Negotiations at the Crossroads: Compromises Concerning Food and the Meal among Contemporary Swedish Consumers

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Introduction

Having to plan for shopping, cooking food and arranging for a meal, is perceived by many contemporary Swedish households as a time-consuming task that has to be squeezed in between work and other activities. These households negotiate a variety of expectations concerning food consumption and the meal. In households with children, decisions concerning food and meals are influenced by them. There are thus many of conflicting expectations that have to be dealt with in order to get food on the table.

First of all, the food that is presented is expected to be nutritious, tasty, easy to prepare, reasonable in price, and suitable for all family members. Sometimes the health situation of different members of the household has to be borne in mind – such as, for example, when a member suffers from diabetes, for example, or has a preference for vegetarian food. At times, it is simply a matter of taste, dislike of certain foods or having ‘picky eaters’ to deal with that influence decisions concerning what to eat and what food is to be avoided. Moral and ethical considerations are also part of the agenda and many consumers are concerned about the environmental implications of eating ‘organic food’. These different expectations are often perceived as conflicting, implying that compromises have to be reached within a family context. The contemporary dining situation is thus perceived as being full of paradoxes, confusions and dilemmas about what to eat.

1 ‘The Creators of the Meal’, on which this paper draws, is part of a four year interdisciplinary research programme called ‘Meal and lifestyle’ consisting of 14 independent research projects, each one focusing on different aspects of food. ‘The Creators of the Meal’ is a collaborative project between business and Academia. One retailer and four wholesalers are participating. The project started in 2007 and will end in 2010. It is financed both by research grants and the participating companies. I would like to acknowledge HUR, Handelns utvecklingsråd, which is financing part of the study.


‘Traditional’ attitude models⁴ are now considered to be blunt tools when seeking to understand actual behaviour and are regarded as ineffective in trying to explain the gap between attitude and behaviour, or intentions and practices. This is not only a theoretical problem which is discussed in consumer behaviour literature; it is also a practical problem that retailing companies and market researchers in the grocery sector have explicitly noted. It is well documented that what consumers express as important to them in terms of food choice is far from consonant with their actual choice. The questions as to how this gap can be understood, and how can it be narrowed are of central importance in this paper.

In order to understand the complex processes guiding actual behaviour in relation to food choice, food is viewed in a social and cultural context.⁵ This perspective regards food and the meal as a social act defining and redefining relationships with ‘people that matter’.⁶ Planning a meal, cooking food, and taking the individual preferences of members of the household into consideration, can be a rather difficult task. Deciding what groceries to buy is not only a question of one’s intentions towards the groceries as such, but also involves managing several conflicting considerations. Thus, a central question of this study is: What considerations are taken into account by consumers when choosing food and making arrangements for the realisation of their meals?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study, which aims to understand how the discrepancy between attitude and behaviour is negotiated among contemporary Swedish households, is Warde’s⁷ antinomies of structural oppositions about cultural values mobilized to make decisions about what food to choose. Warde structured food-consumption tendencies between bipolar oppositions. The results from his study were organised around following antinomies:

- Health and Indulgence
- Novelty and Tradition
- Economy and Extravagance
- Convenience and Care⁸

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The first antinomy, *health and indulgence*, refers to the contradiction involved in nurturing a desire to ‘pig out’ while eating healthy food. The anxiety about eating unhealthy food, often during weekends, is compensated for by eating in a healthy fashion during weekdays.

The second antinomy, *novelty and tradition*, refers to the contradiction inherent in seeking variety by means of new dishes while at the same time wishing to stick to well-known traditional foods.

The third antinomy, *economy and extravagance*, is indicative of the conflict between the moral issue of being a thrifty consumer, trying to save money on behalf of the household, and giving in to something extra, called the ‘treat’.9

The forth antinomy, *convenience and care*, reflects the meaning of the time aspect involved in cooking. Cooking a ‘proper’ meal is considered ‘an act of love’, a devotional rite. However, the preparation of a home-made meal is also time-consuming. Thus buying a ready-made meal is an alternative mode of meal provision for contemporary consumers, when ‘saving time’.

In Warde’s analysis, one conclusion reached was that class still determines intentions and practices in relation to food. The changes in taste that have occurred depend on the emergence of a postmodern society where people seek new identities and social belonging through conscious consumption-patterns and eating habits.

A Finnish study undertaken by H. Leipämaa-Leskinen10 which had applied the antinomies of structural oppositions as bipolar food consumption-related contradictions, also guided this study. This survey of Finnish consumers identified possible contradictions in their food-consumption profiles as it showed that consumers prefer to engage in food-related activities that are aesthetical, healthy, tasty, convenient, caring and economical, but at the same time put forward significant reasons for not being able to fulfil these desires.

