



Research report

Meat in context. On the relation between perceptions and contexts

Sara Korzen, Jesper Lassen*

Department of Human Nutrition, Faculty of Life Science, University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 30, 1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 July 2009

Received in revised form 8 September 2009

Accepted 20 November 2009

Keywords:

Public perceptions

Food quality

Context

ABSTRACT

Studies of the public perception of specific food qualities often report conflicting findings, and it is well known that actual market behaviour frequently deviates from the perceptions of food quality expressed in interviews or surveys. Rather than treating these kinds of disparity as the result of data being self-contradictory, this paper, which builds on sociological theories and an empirical study, suggests that the concept of context can contribute to a better understanding of the threatened paradoxes. First, the paper introduces and discusses context as a theoretical and methodological approach in studies of public perceptions of food quality. Second, a case study of the importance of different contexts for Danish public perceptions of meat quality is reported. The study involved a series of focus-group interviews with Danes. Its results demonstrate that public concerns about meat quality vary, depending on whether they relate to meat in an everyday context or production context. It is concluded that the deployment of context as a methodological and interpretive frame improves our understanding of disparities in the reporting of public perceptions of food qualities.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

When scientific publications reporting studies of people's perceptions of safety, as a quality of meat, are reviewed,¹ two striking features emerge. First, the studies report a range of different perceptions, but few studies reflect on how these differences may be accounted for and how they can be interpreted. Secondly, some studies report perceptions that diverge from reported market behaviour. Some studies interpret this divergence as indicating that people are incoherent. In extreme cases, the researcher ends up accusing people of providing erroneous information in the interviews or surveys reported in the studies (Burrell & Vrieze, 2000; Cummings, Harrison, & Rutström, 1995; Kanis, Groen, & De Greef, 2003). When addressing the inconsistencies, the most common – yet tacit – assumption in the reviewed studies seems to be that there ought to be consistency

between what people say in different social situations, and between what people say and do.

Most of the reviewed studies are marketing studies and/or carried out within micro-economic or social psychological research traditions. Discussions within these scientific fields explore a number of explanations of the paradox of incoherence in sayings-doings, or in what are called differences in attitudes and behaviour. Within the micro-economic tradition some explanations attribute hypothetical biases (Carson, Flores, & Meade, 2001; Carlsson, Frykblom, & Lagerkvist, 2005), explaining differences by alluding to the difference between the hypothetical character of the survey and the practice the study aims to portray. Other studies refer to self-selection bias (Edwards & Anderson, 1987), contending that the respondent's interest tends to exceed that of the average consumer. Within the social psychological tradition the problem of inconsistencies between attitude and behaviour has attracted some attention. Several attempts have been made to understand the relation between attitudes and behaviour and to set up models that can help to predict market behaviour from measured attitudes. In their attempts to predict behaviour, such models add a number of other elements alongside attitudes. Hence some models include sensitivity to the actual relation between the subject (respondent) and the object studied (Fazio, 1986). In the relevant models, this is expressed as an awareness of the extent to which perceptions are also based on the activation of images already stored in the respondent's memory. Other models include awareness of the importance of intention as a link between attitudes and behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1988). In

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jlas@life.ku.dk (J. Lassen).

¹ A search on "(risk* or hazard* or safe* or trust*) and (meat* or pork or swine or pig* or beef for cattle or poultry or broiler* or chick* or animal product*) and (perception* or attitude* or concern* or opinion* or accept* or perceive*) and (public* or lay* or consumer* or citizen*) not public health" was conducted in Web of Science (cross-checked with other databases). Result: 726 references reduced to 122 by reading titles and abstracts, and further reduced by the following criteria: only peer-reviewed items, items including empirical studies, meat (or animal product) a central subject, items focusing on public or expert perceptions. About 60 articles read.

the later work of Ajzen and Fishbein the instability of attitudes across contexts – which is the central theme of our paper – is recognised (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000). However, Ajzen and Fishbein do not consider what causes these differences; nor do they ask how to make use of contextuality in the interpretation of the data.

Our review of studies of public perceptions of meat safety demonstrated a general ignorance of the importance of context. However, the problem of incoherent perceptions may be relevant in studies of public perceptions of most issues. The present paper therefore addresses the role of contexts for public perceptions in more general terms.

The paper investigates the paradox that different studies report different perceptions of the same issue, and the further paradox that these perceptions often also deviate from reported practices. The aim is to suggest, and demonstrate the value of, an alternative approach to studies of public perceptions based on a key notion in sociological thought. This is the notion that perceptions (and practices) depend on social situation – or, as we shall say in this paper, context. The concept of context is first introduced and defined as a theoretical concept. It is subsequently asked how contexts can be used as a methodological and analytical tool. To examine these questions, the paper draws on results from a focus-group study addressing public perceptions of meat quality in Denmark. Thus the point of departure of the study is that, by introducing context as a key methodological and analytical concept, it is possible to understand perceptions without representing people as incoherent or insisting that paradoxical data are incorrect. It should be noted that the paper does not suggest that the concept of context explains every kind of inconsistency associated with expressed perceptions. Our contention is merely that the concept of context provides a useful analytical tool that may tackle parts of the problem.

Contexts in sociological theory

Although they differ in their conceptualization of contexts, many sociological theories share the idea that contexts make up a framework that to some extent determines or facilitates specific practices and perceptions of natural and social phenomena. Thus it is generally assumed that social contexts are of importance in understanding the way a social activity unfolds. For individuals, therefore, contexts may make up a framework contributing to the shaping of practices, meanings and perceptions of specific phenomena.

