we were raising our children... As they started getting into school activities it became more and more of that too. Hmm... so our... our so-called prepared meals were probably more on the weekends, hmm, and then even as they got busier and got jobs it became more and more, I would say, disseminated...

A prerequisite for Jeff believing that he is “rather atypical” is that he has a picture of how ‘the others’ eat which is distinct from how he and his wife eat. He has to benchmark himself away from these people to experience being atypical. From Jeff’s way of speaking we can see that his picture of how ‘the others’ eat is very similar to the picture of the

traditional meat-and-potato eaters that Cheri was striving towards being a part of. An example is that 'the others', in Jeff's mind, eat prepared meals everyday whereas Jeff's family only did so on the weekends. Similarly, Jeff and his wife do not eat together and do not eat the same meal, which deviates from Jeff's implicit standard of the supposed food consumption pattern of a married couple. Jeff, giving the impression that maybe it is not acceptable to deviate too much from the norm, also has a good explanation for why the family started to give up the old ways of eating and deviates from the norm of cooking at home every night. As his children grew older and got involved in school activities, they were not spending as much time at home and it was just not feasible to cook at home every night. In Jeff's account of himself and his family we see the individualization tendencies discussed by Warde as Jeff talks about himself as quite unique and does not seem to have a problem with this by, e.g. striving towards identifying with a larger group. On the contrary, he seems quite proud of his "disseminated" pattern of eating. But, as we have seen, the deviation from the implicit norm Jeff has of how 'the others' eat is not entirely unproblematic as Jeff feels urged to provide explanations and rationalizations for being 'Not Like Others'.

Jeff also shows tendencies towards what Warde calls informalization (1997), where rigid conformist, established and routinized patterns of consumption dissolve. In Jeff's family, the family meal, or the prepared meal as Jeff refers to it in the above quote, disappeared as a regular event a long time ago. From then on, things have gradually become less and less routinized and today Jeff and his wife Betty no longer eat together. He has thereby partly moved towards actually eating in a way that could be characterized as 'Like Myself' in figure 8.1 Above, Jeff uses the expression "catch as catch can" when he tries to describe how they eat which is one way in which this informal approach is exhibited. He goes on to explain what he means with this expression:

- Jeff: [I like] to open up a can and heat it up and maybe throw something else in it, or, I kind of enjoy doing that. [...] I can't say it's cooking but preparation.
- Jacob: So, you like to spice them up a little bit more than...
- Jeff: Mix things in that probably shouldn't be mixed together and that kind of stuff [laughter]
- Jacob: Can you give me an example of that?

- Jeff: Oh, so you can open up a can of tomato soup and I will put all sorts of different spices in it and I'll throw some... cheese, or if we have some things left over in the... in the refrigerator. I might chop it up and throw it in there and it's rather grotesque but...
- Jacob: It sounds good to me...
- Jeff: No, no, no! Betty [wife] will never eat my soup so... I kind of just throw things in it.

In this way, Jeff manages to create a sense of being unique. We have already seen above that Jeff holds a belief that 'the others' cook at home every night. In this quote Jeff returns to the idea of not cooking at home by making the semantic difference between his own way of preparing food that he calls "preparation" which is different from "cooking". The distinction between proper cooking and Jeff's preparation is partly due to Jeff mixing together things that he believes should not go together. He is thereby, at least according to his own frame of reference, breaking the implicit syntax of what kind of foodstuffs could be mixed together (Fischler, 1988: 285). In doing this, he manages to make personally meaningful the semi-manufactured food products he buys in the grocery store. Intuitively, one might be fooled to believe that home cooking would always be seen as more unique than making something out of a box. Jeff, however, shows how it is possible, by the means of "preparation", to make semi-manufactured products personally meaningful. He even personalizes them to such an extent that even his wife would find them grotesque. In a sense, Jeff is reclaiming these food products from the world of commodities and reassembles them through varying household action. He is thereby making them, at least from Jeff's emic perspective, unique in a similar way as observed among the Thanksgiving celebrators in Wallendorf and Arnould's study (cf. Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991: 29).

## Not Like Myself

A common theme during the interviews was to, in different ways, set one's current food consumption apart from either different ways in which one had previously eaten, or ways in which one presently ate but wished one would discontinue. The participants thus expressed a desire to be 'Not Like Myself' as depicted in figure 8.1. The 'Not Like Myself' position is the contradiction to the 'Like Myself' position and serves to

distance the participants from consumption behaviors they do not want to associate themselves with. In many other cases, such as with Cheri's salad consumption above, the 'Like Myself' position was regarded as something positive as it gave the participants a chance to stress their uniqueness. The 'Like Myself' consumption behaviors the participants expressed they tried to distance themselves from by being 'Not Like Myself' were also talked about as unique but not in a positive manner but rather in the terms of abnormalities. By nature of the particular meaning position's relation to the participant's own present or past behaviors it's definition involves placing a participant's current food consumption practices into a larger narrative context of the particular participant's history as a food consumer. In doing this, the participants emphasized that they were engaged in constantly ongoing body-projects. The historical component was reinforced by stories of how the participants continuously refined their techniques as they learnt more about what they should and should not do in order to reach the goals they have set up for themselves. As we can remember from chapter three, the body is not just a physical entity that we possess but rather an action-system (cf. Giddens, 1991: 99; Shilling, 1993). The practical immersion of the body in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity. As self-identity and the body has become 'reflexively organized projects', which have to be sculpted from the complex plurality of choices offered in late modernity (Shilling, 1993: 181), it becomes especially important for the participants to show that they have become more skilled in the working on their 'body project'.

In the quote below, Greg gives an example of how he situates his current food consumption behavior in a larger narrative context of who he was, his past 'Like Myself'. He then goes on to show how he wants to distance himself from his old 'Like Myself' to become what he wants to be, his 'Not Like Myself':

- Jacob: So, so what did you use to eat that you no longer eat?  
Greg: That's a good question... like I said before... I'm gonna take you back a little further... I used to eat a lot of fast food and stuff, and I was a pretty fat kid, and then I kind of got into some fitness and lost some weight and then, gradually, I would gain it back.

Greg here talks about himself as once being a “pretty fat kid” which is a theme that runs along Greg’s entire interview. In this particular example, Greg feels a need to explain that he has a history and that he used to eat “a lot of fast food and stuff” back in the days when he was “a pretty fat kid”. Even though fast food consumption is hardly a unique feature in contemporary America, Greg felt that in the past he consumed abnormally excessive amounts of fast food. He also defines himself away from this picture he has of himself as the fat kid by talking about how he got into fitness and eating, in ways he defines as, healthier. So in Greg’s life narrative he was once the uncontrolled and undisciplined fat kid that was controlled by the food that he could not resist. Today, Greg says he has gained control over the situation and is in control over the food rather than the other way around.

A way to structure one’s food consumption into a coherent narrative is to divide the story into different chapters. When the participants were doing this they were provided with a structure that helped them distinguish their present food consumption behaviors from their past. Throughout Greg’s interview, he used a chapter-like structure to show how he had gradually gained control over his food consumption behaviors. In the endeavor to gain control over his consumption of food, Greg had tried various different regimens that he situated in distinct time periods that were placed in, what can be characterized as, chapters in his life-story. Describing on such chapter, Greg is here talking about a point in time when he was only eating once a day, a practice that he now, in retrospect, believes is not wise:

- Jacob: ...but was it a conscious decision to only eat once a day?  
Greg: Yeah! I thought that was the smart thing to do. And then I'd loose weight. If you only eat once a day that is better than eating three times a day or four times a day and, and I was totally wrong! Yeah, I mean, I'd run every day and then I'd not eat, and not eat, and not eat, and go home and then I'd eat until I went to bed! [laughter] So, you know, but...

As we can see, Greg once stuck to this tough regimen in which he only ate once a day. He now concludes that it was “totally wrong!” even though he cannot hide his pride that he managed to go all day without eating – an indicator of the ability to gain control over the food that

Greg believes he is blessed with. In listening to Greg's story it seems like it was really only the non-eating he was in control over. Once he started eating he lost control and, in his own words, kept eating until he went to bed. But in his mind, this is a chapter of his life that leads up to the present condition where he has finally gained full control. In his retrospect he therefore regards this as a time when he was on the right track even though he was only eating once a day, which he today dismisses as totally wrong. For Greg, every part of his story, in one way or the other, goes back to dealing with the picture he has of himself as the "fat kid". In the earlier chapters of his life narrative he tries to change by losing weight, whereas the later chapters deal with stability, i.e. he tries to maintain his weight. For Greg, the smart thing to do is to eat in a way that allows him to lose weight but later on in the interview he talks about how he now has realized that he has to eat in ways that gives him enough energy to be able to exercise. But as he only exercises to lose weight things go back to the fact that Greg spends his life trying to escape the picture he has of himself as the fat kid.

The main theme when Greg talks about himself as a food consumer thus becomes one of being 'Not Like Myself'. As we will return to later, it is possible that the two positions 'Not Like Myself' and 'Like Myself' are intimately connected as when Greg talks more at length about his present food consumption practices he shifts perspective to more assume the position of talking about his food consumption as being distinctly 'Like Myself'. The meaning positions in figure 8.1 are thus not stable but can be highlighted by the same consumer depending on what story is about to be told.

Greg was not unique in structuring his narrative about food consumption around escaping something. In Greg's case he was escaping his past, he had once been the "fat kid" and he did not want to place himself in that category again. There were similar examples of participants who built their narratives around escaping, perhaps not what they once was but what they could become. They were thus consuming in ways intended to avoid their experienced destiny, a way that could be characterized as 'Not Like (a potential) Myself'. Pär gives an illustration to this in the below quote. During the interview Pär repeatedly came to talk about how he feels that the unhealthy eating practices he engages in sometimes leads him to feel that he consumes in

a way that is 'Not Healthy'. At a point in the interview, Pär suddenly realizes that in talking about these issues he might come across as overly concerned about his weight. In an effort to save himself from me getting the impression that he is a 'weight-freak' he wants to give an explanation as to why he focuses so much on these issues:

Pär:           If we like eat too late at night, then I can also feel that it is a little bit late for sitting there and stuffing oneself with a lot of food, but that has, that is based again on trying to keep one's weight, you know. No other reason! I have kind of a heritage, you know... Mom is chubby like this, you know [motions with hands and fills cheeks with air] and my brother is a fatso, so... I could have been like that too if I wasn't careful...

Pär is concerned that he might come across as being vain and wants to give a rational explanation for himself focusing on weight issues. He finds the explanation in his heritage and expresses that he sees himself as a ticking bomb that has to be tenderly taken care of in order not to detonate into obesity. Recent focus on these issues, exemplified by headlines such as "Sweden on the verge of obesity epidemic" (Aftonbladet, 2002-11-02) and "The ticking fat-bomb" (Aftonbladet, 2002-10-25), seem to give many of the respondents a feeling of all the time being on the verge of falling into the 'fat-trap'. For Pär, feeling that he is predestined for obesity this feeling seems to be even more stressful. To make things worse, in the next chapter we will see how people in Pär's surroundings, such as his secretary Eva-Lisa, constantly tempt him into straying off the narrow path he tries to follow.

As we have seen, the meaning position of being 'Not Like Myself' involves either a change from what one once was or an active resistance to what one could potentially become. In the former case, when the participants were actively consuming in ways different from their past 'Like Myself' they could point to a specific event or time that changed their outlook on food consumption, or, to use the terminology previously introduced, when they started a new chapter as food consumers. If we use the categorization introduced in chapter seven, it seems like, in the light of new information, food consumption practices the participants had previously not paid any particular attention to were moved from being 'Healthy' or 'Not Unhealthy' to being 'Unhealthy'

or 'Not Healthy' (see figure 7.1) or vice versa. The specific events that led them to revise their current views of food consumption seem to work as a kind of barrier between the past and the present and mark their previous unenlightened view of food consumption from their present enlightened view.

For Cheri, getting married and being influenced by her husband made her think of some of her food consumption practices as perhaps being 'Unhealthy' rather than 'Not Unhealthy' as she had previously regarded them. The cause for this was the dissemination of her husband's wisdom of the supposed dangers of a raised sugar-level:

Jacob: You mentioned before that you tried to stay away from... that the sugar level is also something that should be kept under reasonable control...

Cheri: You know, I was never that way before until we got married and you know, baked cookies and cakes and stuff and Todd's [her husband] just like 'I don't know why you make that stuff, We don't eat it, we don't need it' and he is right. You know, if you want a piece of candy just go grab a small piece of candy or have a piece of taffy or a little candy bar or something because if you have that whole cake or that big pan of brownies in front of you, you are going to eat it. You either eat it or you throw it away. Do you need it? No!

Cheri uses a very instrumental justification in quoting her husband saying "we don't need it". In the view Cheri has taken from her husband there are certain things in a potential diet that are needed and some that are not needed and thus should be cut out. Cheri regards herself as lucky to have a husband who is wise enough to be able to determine between the two. We see here that Cheri is heavily influenced by her husband's way of thinking, Cheri's comment that she "was never that way before" indicates that getting married and being influenced by her husband Todd really made her think in new ways and thus turn a new chapter. For Cheri, her husband Todd is an authority that she trust in making judgments about what and what not to include in a diet. He functions as a goalkeeper that sorts out the different messages about food and health that are flourishing. We will return later to this heavy reliance on authorities such as husbands and doctors and their importance in influencing food choice. Even though

Cheri has bought into the idea that “cookies and cakes and stuff” are not needed in a diet, the idea of completely staying away from these temptations is not feasible. While, in contrast to Greg’s account above, Cheri is not able to fully control her consumption of these products, she describes that she has to limit the potential intake by only buying smaller portions. For Cheri, the fact that she has been led to believe that sweet things like cookies and cakes are unnecessary causes stress in yet another way. In the discussion above when Cheri describes herself as a basic meat-and-potato person and talks about her mother’s cooking in a cherished way, she talks about how her mom “*always* had a dessert”. As a consequence of her new revelation about having to keep the sugar levels down, she cannot uphold the cherished tradition of always having a dessert.

Mary provides another example of how her awareness of food consumption, as well as her actual consumption, changed due to a whole series of events that eventually led to her joining Weight Watchers. Mary describes how her sons moved out of the house and how she and her husband then started eating differently. As Mary experienced it, this change in habits in turn led to her gaining weight. Mary describes how she in a very direct way experienced that she was gaining weight by “having trouble getting into [her] clothes”. Mary, holding on to the belief that gaining weight is something bad, decided that she had to take some measures to disrupt this development, which led to her joining Weight Watchers.

Mary:        Hmm, as it was just, it got down to just the two of us or, again, our schedules were different and it was just one of us eating at one time and then like eight years ago, that's approximately when the kids started, hmm... they probably were out a little earlier than that, no, it was about eight years ago. That's when I was having trouble getting into my clothes and I knew I had to lose some weight so I tried weight watchers and that kind of just, my whole outlook on everything pretty much changed through Weight Watchers. I just really started watching what I was eating, tried to eat healthier foods, more fruits and vegetables, although I am not really good at it but I try to be [laughter]...

Mary, then, can point to a specific time, eight years ago, when this change came about. In doing this, her views on foods were forever changed as she describes that her “whole outlook on everything pretty much changed through Weight Watchers”. She then goes on to describe what kind of changes her new train of thought induced which is a great example of the idealized ‘Healthy Food Consumption’ category introduced in chapter seven. Mary explains how she tries to eat more of these healthier foods, namely fruits and vegetables, but how she is not “really good at it” even though she thinks that is what she needs to do.

In this first part of the chapter we have seen how the participants assume different meaning positions when they talk about themselves as food consumers. These positions, which are depicted in figure 8.1, are not stable but consumers constantly express being pulled between the different positions to stay in a state of equilibrium which is both personally gratifying and socially accepted. On the one hand there is a social pressure to connect to a larger group, to be ‘Like Others’ but this position cannot be taken too far as one then loses one’s uniqueness. It is therefore important to also sometimes assume the position of being ‘Not Like Others’ or even ‘Like Myself’. With some of the ‘Like Myself’ positions there is another dynamic at play as these highly personalized styles of eating were connected to bad behaviors that one wanted to shy away from. The position of being ‘Not Like Myself’ is thus assumed.