Despite consumer dilemmas emerging inductively from the analysis of the consumer data, Warde’s theory11 and Leipämaa-Leskinens application of that theory,12 have inspired the identification of the dilemmas found in the empirical data under analysis here.

**Methodology**

Different qualitative methods derived from a consumer panel of thirty-seven Swedish households, followed over a two-year period, were applied. Households with small children, teenagers, and ‘empty nest’ households were selected.

The consumers were interviewed at the beginning of 2008. Shop-along studies were pursued with each of the households in the fall of 2008 and this was complemented by

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11 Warde, *op. cit.*  
12 Leipämaa-Leskinen, *op. cit.*
the collection of shopping receipts over a two-week period. In order to reveal associations and bring up emotional responses towards food and the meal during the interviews, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) – a projective technique, to bring forward consumers deep, latent, and emerging thoughts and feelings – was applied.

The idea behind the use of metaphors is that representation of one thing in terms of another is fundamental to thinking and knowing. The method is based on an assumption that the greater part of the thought process is subconscious, and ZMET is designed to elicit rich data and uncover ‘hidden knowledge’ from the realm of the subconscious.

Despite Zaltman’s recommendation that the respondents themselves should be allowed to collect the images representing their thoughts and feelings towards the research topic – in this case, food and the meal – the research group engaged in this study decided to pick a pool of twenty-five pictures for the interviewees. What this amounted to in practice was, that the consumers were instructed to choose between three and five pictures of the twenty-five food and meal images supplied, to which they responded in either a positive or negative fashion.

This methodological approach was used as a complement to more traditional research methods such as conducting in-depth interviews. Thus the main reason for preparing a pool of pictures that the respondents could choose from was that another study had shown that by preparing the images in advance less time was required of the interviewees in order to carry out the research.

In the study under discussion here, this approach elicited unconscious, non-verbal thoughts and feelings concerning the meal and food choices. In the majority of the interviews the pictures chosen supported the results from the interviews, but in a few cases it revealed paradoxical dilemmas which the consumers themselves also recognised.

**Households**

As already stated, the empirical data emanate from a consumer panel consisting of thirty-seven households all located in Stockholm and its suburbs, which were followed over a period of two years. The types of household involved were as follows:

- 13 households with small children
- 12 households with teenagers
- 12 so-called ‘empty nest’ households (children had recently moved out)

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13 In a shop-along study the researcher follows the respondents on an ordinary shopping trip, asking questions about the choice of groceries as they as they are purchased. Additional interviews are to be conducted in 2009.
15 Zaltman, *op. cit.*
17 Kniazeva, *op. cit.*
Choosing families with children and teenagers is motivated by an idea that dilemmas occur more often in households were conflicting expectations have to be taken into account. The ‘empty nest’ households are also of interest because it can be expected that, as the children are no longer at home, meal habits have changed.

The results from the first round of interviews and the shop-along study with the consumer panel are now presented below.

Consumer Dilemmas

This article argues, in line with the Finnish study\textsuperscript{18} that contradictions are an inseparable part of the human condition and of contemporary forms of consumption. In making food choices these contradictions are explicit. The interviews highlighted various dilemmas faced by consumers when choosing which groceries to buy and consume. The dilemmas are not antinomies in a strict sense, but rather paradoxical situations which the consumers recognise as being problematic. In everyday life consumers negotiate conflicting expectations around these identified dilemmas.

However, the structural oppositions found in the data used in the Finnish study differed from the antinomies presented by Warde.\textsuperscript{19} The reasons for this are many and varied, and include the fact that the empirical data on which the Finnish study was based, were compiled more than two decades apart, and, even more importantly is the fact that the cultural context, in which the two sets of data were assembled, was considerably different. Current trends in media debates concerning food focus especially on individual aspects, such as health and obesity, but social facets are also discussed, especially those dealing with environmental matters and fair trade products. Furthermore, debates about ‘organic’ and locally-produced food are also flourishing.

In the study under discussion here the structural dilemmas identified concern the following antinomies:

- Price and Quality
- Time and Ambition
- Originality and Children’s expectations
- Organic food and Environmental friendly food

A discussion of the empirical data with reference to the different dilemmas listed above is now presented.

