

Consumer Culture in an ‘age of anxiety’ – end of award report

Recent survey evidence confirms that there are **high levels of consumer anxiety about food across Europe**, with 48% of respondents concerned that food may damage their health (up from 42% in 2005), 68% worried about the quality and freshness of food, and 51% agreeing that ‘food today is less safe than ten years ago’ (Eurobarometer 2010). Our research suggests that these modern-day food anxieties are a response to an increasing sense of disconnection between producers and consumers along the food supply chain, prompted by the industrialisation and intensification of agriculture, the globalisation of food supply chains, increasing levels of retail concentration and a series of ‘food scares’ across Europe.

The CONANX project aimed to advance academic knowledge of contemporary consumer culture (beyond individualized notions of ‘consumer choice’) and to achieve a step change in our understanding of consumer anxiety (approaching anxiety as a social condition). The project focused on **consumer anxieties about food** at a range of geographical scales, from the global scale of international food markets to the domestic scale of individual households. The project also aimed to have a tangible impact on public policy (in terms of our understanding of consumer anxieties about food safety, food quality and ethics and their implications for public health). All of these aims have been achieved or are currently being addressed.

Starting from a definition of anxiety as an embodied state involving mental and emotional distress, combined with a sense of uneasiness about a coming event, the CONANX project demonstrated that consumer anxieties about food are not just personal pathologies, to be addressed at the individual level. Consumer anxieties also have important social dimensions, varying over time and place and by social group. The project advanced a new **theory of social anxiety**, drawing on a ‘theories of practice’ perspective, informed by a workshop with leading practice theorist Theodore Schatzki. The theory (Jackson & Everts 2010) examines how particular anxieties such as ‘food scares’ disrupt the flow of everyday life, undermining established systems of meaning until new understandings are firmly in place. It explores how anxieties are ‘framed’ by different communities of practice (media, government etc.) and how they move between social fields (health, environment, animal welfare etc.). It examines the conditions that give rise to food-related anxieties (including the gaps between ‘lay’ and ‘expert’ knowledge), how they spread and/or are contained, and why they are moralised to varying degrees (as in current debates on childhood obesity, for example). Our research emphasises how food anxieties are rooted in the practices of everyday life and subject to a process of ‘affective modulation’ via the actions of state, media and corporate actors (Milne et al. 2011). These ideas were then applied to improve our understanding of the commercial and governmental response to recent ‘food scares’ in China (Gong & Jackson 2012); exploring how government agencies provide food-related health advice to consumers in Sweden (Brembeck 2011); how agri-food exporters in Thailand take account of consumer perceptions in the UK (Coles 2010); and how food anxieties are mediated by television advertising and ‘celebrity chefs’ (Gong & Jackson in press; Jackson et al. 2013; Piper in press). Our research also demonstrates how concerns about food security have spread from the Global South to the Global North following the 2007-8 ‘price spike’ and subsequent economic recession (Lee 2013).

A central argument of the CONANX research programme is that political-economy approaches to understanding the global agri-food system need to be supplemented with an understanding of the social and cultural meanings of food (including their moral dimensions). Rather than seeing morality and markets in oppositional terms – one concerned with values

that are beyond price, the other with the amoral pursuit of profit – our research analysed the interconnection of **moral and political economies** (Jackson et al. 2009). These ideas apply to the way food retailers attempt to provide consumers with appealing narratives about provenance or authenticity (Jackson 2010; Jackson et al. 2010) and to the way consumers make sense of a diversity of marketing messages (about price, quality and taste, animal welfare, fair trade and environmental sustainability) when making choices about what to eat (Meah & Watson, in press). Our research also examined how consumer anxieties about food are relevant to changes in food regulation and product reformulation (Lee 2012), date labelling (Milne 2010) and food waste (Watson & Meah, in press). We also explored how consumer anxieties about food are related to changing gender relations within households and to debates about the alleged decline of domestic cooking skills (Meah & Jackson, in press; Meah & Watson 2011).

The project was **methodologically innovative** in terms of our use of visual ethnography and participative methods (such as shopping ‘go alongs’, kitchen tours and cooking observation) for analysing domestic kitchen practices and our investigation of the role of taste panels to assess consumer reactions to novel foods. The former approach is now being employed in a related project, funded by the UK Food Standards Agency; the latter is in widespread use across the food industry.

The project was inherently **interdisciplinary**, drawing on the project team’s expertise in anthropology, geography, sociology and media studies. In the latter stages of the project, we worked closely with Annemarie Mol’s ERC-funded research group in Amsterdam with whom we are currently co-authoring a paper, outlining an experimental method of intensive ethnographic fieldwork. We are also exploring possible ways of extending Brembeck’s (2012) work on the Swedish Food Safety Authority’s use of social media to communicate information about food risks via discussions with the UK Food Standards Agency.

The proposed ‘**step change**’ in understanding consumer culture (moving beyond individualised models of consumer choice towards a more socially-embedded understanding of consumer practice) is being achieved through the application in policy and practice of the ideas outlined in Jackson and Everts’ (2010) theory of social anxiety and in Watson’s *The Dynamics of Social Practice* (Sage 2012). Theories of social practice help us understand how new technologies and infrastructures (such as freezing and refrigeration) become routinized in everyday life, reconfiguring patterns of consumption, with implications for how safer, more efficient and more sustainable practices might be encouraged. This work is being pursued on a range of fronts including current work with the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), where Jackson has been appointed to an expert group on Energy, Environment and Food Security, charged with bringing forward new proposals to ESRC’s governing Council. Influence on policy and practice is being exerted through Jackson’s appointment as Chair of the UK Food Standards Agency’s Social Science Research Committee and through planned dissemination of our research findings to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). An additional year’s Proof of Concept funding has been secured from ERC to explore the potential commercialization of the CONANX research, using our findings to provide independent advice to food businesses and food-related NGOs.

Besides the papers cited in this report, our research findings, theoretical approach and methodological innovations have been disseminated internationally via **over 60 seminar and conference presentations** and **two books**: *Food Words* (Jackson and the CONANX group, 2013) and the *Handbook of Food Research* (Murcott, Belasco & Jackson, 2013) both of which are currently in press.

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