## Dietary Regimens

In chapter three I discussed the present condition of gastroanomy, which is a state bereft of rules where consumers do not find one specific set of guidelines to follow (Warde, 1997). Instead, there is an intricate network of cultural discourses at play concerning the authority of science and the social construction of ‘good’ foods that can be freely consumed and ‘bad’ foods that symbolize a threat to health. In the light of these developments, it is suggested by Warde (1997), food choice has increasingly become a matter of individual, not social decisions. Many individuals sense that there is such an enormous diversity of foods to choose from and almost as many different pieces of advice about how to

choose that they feel anxious over their food choices. With the dominance of an ethic of self-control (cf. Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) and the fact that there is an increasing emphasis on the connections between food and health, increasing amounts of consumers are engaging in what Beck (1992) calls 'nutritional engineering'. This implies that consumers, in order to eat a well balanced diet, have to be very knowledgeable and up to date on what is healthy and not healthy and how these different entities should be combined. It is suggested by Fischler (quoted in Warde, 1997) that consumers are experiencing anguish, obsession, anxiety and suspicion when they no longer can look at authoritative external rules about what should be eaten. Fischler (in Warde, 1997: 31) describes the result of all the different sources of advice as a 'dietetic cacophony'. One way of reacting to this anomic condition, especially for individuals particularly anxious to find and cling to valid criteria for food selection, is to search for distinct dietary regimens. Regimens are modes of self-discipline that are organized in some part according to social conventions, but, Giddens (1991: 62) reminds us, being personal habits they are also formed by personal inclination and dispositions. Regimens are of central importance to self-identity precisely because they connect habits with aspects of the visible appearance of the body. In one way, the adaptation of dietary regimens is a countertrend to dominant trend of gastroanomy (represented by the arrow marked stylization in figure 3.1) which reintroduces a kind of discipline or regulation over self-presentation through consumer's food consumption practices. Sometimes these regimens come in permanent form where consumers change their ways of eating for a long time and sometimes these regimens are more temporary as in the dieting examples. It should be pointed out though, that dieting many times seems to be a permanent way of relating to food consumption where the specific regimen changes but the overreaching diet-focus remains the same.

Adopting a certain dietary regimen should not be regarded as a recent phenomena sprung from the present condition of gastro-anomy. As was briefly touched upon in the introduction, Foucault (1986) traced the use of dietary regimens advised by doctors back to the golden age of Rome during the fourth century. Later on the undertaker William Banting adopted his strict regimen making him the man who, according to history, was the first to diet (Groves, 2001). Thompson

and Hirschman (1995) identify a number of primary sociocultural values and beliefs that follow from the ethic of control implicit in the above-mentioned dualistic concept of mind and body. One of these is the dualistic view of the individual as an essential self whose true identity is not constrained to the body in which it is housed. Stemming from this view is the idea that it is the task of each individual's mind to make sure that the body is taken care of in a correct manner to prevent it from changing in unwanted ways or even deteriorate. This view is common among the participants, as we have already seen examples of, most notably from Greg and Pär, who take it for granted that the body needs to be constantly worked upon and cared for. In this sense the body is clearly seen as a material object to be worked upon, a body in process of *becoming* (cf. Shilling, 1993), a body more to be regarded as an action-system than a physical 'entity' which we possess (Giddens, 1991: 99).

## Permanent Regimens

As we have seen above, assuming the meaning position of being 'Not Like Myself' sometimes demands that the participants actively sacrifice their old food consumption practices in favor of new 'enlightened' consumption practices. When such a change is taken permanently it many times involves deciding once and for all, or at least until the next revision, what should be included in a diet. Greg provides a vivid illustration of a participant that sticks to a distinct regimen which Greg himself is quite aware of as he talks about himself as "very patterned". The idea of being patterned ran like a thread through the course of Greg's interview. The following quote is taken from the very beginning of the interview:

- Jacob: If we just can start out very broadly with, if you can tell me a little bit what you eat on a day-to-day basis, maybe starting out in the morning and then throughout the day?
- Greg: I'm very pattered [...] I eat pretty much the same things every week and every day, every day of every week except for the weekends. I work out a lot and so I'm really interested in fitness and I got into that to loose weight and have since realized that just working out does not help you loose weight. You need to eat right. My wife is a dietician so she... after seeing me struggle would, she finally said 'You know, if you start eating differently this

would help you' so, I didn't use to eat breakfast or lunch and I'd only eat a big meal at night and so I never lost weight but then I changed and now I do eat breakfast, which was a struggle and that would, it's just cereal and 2 pieces of bread, hmm... And then at lunch I will have like a half a sandwich, a granola bar, something like that. And then in the evenings I'll either have a salad, a big salad or some sort of rice dish. It's kind of the packaged you can buy in the store and you just cook it for 10 minutes and it's different flavored rices and I'll have that. And then on weekends, hmm, at least one weekend night I get to splurge and I'll have French fries. And that pretty much... so, like I can tell you that Monday through Friday almost exactly what I would have for dinner that... I'm just pretty scheduled because it helps me in my workout routine... So Monday night would be a salad with turkey on it, Tuesday would be a rice dish, Wednesday would be the same as Monday, Thursday would be, it's actually kind of a noodle type dish for the carbohydrates and then Friday or Saturday is the night we go out to eat. So one of those nights we go out and I'll have whatever I want and then the weekend kind of is soups and salads and whatever is in the cupboard at that point of time.

The term lifestyle springs to mind upon reading Greg's account of his strict dietary regimen. Lifestyles order things into a certain unity, reducing the plurality of choice and affording "*a continued sense of 'ontological security' that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern*" (Giddens, 1991: 81; cf. Slater, 1997: 87). The term lifestyle usually refers to a more encompassing way of structuring one's life than merely consumers' eating patterns. Certain dietary regimens, however, such as vegetarianism and veganism, provide the more encompassing structure to an individual's life usually meant by the term lifestyle. These specific regimens also usually involve a more thorough commitment to a certain set of ideas. Most dietary regimens, however, do not provide sufficient structure to an individual's life to qualify as lifestyles. For Greg things are a bit different as his dietary regimen truly intervenes in every aspect of his life. He says that he does not regard his ordered way of eating as "a pure dietary thing". Rather, he bundles these decisions into what he refers to as his "fitness program" and thus feels its all part of a larger effort to reformulate the way he lives his life. It seems then, that in

Greg's case, the regimen he follows truly serves as a blueprint that in an efficient way limits the choices he has to make on a day-to-day basis.

Earlier in this chapter we talked about how Greg had gone through some other dietary regimens during his life, such as only eating once a day. He briefly mentions that in this quote as well but continues to talk about the regimen he is currently living after and that he envisions himself sticking to. As we can see in the quote, Greg's regimen is extremely individualized and informed by a rational scientific logic of need satisfaction. This is not surprising as he uses his wife, who is a dietician, as a dietary coach. When Greg talks about what he eats it is very instrumental, e.g. he only eats to get energy to be able to work out which he clearly states by saying that he is "pretty scheduled because it helps [him] in [his] workout routine". An example of this scientific way of talking is when he mentions the noodle type dish he eats on Thursdays for the carbohydrates. For Greg, it seems clear that he has bought into the discourse that the body should be managed and halted from deterioration by means of rational scientific methods (Bauman, 1992; Shilling, 1993). He furthermore expresses what Thompson and Hirschman (1995) has identified as a primary sociocultural value following from the ethic of self-control, namely an idealization of youthfulness. As discussed above, the strivings to be young forever are often portrayed in media, commercials, et cetera, as discussed by e.g. Catterall and Maclaran (2001: 1118), who claim that "*marketers reinforce the cult of the youthful body, which has become the leitmotif of today's consumer society*". In a sense, Greg's dietary regimen is a part of his overall desire to transcend the limits of the body, which is also manifested in him talking about how he idealizes the hard body. Several times during the interview Greg makes a little drum-roll on his belly and says things like "no extras here" while rising his eyebrows. According to Bordo (1999), it is very typical for today's macho man to draw a direct link between a disciplined body and a hard body (cf. Kasson, 2001).

In Greg's account we also see a tension between Warde's (1997) two antinomies of health and indulgence. While Greg clearly has bought into the health discourse he also devotes one meal a week to indulgence. We can recall Weight Watchers 6+1 diet plan that was discussed in chapter four where Weight Watchers so kindly let their followers "*if*

*[they] want, devote one day a week to enjoy life without thinking about [their] weight*". Compared to this, Greg is even more controlled as he only devotes one meal a week to the highly indulgent practice of enjoying a meal without thinking about his weight. When Greg told me about this one meal a week he said that he did not care too much about what he ate at that special time as long as he could have French fries. So important were the French fries for Greg that he even lamented that they did not have a special section in the menus where all the dishes served with fries were gathered.

For Greg, adopting this very strict dietary regimen leads to him defining himself as distinctly unique, or, in other words, to assume the 'Like Myself' position in figure 8.1. This might seem contradictory as I previously argued that Greg built his narrative around trying to be 'Not Like Myself'. What we see here is a two-step process where Greg first uses the way of talking available in the 'Not Like Myself' meaning position to explain his current food consumption behavior. When he has explained the motivation behind his strict dietary regimen he turns to his present food consumption and all of a sudden changes repertoire to instead talk about how distinctly unique he is. The 'Like Myself' meaning position is thus used to describe his present consumption patterns while the 'Not Like Myself' position explains the motivation behind adopting this consumption pattern.

## Temporary Regimens

One way of structuring one's food consumption is to do like Greg in the above example and adopt an all-encompassing dietary regimen that permanently changes one's food consumption pattern. This seems to be somewhat of an extreme position requiring major changes to one's dietary patterns. A strategy for changing one's food consumption without having to engage in such a permanent change is to engage in various more or less temporary dietary regimens, usually in the form of dieting. As we can remember from chapter three, to sometimes engage in dieting has been fashionable ever since that summer day in 1862 when Mr. Banting decided he once more wanted to be able to tie his own shoe-laces (Groves, 2001). In the following quote Pär has been talking for a while about why his family does not eat more fish than they presently do. We can recall from the previous chapter that Pär

spoke about consumption of fish as 'Healthy Food Consumption'. As he is talking about this he accidentally slips into talking about dieting:

Pär: But when we're dieting, we eat those Norwegian, like different kind of frozen fish... It sounds like we diet a lot but we really don't...

Jacob: Well, I was just going to ask about that, is that something you do frequently?

Pär: No, we dieted this spring using 'Danske Rigshospitalets Slankediet'<sup>34</sup> that I have here somewhere [looks through papers at desk] and it has gotten quite a distribution, and it, it was good because we really lost some weight...

Jacob: Danske Rigshospitalets? What is that all about?

Pär: Well now, let's see, I thought I saw it just a little while ago [keeps looking at desk and finds paper]. You eat for three days after the specific scheme you have in front of you and then you eat normally for four days. But then you don't really eat normally because you think 'I can't just binge like I use to', you know... and then you go for it for three days again. It's much easier with this one because then you know at the weekend I don't have to torment myself. Of course you do it so you do it during the weekdays [...] We did it for a month and Jörgen [son] joined twice and Linus [son] once and the family lost a total of 25 kilos [...] I lost almost 10, you know, so I stood for the lion's share of it... and I have pretty much kept it since, you know. It's good to have there, hidden in one's pocket if you know what I mean!

Even though Pär tried to come across as a person who is not really concerned about dieting and food it became apparent during the course of the interview that dieting is part of ordinary life for Pär. The way he accidentally ventures into the subject in the beginning of the quote when he is talking about fish by saying "but when we're dieting, we eat those Norwegian..." suggests that dieting is at least a reoccurring activity for Pär's family. He also repeatedly throughout the interview came to speak about different strategies he used to loose or not gain weight. One example in this quote is that he comments 'Danske Rigshospitalets Slankediet' with saying "it's much easier with this one"

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<sup>34</sup> 'Danske Rigshospitalets Slankediet' is supposedly the Danish national hospitals official diet program. This program has emerged as a popular diet method in Sweden over the last few years.

which in turn suggests that he has tried at least a few other diets to be able to do such a comparison. Considering the discussion above about Pär's view of himself as a 'potential fatso' and how he tries to be 'Not Like Himself' in this regard, his preoccupation with dieting is perhaps not so hard to understand. It is interesting, however, that each time he caught himself talking about dieting he immediately tried to avoid coming across as someone who spends too much energy thinking about issues related to dieting and keeping a low body weight.

What is striking with Pär's discussion about the dieting process is the extent to which he seems to be incorporating this temporary regimen into his overall eating pattern. In Pär's view it is a part of ordinary life to have to go on diets a couple of times a year to keep the body in check. This is evidenced by the last part of the quote where Pär says that he has almost been able to keep his weight since last time they dieted but as soon as he cannot keep his weight any longer he knows what to do as he has the 'Danske Rikshospitalets Slankediet' in his pocket. Furthermore, with this diet he is quite satisfied because he does not have to "torment" himself during the weekend suggesting that tormenting is what the dieting program is about. Still, it is not with anguish in his voice he talks about the diet but rather with enthusiasm. In Pär's family, dieting is turned into a nice little family project in which the sons join in when they feel like it and it is not without pleasure Pär boasts that the family lost a total of 25 kilos. But of course, Pär, the potential fatso, is responsible for the lion's share of this.

## The Stigma of Dietary Regimens

Comments about how 'the others' diet all the time were frequently occurring during the interviews and many respondents expressed that there was a certain stigma tied to being one of those persons who constantly diet. In this sense, the position of being 'Like Others' who diet all the time was many times resented and the participants took a 'Not Like Others' stance with regards to the diet issue. In the discussion about Pär's dieting regimens we saw how Pär was always quick to point out that dieting is not something his family engage in on a regular basis. Similar tendencies to repeatedly point out that they were not, as some of the participants put it, "health freaks" were common during the interviews. If we relate this reasoning to Warde's antinomy between

health and indulgence we can see that while the lipophobic and other so-called health related messages proliferate and the participants no doubt have bought into these discourses they feel a strong need to stress that they are by no means focusing solely on health but also on more hedonic consumption practices (cf. Hill, Knox, Hamilton, Parr, & Stringer, 2002). To sometimes focus on hedonic consumption is, as we can remember from chapter four, not merely an option for every individual but every individual's obligation to him or herself (Gabriel & Lang, 1995: 103). Seemingly feeling this tension between health and indulgence, the participants seek a reasonable compromise between their health related food consumption endeavors and the demands of trying to live up to other aspects of contemporary food consumption such as the search for pleasure, the strivings toward building a family, and the practical demands of living in a fast-paced, convenience-oriented consumer culture.

In the previous chapter we saw how Cheri regarded the consumption of "anything fried" as 'Unhealthy Food Consumption' and how she tried to avoid serving fried foods to her family. Cheri provides an example of trying to appear like she is not really focusing on health issues when she realizes that her skepticism towards fried foods might lead me, the interviewer, to believe that she is too focused on health issues:

- Cheri: OK, like I said, don't get me wrong. It's not that we don't eat steaks and grill, and again I'm just not, I'm just not a fryer person... we're not health freaks, you know!
- Jacob: OK, I won't portray you as a health freak...
- Cheri: No, don't! Because I'm really not [emphasis]! Except for the weight...

In this quote, Cheri manages to make sure that I will not portray her as a health freak, an issue that seemed to be of great importance to her. She thereby seems to nurture the idea that focusing too much on health is something bad. However, she has no problem with being regarded as a freak when it comes to the health and appearance issues of weight. In some particular cases, such as monitoring one's weight, it seems like it is appropriate or even desirable to be seen as concerned whereas an overall focus on health is something negatively looked upon.

An interesting parallel can be drawn to Thompson and Troester's findings reported in the article *Consumer Value Systems in the Age of Postmodern Fragmentation: The Case of the Natural Health Microculture* (2002). The respondents in that study, who were all into the particular natural health microculture under investigation, were very much attuned to the negative stereotypes that circulate in the popular culture about "health food nuts" (2002: 566) and tried to come across as not being overly focused on these issues. Albeit the participant in this study did not belong to a particular food and health related microculture, the ones who engaged in dieting behaviors were so attuned to the negative picture of 'dieters' that they too felt that they had to either justify or downplay this side of their food consumption behavior.

## Idiosyncratic Regimens

During the interviews, the participants many times talked about how they engaged in different kinds of body management techniques on a micro level. Instead of adopting an all-encompassing "fitness program" like Greg they had found products to include in their diet to battle a particular potential health threat. Beck (1992) suggests that in the light of all different expert claims, the body becomes an 'island of security'. When the society feels increasingly complex and there are too many aspects to take into consideration, at least one can have some effect on the size, shape and appearance of one's own body. In chapter three we saw that Warde (1997: 31), with the support of Fischler, claims that in the absence of consistent and authoritative rules, people may times come to behave in unpredictable, unregulated, and idiosyncratic ways. Hildur gives one example of such an idiosyncratic behavior when she, right at the beginning of the interview when she is telling me about her breakfast habits, reveals her secret method of battling hypertension:

- Hildur: ... and then I eat half a coffee cup of frozen lingonberries every morning
- Jacob: Frozen lingonberries!
- Hildur: Frozen lingonberries, yeah! Do you wanna know what it's good for? [laughter] High blood pressure – maybe interesting for you? And I checked it with my family doctor and it really works... the blood pressure goes down...
- Jacob: OK that was interesting, and how long have you, how long have you...?

- Hildur: I've been doing that for about... well, I guess for about two years... Yes, it really is interesting...
- Jacob: And what got you started on this lingonberry thing?
- Hildur: Well, it was actually a, a cousin of my husband who was visiting and she told me about it. 'OK' I thought, 'I guess I could try that'. And I did, and it has showed to have really good... results [...] Yes, it actually... many people think it's kind of crazy but I think it's good... [hysterical laughter]

By adopting this habit Hildur is everyday engaging in a little bit of body-management to battle the particular problem of hypertension. In a way, she is buying into the natural health discourse (Thompson & Troester, 2002) wherein bodily disorders should be primarily fought of by 'natural' means, such as regulating one's diet, rather than resorting to the techniques recommended by traditional Western medicine. Hildur shows that she is quite proud to be battling her hypertension in this way without the help of pharmaceuticals and it almost sounds like she is laughing back at the people laughing at her for her lingonberry-habit<sup>35</sup>. She thereby, in this particular regard, assumes the position of being 'Like Myself' in figure 8.1. During the rest of the interview Hildur was talking in terms of being traditional and thus assuming the position of 'Like Others' but her strong belief in the potency of lingonberries led her to dare being 'Like Herself' in this respect. However, she is sure to point out that this, perhaps somewhat crazy method, really does work even from a traditional medical standpoint as she has checked with her doctor that it really does work.