In the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, for example, contexts are unfolded in the concept of “field”. A field is a setting within which people (actors) take differing positions, relative to one another, that reflect different interests, resources and values (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1999). A core idea in Bourdieu’s thinking is that the positions people take, and the ways they act, depend on the specific field: depending on the field people express different interests and values, just as they use their resources according to the significance these have in the particular fields.

Another example is Erving Goffman’s “dramaturgical approach” (Goffman, 1990). Here society is understood, not as a homogeneous organism, but as made up of several “stages” – Goffman’s metaphor for contexts. Actions and perceptions are viewed as performances by actors within specific stages, and material objects are referred to as “props”. According to Goffman people have, as social actors, the ability to choose stage and props according to the specific audience.

As these examples show, social contexts, understood as different frameworks where people have different perceptions and actions, are a common aspect of sociological thinking. Though they emphasize differences from context to context, most sociological theories also stress that people’s perceptions and

actions have elements that are common to all contexts. In the examples above the common elements, according to Bourdieu, are that across different contexts (fields), practices, interests, values and resources are internalized as the habitus in the individual. Thus some degree of correspondence between practices and perceptions is expected in different contexts. In Goffman’s theory, a similar idea is encapsulated by the notion that in order to form individual coherence the actors arrange their practices through interactions with other actors in social contexts, and that in doing this they thereby develop a homogenous presentation of the self across contexts.

At this theoretical level, context is an interpretative frame that can be used by the researcher as the basis on which to pose relevant research questions and interpret data. At the more practical level, context also captures a situational framing for specific empirical research, for example, the phrasing of the specific questions respondents are asked, or the actual setting of interviews. These two elements of the context are interlinked; together they constitute a platform that can help the researcher address the importance of contextuality throughout the research process.

Context is used as an interpretative frame, for example, when the importance of social context is made explicit in studies of food quality. In such studies, food quality is treated as a social phenomenon, and perceptions and actions related to quality are represented as practices within situations in which actors relate to other actors (e.g. Edwards & Anderson, 1987; Harvey, McMeekin, & Warde, 2004b). Here sensitivity to context includes sensitivity to the specific social and cultural situation within which the consumer perceives the qualities. Cardello, drawing on the work of Schutz, and his concept of “situational appropriateness”, differentiates the way a consumer would perceive the quality of “a meal of poached eggs, toast, cereals and juice” when served as breakfast and the way that meal would be perceived when served as dinner: the quality would be regarded as high in the first case and low in the second (Cardello, 1995). This kind of differentiation translates into context as a situational framing when it is used in the operationalization and design of empirical studies of food quality: here the researcher might distinguish, for example, between different meals (i.e. situational contexts) when devising interview questions about different qualities.

Meat and contexts

Given the above understandings of social context, studies of public perceptions of meat quality need to be sensitive, both methodologically and analytically, to contextual aspects.

An examination of the articles on public perceptions of meat quality reveals that only few studies consider the importance of specific contexts when formulating research questions, designing the data production or analyzing the data. Although most of the studies accept, and address, the fact that the concept of quality is complex and can be analyzed in many different ways, only a few included methodological or analytical reflections on the contexts in which the respondents were placed during data production.

One context that was included in some studies is the context of the meat itself. Some quality concepts are sensitive to the different states of the meat at various stages in the line of production, distribution and consumption. One example is the “total food quality model” (Grunert, Bredahl, & Brunso, 2004). This distinguishes between evaluations of food quality before and after purchase. Here the context of the meat is introduced by focusing on the differing ways quality might display itself at different stages of processing. In this understanding the meat, as the object, is followed through the production/consumption process, but the respondent, as the subject, is still assumed to be located in one

position, from which he or she perceives the object in different positions. It could be argued that the different meat contexts represent different social contexts, e.g. that assessing meat quality after purchase places the respondent in a specific social context of preparing and eating. We will argue, however, that since studies applying the total food quality model do not reflect on the social context of respondents, they only partly grasp the importance of context as we have outlined it above.

Only one of the studies reviewed demonstrated sensitivity to the social context of people's perceptions of quality (Holm & Mohl, 2000). The aim of this paper was to study practices of everyday life in families with small children, and to analyze the way in which meat-related concerns are involved in the planning and eating of meals. As a qualitative study, it was designed with specific sensitivity to the role of the social context of the respondent. This sensitivity could be seen in the study design, which used the participant's own life-world as the point of departure for the interviews. Thus perceptions of meat quality were identified by encouraging interviewees to talk about meat in the supper they had had the day before being interviewed. In the discussion the researchers interpreted specific statements in sensual terms as expressions of a common criticism of modern livestock welfare that is not expressed directly in the everyday context of the data. In this approach, the perception of qualities uncovered may embody the complexities and dilemmas of the participant's everyday life, and an understanding of the apparent contrast between people's critical attitude to meat and reports on eating meat on a daily basis.