\textsuperscript{18} Leipämaa-Leskinen, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{19} Warde, \textit{op. cit.}
Price and Quality
Several households expressed a dilemma concerning the price-level of the groceries they buy and the quality they get. The consumer quoted below considered quality to be important when feeding her five children, since she regarded it as her responsibility to provide the children with nutritious food and good eating habits. She had become more concerned about this after having watched a programme called ‘You are what you eat’, on national TV. Despite her ambition to provide her children with good quality food she sometimes had to compromise and buy cheaper food, depending on the amount of money the household could afford each month for grocery shopping. She stated:

If I have the possibility to shop in bulk, if I have that much money, then I buy one chicken dish per week and maybe one meal that includes cod. Semi-manufactured dishes I try to avoid completely. That is because they contain so much junk. But, if you are poor, the sausage is damned cheap (Woman, 41 years old, five children).

In a somewhat similar Danish study, twenty families were interviewed about daily food-related practices and ideas. The study showed that the respondents had both positive and negative opinions about processed and unprocessed food. Positive opinions about food quality concerned aspects of convenience and taste while negative considerations dealt with the way food was processed and distributed. The study showed that concerns about food safety were intrinsic to concepts of food quality and hence reflected compromises that families made in everyday life rather than the consumer preference as such.

The dilemma between quality and price is explicit in the arguments put forward by consumers when they explain why they choose not to buy ‘organic’ food. For some the higher price that has to be paid for ‘organic’ food is simply not worth its so-called ‘green’ quality, and there are many ways of justifying the decision not to buy ‘organic’ foodstuffs. One consumer explained her situation as follows:

I try to buy ‘organic’, but I really think it is rather bad. It often stays on the shelves, and becomes bad, and, besides, it is quite expensive. So then I do not buy it (Woman, 45 years old, four teenagers).

Other consumers, however, argue that the higher cost involved in purchasing better quality products is worth paying:

Food habits for me have changed during the last five years. I buy more quality than quantity now, smaller sizes and higher quality products. The quantities I bought before were actually larger. But it depended on the size of the household; there were more household members. And then I did not have the same amount of money at the time. It is hard work to carry home milk for five people. I tried to make the money last. When you have three teenagers at home it is like big black holes you have to fill. I think, unfortunately, that it is quite impossible for many people to eat organic food. A better [more competitive] price

for organic food would be welcome (Woman, 51 years old, five children in the extended household, four children had moved out).

For this woman, eating organic food became possible when she remarried, after most of the children had left home. She mentioned several times that every consumer should be able to afford organic food.

**Time and Ambition**

For many consumers, dinner is squeezed in between different activities; hence they consider time to be a scarce commodity. For the woman mentioned below, it was easier to cook proper food when she was unemployed, as she then had more time to cook and to make ‘good’ food. In this situation it was possible to enhance the household dinner experience and to keep family life intact. She said:

> Very much in everyday life concerns food. You go home from work, you cook, and then you relax at home. It was easier when I was on sick-leave and unemployed because then I could cook a different kind of food. Then I could make casseroles during the day because I was at home anyway (Female, 45 years old, two children).

According to Marjorie L. deVault, devoting time to cooking and preparing a meal implies quite literally to ‘produce family life from day to day through the joint activities of others’. 21 Keeping a family together revolves, to a large extent, around preparing and eating meals together—which is denoted as the traditional way of ‘doing family’, thus sustaining and reproducing the ‘naturalness’ of prevailing arrangements. 22 Preparing, cooking and serving a meal can also be regarded as ‘an act of love’.

For the ‘empty nest’ households, the fact of children leaving home resulted in there being more time for cooking. Hence, it was found that eating habits in ‘empty nest’ households had changed, and that more time, effort and money were devoted to the act of preparing a proper meal. According to a woman in her sixties:

> I think that semi-manufactured products have meant salvation when working. But now, as a retired person, I must say in defence of my husband that he really does not want any semi-manufactured food. He wants home-made food. He thinks we have the time [to cook this]. And then we eat better food. Then I am back to the potato purée, the mashed turnips, and the pea soup. Home-made food is much nicer and tastier (Woman, 56 years old, ‘empty nest’ household).

The ‘empty nest’ couple even avoid going to restaurants, since this was something they had frequently done during their working life. Now, having the time to prepare a meal at home, and to enjoy it, the nicest meal for them is a home-made one.

21 deVault, *op. cit.*
Originality and Children’s Expectations
In households with children, a considerable amount of negotiation concerning the meal occurs. In this regard, many households found it quite problematic to negotiate between the different expectations of household members concerning the meal. In some households this situation had led to compromises such as cooking different meals for different family members.

We have solved it by letting Marcus get the kind of food he likes. We make other kinds of dishes for ourselves, because he basically likes only meatballs, sausage, meat sauce and spaghetti… But now, when he is almost sixteen, he has the courage to taste something else. I mean, I want to eat my kind of food; I want to eat my salmon, which is something only I like. Then I make other dishes for the children (Woman, 39 years old, two children).