## The Asociality Of Gastroanomic Food Consumption

In chapter three, Warde's prediction that we were moving into a state of gastroanomy was discussed. Gastroanomy was the situation in figure 3.1 where a simultaneous individualization and informalization occurred. Traditionally, food choices have been governed by gastronomy, i.e. knowledge of the rules of food. Today, we are living under conditions where the rules no longer seem self-evident to consumers and they are therefore open to individualized reformulation.

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<sup>35</sup> If you want to join Hildur in laughing she recommends you eat the lingonberries half-frozen when they are still a little bit crisp.

The gastronomy has thereby been replaced by gastroanomy, a condition bereft of rules (Fischler quoted in Warde, 1997). When individuals lack reliable criteria to make food choices, food selection and intake are increasingly a matter of individual decisions. Expression through consumption thereby becomes detached from affective communal norms and ideals, and increasingly becomes socially disembedded.

Many traditional accounts of food deal with how food consumption functions as a social marker asserting both the oneness of those who eat the same and the otherness of whoever eats differently, i.e. the meaning positions 'Like Others' and 'Not Like Others' in figure 8.1. Furthermore, food is a very important aspect of identity construction in that the way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization (Fischler, 1988). The sociality of eating, and especially the sociality within a family, is thus usually stressed when it comes to food consumption as exemplified by Fürst who writes:

Dinner is often the only time of day when a family sits down together, face to face, gathered together in a common activity, a potentially quiet hour characterized by shared enjoyment (1988: 97)

I am not to argue that these social functions of food have diminished even though the tendency to romanticize the family meal in Fürst's manner might be overstating things. However, I will show some occurrences of a striking asociality of food consumption that occurred in the participants' accounts.

As we have seen earlier, Greg structures his consumption according to a strict dietary regimen. Greg's way of speaking about this regimen reveals that he has a highly functional view on his food consumption. This functional, 'fuel for the engine' style of talking about food consumption plays out in the following quote as well. For Greg, the functionality of food has become so prominent that he downplays every social aspect that food might have:

Jacob:     And does your wife eat the same?  
Greg:       No, she eats differently than me. She eats better, I mean, she does the fruits and the vegetables and things like that. Our schedules are different so we don't, ah, and we like different things so, as you can tell, mine is probably pretty boring. So she likes a little more variety. But it works for

me, and it helps, it gives me the energy for working out and stuff like that too so that's kind of it, in a nutshell

Greg's entire dietary regimen is built up on the logic of fitting into his larger "fitness program" where not gaining weight while still getting enough energy to exercise are the two main concerns. Consumption of foods living up to these two criteria are placed in Greg's 'Healthy Food Consumption' category that, again, works as an idealized image of how one's food consumption should look. Greg's highly functionalistic approach to eating is reflected in him using the expression "It works for me, it helps, it gives me the energy for working out" where he clearly states what he wants to get out of his food consumption – functionality. One of the striking things about Greg's diet is that while he only uses functional justifications for choosing his food consumption patterns he still believes that his wife eats better as she eats the "fruits and the vegetables and things like that". Apparently fruit and vegetables is not a necessary part of Greg's "fitness program" even though he deems them better than the foods he is eating.

Greg sticking to a strict dietary regimen, the fact that Greg and his wife have different schedules and that they "like different things" makes eating together a rare occasion in Greg's household. The same thing goes for Jeff, which might not be surprising if we recall the way he described his cooking/preparing of foods above by saying "it's rather grotesque" and stating "No, no, no! Betty [wife] will never eat my soup". When Jeff talks about what he and his wife eat we see the same type of explanations as in Greg's quote above:

Jacob: OK and you said that usually you fix something quick, like a soup or something... So, is that usually something you make yourself...?

Jeff: Out of the can! Out of the can, something out of the box, something very quick, something microwaveable... hmm... and a one... what I would almost call a one course meal... hmm... that sort of thing. Macaroni and cheese, or soup and crackers, soup and toast, that's what *I*, what *I* would eat. Betty is, hmm, a little bit more concerned about her weight than I am, hmm, so she will frequently eat at night, have some kind of TV-dinner; weight watchers TV-dinners or a healthy meal, hmm...

- she probably eats a lot more, a lot better balanced meal than what I do...
- Jacob: So, TV-dinners, that's like the frozen type?
- Jeff: The frozen type, yeah and so she gets those that have low fat, hmm, so she watches that pretty, pretty carefully.
- Jacob: Ok. so you don't usually eat the same thing even, even though you...
- Jeff: No, and largely because we probably get home at different times.

When Jeff is describing what he usually eats he is very focused on what *he* eats as exhibited by him repeatedly referring to “I”. He then goes on to talk about his wife, Betty, and how she has different considerations when she chooses what to eat. In this case it is Betty who has functional qualifications on the food that disables them from being able to eat the same food. She eats “a lot better balanced meal” than Jeff believes he does while Jeff himself is more focused on something “quick”. We see here, again, that Jeff idealizes the low-fat foods and places the consumption of those in the ‘Healthy Food Consumption’ category. In this quote, and also in the rest of the interview Jeff does not in any way talk about trying to consume more of these products. We will return to this in the next chapter. Jeff also explains that he and his wife get home at different times, which furthermore gives them a valid reason for not eating together.

## Asociality in the Social Arena

Even though I have pointed to some aspects of food consumption that can be deemed asocial it is still very much a social activity, which in itself lies at the heart of Fischler’s (1988: 276) assessment that habits of eating are ritual displays in themselves in that food not only nourishes but also signifies. Throughout the history of Western culture, the state of one’s body has been interpreted as a material sign of the moral character “within”. (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995: 144) Obesity and bodily dysfunction have therefore traditionally been regarded as a result of a weak mind. Drawing from these values, the more health conscious participants are aware, and not seldom proud, that their food consumption practices sometimes get scrutinized in the public eye. The self-esteem – which in Giddens’ (1991: 66) terms is confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity – they draw from this

makes them feel socially accepted and valued. A person who successfully fosters a sense of pride in the self is one who is able to psychologically feel that his biography is justified and unitary which is just what both Greg and Jeff does in expressing the coherence of their dietary regimens. In chapter three we looked at how food consumption is a peculiar consumption activity as it has a twofold moment of risk. On the one hand it is a risky business since bad consumption choices can lead to direct physical harm. On the other hand consumption of food is a potentially risky business in an additional way where the outcomes of one's choices will be scrutinized in the public setting. The blend of these two risks, the risk of making a bad choice for one's own health, and the risk of making a bad choice potentially harmful for one's self-identity, makes food consumption a peculiar activity. The participants who see themselves as having a particularly strong willpower, such as Pär and Greg, draw much pride from the attention they get from envious friends, colleagues and other people in their surroundings who they perceive as having lesser willpower. Thompson and Hirshman (1995) discuss how the ethic of self-control combined with the dominant protestant/Lutheran ethic leads to the notion that there should be no excess in eating or drinking. Rather, there is more often some degree of asceticism combined with the self-control (cf. Giddens, 1991: 104; Lupton, 1996: 137). It seems like these participants are well aware of this and expect the people around them to notice and value their asceticism. One example is provided by Pär who seems to get a kick out of appearing like a dietetic role model:

- Pär: The others [at work] really need to diet more and I could really tell that they had a hard time dealing with me sitting here with my Keso<sup>36</sup> and all that other stuff, you know. And some of them tried it then, like, for a while, but it was only half-hearted, I could tell...
- Jacob: Yes, you mean that they experienced it as a little bit disturbing that you...?
- Pär: Yes, yes, I think so...
- Jacob: How could you tell?
- Pär: Well, it's things like 'So, there you're sitting again with your damn crackers' and stuff like that, you know. But then again, I know that they really would like to do it too, but they just don't have the energy, and time, and, I

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<sup>36</sup> Keso is a Swedish brand of cottage cheese.

guess, desire. Because if you would walk through the corridor at my workplace, they're like [motions a big belly with his hands] Yeah, they're overweight every single one of them... and that's probably just because they sit there and binge on those rolls with cheese and marmalade in the morning and then in the afternoon it's like Danish pastries and cookies. If I would've done that I would be overweight too...

It seems like Pär has no problem in taking the place of the others and fantasizing about what goes through their minds as they look at him – the master dieter. He is projecting himself into their roles and imagines them feeling a sense of shame for experiencing a lack of social acceptability of their own personal narrative which in turn stems from there being a discrepancy between themselves and their ideal self (Giddens, 1991: 68). One cannot help thinking that Pär's ability to project himself into the minds of the others stems from his past when he himself have experienced the lack of “energy, and time, and, I guess, desire” that he imagines the others are experiencing.

Pär also shows yet another example of the categorization of ‘Unhealthy Food Consumption’ as he talks about all the things the others eat such as Danish pastries and cookies. Pär stoically resists all these temptations in his quest for escaping his fate as the potential fatso. In the quote we also see that the scrutiny of the public eye has two different foci. The first one is on the actual food consumption practices, i.e. the act of eating in themselves. The second focus is on the body, whose appearance is seen as directly linked to the food consumption practices. According to Giddens, bodily regimens, such as dieting, are the prime means whereby the institutional reflexivity of modern social life is focused on the cultivation, or even the creation, of the body (1991: 100). The regularized control of the body that Pär is engaging in is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained. By feeling the eyes of the others being placed on the body, self becomes more or less constantly ‘on display’ to others in terms of its embodiment (cf. Giddens, 1991: 58).

# Chapter Nine

## Speaking of Food

In chapter seven we looked at how the food consumption practices described by the participants could be classified according to their alleged healthiness. A categorization was made, dividing these consumption practices into 'Healthy Food Consumption', 'Unhealthy Food Consumption', 'Not Healthy Food Consumption', and 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption' (see figure 7.1). A reoccurring theme during the interviews was that the participants talked about the 'Healthy' consumption practices as an idealized way to consume and how they were striving towards consuming more in this idealized way. For various reasons, however, they were unable to do so. Instead of the idealized consumption, their day-to-day food consumption mostly fit with the consumption behaviors assembled in the 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption' category. If we return to figure 7.1 things could be summarized by saying that i) the participants tried to avoid eating in ways belonging to the right side of the figure, i.e. 'Unhealthy' and 'Not Healthy Food Consumption' ii) the participants mostly ate in ways that fit in the lower left hand corner of the figure, i.e. 'Not Unhealthy Food Consumption' iii) the participants wanted to eat in the idealized ways belonging to the upper left hand side of the figure, i.e. 'Healthy Food Consumption'. To make things even more complex for the participants, it seems like many of them suffer from what is sometimes referred to as a value paradox (de Mooij, 1998). A value paradox occurs when there is a discrepancy between what is desirable and what is desired. From the empirical material we can see that the consumers seem to have a rather clear picture of what they would like to eat, or rather what they would like to like to eat – this is what is referred to as the desirable and could be found in the upper left corner of figure 7.1. What is problematic for the participants is that they do not really desire

these desirable foods. Instead, they desire foods that they have been taught that they should not desire, e.g. fast foods, chips and candy. Consumption of these products that they desire is usually placed in the categories on the right side of figure 7.1. There is thus a discrepancy between what they know they should be wanting and what they actually want.

As we could see in the last chapter, food consumption is an important part of forming a coherent narrative of the self, finding a balance between conforming to certain standards and being unique. In forming this narrative of the self, it is not acceptable to merely ignore the discrepancy between one's ideal consumption pattern and one's actual consumption pattern. In speaking of their food consumption, the participants must therefore come up with strategies to justify why they are not consuming in the manner they think they should. In this chapter, we will first look at some ways in which expert groups define food products and food consumption practices as either risky or safe and how the participants grapple with the issue of keeping up with the ongoing stream of expert messages. After this we will turn to looking at three different strategies used by the participants to justify why they do not live according to the knowledge they have gathered from various expert systems. First there are examples of different reasons the participants give for deviating from the norms, then there is an explanation of the so-called syntactical trap, and finally there are some examples of compensatory behaviors the participants engage in when they have failed to live according to their own norms.

## A Relational Model of Expert Meaning Positions

For the participants to be able to form ideas, and to speak, about what and what not to include in a diet, they have to be informed by some kind of knowledge. A large part of this knowledge stems from information trickling down from what Giddens refers to as various expert systems (1990; 1991). An individual might feel that governments, scientists or other technical specialists can be trusted to take the appropriate steps to counter the array of global dangers we are said to be facing. This ensures a sense of trust even though the world we live in might seem apocalyptic at times. An inherent quality

of the expert systems is that people have to invest trust in them for them to be meaningful. This trust eliminates the need to have a deeper technical knowledge of the information sent out through the expert systems (Giddens, 1991). The expert systems are usually informed by the dominant views of how we are supposed to take care of our bodies. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) identify key sociocultural values and beliefs that follow from the ethic of control implicit in the dominating dualistic concept of mind and body discussed in chapter three and four. In the late modern age, the ideal that knowledge not only allows the world to be controlled by the rational realm, but also liberates the transcendent self from various forces of nature is one such dominating sociocultural value. This liberation, and the freedom that is supposed to come with it, is – as pointed out by Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer (2002: 810) – janus-faced as the possibility turns into an obligation. Consequently, people remain *“hostages to the imagery of ‘rational mastery’ over human nature, identity and fate and of the artificial, designed, monitored and reflexively improved rationality of life”* (Bauman quoted in Askegaard et al., 2002: 810).

As a consequence of the obligation for consumers to use expert information to the betterment of themselves, a key issue becomes how to decode and make useful the abundant information we are faced with on a day-to-day basis. In figure 9.1, which again is inspired by Greimas’ semiotic square introduced in chapter six, different meaning positions that food products and food consumption behaviors can be given by experts are mapped out. The main debates and the big headlines in the media concerns the definition of what is ‘Safe’, the assertion in figure 9.1, and what is ‘Risky’, the negation of the assertion in figure 9.1. Since the positions of what is safe and risky is many times contested, revised or a combination of the two, it is an arduous task for consumers to decide what positions are appropriate at a particular point in time. This task involves issues of whom to trust and to what extent. Many of the participants develop heuristics for whom to trust and use different strategies to filter out information that they refer to as relevant. The result many times is that, rather than trusting one source to be completely and utterly true, they take an intermediate stance and decide for themselves that a particular product or behavior is either ‘Not (Really) Risky’ or ‘Not (Really) Safe’, the contradictions to the assertion and its negation in figure 9.1.

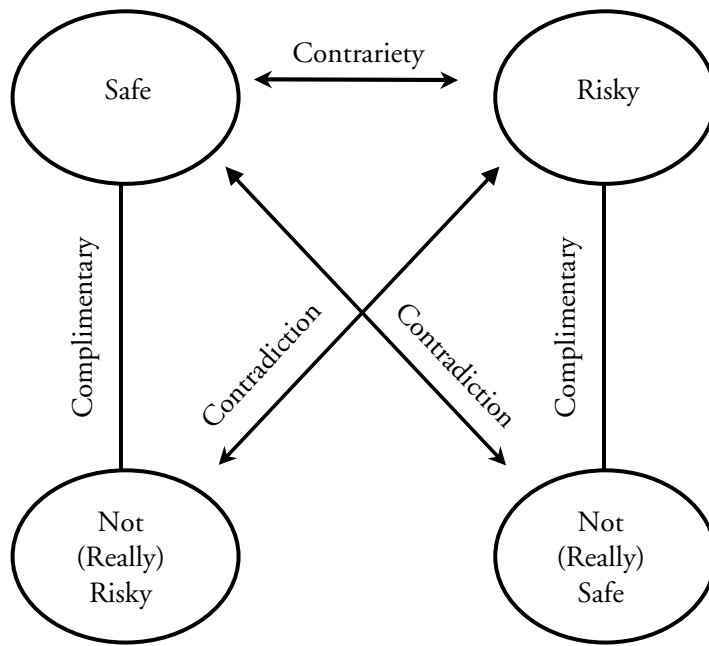


Figure 9.1: A Relational Model of Expert Meaning Positions

One of the main issues for consumers is deciding whom to trust, which in turn decides how the positions in figure 9.1 are distributed. Though most people only have very superficial knowledge of the technicalities of the expert systems that affect their day-to-day lives, they have to invest trust in them to be able to function on a daily basis. Without investing trust in some of the potential experts there is just too excessive an amount of information to deal with for an individual consumer. The participants many times reproduced messages from multiple different expert systems during the interviews. Sometimes they also expressed anxiety over the fact that they somehow had to choose which ones to listen to. Giddens suggests that to make this bearable, consumers engage in a sort of ‘effort-bargain’ – i.e. a pragmatic acceptance of some expert systems and a more all-encompassing trust in others.’