Perceptions of meat quality in an everyday and production context: a case study

To examine the importance of the context of public perceptions, the remaining parts of this paper will report the findings from a focus-group study of people's perceptions of meat quality in different contexts. In order to select relevant contexts for comparison, general sociology of food and specific studies of meat in modern society were examined. These studies have shown how meat interacts with different parts of social life, this for example being with family sociality and identity formations (Lupton, 1996), with global trade and labour division (Atkins & Bowler, 2005; Vialles, 1994), and with cultural identifications (Mennell, 1996). The guiding assumption of the study was that people relate differently to meat and meat products depending on the social situation within which they relate to them. As illustrated above, a wide range of contexts can be used to illustrate this point. For the purpose of this study, and drawing on a previous study (Lassen, Sandøe, & Forkman, 2006), two contexts were chosen: the context of everyday activities and, as a more abstract question, the context of food production. Other contexts which could have been relevant in a study of meat quality include: the more narrow contexts of preparation; the wider context of meat production in an economic perspective; and the political context of food product regulation.

The two contexts included in the study were defined in relation to the social frame within which the interviewees and respondents answered. One context, hereafter named the everyday context, focused on meat as something the participants consume, using a broad sociological understanding of consumption (Warde, 1997); hence practices related to buying, preparing and eating the meat were all included here. The other context, hereafter named the production context, focused on the process whereby animals are transformed into the meat products sold in the food sector. It included all aspects of meat production, from primary production and slaughtering through to meat processing and retail sales.

The assumption was that the participants would display differential sensitivity to these two contexts: that is, they would reveal different perceptions, and/or consider different quality

aspects to be relevant, depending on the context at hand. Quality, however, is not a straightforward concept. A review of the literature on meat quality disclosed, as others have observed (Reeves & Bednar, 1994), substantial variation in concepts of meat quality.

A significant proportion of the studies (e.g. Cowan, 1998; Mccarthy, O'Reilly, Cotter, & De Boer, 2004; Verbeke & Viaene, 2000) did not explain their understanding of quality at all. Among the studies providing reflections on the concept of quality, the majority took their point of departure in an understanding of quality distinguishing between its intrinsic and extrinsic aspects (e.g. Bernues, Olaizola, & Corcoran, 2003; Hoffmann, 2000). Intrinsic aspects relate to the physical product, and include taste, texture, pesticide residues and fat content. For the consumer, intrinsic quality aspects can be both detectable (e.g. taste) and undetectable (e.g. pesticide residues). By contrast extrinsic aspects of quality are incorporated into the product through the production process; by definition, they are not physically detectable in the end product. Examples include branding, environmentally friendly production, and socially sustainably conditions for the workers involved in food production. The extrinsic quality aspects, it should be noted, as in the total food quality model above, include the context of the meat (Grunert, 2002). For both intrinsic and extrinsic quality aspects that are undetectable, the consumer is bound to depend on trust in information accompanying the product as a basis for carrying out food-related practices.

Furthermore, a common element in the reviewed studies is a focus on if, and when, the consumer learns about the quality of the product. Some studies focus on search attributes. These are aspects that can be evaluated by the consumer at the time of purchase by looking at the product (e.g. colour) (Henson & Northen, 2000; Hoffmann, 2000). A second group of studies focus on experience. This refers to qualities that can be evaluated only through the usage of the product, which for food means by preparation and eating (Bernues et al., 2003). Thirdly, the concept of credence attributes is considered in some studies. Credence quality attributes, such as pesticide residues, cannot be evaluated by the consumer at any stage in the consumption process (Hoffmann, 2000). Despite the processual aspect of these concepts, the studies on which they appear they do not reflect the contexts of the participants, analysis or interpretation of the data.

Although this is sometimes overlooked by researchers and members of the public, quality is inherently normative in character. With this in mind, a bottom-up approach to quality, focusing on what the participants use to distinguish between good and bad meat, was applied.

The everyday context is characterized by a high degree of familiarity: for most people meat is associated with concrete practices and experiences. It was therefore hypothesized that, within this context, the participants would focus on quality as it related to these concrete experiences and practices (buying, preparing and eating), as enclosed in the concept of intrinsic qualities, and focus on search and experience attributes. In addition it was expected that the various symbolic meanings meat has in relation to the family and the mealtime would be exposed. Hence it was expected that accounts of quality within the everyday context would contain the material feeling of meat as well as discursive elements.

The production context, by contrast, is characterized by remoteness: most people have no first-hand experience, and knowledge, of the food sector. Therefore accounts of quality within the production context would be expected to draw on people's images and second-hand experiences. It was therefore hypothesized here that concerns about extrinsic qualities and credence attributes would prevail, and that trust in the wide range of actors

and concerns about the welfare of the animals involved in the production would play a role. Again symbolic as well as material aspects were expected to be a factor. Hence, although the production context contains both discourses and practices as the everyday context, the discursive element dominates in the production context.

Data production

The data in this study were produced in a series of focus-group interviews carried out with members of the Danish public. The interviews addressed public perceptions of meat quality in the everyday and production context. They took a bottom-up approach to quality as their point of departure. Hence, meat quality was seen from the point of view of people (the participants) in a way that reflected the concerns and interests they express when categorizing meat.

With this point of departure, it should be noted that in everyday conversations “quality” typically refers to something positive. “To say that something ‘has quality’ is almost always to recommend it” (Harvey, McMeekin, & Warde, 2004a). To get beyond this everyday use of the word “quality”, the focus groups were designed with the aim of encouraging the participants to talk – within the two contexts – about the aspects they are concerned about in relation to food, as well as the ways in which they try to separate good from less good food. This design left the determination of aspects of quality to the participants, and thus permitted an examination of the ways in which the focus changed from context to context.