It can be problematic for a family to have a varied diet when the children want to eat ‘mainstream’ food. In the case of the mother mentioned below, it is a teenager with a very limited sense of taste concerning food, who makes cooking a meal a difficult undertaking. The mother works in a shoe-store and as she arrives home in the evening just before seven o’clock, cooking has then to be quick and easy. She would like to cook more ‘real’ food than she actually does, but her son does not like that sort of food. The mother expresses her dilemma concerning her son as follows:

He will stay at home until he is 30 years old. I will eventually throw him out. London is the place to study if you are interested in archaeology... Then we can make the kind of food I like. It might sound harsh to blame him, and we absolutely do not, but it is bothersome to make two dishes every day (Female consumer, 45 years old, two children).

In the above case, the negotiation that takes place is between the mother’s desire to serve ‘real food’ and the teenager’s expectations that the food will taste ‘as usual’. According to some sociologists, serving children plain and monotonous dishes can be considered a way of controlling them – on the basis that developing children’s palates for tasty dishes might open the door to the growth of other aspects of sensuality among them. The latter is said to be the case in cultures where it is common to serve varied children’s menus.

Organic Food and Environmentally-friendly Food
It can be problematic to be an ‘organic’ consumer while at the same time remaining altruistic in relation to the environment. It is the case that promoting ‘organic’ food is not always an environmentally friendly thing to do. Even though ‘organic food’ does not stand in sharp contrast to ‘environmentally-friendly’ food, consumers sometimes consider it difficult to be ‘organic’ without being environmentally ‘unfriendly’.  

24 Corrigan, op. cit.  
25 Ibid.
This is explained by a household consisting of a couple – each of whom was divorced and had children during their previous marriage – who married some years ago. In the extended family there are five children, even though only two of them live at home. The family, who live in a suburb north of Stockholm, drive a bio-fuel car, and eat a lot of green food for health purposes. However, environmental concerns and issues of sustainability are also important for them. In fact, these concerns complicate their choice of groceries, since ‘organic’ does not necessarily mean ‘environmentally friendly’ in a more altruistic sense.

This is a dilemma that is not easily solved, and a lot of effort is invested by the couple in an attempt to reach a compromise between eating organic food and being environmentally friendly at the same time. They state:

We buy as much organic food as we can, when available, at least when it is reasonable to do so. We have thought about organic food and transportation, yes we have. First you transport the product around the world and then you sell it as ‘ecological’ food. I mean, [it is] organic food, yes, but [it is] not environmentally friendly… (Male and female consumers, 51 years old, five children in the extended household, four children have moved out).

Another couple interviewed were not as concerned as the previous persons about the dilemma of being ‘organic’ while at the same time being ‘environmentally friendly’, even though they had taken the issue into account when buying food:

Environmental concerns guide our behaviour to some extent. On the other hand, we eat meat from Latin America that has been transported a long distance. We do not choose ‘ecological’ products on a routine basis (Man and woman, 56 years, ‘empty nest’ household).

Similar anxieties about a possible clash between eating organic food and being environmentally friendly is expressed by a single mother, who solves various moral dilemmas by employing one neat solution – that of making ‘organic food choices’. The buying of ‘organic food’ embraces many concerns she has about being a consumer, including both ethical and moral considerations. Buying ‘organic’ is a means by which she feels she can be a conscious consumer. Even though this approach is sometimes successful, this woman is also aware that by being an ‘ecological consumer’ she is not necessarily treating the environment is a sustainable way:

... that comes to my mind when I think about the ecological milk. It is not environmentally friendly since it is transported long distances. This gives me a split feeling sometimes… (Woman, 46 years old, one child).

The result is that the woman has a feeling of anxiety about trying to be a conscious consumer. But being a conscious consumer, and thus choosing ecological food items, can actually imply that she is making harmful choices vis-à-vis the environment. This is why she gets ‘a split feeling sometimes’.
Findings

Gaps between intentions and practices are evident in many consumer activities, including concerning food and the meal. Negotiations occur, and a compromise has to be reached in a situation of conflicting expectations, and justifications become the manner in which discrepancies are bridged. This study has identified what consumers perceive as conflicting dilemmas arising in everyday life when trying to decide what food to buy and which meals to prepare. These dilemmas concern price and quality, time and ambition, originality and children’s expectations, and organic food and environmentally-friendly food. For the consumers mentioned above, the dilemmas have proved difficult to manage and hence negotiations must take place in order to reach acceptable solutions for all concerned.