Sabrina gives an example of how the kind of authoritative knowledge the experts are believed to have in their possession leads to the respondents feeling that they can safely invest trust in them. Prior to the following quote, Sabrina has been talking about how her doctor had explained to her that if you gain a little bit of weight all the time, eventually you are going to weigh a lot more than you do now. Sabrina then goes on to tell me why you should believe in what the doctors say:

- Sabrina: You know, they didn't become a doctor by being stupid...
- Jacob: No, you would hope not.
- Sabrina: You know, they obviously know something. He hasn't been a doctor for 45 years not knowing anything. Obviously he has some knowledge there. So you know, you just, you hear these things and you read these things and it's like 'There has to be truth to this stuff'.

Since, as Sabrina puts it, doctors “didn’t become doctors by being stupid” she believes they deserve to be listened to. Similar references to how certain authorities, such as doctors, scientists, husbands, wives, and the government, know what they are talking about and therefore should be paid attention to were common during the interviews. If consumers would not place trust in expert system, the risk is that there are an overwhelming amount of potential occurrences – such as food scares and food related maladies – which, where the individual seriously to contemplate them, could produce paralysis of the will. By placing trust in various expert systems, consumers build a ‘protective cocoon’ around the self, which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality (Giddens, 1991: 129). In this sense the protective cocoon helps consumers deal with the abstract systems of knowledge that surrounds us and are especially prevalent in the case of different claims about foods’ inherent qualities.

## Safe and Risky

Earlier on we discussed Warde’s assessment that we are living under conditions of gastroanomy where little guidance is offered as to how we, as consumers, should compose our diets – the gastroanomic condition is a condition bereft of rules (Warde, 1997). Furthermore, in the late modern age, the sureties of tradition and habit have not been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge but rather with doubt (cf. Giddens, 1990; Giddens, 1991). Consequently, consumers are experiencing anguish, obsession, anxiety and suspicion, as they no longer can look at the traditional and authoritative external rules about what should be eaten. This is an extension of general modern developments in which modernity “*confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and, because it is non-foundational, at the same*

*time offers little help as to which options should be selected” (Giddens, 1991: 80).*

This sense of anxiety and anguish was many times voiced as the participants felt that just about everything had at least the potential to be ‘Risky’, the negation in figure 9.1. Pär illustrates this experience of anxiety and anguish when he tries to express what authorities he listens to when it comes to deciding what to include in the diet. Throughout Pär’s entire interview he was referring to various different experts influencing his decisions. When I asked him where he got the information from and how he paid attention to the different messages in the newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV he gave me the following description:

Pär: No, we do talk about it, Rut and I. Well, it is all we discuss when we are at the, at the retailers. You know ‘we’ll have this instead because it’s healthier, you know’. But, when it comes down to it, it’s probably she that pays attention to the information in the media and reads those articles in the news. I skip those. I mean, if one was to follow all of that, it’s like Linus [son] says, if one was to follow all of that one could soon not eat one single thing. Everything is dangerous in some respect. I think the most important thing is to have dead easy rules like varying your diet as much as possible in order not to get too much of anything, you know. And not too little of anything either, if one is lucky [...] Yes, but we *do* take things into consideration! We do!

In this quote we see examples of how Per and his wife negotiate and try to make sense of the meaning positions taken by various experts. There are a lot of relevant issues at play starting with the statement that Pär and his wife, Rut, do talk about these issues in the store. For Pär and Rut, the issues of whether a certain product is healthy or not seem to be important and salient enough to be addressed at the time of grocery shopping. Among the other participants there were also frequent stories about how they tried to incorporate the knowledge they had gathered from e.g. the media into their decision-making processes in the store. One simple way of doing this that the participants frequently referred to is to look at the nutritional information panels that are lawfully placed on all food items in Sweden and the US. The fact that Pär and

his wife do take these issues into consideration is further reinforced in the second part of the quote where Pär feels the need to emphasize that they *do* take things into consideration. A choice not to care about health issues when buying and consuming food would not be accepted as pointed out by Rozin, who maintains that the nutritive value of food has become a moral issue (Rozin, 1998). There is, for example, recent evidence suggesting that for many American college students, consumption of a junk food diet has negative moral implications (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). It is so taboo, in fact, that consumers rebel by not caring about the available mainstream health messages. Ways of doing this is, e.g. to eat and drink massive amounts of candy, fast food, and alcohol to show that one does not care. For these rebellious acts to be meaningful the mainstream cultural meaning of these types of products and consumption behaviors must be stably place in the 'Risky' position of figure 9.1. Only then can these types of behaviors become a means of standing outside society (cf. Gabriel & Lang, 1995: 143). This type of rebellion is on the rise as suggested by e.g. the publication of books such as *FAT!SO?: Because you don't have to apologize for your size!*<sup>37</sup> (Wann, 1998) which cater to consumers who actively or passively want to rebel against the strict food consumption norms of society.

While Pär acknowledges that the issue of paying attention to the potential healthiness of the foodstuffs they buy is important, he delegates the main responsibility to his wife by saying that she is the one that pays attention while he "skips" those parts of the news. Women often take on this role in families as Kemmer, Anderson, and Marshall (1998) show in their study of couples in the transition from single living to cohabiting. The strategy to delegate responsibility to someone else is commonly applied by the respondents. It seems to be a reassuring thought that someone else has assessed how the meaning positions 'Risky' and 'Safe' in figure 9.1 should be distributed. Even more reassuring is it that someone is acting on these definitions to decide what should be put on the shelves of the retail stores. In some cases the participants delegate responsibility to the retailers using the capitalist logic that a store could not afford to sell products potentially harmful to consumers as they thereby would risk getting either sued and going out of business, getting a bad reputation and going out of

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<sup>37</sup> A spin-off from the underground zine FAT?SO! (<http://www.fatso.com>)

business, or subjected to substantial fines by the government and going out of business. Another type of logic used is to delegate the responsibility to the government, stating that they have instances specialized in checking all the food products sold in the country. Interestingly, both respondents from Sweden and the US reported that their home country had the strictest food-safety controls in the world. When I asked the participants for more details about the state's food-safety program they oftentimes became defensive as it became clear that they were not familiar with any details. Instead they sufficed with saying that everybody knows that there is such a program seemingly not wanting to contemplate the possibility that it might not be as rigid as they hope. Doubting that the state takes care of these issues would possibly pose a threat to the consumers' sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). By delegating the responsibility to someone else the participants managed to feel safe despite being aware of all the dangers potentially lurking in the food-shelves of the stores. The delegation of trust reinforces the feeling of living inside the type of protective cocoon described by Giddens as it effectively 'brackets out' potentially disturbing occurrences.

Pär goes on to address the issue of dealing with the cacophony created by all available expert systems. He refers to the wisdoms of his son – Linus – who believes that if you listen to all claims being made, you soon cannot eat one single thing; everything has been placed, at some point of time, by someone in the 'Risky' position of figure 9.1. Pär reinforces this idea by saying that "everything is dangerous in some respect". This feeling of resignation caused by the sheer mass of available messages of what to do and not to do was quite common during the interviews. One strategy applied by the participants for dealing with the situation was to, as exemplified above, delegate the responsibility for making correct choices to someone else. Preferably someone who you hope is better at assessing the trustworthiness of the different claims. Another type of strategy was to either state that every type of food product is probably bad in some sense and that it therefore probably does not matter too much what precautions you take (cf. Rozin, 1998), or to adopt an almost fatalistic approach believing that somehow 'everything is bound to come out all right in the end' (cf. Giddens, 1991: 23). Thereby, the participants could choose not to listen to the available messages based on two opposing rationales; either

the more positively loaded that everything is probably ‘good’, or the negatively loaded idea that everything is probably ‘bad’ (cf. Giddens, 1991: 121).

In order to sort out the complex relations between the multiple available expert systems consumers can engage in what Giddens (1991) refers to as ‘effort-bargaining’ wherein certain expert systems are accepted on a more pragmatic basis and others are trusted in a more all-encompassing sense. One way of engaging in effort-bargaining to get out of the efforts of grasping the expert systems is to invest trust in some industry standard that can work as a heuristic in choosing the right type of product. Once such a pragmatic acceptance of the industry standard is decided upon all the products living up to that standard is automatically placed in the ‘Safe’ category in figure 9.1. One such industry standard in Sweden is the key-hole symbol that was introduced by the Swedish National Food Administration in 1989 to be placed on foodstuffs that had either a low-fat content or were rich in dietary fiber (Livsmedelsverket, 2000). Bärne talks about how the key-hole symbol helps him in choosing the ‘right’ product:

- Bärne: But, I guess that’s what we try to stay away from. I mean, products with too much fat in them. We always have liver paste at home, you know, but it’s always, it’s the one with the key-hole symbol...
- Jacob: OK so the key-hole symbol...
- Bärne: Yes, yes, it’s... if I stand there with two smoked boloneys in my hand, I’ll take the one with less fat, you know. So the fat-content is something we watch quite a bit. And we can buy some, when I bought minced meat yesterday, to give an example, I took the more expensive one just because it had less fat! And we couldn’t have done that 17-18 years ago because we couldn’t afford it, you know, so we would always take the cheapest one! But now I can afford to think about these aspects too...

Bärne, having bought into the low-fat gospel that reigns sovereign in Sweden, uses the key-hole symbol as a simplifying heuristic. The key-hole symbol came up frequently during the Swedish interviews but no such symbols were mentioned among the US participants. Bärne also brings up the topic of how his financial situation had once prevented him from being able to choose healthy products. Albeit financial

limitations to be able to consume in a healthy manner are often reported in other studies (e.g. Feurst, 1991), Bärne was one of the few who mentioned this aspect during the interviews<sup>38</sup>.

For consumers not choosing to place all one's trust in one source, such as the key-hole symbol, a different way of engaging in effort-bargaining to get out of the efforts of grasping the expert systems is to invest trust in some kind of intermediary who can help in making understandable and guide among the plethora of available expert messages. Jeff has found the perfect solution to this problem giving me the following story when we talk about where he learns what to do and not to do as far as food consumption goes:

- Jeff: But being married to a nurse... and just being in that circle of friends... hearing her talking about some of the people she has worked with, her take on a friend who might be in the hospital, this, that, or whatever...
- Jacob: So you have an expert at home?
- Jeff: Yeah, and, and it's just... Being married to her, working in a hospital, you just hear more about that [...] and in her continued education, her journals, just in the dialoguing back and forth, you know, things that she'll say to our kids and when there is a query over... when they have questions. I think with her, with her career I've just become very much aware of it. Haven't changed a lot of my habits...

In this example Jeff trusts his wife, Betty, to map out the meaning positions in figure 9.1 so that he at any given time can update himself on what is 'Safe' and 'Risky'. By doing this he does not have to engage first hand with the expert systems but gets the messages filtered through, what he believes is, a reliable source. As we can see towards the end of the quote Jeff claims to not having changed a lot of his habits but he later says that at least now he knows when he is doing something he should not be doing. Betty many times assumes the role of a dietary coach that helps people in distinguishing between what is 'Safe' and

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<sup>38</sup> As the participants did not talk about their financial situation being a limitation to their possibility to consumer in a healthy manner I have chosen not to discuss it further. I am aware, however, of the fact that individuals' financial situation is usually thought of as being correlated to the state of their health (e.g. Folkhälsorapport 1994; Socialstyrelsens hälsorapport 1991).

'Risky'; she does so with her children and it is part of her job to be knowledgeable on these issues. Jeff therefore feels secure in delegating the responsibility for being up-to-date and trusts his wife to bring home 'Safe' products to the home as she either does the shopping alone or together with Jeff. Just like with Pär above, who "skips those parts of the news", and trusts his wife to be able to distinguish between what is 'Safe' and 'Risky', Jeff and Betty frequently puts these issues on the agenda in the conversations between the spouses. This delegation of trust is a common way of relating to the multiple expert systems among the participants.

I had Giddens (1991: 101) state in the opening chapter that there are so many different messages about food and health that if one was to listen to all of them it would be impossible to handle the situation. Pär echoed this idea in referring to his son Linus above who wanted to put everything in the 'Risky' category. This somewhat resigned position was frequently occurring among the participants. It seems like Giddens assertion that in the late modern age, the sureties of tradition and habit have not been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge but rather with doubt is quite true. Margareta gives another illustration of how the extensive coverage in the media makes her shut her ears and instead just hope for the best:

Margareta: I don't care at all about it. The first thing is that we really don't read tabloids but information tends to come around anyhow but I have stopped caring about it. And those reports, alarms they appear without... To have a balanced diet and to have many things, I think that's the best. Because there is probably a lot that isn't too good for us but maybe we can't avoid it. I really can't know what's in those eggs, I mean, if I hear an alarm about eggs, that wouldn't lead me to give up eggs, I wouldn't do that...

Margareta has taken the extreme position of resignation saying that since she cannot assess the trustworthiness in the messages she might as well not listen to them at all (cf. Rozin, 1998). She thus refrains from even trying to map the positions in figure 9.1. Instead, she opts for the strategy of keeping a balanced diet. This idea to vary the diet as much as possible to balance out different ingredients deemed 'bad' by medical science mirrors a finding from Askegaard, Jensen and Holt's (1999: 336) study of lipophobia. In that study, the Danish informants were

referring to “a balanced diet” as a sufficient remedy against harm from excessive consumption of these ingredients. Pär gives another example of resorting to the strategy of balancing out different things through keeping to a varied diet:

Pär: But we try to, well, but it’s probably more by varying the diet. By not barbecuing, for example, the meat too damn hard, which Rut loves, totally sooty black meat, she loves that, you know. But we wouldn’t do that, you know, because it’s not at all healthy. The fat, we cut that away... and sometimes when we have company, they wonder where the fat is... and want it you know. And sit there and munch on it [degrading tone of voice]. Well, but, I don’t think we have, that we, we have any really well developed theories about our food housekeeping. It’s exclusive Swedish husmanskost that forms the basis for it, I guess? Because you couldn’t really say husmanskost since there are no brown beans and none of that stuff. But that’s just because they [the kids] don’t like it.

As suggested by Giddens (1991: 188), the principle of cognitive dissonance is many times influencing consumers to appropriate certain types of information that goes well with their pre-established habits. The overabundance of available information is thereby reduced via routinized attitudes that exclude, or reinterpret, potentially disturbing knowledge. Pär is functioning in this way when he suggested in the quote in the beginning of the chapter that the best way for getting the grips on the potential threats is the “dead easy rule” to vary the diet as much as possible. In this quote, Pär admits that they do not really have any well-developed theories about how to go about choosing foods although he referred to dead easy rules earlier on suggesting that, in a vague sense, Pär hopes that everything will come out ‘all right’ in the end. When Pär starts to dissect the meaning of his own strategy of varying the diet he invites us into his world of hard sacrifices. He exemplifies the strategy by stating that they do not barbecue the meat “too damn hard” in order for it not to get “totally sooty black”. Pär thus shows that he has internalized one rather extreme version of what is ‘Risky’ according to the experts. Except for this example of what the “dead easy rules” consist of, Pär satisfies with stating that they stick to exclusive Swedish husmanskost. As we can remember from chapter seven, husmanskost was many times used as an ideal of what should be

consumed, which is the case also for Pär. A point relating to husmanskost, and a point that we will return to shortly, is to note that Pär blames his kid for not sticking to a strict husmanskost diet. He hails a husmanskost diet as the best but is unable to stick to it, as he also has to nurture the family. When Warde discusses the four “antinomies of taste” (Warde, 1997: 55 pp.) he uses the contrasts between convenience and care, and health and indulgence. In Pär’s account we see that he, rather than being pulled between these tension suggested by Warde, is drawn between the poles of health and care. There thus seem to exist a potential antinomy between not only the pairs suggested by Warde but also in between them as exemplified by Pär feeling strained between health and care.

Finally, Pär’s statement that his friends are left bewildered when he and his wife cut the fat away from the meat gives Pär a chance to appear refined. He thereby exhibits yet another side of the sociality aspects of food consumption discussed towards the end of chapter eight. Here, Pär is showing that having reached a certain level of knowledge of how to interpret the expert claims and thereby map out the relations in figure 9.1 can serve to boost the confidence and thus lead to increased self-esteem.

### Not (Really) Risky and Not (Really) Safe

In chapter three, the institutional reflexivity of late modernity was discussed and especially the notion that most accounts from various expert systems are open to chronic revisions in the light of new information and knowledge (Giddens, 1991). We have already seen that there is not *one* idea of what the concept of health stands for. Instead, there is a multitude of different claims and counterclaims being made by various types of experts. Giddens (1991: 32, 99 pp.) clarifies that in the circumstances of late modernity, many forms of risk do not admit of clear assessment, because of the ever-changing knowledge environment which frames them. Even risk assessments within relatively closed settings – such as the relationships between certain foods and health – are often only valid ‘until further notice’.