Six focus-group interviews (N : 5–9) were carried out during May 2006 in different parts of Denmark, including rural as well as urban areas. Participants were recruited by a professional recruiting company using their participant panel and random telephone number generator. Recruitment was carried out according to the following inclusion criteria: over 18 years of age; not living with their parents; sharing or sole responsibility for food shopping in the household. To avoid discussions dominated by especially knowledgeable individuals, persons who were at the time, or in the past had been, occupied professionally with food production were excluded. Each group was composed to ensure variation in age, gender and educational background. The groups were assembled so as to obtain variation in the perceptions and arguments put forward by the participants. Focus groups were moderated by the researchers.

As explained above in connection with the bottom-up design of the study, the focus-group discussions looked first at perceptions of meat quality in the context of everyday meat consumption. After this, perceptions of quality in the context of meat production were examined. That is, participants were prompted to discuss and categorise food and meat, with these subjects being placed in the two different contexts by the moderator. The first context, of everyday consumption, where the focus is on daily food practices and meals, was introduced by asking the interviewees to think about for 2 min, and note, what they had for dinner yesterday and why. Afterwards the notes were presented and discussed in plenary sessions, where the moderator, in due course, asked participants to focus on the role of meat in their everyday consumption. The second context, of production, where the focus is on meat production and processing between the farm and the retailer, was introduced by letting the participants interview each other, two-on-two, about what thoughts the following statement gave rise to:

Now we've talked about meat. Then if we think about the fact that meat comes from somewhere. There is production in an agricultural sector and a food industry that processes the meat.

Following this discussion, participants were prompted to brainstorm and list what meat quality is. The list notes were

subsequently sorted, first, into two equal-sized piles with the qualities most alike, and then three piles: important qualities, unimportant qualities, and qualities falling in a middle category. The participants were prompted to give the piles headings describing the qualities included.

The focus-group discussions were transcribed verbatim and transcriptions were coded thematically using the software Atlas.ti. The coding – and the subsequent analysis of perceptions – focused on uncovering the content of, and argumentation about, qualities within the two contexts. The coding, then, was a categorization of different types of quality that were identified as arguments characterizing, or discriminating between, good and bad meat.

The analysis of the arguments was based on a simple model based on Stephen Toulmin's original model of argumentation. Following Toulmin, an argument, in its most simple version, includes three items: a claim, data (or the “facts” that sustain the claim) and a warrant (or the “logic” that connects claim and data) (Toulmin, 2003).

Results

Meat and meals; animals and production

The analysis confirmed the hypothesis that by employing a concept of social context in a study of people's perceptions of meat quality, it is possible to understand and interpret what at first look like paradoxes and inconsistencies in people's perceptions. This is first of all apparent when it is analyzed what qualities the interviewees find it relevant to discuss within the two contexts. The most prominent difference in perceptions of quality within the two contexts was that, in the everyday context, the respondents focused primarily on the product (meat) and its performance in the meal, whereas in the production context the focus was primarily on animals and the transformation of animals into meat.

In the everyday context, participants most often talk about qualities like: taste, texture, and content of additives, as well as health (primarily in terms of fat content). Other qualities entering the discussions here had to do with convenience (i.e. how easy different meats are to obtain and/or prepare) and social suitability (i.e. how particular meat products meet desires from different members of the family, and the extent to which different meats, or cuts, are suitable for a specific social situations, like having friends over for dinner). The notion of convenience as a quality, cast in terms of ease of preparation and short preparation time, is nicely expressed in the following quote, where a respondent is answering the question, “What did you have for dinner last night and why?”

Smoked saddle of pork, salad and pasta. And that's because it's quick and easy to prepare. It doesn't take much. The saddle of pork doesn't need much preparation. So...you don't have to spend a lot of time in the kitchen.

The importance of concerns about making a smooth-running daily practice is shown in the following, not untypical quotation from the everyday context. Bo, who is father of three small children, aged 2, 5 and 7, says:

We had pasta too, because our kids like it [...]. It was an easy everyday dish. Child-friendly. Often, I cook in time for us to eat with the kids, but if I'm in a hurry and we both have to go somewhere, I will cook something for the kids, and then I'll cook some grown-up food later when either I or my wife gets home. Food that's a bit spicier with chilli. Most of the time, we also plan a week ahead, so that we can do the grocery shopping and make sure that the kids get some healthy food as well. That's very important to us. We buy organic as often as possible. When

our budget allows for it—because it's not always that we can afford to buy organic products. Otherwise we would. The meat we buy is always organic. The trimmings might not always be. The pasta and the potatoes are also organic as often as possible.

In the quotation several of the common arguments that dominate the everyday context are in fact present. First of all, good meat is judged by its ability to meet some basic requirements of the meal. Obviously these requirements differ from participant to participant, and therefore arguments also differ for participants depending on their social situation. For people living in families this implies primarily that the meat is judged by its ability to sustain a social situation around the meal where everyone is happy, likes and enjoys the meal. For participants living alone, or participants who do not ascribe importance to eating as a shared, important social event, meat is judged primarily by its ability to meet the demands of being easy to prepare and accessible.

Meat production occupied a much more subordinate position in the participant's discussions of meat quality in the everyday context. When the interviewees did bring up qualities related to production, the most dominant such qualities were organic and animal welfare status. These qualities are related to production, but they are directly traceable, in some meat products, in the purchasing situation, through labelling. The everyday choices of the participants and their families are, however, full of dilemmas, and these dilemmas are often expressed in compromises in meat-eating practices. The dilemmas of the participants everyday choices, and how these are expressed differently in the two contexts, are further analyzed elsewhere (Lassen & Korzen, *in press*).

In the case of Bo, it is not obvious whether organic is linked to qualities other than health, but in other parts of the data organic is certainly related to animal welfare. Consider, for example, the following excerpt, where Anita express the compromise between organic products as signifiers of better animal welfare and her son's taste for liver pâté:

The issue of animal welfare, that was mentioned, I agree is important. Of course, like everyone, you have to compromise once in a while—if, for instance, your son wants liver pâté but doesn't like the organic liver pâté.

Here organic status is directly linked to animal welfare, but although Anita prefers organic products' taste, the demands of her son defeat her preference for organic. This is an illustration of how, ultimately, the quality that prevails is often the one that takes the family into account and facilitates everyday social coherence.

In the everyday context, it was felt that responsibility for ensuring that products meet the demands of the respondent rests primarily with the respondents themselves (through their shopping practices and preparation) and the retailers. Other actors in the line of food production, distribution and consumption rarely make an appearance in discussions of the everyday context.

The qualities that are brought into discussions in the everyday context all have to do with the provision, preparation of consumption of meat. Moreover, none addresses the production of the products. Hence, by and large, everyday qualities are what are characterized, in the literature, as intrinsic qualities. It is also noteworthy that these qualities all share a material aspect: they relate to physical features of the meat which can, for the most part (at least to some extent), be directly judged by the consumer. In other words, they are experience qualities (Bernues *et al.*, 2003; Hansen, 2001; Steenkamp, 1990). Hence, here, the focus of the participants is on meat as a commodity, and the way meat performs in the meal.

In the production context, the discussions in the groups shifted from meat as a product in the social lives of the respondents to meat as a result of a production process. It was here, then, that animals were introduced in the discussions by the participants.

Moving to the production context, the qualities dominating the discussions also changed. The dominant qualities now had to do with animal welfare, environmental consequences, additives, safety, GMO free, trust (often expressed as mistrust of the food industry, on the basis of experience or the image drawn by the media) and transparency (whether it is possible to obtain information about elements in the production process, such as what the animals have been feed). The participants primarily talked about qualities linked to the animal in the production process. Meat was chiefly associated, not with what is found on the counter or at the dinner table, but the entire process from farm to fork – with an explicit predominance of the process prior to consumption. The following excerpt illustrates how a participant unfolds her concerns about animal welfare, additives and trust (in the shape of fraud: selling water and bones as meat):

[...] after all, I would like to know that the animal has had some kind of decent life under fairly good conditions. And that it hasn't been filled with a lot of medicine and stuff. What really scares me a lot is the actual way in which they are being slaughtered. The things that happen when the meat is being processed. It seems that all you hear are these horrible things about how they pump the meat with water, and about how they will take anything and put it through this grinding mill, so that you get the bones in and everything.

In contrast with the intrinsic qualities' dominance in the everyday context, qualities in the production context tend to be of extrinsic nature. Commonly, these qualities are not directly represented in the product itself, but refer to conditions during the production process and therefore express the history of the product.

The observation that extrinsic qualities dominate discussion in the production context, and that intrinsic qualities predominate in the everyday context, does not imply that the two contexts are mutually exclusive. Some intrinsic qualities are occasionally taken up in the production context, just as some extrinsic qualities appear in the everyday context. This sometimes happens, for example, when a participant, like Finn in the following discussion (taking place in the production context), expresses the idea that there is a close relationship between the intrinsic and extrinsic:

Freja: is it free range [animals]?

Finn: no, it's not. It's an elderly farmer who goes around and talks to his animals and strokes them. He has nothing else to do, because to him, his life is his animals.

Freja: does it mean something to you that you...like... – or is it because it's more practical?

Finn: no, it doesn't mean anything that someone is talking to the animals other than...what comes out of it has better quality.

Finn connects the fact that the farmer has treated his animals kindly (talked to them and stroked them) with what he calls quality. Although "quality" here is used in a general sense, Finn explicitly rejects the notion that it has to do with animal welfare. Hence it must be assumed that he is referring to eating quality, or taste—an intrinsic quality aspect.

Thus arguments in the production context revolve around the actors in the production, and around elements – such as environmental concerns and animal welfare – that are internalized in the product through the production process. This increased focus on other actors is mirrored in discussions highlighting trust

as an important issue. The dominance of concerns relating to meat as a result of a production process, and relating to trust in actors in the food sector, was often expressed just after the production context had been introduced. Here is a characteristic series of remarks:

[...] what can I say?.. Naturally, I am a bit concerned about what is going on in the food industry. I can't see what's going on. It is mostly the fact that I don't know what comes out, or what has been added to it. But, like someone was saying, I do have the option of going to the individual farmer and buying 'pure' meat. Or rather, I don't know that either. I do not know what he puts in the animals, in the feed. In the animals—by that I mean antibiotics and different kinds of things. You can't know this either, even though you know the farmer, and he is a hell of a nice guy. I still cannot see what he feeds his cattle. So I really don't know what good all this is going to do us. All I can say is that it worries me, because by now we have seen so many cases² where perhaps people did c.

This participant expresses a general concern that she has no knowledge of what is going on in the production process. She does not know what happens to the animals, or what is added to products during production. For her, this insufficiency of knowledge leads to a general mistrust. She does not know what the farmer feeds the animals, or what is added to the feed. Nor does she know how to obtain such information. She could choose to buy her meat from a local farmer, so that she can talk to the producer, but this does not give her the sense of being certain about what goes on in the production process. Through the argumentation, and through what the participant underlines as a concern when prompted in the production context, this participant shows that she perceives meat quality in this context as something including both feed and the use of medicine in the production.