Throughout the interviews it could be noted that some of the participants have caught on to the idea that maybe science is not as

scientific as it might seem at first glance and that the scientific community is far from homogenous (cf. Brown, 1995). This was surfaced by the fact that the participants were many times able to account for various different expert systems. Most of the time they did so without probing and naturally intermingled references to these different expert systems in telling their stories. This ability to account for many different expert systems sometimes created a tension between investing trust in some experts and expressing doubt in others. In some cases the participants even told stories of how they used to listen to, and follow, one group of experts but how they then, when they heard trustworthy stories from another group of experts, changed their habits. In these cases we can see that the sense of trust and security that consumers achieve by building a 'protective cocoon' is not entirely stable. The protective cocoon is constantly bombarded with claims that challenge its foundation. The hard shell of the protective cocoon manages to bounce off the contradictory messages for a while but as the bombardment grows heavier the cocoon can eventually crack. The positions of meaning in figure 9.1 are thereby challenged and new information has to be taken in and processed by the consumer for him or her to decide whether to accept or discharge it before engaging in building a new cocoon. When these types of changes do occur it seems like the participants many times stayed away from placing the meaning too stably in either the 'Safe' or the 'Risky' category and instead opted for the more intermediary positions of the contradictions 'Not (Really) Safe' and 'Not (Really) Risky'. Once the stable meaning positions one had accepted as true are challenged to the degree that they cannot hold sway, the participants expressed that they really did not want to fall for the temptation of trusting any one source too hardheadedly again.

The following interview extracts gives an illustration to the situation where new information challenges the meaning positions in figure 9.1 to such a degree that a new health regimen is adopted. In her interview, Vicki told me how she had been living after the conventional low-fat approach to dieting for a long time before all the talk about the best-selling books by Dr. Atkins finally made her decide to change from one health regimen to another:

Vicki: Well, we try to be healthy, and I used to eat like low-fat, but now I don't like that low-fat any more and so... because like the Dr. Atkins and all the different... stuff,

that people have in their diets how maybe that low-fat stuff isn't making any sense and stuff and so I just now try to have it balanced and be sure to have like, try to remember the vegetables and stuff like that, so [...] because on the other side they say totally the opposite. So then it's sort of like, maybe I should just be moderate and eat food I enjoy and try to keep it balanced and stuff...

Jacob: And who is on 'the other side'?

Vicki: Like the, medical community and the diet people, you know, that tell you what to eat, not diet, you know what I mean, the diet health type people for the United States and how they tell you to eat low-fat and low-fat is better and fat is really, really bad and, you know, the less fat the better. But then, you know, you have to have so much to eat, so you gonna make it up, so you're gonna eat carbohydrates instead...

In this interview excerpt we again see references to keeping the diet balanced to even out potentially 'Risky' products. The products she once conceived of as 'Safe' has changed meaning to instead appear 'Not (Really) Safe' as a consequence of incoming knowledge. For Vicki, the messages sent out by Dr. Atkins somehow seemed more trustworthy than the messages being sent out by the proponents of consumption of low-fat products, or "the other side" as she referred to them. In Vicki's mind there is a battle going on between these two expert systems which is quite accurate, as suggested by a recent article in *The New York Times* talking about the tension between the 'Dr. Atkins-type experts' and 'the others':

It [Atkins' diet] is also the most controversial. Among its sworn enemies are [...] the guru of the high-fiber, low fat crowd that Atkins has if not replaced then at least battered; [...] the president of the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine; the American Heart Association; the American Kidney Fund; and the American Dietetic Association. All cite the long-term health concerns of high-fat diets but concede that the short term weight loss benefits [of Atkins' diet] are real (2002-11-13).

During the interview, I was intrigued by Vicki's ability to judge between the two groups and so decisively take an active stance. To me, it seems like there is a large group of rather authoritative experts among Dr. Atkins' "sworn enemies" that warns against Dr. Atkins' approach. How could Vicki decide what group of experts to listen to? In order to

find out more about what Vicki found appealing in Dr. Atkins' approach I pretended not to be familiar with his work and tried to get her to describe it to me. Vicki's answer, however, did not help me much in understanding what Vicki found appealing about Dr. Atkins' approach:

- Jacob: OK, I don't think I am familiar with the Dr. Atkins...
- Vicki: OK, he's, he's a weight loss doctor and there's a lot of, he's got all these books that are, like, on the bestseller list and he's like totally opposite of the, like people should eat low-fat for their heart and everything and he says that actually, low-fat – that makes your heart problems worse! And that makes people fat too because, hmm, it makes the insulin... no? I try to remember... It makes the insulin go, and the insulin goes, I don't know, I'm not very good at that, but it's for...
- Jacob: So, the insulin...?
- Vicki: I think the insulin starts and you get hungry faster, you eat more... the insulin makes your fat, fat-cells be there more, fat be stored more, and there is some about, he says it makes the cholesterol worse, I think it is, some, anyways he says it's like bad for the heart... He says it's bad for heart-disease!

What Vicki exhibits here is an example of what seems to be one of the main antecedents to the participants' difficulties in assessing the trustworthiness of different expert systems. The expert lingo is usually rather specialized and uses a lot of technical terms, such as insulin, that are only vaguely familiar to the consumers. Furthermore, as Giddens (1990: 148) points out, incoming expert information is often fragmentary or inconsistent, as is the recycled knowledge which colleagues, friends, and intimates pass on to one another. The available information therefore becomes hard to deal with even though the participants express that they have grasped the main ideas. There were plenty of other occurrences in the empirical material of participants having a hard time reproducing the main ideas about the technical aspects of the particular expert system they were currently adhering to. For Vicki, maybe the difficulty in reproducing Dr. Atkins' ideas lay elsewhere than merely in having a hard time remembering the different technical specifications of his approach. It turns out that her belief in

Dr. Atkins perhaps stems from other influences than just having been seduced by his brilliant rhetorical technique:

- Jacob: And do you read these books by Dr. Atkins?  
Vicki: Hmm... no... I'm not really trying to loose a lot of weight but, I don't know, my brother, two of my brother-in-laws were doing that...

So even if Vicki does not seem to be an avid reader of Dr. Atkins books she believes in his message – or at least in her own version of his message. In one of the quotes above, Vicki refers to Dr. Atkins' books as being on the bestseller list and in this last quote she talks about how two of her brothers-in-law had used Dr. Atkins' books. So, while she has not really looked into Dr. Atkins' books herself she seems to believe in them since so many others do – a variation of the delegation of responsibility we talked about above.

Jörn, in chapter seven, gave a rather confused account of there being something fishy with the marinated meat but, as we can recall, in trying to explain what was problematic about the marinated meat he could not really remember what it was all about. In the following quote, Jörn exhibits the same type of confusion as with the marinated meat even though this time he is talking about something that he considers positive:

- Jörn: We buy Wapnö<sup>39</sup> milk instead of the other milk. And that's mostly because they have a closed system at Wapnö, you know. So the milk is much fresher! Fresher... they measure that somehow, but it was something like a number of something per unit of volume. It was only a fifth! Because it, like, goes directly from the cow's stomach into the system at Wapnö. So that makes it a little bit more expensive – but I still buy it!

Even though Jörn cannot account for exactly what is better with the milk from Wapnö he has caught on to the idea, which is heavily marketed by the Wapnö company on the milk cartoons, that the milk is somehow better. Jörn also gives other reasons for the milk's superiority such as the feature that you cannot only see what day the

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<sup>39</sup> A local dairy producer

milk has been milked but also the exact time. When I asked Jörn about the ways in which he used that particular piece of information he could not give any answer but merely stated that the more information the better. The type of scientific rationality described with help of Ritzer (1996) in chapter five has trickled down to the consumer level and each symbol of increased control and calculability, such as the exact date of milking, is read as something positive even if the consumers lack the tools necessary to use this information.

In chapter two I suggested that many of the available messages about food and health have the character of modern myths (cf. Barthes, 1969: 203 pp.) wherein the dominating natural science/medical discourse has the power to define the relationship between a certain food product and its alleged function on the body. In the cases with the expert systems, the lingo in which the messages are communicated in masks, from the consumers, that the causal relationship between a product's attributes and its alleged function on the body are usually far from linear. The claims being made by the various experts are usually grounded in scientific research of some kind and are thus, if one accepts the epistemological standpoint of the particular scientific community, in some sense 'true' (albeit open for revision). The consumers, however, usually lack the tools to assess this. Instead the messages about the products are held on a mythical level where the specificities of the particular claims are forgotten or turned into simple heuristics (cf. Rozin, 1998: 17). For Jörn, it does not matter that he cannot remember what "number of something per unit of volume" that "was only a fifth" due to Wapnö's closed system, and for Vicki the connections between Dr. Atkins' diet and the insulin are not that crucial. The main thing is that they have bought into the myth of Wapnö's and Dr. Atkins' superiority. In their day-to-day lives they have no desire to unmask these myths as they successfully helps them in building a protective cocoon and thus sustain of a viable Umwelt (Giddens, 1991: 129).

## Reasons To Deviate From The Norm

We saw in chapter seven how the participants spoke about their food consumption acts in different more or less idealized ways and how they

were striving towards consuming in ways they conceived of as 'Healthy Food Consumption'. In this chapter we have looked at expert messages influence in defining food products and consumption practices as being regarded as 'Safe', 'Risky' or their contradictions. One of the messages to take away from these analyses is that consumers have set up norms for themselves about how they are supposed to eat. As the consumers many times feel that they deviate from these norms they are searching for rational explanations that will justify these deviations. One way of doing this is to define a number of situations as 'special' where it is acceptable to deviate from the norm and where the 'ordinary' rules do not have to be followed. Jörn provides an example of doing this. He usually does not do the cooking at home; on the special occasions when his wife is not at home and he has to cook he therefore feels that he can disobey the rules:

Jörn: I stuff it [the food] with all those things that she [wife] doesn't think we should eat. Like cream and stuff, you know..."

Jörn agrees with his wife on the general idea that the family should try to limit the intake of cream, butter and other products high in fat as these are deemed 'Risky' by various expert and the consumption of these hence is defined as 'Not Healthy'. Since Jörn only cooks infrequently he thinks it is acceptable for him to add these products despite their status as 'Risky'. His justification is that he really is not much of a cook and that he therefore needs these 'shortcuts' to a better taste. He expresses worry that his kids might not like his cooking would he not use these 'forbidden' ingredients. He thereby manages to justify himself cooking in a way that he otherwise would have considered wrong.

The participants also make a distinction between what they refer to as 'everyday foods' and 'special foods'. Special foods are eaten at occasions where it, for various different reasons, is more accepted to deviate from the norm as in this excerpt from Sven-Olof's interview:

Sven-Olof: Well, if it's a birthday or father's day or, even better, a wedding day! I don't wanna take any precautions then because I do that the rest of the year [...] maybe it's chips with dip and all, you know – because it's a special day. But that day wouldn't be so special if you didn't care

about taking all those things into consideration the rest of the year [...] Regardless of what they say in the media and stuff about all the dangers and cholesterol and all the works... Because it, I believe that... the over-all pleasure it gives really makes up for it...

We see here that Sven-Olof allows himself to transgress the limits of 'Unhealthy Food Consumption' on these special days and indulge in "chips with dip and all" even though he is sure to point out that he is aware of, and have bought into, dominant messages about the potential unhealthiness of these foods. Sven-Olof, however, is not a dare-devil in any way and points out, in a very Lutheran way, that he first makes sure to take precautions the rest of the year and, knowing that he does that, he can indulge on these special days. Other types of special occasions include spatial dimensions where the participants expressed that they would allow themselves to eat in a different way when on vacation, or, as in the example below, when they were not in their hometown:

Pär: Or McDonald's and stuff like that. That only happens if you're someplace else, like in a different city or something. And needs to grab something quick... but it would never happen that we would go here...

The distinction between the normal, everyday behavior and these special occasions are very clear in the accounts from the participants. They seem to have no trouble in distinguishing between when it is acceptable to deviate from the norm and when normality reigns and precautions should be taken.

Göran has found an especially suiting way to justify that his present food consumption behavior deviates from the norm of healthy eating he has set up for himself. He is currently working as a chef and as part of his job he has to taste the food he cooks for the guests. The way he speaks about this issue reveals that this is something he has thought a lot about and that creates anxiety in Göran's life. He even refers to it as "one of my disasters in life" indicating that this is something he has strong feelings about.

Göran: Well, that is one of my disasters in life, this whole snacking thing [...] if I would quit that, then, then my health status would really have changed, like with my

weight and stuff, I really think so. I'm almost certain. And you always taste more than you really... it's really enough to taste just a little bit. You don't, like, have to strut around there and, you know, gormandize [...] because you can always blame things on that, you know, you have to taste it! And if someone asks, like 'Why did you do that?' you always tell them 'Never trust a skinny chef!' [laughter] or you say 'A man without a belly is like a house without a balcony!' Those are the two things you can throw in their faces...

Göran, albeit he cannot fool himself, has come up with a strategy to, jokingly, dismiss anyone who might have comments about his food consumption behavior. This defensive stance indicates that Göran is taking the role of the others passing judgment on him for not living according to the dominant ideas of how one is supposed to take care of oneself. Göran has thereby internalized these ideas to such an extent that he is forced to build up a standard defense should anyone question him about it. Feeling that just 'giving in' to his 'hedonistic side' would not justify his behavior he turns to a work related excuse expressing that he, in an almost heroic way, jeopardizes his own health in order to function in his professional life.

## Uncontrollable Urges to Consume

Another theme that was commonly played out in the interviews and that served as a justification for deviating from the norm was that the participants were, quite simply, overcome by irresistible urges to consume. Since the participants feel as if it is beyond their control when the temptations become too strong, these irresistible urges turn into the best possible justification for deviating from the norms. The urges would usually appear either as the participants were shopping for food or as they were engaging in some other activity where they were exposed to temptations without being able to take control over the situation. Brown and Reid (1997), in their investigation of Shoppers on the verge of a nervous breakdown, found that their informants many times felt an:

Internal struggle between the hedonistic and ascetic sides of themselves, between the overwhelming desire to have, to possess, to spend, to indulge and their ever-present, ever-prudent, ever-nagging

consciences, which remind them [of...] the number of calories in cream cakes, crisps and bars of chocolate. In short, between their Calvinistic and CalvinKleinistic inclinations. (1997: 118 pp.)

The, as Brown and Reid put it, 'hedonistic side' of the participants many times seemed to play a large part in the participants' day-to-day whereabouts. Not least the constant monitoring of this side and the efforts put into keeping it in check were talked about as energy consuming. There were some participants telling stories of how they would sit at work-related meetings and not be able to listen to anything said because they were devoting all their energy to not giving in to the urge to eat any of the cookies placed on the table in front of them. These stories challenge the notion of food consumption being an activity that takes place at a number of instances during the day. Instead, food consumption seems to be an ever-ongoing activity where consumers are either eating or engaging in active, purposeful non-consumption at every hour of the day. Some of the participants, such as Vince, revealed how they were unable to resist such urges:

Vince: If there is a doughnut or a roll in my eyesight it has to be consumed and I don't give a rip...

In the case with Vince, as in many other examples, the temptations the participants were exposed were something they just happened to stumble upon. Other times there were particular people that, seemingly with a purposefully evil mind, exposed the poor respondents to these hard-to-resist temptations:

Pär: Since we started here, I've had some trouble at this workplace, since Eva-Lisa, who is our assistant, she lives over here and she, like, stops by Haga Konditori<sup>40</sup>. And she would buy fresh rolls and they are just amazing! And they have all different kinds like its whole wheat, and French bread and all kinds of stuff and they are eaten here at around 10. And I could never handle that, you know, because I'd gain way too much weight, so... I don't eat that, but... But the others, they do it, they just eat tons here...

Jacob: But you attend the coffee-break?

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<sup>40</sup> Haga Konditori is a local bakery.

Pär: Yeah, yeah, I drink my coffee and, but I never eat the rolls here... I did that for a while and then we had to go on a diet this spring. I just couldn't take it, and you kind of get that, you know, so I stick to eating three meals a day.

For Pär, Eva-Lisa's attempt to create a nice atmosphere at the workplace is turned into an evil act of temptation. But Pär, who, if we recall what we learnt in the last chapter, is fighting against his fate as a potential fatso, has to show his stamina in constantly resisting Eva-Lisa's fresh rolls. For Pär, sticking to his strict three-meals-a-day-regimen helps him in resisting this particular temptation. In Pär's case the situation is turned around and he gets a possibility to show off his strong will-power to the other's at the workplace which reinforces the picture he has of himself as someone who has taken control over his own food-consumption which, as we discussed in the previous chapter, can lead to increased self-esteem (cf. Giddens, 1991: 66).

## Blaming Someone Else

Cheri gives us one last example of finding a justification for deviating from the norm. In her story of how her family eats she many times describe situations that she cannot control. She expresses a general feeling of some greater force steering her actions in an undesirable direction. In the following section Cheri justifies her family's frequent eating out habits by the fact that her family only has three members:

Cheri: ... but we eat out quite a bit just because there is just three of us and it is so hard to cook for just three people [...] So, for three of us you know, it's hard to cook for just three. So we find ourselves eating out a lot more than we eat here

In being forced to take her family out to dinner she thereby is drawn between Warde's (1997) antinomy between convenience and care. Cheri does not think it is worthwhile cooking for just three people and opts for going out to dinner for convenience reasons. She also explains to me that it was easier for her mother who had a bigger family to feed. But not only is Cheri forced to put at risk the family's well-being from a social standpoint by this behavior. In Cheri's world, the most nutritious food is the one she cooks for her family. When she is forced to go out to eat, the food might indeed be tasty but hardly as

nutritionally correct as the one she can cook at home. She thereby, as a consequence of having a small family, has to expose them to not only social risk but also physical risk:

Cheri: But that's the... you know, it's almost like a two part story because when we eat here [at home] I cook healthy but when we eat out that is not healthy, that is so unhealthy eating out!