As a further development of the argument of the mistrust engendered by the shortage of information about production, a group of participants expressed how this is turned in to a strategy of trust. The argument runs that, to cope with the mistrust, one has to produce a necessary trust. For these participants, lack of knowledge is dealt with by trusting the system and by an acceptance that things must be okay.

You kind of have to concentrate on the things where you can have real influence... you really don't know—you get completely immune to the debate that is taking place in the media anyway, because it... because I kind of have a feeling that they are just going from one scandal to the next. So it has very little to do with enlightening the consumer. If you have to worry about these things all the time, then there is nothing to life but worries. Sometimes you just have to have some trust.

Closely related to the theme of trust is discussion of safety. In the everyday context discussions about safety were, by and large, absent. In the production context, safety was addressed, but it did not dominate the discourse until the moderator, at a late stage, prompted participants on the subject. Common expressions on safety relate to mistrust of actors in food production based on stories in, for example, the mass media, or based on personal experience of safety issues. Generally speaking, participants perceived safety as something that just has to be okay, and as an issue dictating specific practices by consumers, for example, hygiene in the kitchen and the separate preparation of fresh meat and vegetables.

It appears from this analysis that only additives appear as a dominant aspect of quality in both contexts. To be sure, the qualities animal welfare and organic are present in both contexts, but they have a less conspicuous role in the everyday context. One issue appears with considerable intensity in both contexts, namely price. However, whether or not price is a "quality" is contested: some studies include it as an aspect of quality (O'Donovan & McCarthy, 2002; Richardson, Macfie, & Shepherd, 1994); others do not (Verbeke & Viaene, 2000). Several studies agree that price is an indicator of, or cue for, quality (Glitsch, 2000; Jin & Koo, 2003). Our study supports this view, since the participants often argued that, by paying higher prices, they ensure that the quality (e.g. taste or tenderness of a steak) is superior. However, we also found evidence supporting the idea that low price, in particular, is in itself a quality—meaning that it is a quality of certain meats that they are affordable. Thus price was handled as a quality when, for example, the participants argued that they had something for dinner because it was on offer: "we had rissole, and that was because there was an offer on minced veal and pork".

Discussion

The key result of the present study is that public perceptions of meat qualities vary between contexts. As we have demonstrated, perceptions in what we have called the everyday context differ from perceptions in the production context. The empirical study showed that there is a relationship between the contexts and what the respondents are concerned about (i.e. their perceptions): in the everyday context of buying, eating and preparing food, people tend to focus on intrinsic qualities; in the production context, they tend to focus on extrinsic qualities.

The main claim we have sought to defend in this paper is this: the fact that there is a close relation between context and perceptions is indicative of neither methodological problems in our analysis nor irrationality among the respondents. Indeed, this fact offers the opportunity to explain the perceptions in question as rational within their actual context, and to call for methodological caution in future studies of perceptions of food and food quality. Such methodological caution might involve the investigation of contexts that may be relevant for the empirical problem in question through a systematic reading of previous studies and/or theories about the issues addressed in the study. Further, the importance of any identified context should be addressed in the design of the study. For example, a discursive framework and situational context that reflects the research questions should be constructed. In addition an awareness, and purposive use, of different contexts in the design should be reflected in the analysis and interpretation of data. Hence conclusions should be explicitly tied to the contexts within which they are valid. Equally, generalisations to other contexts need to be supported and, where necessary, accompanied by discussion of any limitations. The following illustrates some of these points with reference to the present empirical study.

In order fully to understand the relationship between contexts and perceptions, it helps to look at the practices associated with the two contexts. Focus-group respondents, when considering the everyday context, tended to be preoccupied with the management of practicalities in relation to eating in the busy course of daily life. For families this involved, for example, balancing the smooth running of family life and concerns about individual needs. By comparison, respondents, when considering the production context, tended to focus on practices outside their own life. They now discussed the activities and practices of the food sector, focusing on the transformation of animals into meat, or food products. What we see here is an exemplification of the ideas of Goffmann and Bourdieu briefly set out in the introduction, that is,

² The focus groups were conducted spring 2006 during an ongoing scandal over lack of control in meat production and distribution; the scandal was widely discussed in the Danish mass media.

the practices and perceptions are united within a given context. These unities of practices, perceptions and context could also be described as different value systems, in which different logics, or valuing, prevail (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1999). The core idea is that the individual, during a day, a year, or his or her life, participates in different social spaces, characterized by the hegemony of context-specific rationalities: arguments and reasoning considered relevant or valid in one context may become irrelevant or worthless in another.

The results we obtained on the differences between the everyday and production contexts are suggestive of a picture that is similar, in many ways, to what other studies have presented as the “consumer-citizen divide” (Lewinsohn-Zamir, 1998; Reich, 2007; Sagoff, 1988; Trentmann, 2006). What many of these studies seem to agree on is that consumer responses reflect values, interests and practices associated with the practicalities of buying, eating and preparing food (the equivalent to what we have called the everyday context), whereas citizens responses reflect values, interests and practices relating to the common good and organization of society (the equivalent of what we have called the production context).

One line of study that introduces the consumer-citizen divide as an interpretive element is contingent valuation studies (or willingness-to-pay-studies) of perceptions of public goods. Both Nyborg (2000) and Curtis and McConnell (2002) apply this with reference to Sagoff’s understanding of consumers and citizens. Nyborg introduces consumers and citizens in order to overcome the problem of over-valuation of the issue at hand. This problem, in which essentially there is an overestimation of the found willingness to pay for a certain good, is a widely recognized defect of contingent valuation studies. According to Nyborg people may express different perceptions of (or willingness to pay for) the same valuables in consumers or citizen contexts. This complicates the interpretation of, for example, environmental valuation (Nyborg, 2000). As we shall emphasize shortly, our study may help not only in refining the interpretation of results, but also in suggesting how, methodologically, valuation studies can handle the problem.

In their study, Curtis and McConnell use “consumer” and “citizen” as labels for individuals: participants in their study are either consumers or citizens. With reference to Sagoff, they discriminate between consumers and citizens in a survey population by identifying the way respondents answer to two versions of the same question: one introducing an altruistic perspective, the other a self-interested perspective. Curtis and McConnell characterize the roles of citizen and consumer as a deeper characteristic of the individual irrespective of the context. Our analysis suggests that rather than regarding the individual as either a consumer or citizen, we should understand people as both consumers and citizens. The point here, to expand a little, is that different contexts make different rationalities applicable, and hence people will, over a period, depending on the context they are in, express themselves as consumers as well as citizens.

Other studies accept that people play different roles as consumers or as citizens, but point to the fact that an amalgamation of the two roles sometimes seems to take place. These studies observe that some consumers, when acting in the marketplace, increasingly base their decisions, not just on issues like intrinsic quality or concerns about their everyday lives, but also on extrinsic qualities and societal concerns normally confined to the political sphere. This consumer-citizen represents what has been conceptualized as political consumerism (Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle, 2004). Empirical studies have thus identified political practices that are adopted by consumers in the marketplace. However, studies also point to the fact that not

all consumer practices include such political aspects. People are often trapped in a dilemma: they desire to express their concerns as citizens in the marketplace, but they are also restricted in doing so by limited economical, cultural and social resources (Halkier, 2004). This phenomenon also became apparent in our study when the respondents in the focus groups expressed the dilemma of what they say and do in the everyday context.

Methodologically, our study raises an important issue about the close relationship between the context that respondents are placed in and their expressed perceptions. This relationship between context and perceptions underlines the importance of consideration of the context of the respondent when one is devising research questions, producing data, and analyzing results. Ignorance of contextual matters in the design phase may result in a study that produces ambiguous empirical data (e.g. if everyday contexts are mixed with production contexts) or even useless data (e.g. in cases where the research question relates to consumers, but the design is such as to produce data in a production context, or vice versa). Similar concerns relate to analysis and interpretation: failure to take context into account here may generate skewed conclusions.

In practice, this means that studies of perceptions should be designed with sensitivity to the contexts within which the respondent is placed, and their impact on the expressed perceptions. In a survey, for example, this requires awareness of the wording used both in introductions and in ensuing questions, and how these operate to place the respondent within a specific context. In any subsequent analysis, clearly, answers will ideally be interpreted within the context in which they were produced.

Furthermore, since contexts not only affect the perceptions that are expressed, but also seem to determine what issues are so much as relevant, it is advisable to be cautious about the questions asked within the different contexts, e.g. see Lassen and Korzen (in press) for a discussion of environmental arguments in the two contexts defined in the present study. This point is even more relevant to quantitative studies in which the researcher’s ability to determine the situational context of the respondent, when he or she is answering, is very limited. For example, where a survey of perceptions of meat quality addresses safety issues within an everyday context one will face a problem when interpreting the data, as discussed above. By conducting a survey on perceptions of meat safety in an everyday context, the researcher is likely to introduce issues which, so far as the respondents are concerned, are not relevant in the actual context. Such changes of discursive context introduce uncertainty about the validity of the data.