Above, we discussed how Pär sometimes seemed to be stuck in between considerations of health and considerations of care. In relation to that, I suggested that there might exist a potential antinomy between not only the pairs suggested by Warde (cf. 1997: 55 pp.) but also along other dimensions. In Cheri's example we see yet another example of this as Cheri seems stuck in between considerations based on convenience rational and considerations based on health rationale which go outside of Warde's originally suggested convenience and care, and health and indulgence antinomies.

## The Syntactical Trap

Lévi-Strauss once wrote that food “must not only be good to eat, but also good to think” (quoted in Fischler, 1988: 284) referring to that in order to identify food, one has to be able to distinguish, order and classify the elements of which it consists. To provide the criteria whereby this classification is made there are various culinary systems or cuisines that offer rules ordering the world and giving it meaning. One way in which such a culinary system works is in ordering the syntax of the meal, i.e. what goes with what and at what times of the day. E.g. a Frenchman would think it odd to drink white coffee with dinner and an Italian would probably resent being served spaghetti for breakfast (Fischler, 1988: 285). This implicit syntax of meals sometimes causes trouble for the participants as they express feelings of being caught in a syntactical trap where they are forced to either eat things they do not wish to eat or are prevented from eating things they wish to eat.

During the interviews, many of the respondents expressed frustration that they could not live as healthily as they were aspiring to because ‘certain things go with certain things’ – i.e. there is a dietary syntax.

One example is Pär, who we have seen before is trying to serve more fish to his family. In the following quote we are invited to get a glimpse at some of the underlying reasons to why Pär's family has a hard time eating fish:

Jacob: Is there anything that you feel that you perhaps should eat less of?

Pär: Yeah, maybe pasta... But it's all connected, you know, because you don't have pasta with fish. Well, you could have it, I mean, there are... But if we would have eaten more fish we would have eaten less pasta and then we would have had a nice balance. Well, it's like this, you know, the kids... When Linus [son] moves out we're gonna have more potatoes and fish and stuff...

In Pär's universe pasta cannot be served together with fish. Consequently, Pär's family's fondness for pasta is turned into an obstacle to including fish in the diet. Not only does it prevent them from eating fish but it ruptures the entire balance of the diet. Just like in the example above, Pär is blaming his children for not being able to live according to his norm, thus again illustrating how he is pulled between considerations based on care for his children and considerations based on health.

Cheri, who, as we can remember from chapter seven, places the consumption of all fried foods in the 'Unhealthy Food Consumption' category, provides another illustration of being caught in the syntactical trap. Prior to this quote from Cheri's interview, she had told me about how much she likes to grill in the summer. Grilling burgers is, in Cheri's mind, the perfect way of preparing minced meat as she can buy the lean beef in the supermarket and then, as the meat is grilled she can "see how the remaining fat is dripping from the meat onto the grill as the meat is cooked". In the following quote, Cheri first reinforces how much she resents frying and then moves into how she, by the logic of the syntax of the meal, has to serve french fries with the burgers.

Jacob: So, is there any specific thing about fried food that you want to avoid?

Cheri: Just for health reasons. Plus it makes your house stink. We do have a deep-fat fryer with a lid on it and I just refuse to use it in the house anymore. We put it out in

the garage and use it when we use it for french fries and tater-tots. Because obviously with the little one [her 10-year-old daughter], you have to have french fries. You know, if you're having hamburgers on the grill, you got to have french fries to go with it.

Cheri hints that she perhaps might be able to conceptualize eating burgers without french fries. But due to the presence of her daughter she is caught in the syntactical trap and is thereby forced to serve french fries. In a similar vein, Gertrud is describing how she always likes to serve a vegetable with her meals. Like Cheri, she is talking about a cooking method that she finds particularly healthy, in this case steaming, and how she, again by the logic of the syntax of the meal, is forced to serve something she deems unhealthy with the vegetables:

Gertrud: Baked potatoes or mashed potatoes and always a vegetable. I always have a canned vegetable of some sort. I like to do steamed vegetable with... of course fattening butter on it, and of course salt and pepper. But, you know, you got to have... you can't completely cut your diet of no, you know, fat!

All these cases point to the problem of being caught in the syntactical trap in different ways that prevents the respondents from an eating pattern that they would deem altogether healthy; Pär cannot eat fish because the family likes pasta too much; Cheri is forced to serve french fries; and Gertrud just has to put “fattening butter” on her otherwise healthy steamed vegetables.

## Outside the Syntax

The above examples of the syntax of the meal all point to the problem of things either ‘not going together’ or having to ‘go together’. Another issue related to the rules of how a meal should be composed is that vegetables seem to reside entirely outside the syntax of the meal. In many of the consumption stories the meals described consist of e.g. meat and potatoes or pasta and sauce and only after that are vegetables remembered as exhibited by Pär:

Pär: [...] and then we always have some kind of vegetable. It's preferably Rut [wife] that's really good at remembering

that. I can forget to put it on the table, but it's there, we always have it at home. . There is always tomatoes, cucumber, lettuce and stuff, and it should be out there at each meal. And then we have to cut it up and place it on the plates, otherwise... they [the kids] won't take it voluntarily... We put it on the plates, you know, and then they have to eat it. And then they eat it right away so they have it out of the way [laughter].

When Pär talks about the vegetables it seems as if they are not part of the meal. He would probably not forget to put potatoes or meat on the table as those form the core of the meal. The vegetables, however, since they reside outside the syntax, can easily be forgotten. Pär, being aware of the problem of them forgetting the vegetables uses different strategies, such as putting vegetables on the plates when setting the table, to force the family into including them in the diet.

Noel also has trouble in incorporating vegetables into his meals. From chapter seven we can remember that Noel placed consumption of vegetables in the 'Healthy Food Consumption' category. This is further reinforced in this quote by Noel referring to the messages he gets from his doctor. Still, even though he tries to, Noel does not seem to be able to fit vegetables into his conception of a tasty meal:

- Jacob: OK, but in your typical rice and meat dinner would you have any vegetables there?
- Noel: No [laughter] I'm pretty bad about that, so [...] sometimes I visit the doctor, hmm, you know and we talk about that and like I said that's probably, probably the reason why I said, you know, I try and [...] expand my diet a little bit but for some reason I just, whenever I buy vegetables, like in a grocery store I just, I don't know, they either go stale or I don't use them or something...

Like Pär, Noel tries to force himself to an increased consumption of vegetables by buying vegetables when he goes grocery shopping. Unlike Pär, however, he does not cut them up and put them on the plate to force consumption, which leads to them not being consumed. Göran provides one last example of how the vegetables are not really part of the meal but something that one, at best, remembers to put on the table after the 'actual' dinner is prepared. Like the examples above,

Göran wishes that vegetables would have a “more prominent position” but seems unable to give them a place within the syntax of the meal:

Göran: Vegetables should have a more prominent position. Because usually it's like 'Whoops, vegetables' and then you run down to the freezer to see if you have something there or pop open a can of corn.

The suggestion that vegetables reside entirely outside the syntax of the meal perhaps gives some clues as to the inability of various information campaigns to get consumers to eat more vegetables. In chapter seven we saw how many of the participants placed the consumption of vegetables in the 'Healthy Food Consumption' category that they wished to consume more of. Still, there seem to be obstacles in the way of including vegetables in the diet. Visser (1999: 125) suggests that in the “*increasingly relentless hunt for health*” one thing you can do is to survey the world for a healthy culture and then elect to eat that culture's food. Even though Visser is perhaps stretching the limits of what is feasible for most consumers she taps into the area of the difficulty of adding or subtracting certain parts of one's diet while keeping the rest intact. Because of the inherent syntax of the meal there seems to be a resistance to such changes and, given that, perhaps changing one's whole diet is the only available means if one really wants to change.

## Compensatory Behaviors

Throughout the last part of this chapter we have seen how the participants are, for various reasons, forced to consume in ways they describe as 'Not Healthy' or even 'Unhealthy'. However, the participants take the norms they have set up for themselves quite seriously and oftentimes describe how they engage in compensatory behaviors when they feel that they have validated their own norms too strongly. In other words, they discipline themselves for not living up to their own norms. In the chapter seven under the heading 'Not Healthy Food Consumption' the following quote from Lovisa was presented:

Lovisa: [...] or when you have been eating a lot, you know... You've been on vacation and just yummy, yummy, yummy! And then you think: No, that's it – now it's time to go on a health-spree!

As discussed in connection to that, Lovisa talks in a way suggesting that eating too much of some particular food, her mother's home cooking in this case, could be classified as not healthy food consumption. When Lovisa has engaged in this type of consumption behavior she expresses that she has to compensate this by going on "health-spree". The media has come to normalize this type of compensatory consumption practice by frequently featuring articles with suggestive titles like "After the Holiday Gluttony – Detox!" (Amelia, January 2001). The participants seemed to have bought into this idea of having to compensate for the inadequacies in their diet by engaging in more or less temporary regimens. We can also remember how Pär, when he was talking about Eva-Lisa's rolls, described how he had to go on a diet after having been lured into eating rolls together with the morning coffee and thus breaking his three-meal-a-day regimen.

An aspect that surfaces when the participants talk about the changes they have made in their diets to close the gap between their ideal and factual eating patterns is that it is not enough to justify these switches with merely health-related aspects. Rather, they have to find other rationalizations for their choices. Warde (1997) introduces the tension between health and indulgence wherein consumers feel that they have to take both these contradictory elements into consideration. In the participants' stories, there are frequent references to how a particular change in food based on a health rationale have come to be a change that can now be based on a taste rationale. They have thereby not foregone any pleasure and indulgence in making this change and therefore feel that it is socially acceptable to a higher degree than otherwise would be the case. At one point in time they were thus forced to compromise and make changes in order to live a healthier life. These changes, however, were only temporally based on a health rationale as they express that they have come to favor the new regimen.

An illustration of this is given in the following interview extract from Mary wherein she talks about how she has come to prefer the new regimen of the healthier food products that she has substituted for the old ones:

- Jacob: Hmm, OK... So, were there any other specific things that you had to give up, or, when you changed your diet there eight years ago?
- Mary: Hmm, ice-cream... I can't eat ice cream [laughter] – *real* ice-cream. But I've gotten, to me the ice-cream is, I might just as well just slap it all over me anyhow cause its gonna make me bigger. Ahhh – but I love yogurt! So, I've, I've changed from the true ice-cream to the frozen yogurt. The, and... we'll go to one of the yogurt places rather than keeping it in the refrigerator. Like TCBY<sup>41</sup> isn't very far from here and they usually have a fat-free yogurt which is pretty good and now I'm probably to the point where I prefer that over the true ice-cream except for every once in a while you just got to have that craving for 'the real stuff' [laughter], you know...
- Jacob: And do you usually have it then, when you feel this craving?
- Mary: Well, actually, hmm... everybody around me, a lot of them... at this basketball tournament we were at, were having [ice-cream] in waffle cones, real ice-cream. Oh, I was just drooling and I... But this other girl and I, we went out, because they have an, in the place where they have it, there is an area on the second floor, which is where we were sitting, and you can walk all the way around, so we went out there during games and we were walking and I said 'if the ice-cream is out here you just push me and keep me going' [laughter] And I didn't have any! So I felt pretty good about that, I really did! Usually I can kind of work my way through it and it's not, it's not worth the calories that are in it and the fat that's in it. If you really, really get an urge then I'll have to give in and go and have a scoop of it some place.

The first thing to consider here is that Mary makes a distinction between real, or true, ice-cream as opposed to the frozen yogurt that she is now eating. There is thus different levels of ice-cream-like products with real, or true, ice cream on top and other inferior products like frozen yogurt below. Real or true ice-cream has positive connotations of a return to the 'good old days' where things were what they seemed. Logically, something that does not belong to the real or true category must be unreal or untrue, connoting a sense of phoniness to the frozen yogurt. The frozen yogurt, however, comes with the morally positive

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<sup>41</sup> TCBY, The Country's Best Yogurt, is an American frozen yogurt franchiser.

(given the current hegemony of lipophobic ideas in contemporary Western society, cf. Askegaard et al., 1999) but culinary inferior connotation of being fat-free.

Another aspect worth noting is how Mary talks about her consumption of ice-cream having a very direct effect on her body size. In chapter seven, I talked about how none of the respondent, except for the ones mentioned in the Mountain Dew section, gave accounts of how their food consumption physiologically affected their bodies. What I was talking about then was a direct physical feeling of how their bodies responded when they ate certain food products. With the notion of putting on weight as a consequence of food consumption it is an entirely different story. Mary says that she “might as well just slap it [the real ice-cream] all over [her] anyhow cause its gonna make [her] bigger”. This description gives the idea that she is not really willing to internalize the ice-cream; it is not really a part of her but instead becomes a part of the body that she does not want.

Although the frozen yogurt is comparably better, from Mary’s health perspective, than the “real” ice-cream it is still too tempting to be kept at home in the refrigerator. The frozen yogurt is thus stronger than Mary’s willpower and she knows that the only way to resist splurging too often on frozen yogurt is to not have it at home. She has thereby outlined a strategy for keeping her urges in check by using the heuristic to only eat frozen yogurt at frozen yogurt establishments.

Mary explains that she has come to a point where she probably prefers the fat-free frozen yogurt over the true ice-cream. This statement requires some more scrutiny as Mary also reveals that she sometimes get a craving for “the real stuff”. Why would you get a craving for “the real stuff” if you were entirely satisfied with the new stuff? If we recall the discussion of the value paradox from the beginning of this chapter it seems like frozen yogurt is the desirable – i.e. what Mary would like to like to eat. What she actually desires is the “real” ice-cream as suggested by her account of sometimes getting the “craving for the real stuff”. She thus experiences the tension between the desired and the desirable put forth by de Mooij (1998). Her hesitance towards the “real” ice-cream is understandable if one looks at her expectancy-value influenced reasoning towards the end of the quote where Mary explains that with

the “real” ice-cream “it’s not worth the calories that are in it and the fat that’s in it”. This calculation can be explained by Mary’s engagement in Weight Watchers. The Weight Watcher program builds on a technique of counting ‘points’ based on how many calories there are in certain food products. Mary explained to me during the interview that a large “real” ice-cream could count for almost 8 points, which, considering that Mary had a daily allowance of 23 points, does not leave much room for other types of food consumption.

When Mary talks about her craving for ice-cream it sounds like she is overcome by an uncontrollable urge (cf. Brown & Reid, 1997). She explains that “everybody around [her]” eats ice-cream and that she is the only one who cannot have it. In this way the consumer Gods are placing her under great temptations that she needs help to overcome. She gets help from her friend that need to physically steer her away from consuming the ice-cream. Mary thereby first tells us that she cannot control herself at home and therefore does not keep frozen yogurt at home. She then goes on to explain how she needs help from friends in order to not fall into the temptation of having ice-cream. When she shows this perseverance and does not fall prey to the temptations around her she is mighty proud as exemplified by her stating that she “felt pretty good about that”. But she finishes off by saying that sometimes, despite all these efforts, she cannot resist and has to “give in” and have a scoop some place.

## Chapter Ten

# The Everyday Anxiety of Contemporary Food Consumption

In this dissertation I have set out to look at how the globalized modern institutions connected to food consumption and health permeate the daily lives of consumers. There is an abundance of available messages about how and what we, as consumers, should and should not eat in order to stay healthy. There is also a wealth of products that make more or less clearly outspoken claims about how they can help consumers lead a healthy life. Still we know little about how consumers deal with the abundance of information they are confronted with on a day-to-day basis. In order to look at this from a consumer perspective I have studied how the claims made by different expert systems are reproduced in consumers' stories of food consumption. By adopting this approach, a consumer-near description of how these expert systems permeate and influence the daily lives of consumers is arrived at. Three areas have crystallized as important in the consumer stories and they have been dealt with in the three preceding chapters: how is healthy and unhealthy eating conceived of and spoken about in consumers' consumption stories; how does living under the shadow of all the messages provided by various experts resonate in consumers' stories of self-identity; and how do the consumers deal with the notion of risk in their stories of handling their day-to-day food consumption.

In concluding this dissertation I will bring out the main points to be taken away from the investigation and discuss in what ways they further our knowledge of the area of consumers' relations to food and health. In doing this I will start out by describing some of the peculiarities of food consumption in late modernity and how they affect consumers' views of food and health. These peculiarities have two parallel, but

interconnected, antecedents. The first one is the rapid changes that have taken place in the area of food production. These changes have made it increasingly hard for consumers to stay up to date on what the products are all about which has led consumers to have to increasingly place trust in various experts dictating what they should and should not do. The second antecedent to the particularities of food consumption in late modernity is the gastroanomic state we have reached. The traditional rules of how to structure our food consumption have increasingly withered away and it is today much more open for an individual consumer to structure her or his food consumption in accordance with the suggestion given out by different experts. Following this I will discuss how these developments have led to a situation wherein consumers have to develop their own dietary regimens based on salient information in their surroundings and how the pressure to be an aware and up to date consumer leads to an everyday anxiety.