For example, studies finding a high willingness to pay for a specific quality, such as safety, cannot always be interpreted as a demonstration that consumers are indeed willing to pay a premium for safe meat products. For most people, safety issues relate to the production context, and therefore expressed safety perceptions cannot be directly translated across to practices in the everyday context.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Danish Food Industry Agency, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. For valuable input and stimulating discussions we would like to thank all our partners in the three cross-disciplinary projects Decont, Camy and Qualysafe. For stimulating discussions and helpful comments we thank all our colleagues at the Unit of Sociology of Consumption within the Department of Human Nutrition at the University of Copenhagen. Finally, we would like to thank Paul Robinson for improving our English and giving editorial advice.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1988). *Attitudes, personality and behavior*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Prentice Hall.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (2000). Attitudes and the attitude–behavior relation: reasoned and automatic processes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 11(1), 1–33.
- Atkins, P., & Bowler, I. (2005). *Food in society. Economy, culture, geography*. Arnold.
- Bernues, A., Olaizola, A., & Corcoran, K. (2003). Extrinsic attributes of red meat as indicators of quality in Europe: an application for market segmentation. *Food Quality and Preference*, 14, 265–276.
- Boltanski, L., & Thevenot, L. (1999). The sociology of critical capacity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2, 359–377.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The logic of practice*. Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Polity Press.
- Burrell, A., & Vrieze, G. (2000). Dutch consumers' concern for the welfare of laying hens: is purchasing behaviour ethically motivated? In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Preprints of the EurSafe congress* (pp. 93–97). Centre for Bioethics and Risk Assessment.
- Cardello, A. V. (1995). Food quality: relativity. *Context and Consumer Expectations. Food Quality and Preference*, 6, 163–170.
- Carlsson, F., Frykblom, P., & Lagerkvist, C. J. (2005). Using cheap talk as a test of validity in choice experiments. *Economics Letters*, 89, 147–152.
- Carson, R. T., Flores, N. E., & Meade, N. F. (2001). Contingent valuation: controversies and evidence. *Environment and Resource Economics*, 18, 173.
- Cowan, C. (1998). Irish and European consumer views on food safety. *Journal of Food Safety*, 18, 275–295.
- Cummings, R. G., Harrison, G. W., & Rutström, E. E. (1995). Homegrown values and hypothetical surveys: is the dichotomous choice approach incentives-compatible? *American Economic Review*, 85, 206–266.
- Curtis, J. A., & McConnell, K. E. (2002). The citizen versus consumer hypothesis: evidence from a contingent valuation survey. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 46(1), 69–83.
- Edwards, S. F., & Anderson, G. D. (1987). Overlooked biases in contingent valuation surveys: some considerations. *Land Economics*, 63, 168.
- Fazio, R. H. (1986). How do attitudes guide behaviour? In R. M. Sorrention & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition: foundations of social behaviour*. Guilford Press.
- Glitsch, K. (2000). Consumer perceptions of fresh meat quality: cross-national comparison. *British Food Journal*, 102, 177–194.
- Goffman, E. (1990). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin Group.
- Grunert, K. G. (2002). Current issues in the understanding of consumer food choice. *Trends in Food Science & Technology*, 13, 275–285.
- Grunert, K. G., Bredahl, L., & Brunso, K. (2004). Consumer perception of meat quality and implications for product development in the meat sector—a review. *Meat Science*, 66, 259–272.
- Halkier, B. (2004). Consumption, risk, and civic engagement: citizens as risk-handlers. In M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal, & D. Stolle (Eds.), *Politics, products, and markets. exploring political consumerism past and present* (pp. 223–243) transaction.
- Hansen, T. (2001). *Fødevarekvalitet - et forbrugersperspektiv*. Jurist- og Økonomforbunds Forlag.
- Harvey, M., McMeekin, A., & Warde, A. (2004a). Introduction. In M. Harvey, A. McMeekin, & A. Warde (Eds.), *Qualities of food*. Manchester University Press.
- Harvey, M., McMeekin, A., & Warde, A. (2004b). *Qualities of food*. Manchester University Press.
- Henson, S., & Northen, J. (2000). Consumer assessment of the safety of beef at the point of purchase: a Pan-European study. *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 51, 90–105.
- Hoffmann, R. (2000). Country of origin—a consumer perception perspective of fresh meat. *British Food Journal*, 102, 211–229.
- Holm, L., & Mohl, M. (2000). The role of meat in everyday food culture: an analysis of an interview study in Copenhagen. *Appetite*, 34, 277–283.
- Jin, H. J., & Koo, W. W. (2003). The effect of the BSE outbreak in Japan on consumers' preferences. *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, 30, 173–192.
- Kanis, E., Groen, A. F., & De Greef, K. H. (2003). Societal concerns about pork and pork production and their relationships to the production system. *Journal of Agricultural & Environmental Ethics*, 16, 137–162.
- Lassen, J., & Korzen, S. (in press). The environment overlooked? The role of the environmental concerns in organic food discourses. *Anthropology of Food*.
- Lassen, J., Sandøe, P., & Forkman, B. (2006). Happy pigs are dirty!—conflicting perspectives on animal welfare. *Livestock Science*, 103, 221–230.
- Lewinsohn-Zamir, D. (1998). Consumer preferences, citizen preferences, and the provision of public goods. *Yale Law Journal*, 108(2), 377–406.
- Lupton, D. (1996). *Food, the body and the self*. SAGE Publications.
- Mccarthy, M., O'Reilly, S., Cotter, L., & De Boer, M. (2004). Factors influencing consumption of pork and poultry in the Irish market. *Appetite*, 43, 19–28.
- Mennell, S. (1996). *All manners of food*. University of Illinois Press.
- Nyborg, K. (2000). Homo economicus and homo politicus: interpretation and aggregation of environmental values. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 42, 305–322.
- O' Donovan, P., & Mccarthy, M. (2002). Irish consumer preference for organic meat. *British Food Journal*, 104, 353–370.
- Reeves, C. A., & Bednar, D. (1994). Defining quality: alternatives and implications. *Academy of Management Review*, 19, 419–445.
- Reich, R. (2007). *Supercapitalism*. New York: Knopf.
- Richardson, N. J., Macfie, H. J. H., & Shepherd, R. (1994). Consumer attitudes to meat eating. *Meat Science*, 36, 57–65.
- Sagoff, M. (1988). *The economy of the earth*. Cambridge University Press.
- Steenkamp, J. B. (1990). Conceptual model of the quality perception process. *Journal of Business Research*, 21, 309–333.
- Toulmin, S. (2003). *The uses of argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trentmann, F. (2006). Knowing consumers—history, identities, practices. In F. Trentmann (Ed.), *The making of the consumer* (pp. 1–27). Berg.
- Verbeke, W. A. J., & Viaene, J. (2000). Ethical challenges for livestock production: meeting consumer concerns about meat safety and animal welfare. *Journal of Agricultural & Environmental Ethics*, 12, 141–151.
- Vialles, N. (1994). *Animal to edible*. Cambridge University Press.
- Warde, A. (1997). *Consumption, food & taste*. Sage Publications.