## Food Consumption in Late Modernity

There is a peculiar dynamic to contemporary food consumption that in large stems from the societal development referred to as late modernity. As we can remember from chapter one, over the last decades the developmental tendencies of the modern movement have become radicalized. This radicalization leads certain social theorists to suggest that we have entered into a state of late modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991). One of the corner pillars of the modern movement was the increasing emphasis on scientific rationality and logical reason in explaining and understanding the world. As science and rationality gained in importance, other means of understanding and explaining, such as religion and superstition, were downplayed. Natural science was given a hegemonic status as the only tool through which one could understand the world and science should furthermore be put to work to develop the modern society to a better state through material progress. According to Giddens (1990), modernity can be set apart from traditional social order by a number of discontinuities, the pace of change being the first one. During late modernity the pace of change, especially in the technological arena, is extremely fast compared to earlier times.

Inherent in the modern project, and the consumer society so closely intertwined with it, has been the improvement of the quality of life by expanding consumption possibilities (Firat & Dholakia, 1998). In the realm of food, the notion of increasing the material progress for a long time meant that science should be put to use in order for the food industry to be able to produce more food. Until quite recently, finding techniques to increase the output was the dominant goal. This has been a very successful endeavor as convenient, un-expensive food is available at an arms-length distance at virtually all hours of the day. Undernourishment in the Western world is virtually unseen; rather the problems today are more related to overnourishment, especially among the low-income strata (WHO, 2000, 2002c).

Over the last decades there has been a gradual shift towards directing more attention to developing products with so-called added value. The particular focus of this trend over the last decade has been to develop products where the added value is supposedly health related. One of the main reasons for this is that we are starting to encounter the first serious ricochet of our abundant consumption practices. We have long heard horror stories about the ozone-layer, the pollution of the oceans, global warming, et cetera, but these scares have all been distant enough for us to let them bounce off the protective cocoons we build around us to ensure a basic sense of being in control (cf. Giddens, 1991). But now, with the food-related diseases, and especially the so-called noncommunicable welfare diseases, affecting our own bodies<sup>42</sup> we can look away no more. This is something that the food producers have picked up on and one of the dominant trends in the food industry is to develop high-value-added products with a focus on health (Heasman & Mellentin, 2001). The initial justification for this dissertation project was, as discussed in the introductory chapter, an ambition to find out more about consumers' stances towards such high-value-added products with a focus on health.

As the pace of change and technological development has picked up it has become increasingly hard for laypersons, as well as experts, to stay up to date on what the latest developments are and what all the new,

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<sup>42</sup> Food related diseases are portrayed as being one of the main threats to the well-being of the western world (IASO 1999; WHO 2002a)

product types, terminology, and sales tags introduced on the market are all about. This could be traced in the empirical material as a lot of different concepts were interchangeably used during the interviews such as 'organic foods', 'natural foods', 'functional foods', 'whole foods', 'genetically engineered foods' 'genetically modified foods', 'genetically manipulated foods' to mention a few. Even though these different concepts are by no means comparable - some of them have legal definitions, e.g. functional foods, some of them are ideologically value laden and hide a critique towards the developments in the food industry, e.g. genetically manipulated foods, some are characterized by their production method, e.g. organic foods or genetically modified foods – they were used in the same rough and ready way by consumers in their talk about food consumption. During the interviews, the participants had a hard time distinguishing between the different concepts and did not express any high motivation to do so. These concepts do exist, however, in the consumers' consumption universes and all the information about these product types, from media, from the producers, from the retailers, from the government, and from fellow consumers, trickle down to the consumers and become part of their more or less elaborated sense making. This sense making is complicated by the sometimes contradictory messages sent out by different expert systems. An example can be gathered from chapter seven where we saw that many of the participants were influenced by voices saying that natural foods are good and that there is something suspect with most processed foods making them, at least potentially, less healthy or perhaps even more unhealthy than the natural products. Due to the highly processed nature of high-value-added healthy products there might be somewhat of a contradiction inherent to these products due to the consumer links between naturalness and healthiness. The great market success of these products over the last few years suggest that there is still a large enough market for these products to be a healthy business opportunity (Heasman & Mellentin, 2001) but in the consumer universe, contradictions like these create a certain stress. All the information about new product types together with all the new information about products already on the market creates a situation for the consumers where they feel that they just cannot take it all in.

There is nothing inherently bad about the efforts to develop high-value-added food product, just like there is nothing wrong with improving

people's dental hygiene as is the case with the fluoride enriched chocolate-bars on the market in Japan (Rudérus, 1991). The problem is that it seems to be hard for consumers to keep track of and distinguish between these different products. In some cases there is almost an expression of resignation from the consumers as they find that they are caught in an endless maze of finding the perfect combination of foods so that they can continue to live their (supposedly) unproblematic lives. There are some further issues that can be raised with regards to food products making specific health claims. Little is known about what some of the more specialized high-value-added foods or other foods where a specific healthy benefit has been identified can do in a larger context; it is known that taking of several medications can nullify or amplify the effects of each individual one (cf. Beck, 1992). People do not live by medications alone but the various products that compose a diet might have the same effect. The kinds of meta-analyses needed to determine that are extremely hard to conduct (cf. Ravnskov, 1998). Furthermore, in the marketing communication the highly specialized healthy food products usually build on a false ontology wherein their magical power (cf. Bauman, 1992; Falk, 1996) is placed within the products rather than in the relation created between a particular consumer and the product at the moment of ingestion. This is an example of how these products, in the minds of consumers, reach a mythological status in Barthes' (1969) sense. In the semiotic system related to food there is no doubt that they stand in a relationship with a healthier future, it is thus in this system that they gain their magical powers. However, this tends to obscure the fact that they do not necessarily have the power to directly alter consumers' bodies.

## Placing One's Faith in the Experts' Hands

In the area of food there is not only a high pace of change but also a large scope of the developments, this is the second discontinuity that sets modernity apart from traditional social orders (Giddens, 1990). The large scope of the developments becomes evident in that scientific developments in food production are rapidly disseminated across the globe, or at least in the Western world, as a consequence of the food market's global character. Not only the production of the actual food is global in character; the particular meaning systems connected to the

area of food and health are also disseminated across the Western world. An example of such globally disseminated meaning systems is the discussion and critique of some of the modernized production techniques in farming. One particular case that surfaced during the interviews was the recent discussion about cattle farming and the risk of catching Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease as a result of eating beef (cf. WHO, 2002b). Even though no cases of so-called mad-cow's disease have been reported in either the US or Sweden, participants from both empirical locations brought up the topic and said that it was something they thought and worried about. The global diffusion of expert systems thereby leads to a situation where there is no need for a direct physical closeness of particular sources of anxiety for consumers to *de facto* be affect in their day-to-day lives.

All these developments in the area of food lead consumers to a situation where they have to place trust in various expert systems in order to make sense of their day-to-day lives. In the area of food and health there are many different groups involved in trying to influence consumers to betterment through correct nutritional decisions. Examples include governmental advisors telling us what we should and should not do and other authoritative organizations such as the American Dietetic Association. But there are also commercial enterprises playing a similar role such as Weight Watchers that have become an authoritative voice in their own right. There is also an abundance of messages available in the media about what consumers should and should not do. These messages could be categorized in an infinite number of ways and in the opening chapter I made an illustrative categorization of some recent headlines from the media intended to introduce the plurality of different available messages. The messages were divided into ones concerning things that we have previously been taught are safe that are all of a sudden being repositioned as risky. Other times, food that we have been taught that we should eat to stay healthy turn out to, by the latest studies, have no such effect. Even worse, from a consumer perspective, are the cases where foods that were previously loaded with positive health connotations are repositioned as something risky that will not only not boost the level of our health but even make it worse. On the positive side, the whole story is sometimes reversed where risky foods are repositioned as safe and consumption of foods that were never given the

status of elixirs-of-life get a chance to play that role, at least until further notice.

There are, as has been repeatedly pointed out, numerous sources providing guidance as to what we, as consumers, should and should not do. The messages are framed in different ways according to what health philosophy build the foundation for the particular claim. In all, we can conclude that there are multiple contrasting expert systems where such systems are defined as "*systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today*" (Giddens, 1990: 27). The meaning structure given to food has been skewed over the last decades to increasingly focus on the duality of medicine and poison (Falk, 1996). At least three distinct ways of speaking about the connections between food and health can be identified in the empirical material. These three discursive streams can also be identified in the public debates over the last decades. What is striking in the empirical material is that, even though these three ways of talking used to be quite distinct, the boundaries between the three groups have become blurred and most consumers seem to be simultaneously influenced by them.

The first group represents the traditional medico/scientific/nutrition discourse that rests on the conventions of traditional natural scientific methods. To lay-persons the way this group communicates is one of saying 'we know exactly what is right and wrong' and the picture they are painting appears to be black and white with foodstuffs, or consumption behaviors, being placed either as healthy and safe or as unhealthy and risky. This is reinforced by the fact that the results are many times reported 'as they happen' by reporters who have not grasped the sometimes ephemeral character of scientific facts (Rozin, 1998: 17). As a consequence of the frequent revisions of the presented facts, the consumers many times express skepticism towards these 'experts' as they appear to often be wrong. Nevertheless, the consumers spoke in ways that suggested that they found it reassuring that there were at least some 'facts' about food that they could think of as stable such as the evils of salt, fat, and fried foods.

The scientists working in the field are, hopefully and usually, aware of the status of their findings as being open to revision. From time to time

the scientist are not so scrupulous themselves in what seems to be, at least from an outside perspective, vain attempts to get the media attention that comes with reporting a new 'food scare'. An example is Professor Lennart Hardell from Örebro who has been dubbed the 'Swedish Cancer Alarm Champion' in media (Svenska Dagbladet, 2002-09-19a). A recent review of his scientific reports by a group of three researchers from other universities in Sweden show that he has had little support for the over 100 cancer alarms, some of which were connected to food and health, given out by his group of researchers over the last few years (Svenska Dagbladet, 2002-09-02). According to these critics, Hardell has a tendency to report scientific findings as if they were absolute facts even though they are not thoroughly grounded. These tendencies to twist results in order to create spectacular findings were further evidenced by Hardell's old boss, professor Lars-Gunnar Larsson who, in a recent interview (Svenska Dagbladet, 2002-09-19b), shared his very critical thoughts on Hardell's scientific rigor. Hardell's scientific status was further questioned by two independent researchers who critically examined his latest studies on the connection between the use of mobile phones and cancer (Boice & McLaughlin, 2002). All these critics point to the fact that for some reason Hardell is inclined to create big news that reaches the masses with his research. Professor Hardell is, luckily, an exception to the rule but the tendency for the medico/scientific/nutrition discourse to be highly specific and normative remains. Ordinary laypersons who lack the necessary means to assess the trustworthiness of these types of alarms are left with a feeling of there being an enormous amount of risks that we are faced with on a day-to-day basis.

The second way of speaking also stems from groups of experts and is one that has been on the rise over the last decade. These experts speak in voices saying 'We kind of know what is right and wrong but it is really complex'. While these experts also use the natural sciences as a basis for their discussion they are more open to looking at the issue of health and healthiness with regards to food from a more all-encompassing viewpoint. While still thoroughly grounded in traditional scientific thinking, although many times with a multidisciplinary approach, a view of health as a merely physiological state is eschewed. Instead, psychosomatic reasons for unhealth and other types of more or less holistic stances are taken where a consumer's life situation in a

wider perspective is focused upon rather than the more conventional cause-effect view proposed by the first group. This second discourse also tends to adopt and communicate various eastern philosophical views, usually around the theme of finding balance, on food and health. This way of speaking was frequently referred to by the participants in more or less vague sentiments about the necessity of keeping a balance. When queried about what this notion of balance implied the consumers usually only referred back to the necessity of getting the full picture without being able to explicate in more detail.

The last way of speaking is the more consumer-near discourse that speaks in a voice saying 'Help, we really do not know anything at all!' and is dominated by messages of the impossibility of being able to figure out what to do. In the light of the 'dietetic cacophony', to once again borrow Fischler's expression (cited in Warde, 1997), many consumers experience that everything is problematic to some extent and that whatever choice you make in structuring your consumption, no matter how well-grounded it might seem at the time, the pendulum might swing back and it could turn out that you have taken a wrong turn. The plethora of available messages is just so overwhelmingly large and diverse that it seems impossible to find any kind of common thread amongst them. This last discourse is conditional on the two previous ones; had it not been for the great plurality among these two the last one would not have anything to build upon.

These different discourses, in the particular versions they are understood, united, juxtaposed, and contrasted, are played out in various forms during the consumer stories of food consumption. And these stories, according to the proponents of a narrative approach to understanding consumers (cf. Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000), let us have a glimpse at how consumers build a narrative understanding of who they are as consumers, their self-identity. We can see in the empirical material that the participants were heavily influenced by a multitude of the aforementioned expert systems and easily intermingled them into their stories of food consumption. They were thus highly reflexive in appropriating the expert knowledge and readily incorporated new information into their ever-changing stories of who they are as food consumers. In chapter three I discussed the current situation where many consumers are living in a situation where the

choices of how to structure one's diet are not guided by one specific set of rules and regulations. Instead we are, according to Fischler (quoted in Warde, 1997), in a state of gastroanomy where the traditional gastronomical order has broken down and has not been replaced by another equally authoritative set of rules and regulations – the gastroanomic condition is a condition bereft of rules. Since we are in a state of gastroanomy, the way any one consumer chooses to structure her or his diet is open to a multitude of different possibilities. During the interviews, the participants talked about the way they structured their diet as being consciously thought out. Even though many expressed that they basically ate like others, e.g. the meat-and-potato eaters, and thus followed a tried and tested gastronomical pattern, they were sure to point out that they also included more specific features to their diets that made them unique. Since there is not one voice that automatically has the right to define what is right and wrong, the individual consumers have to make an active choice of what voice(s) to listen to. This many times leads the consumers to adopt more or less rigid dietary regimens. An interesting finding is thus that even the consumers that do not state *a priori* that they are following a certain regimen, as in the case with vegetarians or fruitarians, are many times following a rather strictly defined regimen anyway that they have patched together themselves from the available information. The consumers thereby act like *bricoleurs* who appropriate and reassemble the available cultural resources into personally meaningful patterns (cf. Hebdige, 1979: 103; Slater, 1997: 165). Even though there are multiple heterogeneous networks of combinations of different dietary styles the participants' ways of talking suggested that they were sticking to their described regimens. It should be remembered however that a frequent way of distinguishing one's present eating pattern was to set it apart from one's past eating pattern. It is likely that the strict regimens the consumers are adhering to today will also be reformed in the future and that the stability of the regimens might be somewhat overstated in the consumer accounts.

## A Consumer Perspective on Food and Health

Due to the complexity of the reflexive process in which consumers appropriate different expert notions in structuring their food

consumption, merely looking at food as either healthy or unhealthy does not nearly capture the richness, ambivalence and messiness that consumers express that they experience in figuring out how to eat on a day-to-day basis. In chapter seven, I therefore proposed a relational model of healthy food consumption, inspired by Greimas' semiotic square (cf. Nöth, 1990: 317pp.), that looks at the issue in terms of how the individual consumers talk about their food consumption practices. The healthiness of these consumption practices, in turn, is not determined by merely choosing a particular product but instead by an interplay between healthy and unhealthy products, cooking and eating. With the help of this relational model we could see that that the positively healthy eating practices were held as *ideals* of how to eat. The consumers were striving towards consuming more in that manner but on a day-to-day basis they sufficed with eating in ways they talked about as not unhealthy. The risk-avoidance ethos suggested by Beck thereby seemed to quite accurately describe consumers' stances toward food (Beck, 1992); the participants seem to be more inclined to try to avoid unhealthy foods than to search for positively healthy foods.

Throughout the interviews it could be identified that the consumers, in their stories of food consumption, built a coherent story of themselves as consumers. Two main ways of doing this were identified that were many times simultaneously employed by the participants. Either the participants connected themselves to a particular group of consumers or they set themselves apart from such groups. Again being inspired by Greimas' semiotic square I conceptualized the different identity positions of the participants as being between the assertion 'Like Myself' and its negation 'Like Others' and their contradictions. The participants many times expressed a certain tension as multiple sociocultural values of how to structure ones' food consumption were simultaneously putting pressure on them. On the one hand there is a pressure to connect one's food consumption to a larger group – to be 'Like Others'. At the same time it is not entirely acceptable to be merely 'Like Others' but one has to also have some unique traits – to be either 'Not Like Others' or 'Like Myself'. In order to reach a state of equilibrium where the particular participants felt comfortable different combinations of these, seemingly contradictory, strategies had to be balanced off. Another recurrent theme that emerged from the empirical material was that the participants seemed to want to distinguish their

present, enlightened, food consumption practices from their past, unenlightened, food consumption practices. One way of showing how one has ridded oneself of one's past bad habits was to talk about one's present food consumption as being 'Not Like Myself'. In these cases the 'Like Myself' position refers to one's past behavior. When the participants spoke of themselves as food consumers they many times stressed that they were aware of potential pitfalls that exist in constructing a diet and that they consciously tried to avoid those pitfalls.

An important part of the participants' life stories were the types of more or less rigid dietary regimens discussed earlier. As has been pointed out, these eating patterns might be quite consistent and precise even though they are not following an 'officially recognized' regimen such as veganism. The types of sacrifices the participants expressed that they made in order to follow their chosen regimen many times seemed to generate great pride. One such sacrifice that some of the participants made was to disregard the social aspects of food consumption. Instead of, as it is conventionally described, using food consumption to assert the oneness of the family they spoke of food in purely functional terms and described how they, due to different needs of different family members, ate differently from the rest of the family. It thereby seems like, in the wake of the gastroanomic condition created by e.g. the dissolution of the ritual of the family meal, a certain asociality has entered the food scene.

When the consumers are faced with the multiplicity of available messages of the relations between food consumption and health sent out by various expert systems they have to adopt certain coping strategies. In chapter nine, Greimas' semiotic square was used to map the different meaning positions of different products and behaviors and to show how these positions might fluctuate depending on incoming information. In talking about the different expert messages and how they affected the views of food products and consumption behaviors the consumers either positioned them as the assertion 'Safe' or its negation 'Risky'. Due to the enormous assortment of available messages with contrasting opinions, many of the participants choose to adopt the somewhat more mellow meaning positions of categorizing products or behaviors as either 'Not (Really) Risky' or 'Not (Really) Safe'.

Oftentimes a resigned position is taken where the consumers suffice with stating that they cannot really know anything, as the experts seem to be changing all the time. The pragmatic logic for consumers becomes to assume that the products or behaviors are neither as risky nor as safe as the experts claim. As was previously mentioned the participants also adopt different coping strategies such as trying to vary one's diet as much as possible to, hopefully, balance out different potentially harmful substances, or choosing to listen to one group of expert while closing one's ears to all other messages.

We have seen how the participants many times have an idealized consumption practice that they are striving towards and how the self-identity of the participants is jeopardized when the consumers feel that they are unable to live up to their idealized consumption practices. It is not acceptable for the consumers to merely ignore these discrepancies but instead they have to come up with different discursive strategies to motivate – both to me as an interviewer and to themselves – why they are not living according to their own norms. Two main strategies of motivating one's deviance can be identified. The first strategy is to define certain situations as so special that precautions do not have to be taken. The second strategy is to place the control, and hence the responsibility, of one's food consumption outside the control of oneself. A peculiar way of doing this is to express that one is caught in the so-called syntactical trap. This is a situation where, due to the logic that certain foods 'go together' and certain foods 'do not go together', one is unable to live according to the norms.

When the consumers are trying to live according to their own norms of how to consume they many times express that they are forced to make sacrifices in the gastronomical quality of their diets. Sometimes this is framed as something positive in a Lutheran manner; one should suffer in order to stay healthy. But there are also examples of the opposite where the consumers feel that they have to excuse themselves for eating in ways they perceive as healthy. Explanations for this behavior can be found in the antinomy between health and indulgence suggested by Warde (1997: 78 pp.). Both health and indulgence are important values in our society and it is not socially acceptable to ignore either one of them. The consumers thereby had to come up with strategies to

motivate their seemingly health related food decisions on other, more hedonistically based, rationales.

## Choosing Health?

Overall it seems like consumers are experiencing an everyday anxiety due to the salience of food and health related questions and the difficulties involved in finding pertinent answers to those questions. In chapter one I suggested that there might be a paradox hidden in the search for healthiness. Consumers are faced with an unprecedented amount of information about what and how to consume in order to stay healthy. Intuitively one might thereby draw the conclusion that today it would be easier than ever to be able to put together a healthy dietary regimen. In the empirical material the consumers express an almost opposite sentiment as they feel lost amongst all the available information. Thus, the increased availability of information does not lead to an increased sense of control but instead to an increased sense of not being able to stay in control. The information leads the consumers to feel that the knowledge of how to control their bodies is thrown into radical doubt (cf. Shilling, 1993: 3).

As Beck (1992: 35) suggests, risk seems to overshadow positively good things in guiding the lives of the consumers. One of the remaining pictures of the participants in this study is that they feel anxious since every meal is a compromise where a potentially better choice could have been made; the 'I am what I eat' sentiment introduced in chapter one turns into 'I want to become what I wish I ate'. Instead of being able to use the available information to reduce the anxiety of how to consume, it is used as a benchmark setting a standard that the consumers express they are constantly failing to live up to. For consumers, eating in a healthy manner usually is more about expelling future threats than to cure a present condition (cf. Falk, 1996). The consumption game involved in trying to eat healthily thereby becomes one where the status at each point of time becomes hard to assess. It is hard for consumers to evaluate whether, to use the metonymic constructions from the empirical material, eating "carrots and celery" and forsaking "pizza and stuff" today will make a difference tomorrow. The participants express that they find it aggravating that one never gets to know whether one

has really lived up to one's health potential or not. There is, seemingly, always a better road that could have been taken in retrospect had one only known beforehand what kind of information one would be bombarded with in the future.

As consumers living under the constant assault of the neo-liberal gospel that freedom to choose is something good, and as researchers in the interpretive tradition where consumer agency has traditionally been stressed, we have been indoctrinated with the message that consumers today are free to choose the way they want to consume (cf. Murray, 2002). It is sometimes suggested that today consumers can supposedly liberate themselves from the market by engaging in various constructive consumption practices (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In the case of food consumption, at least according to the respondents in this study, this freedom to choose among the plurality of products available on the market is not altogether a positive aspect. Due to the hardships involved in knowing what to choose the consumers instead feel that this creates an anxiety. In the area of food and health, consumers are not free to choose. Rather, they are obliged to do so among the strategies and options provided by the different available expert systems in order to construct a coherent narrative of the self (cf. Giddens, 1990: 124). The freedom to choose turns out to be, to again borrow the expression used by Askegaard et al. (2002: 810), "*janus-faced*". Choosing healthy products, healthy cooking and healthy eating by reflexively incorporating the available messages of food and health is made into an obligation to choose the 'right' way of life. In this way, changes in intimate aspects of personal life are directly tied to the establishment of globalized expert systems (Giddens, 1991: 32). This type of concern for self-fulfillment is not, according to Giddens (1990: 124), just a narcissistic defense against an externally threatening world, over which the individuals have little control, but also part in a positive appropriation of circumstances in which globalized influences intrude upon everyday life.

As we have talked about earlier, being concerned about the state of one's health is not something optional. Many contemporary discourses about health frequently suggest that not following the proposed regimens will lead to the breakdown of the welfare system. Oftentimes suggestive framings are used about dietetic wrongdoers being "A threat

to society”, or that “We are standing in front of a galloping fat-epidemic” and how “Our kids are going to die before ourselves from type II diabetes and heart disease” (Aftonbladet, 2002-11-05). When we believe that this knowledge is held by everyone, we are led to believe that others are watching, monitoring, and judging us and thus behave accordingly. Consumers are not free to act any way they wish as they experience being under the constant ‘gaze’ of others monitoring their behavior (cf. Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1987), suggests that modern society can be regarded as a panoptical society where individuals constantly supervise and control each other. Instead of the *post facto* physical mutilation of the dark ages, supervision and exercise of power is today characteristic of the entire modern society and its institutions (cf. Johansson & Miegel, 1996: 141 pp.).

## Concluding Remarks

In concluding, things could be summarized by saying that in the empirical material we could see that the talk in Nebraska is, at least to a large degree, similar to talk in Sweden. The common denominator is the omnipresence of globalized health messages in speaking of food; the participants seemed unable to speak about virtually any aspects of food without explicitly or implicitly intermingling value laden propositions about foods’ potential healthiness. It should be pointed out, however, that just because people talk the same talk they do not necessarily, or even probably, walk the same walk. To establish that two consumers speak in a similar way does thereby not suggest that they act in a similar way. This is not only true for comparisons between the two empirical sites but also within both Sweden and Nebraska. We could see in chapter seven that the different consumers referred to quite different things when they talked about e.g. healthy eating.

There were also some more marked differences between the two empirical sites. As I pointed out in chapter six, this study is not designed to find cross-cultural differences between the US and Sweden. Still, a few comments on the findings that addresses these issues will be given here. First, the lack of sociality found among the Nebraskan participants, discussed in chapter eight under the heading ‘The

Asociality of Gastroanomic Food Consumption', was not nearly as clearly outspoken among the Swedes. In the empirical material from Sweden eating together as a family was played out as a prominent, albeit many times only implicitly mentioned, theme during the interviews. Among the Americans, functional justifications were many times used to explain why the families did not eat together. In one of the Swedish interviews where the functionality of food was a recurrent theme – the interview with Pär – he managed to turn even the dieting into a quaint family happening bringing the family closer together, thus reinforcing the sociality aspects of even highly functional eating patterns. Pär even spoke like a proud father bragging about how the family had lost a total of 25 kilos during their last round of dieting.

A plausible reason for the Americans' starker focus on the functionality of food is given by the fact that previous studies have shown that in the US people have a more cause and effect view of diseases (Rozin 1998). An illness is seen as caused by some external stimuli and by dealing with that stimuli the effect of it will deteriorate. In Europe illnesses are more viewed as a result of some internal imbalances. Recommended treatments are therefore more holistic in the sense that they emphasize the totality of a person's well-being including such factors as the potential positive psychological effects of sharing a meal. Rozin (1998: 21) also speaks about Americans as being worry oriented when it comes to food whereas French are more pleasure oriented; he concludes that *"the trade-off between pleasure of eating and long term health is not nearly as stark as Americans make it out to be"*. Other studies have also implicated that there is a fundamental difference between how Europeans and Americans view food consumption. In the abovementioned study by Askegaard, Jensen and Holt (1999) the authors discuss this with regards to consumption of fat where Danes had a relatively more gastronomical way of speaking about fat than the Americans. Although it seems impossible to speak of food without talking about health among both Nebraskans and Southern Swedes, the tendency to use a more scientized lingo and have an even more functional orientation towards food consumption was found also in this study.

It can furthermore be gathered from this study that consumers are highly inclined to absorb vast amounts of information and reflexively

use it in organizing their everyday consumption activities. It would be unwise then to suggest that information campaigns by public policy makers are meaningless. The connection between the communicated information and the resulting consumption practices are far less linear and more ambivalent, however, than what the logic of consumers as rational decision makers in the spirit of Homo Economicus would suggest (cf. Fürst, 1988; Halkier, 2001). It is unfortunate then, that this is the logic that most information campaigns by public policy makers seem to rest on. The problems described regarding the state of the consumers' health are reduced to being merely information problems. The idea that consumers, given effective communication, would choose the 'healthy' alternative suggested by whomever is behind a specific information campaign finds little empirical evidence. It is unlikely that even the most cunning information campaign, no matter how intriguing the framing may be, will be able to change consumers much more than previous health campaigns. What we are dealing with here are not uninformed consumers fumbling around for lack of better knowledge or suitable consumption opportunities. Instead, it is highly knowledgeable and even at times motivated consumers being aware of what they should be doing and the consequences for not doing so. The Homo Economicus logic of most information campaigns only works as long as food consumption takes place in a sterile world of controlled eating behavior. But that is not the context in which food consumption takes place. Studies of food consumption must be re-contextualized to the situations in which it occurs, i.e. in situations where consumers are overcome by uncontrollable urges (Brown & Reid, 1997). It seems like the crux of the matter, with regards to healthy eating, is that the potential long-term gratification of consuming what various expert groups deem healthy does not stand a chance against the assured short-term gratification of polishing off yet another Big Mac.

Perhaps some of the answers to the questions of how to understand more about exactly how consumers reflexively appropriate expert knowledge can be found in furthering the methodological approaches to the study of food consumption. In this study, by looking at how consumers talk about their food consumption, we have arrived at a consumer-near description of the relationships between food consumption and health. An interesting way of furthering the knowledge of consumers' relationships on food and health would be to

adopt the type of *consumption studies* described by Østergaard and Jantzen (2000: 18 pp.) as the fourth perspective of consumer behavior research. This type of research moves the focus away from the individual's consumptive patterns to instead conceive of individuals as tribe members and study the interaction between such members. Such an approach would place more emphasis on observation of individuals rather than to rely solely on interviews and could thereby shed more light on the highly social activity of food consumption.



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## APPENDIX A – Letter to Consumers

### Dear Consumer

My name is Jacob Ostberg. I am a Ph.D. student from Lund University in Sweden. This year I am visiting the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, as an exchange student. I am asking you to participate in an interview for my research project. This research project deals with consumers' food habits and is part of my Ph.D. dissertation work.

I will be asking you about your thoughts, feelings and behaviors concerning food. I would like to interview you one time at your convenience. The duration of the interview will be between one and one and a half hour.

Participation is totally anonymous and confidential. I will not give your name or any information about you to anyone else at any time. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding the study. My office number is (555) 472-3279, and my home phone number is (555) 436-8967. My e-mail is [jacob.ostberg@fek.lu.se](mailto:jacob.ostberg@fek.lu.se).

Thank you for your cooperation!

Jacob Ostberg

## APPENDIX B – Profile of Participants

Table B.1: Profile of US participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education	Description
Barry	27	PhD-student	Graduate school	Married, one daughter
Cathy	33	Secretary	College	Singel parent, one daughter, marathon-runner
Charlotte	42	High-School teacher	College	Married, two daughters
Cheri	34	School Secretary	High-school	Married, one daughter
Sabrina	37	Day-care teacher	High-school	Divorced, two daughters
Darrel	29	Real-estate agent	MBA	Married, one son, Mormon
Don	68	Retired carpenter	High-school	Widower with new “girl friend”, no children
Greg	42	Accountant	Bachelors in business	Married, no children, catholic
Jeff	54	Staff manager hospital	PhD in Biochemistry	Married, two sons
Mary	52	Accountancy Secretary	High-school	Married, two sons, of German descent
Mick	33	Gas-station worker	High-school dropout	Single with girlfriend(s), lives alone, no children
Nancy	45	Staff manager hospital	MBA	Married, three children
Nikki	57	Bank employee	Occupational college	Married, one child
Noel	29	Foreman state office	Bachelors in engineering	Single, of Filipino descent, no children
Ralph	38	Law assistant	College	Married, two children
Rosemary	64	Retired dental-nurse	College	Widow, raised six children, diabetes since three years.
Susan	28	Teacher	College	Married, one son, Mormon
Tommy	25	Factory worker	High-school	Single, no children
Vicki	48	Administrator state office	Bachelors in history	Married, two sons, catholic
Vince	32	Bank employee	College	Divorced, two children

Table B.2: Profile of Swedish participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Education	Description
Ingbritt	66	Freelance writer	College	Divorced, retired, one daughter, globetrotter
Bo	55	High-School Teacher	College	Second marriage, athletic, two children (vegetarians)
Bärne	52	Fire-man	High-School	Married, two children, triathlete
Gertrud	65	Bank clerk,	High School	Married, two children, old-fashioned
Gunilla	31	Assistant nurse	High School	Co-habits, two children
Lovisa	26	Student	Undergrad in Social Studies	Single, no children
Jussi	63	Retired army officer	Military school	Married, two children, used to strict 'military eating'
Jörn	43	High-School Teacher	College	Married, one child, used to be a vegetarian
Katrin	30	Social worker	College	Single, no children
Leif	28	Bank teller	Community college	Single with girlfriend, no children
Kerstin	29	Occupational therapist	College	Married, one daughter
Loa	34	Physiotherapist	College	Married, no children
Maj-Britt	26	Assistant nurse	Unemployment education	Single, no kids, timid
Margareta	64	Elementary Sc. Teacher	Occupational College	Married, two sons
Marianne	54	Assistant nurse, teacher	High School	Cohabits with new man, two children
Pär	46	R&D manager	PhD in Social Science	Married, three teenage children
Göran	32	Chef	'Chef College'	Married, two children
Runo	27	Student	College	Single, no children
Hildur	78	Retired shoe-saleswomen	Elementary School	Widow since 7 years, three sons, farmer's daughter
Sven-Olof	46	Buss-driver	High-School	Married, two children

## APPENDIX C - Ethics Protocol

### Ethics Protocol

Hi, my name is Jacob Ostberg. I am a doctoral student at the University of Lund in Sweden. Currently I am spending a year as a visiting scholar at the Department of Marketing at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

I am the principal investigator of this project and I may be contacted at phone number: (402) 472 – 3279, or e-mail: [Jacob.Ostberg@fek.lu.se](mailto:Jacob.Ostberg@fek.lu.se), should you have any questions.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your participation is very much appreciated. Just before we start the interview, I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several very definitive rights:

First, your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.

You are free to refuse to answer any questions at any time.

You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team, i.e. to me and my supervisors.

Excerpts of this interview may be made part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that I have read you its contents.

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(signed)

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(printed)

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