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Risk, rinsing and reheating: shifting geographies of responsibility in domestic food safety



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CONANX Work Package 3

CONANX WP3: Food 'anxieties' & consumer practice

- A range of public policy concerns and private anxieties circulate around domestic food practices.
- Concerns regarding the incidence of foodborne disease in the UK have led to the emergence of an 'official' understanding of consumer behaviour based on assumptions about consumer 'ignorance' and poor food hygiene knowledge and cooking skills (Jackson et al 2010).
- Fails to acknowledge the complex relationships which converge in people's everyday provisioning practices.
- Routine shopping, storage and food preparation practices involve the negotiation of a range of 'risks'.
- Project draws upon current theories of practice (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2002; Warde 2005; Shove et al. 2007) to explore the complexity of consumer practices concerning food.

Understanding ‘practice’

- “...a **routinised** type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of **bodily activities**, forms of **mental activities**, ‘**things**’ and their use, a **background knowledge** in the form of **understanding**, **know-how**, **states of emotion** and **motivational knowledge** “ (Reckwitz 2002: 249).



- ‘...practice has its own logic, which is not the rational or calculated logic of the logician, it is an **embodied, practical logic**, without conscious or logical control” (Power 2003).

Responding to microbiological risk in the UK

- Food Standards Agency (2000) - improved regulatory authority over production/supply chain = transparency/accountability.
- Continuing high levels of domestic foodborne illness: ‘consumers are increasingly considered the weakest link in the chain’ (Terpstra et al. 2005).
- FSA’s consumer-facing work: media campaigns; focus on 4 C’s
- Literature suggests that consumers both attribute responsibility for breaches in food safety with externalised others, and that they underestimate the risks presented through their own practices (Bruhn 1997; Green, Draper et al. 2003; Kennedy et al. 2005; Bergsma et al. 2007; Byrd-Bredbenner et al. 2007); consumers accused of ignorance and complacency (Eves et al. 2006).



Cavalier and complacent? Attitudes toward food 'risk'

- Rationalising risk in practice
- Competing discourses
- Distributing responsibility





Rationalising risk: reheating

“...Sally wouldn’t ever allow that now because, you know, heating the meat, letting it cool down, heating the meat [whispers] it’s all a load of rubbish I think, because I’ve, you know, some people say you shouldn’t eat meat more than twice re-heat it, but I’ve done it three or four times I’m still here I’m fine. So’s Sally, so’s the kids” (Stuart, 41).

“I’ve never suffered anything specifically bad from food poisoning. I’ve heated rice as I’ve said enough times and I’ve never, I’ll keep doing that because it’s never had any effect, but I might not after this evening if you’re gonna tell me something about cooking rice again that’s gonna turn me away from that forever... Is it just, there’s nothing like long term, brain damage, cancer related...?” (Andy, 24)



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'Practical logics': cross contamination

- **Motivational knowledge:** *“I’m very concerned about uncooked meats and chicken especially”.*
- **Experiential knowledge** from childhood, observation of mother’s practices and absence of illness.
- **Beliefs:** that exposure to germs is important for a strong immune system.
- **Engagement with ‘things’:** chicken as a ‘danger’ food; intermediaries to ameliorate anxieties: blue chopping board for uncooked meat, antibacterial spray.





Negotiating competing discourses: food safety Vs food waste

Use by dates:

- “a manufacturer’s gimmick” (Bert, 85) designed “to have you back in the shop” by “preying, a little, on your insecurities about looking at Use By dates” (Carmen, 37)
- “I don’t like wasting food, I didn’t like, it annoys me when I have to throw stuff away ‘cause... I’ve wasted my money on it” (Andy, 24)
- “I’ll eat stuff that’s past its best, because I don’t want to throw it away... I hate that you know, I’ll try and, I try and organise my food that I buy to make sure that I don’t throw anything away” (Amy, 34)
- “I think people have a lot of hang ups these days, about how perfectly in date and, what have you, food needs to be” (Steve, 30)
- “I think it’s perhaps the ‘nanny’ state, or something. You have children growing up to very strong rules than the children we grew up as... We have been brought up to actually make our own decisions” (Marie, 42)



“....they don't understand what [these dates] mean, it's nothing to do with anything.... I say to people, 'Do you think that this Use By date, they keep it, today it's not a problem? Is it a problem tomorrow, it will kill you, is that what you think? What do you think this Use By date it, is the day that's set well ahead of some possible danger that it might have'...In principle ...I generally ignore these dates, completely ignore them, and I look at them and, depending on how it looks and how it tastes, how it smells and it's, it won't kill you if you have a taste, and the taste isn't very good you can throw it away. But a lot of people, [daughter-in-law] is one of them, er, they look at the date and it says use by the, 'Oh that's yesterday', a whole loaf of bread, 'I'll give it to the ducks'. It's a perfectly fine loaf of bread” (Ted, 66).





I mention their son's point about passing on bits of leftover cabbage to them. Laura joins in: *'We'd be cross if it gets thrown away'*. She turns to Ted and says: *'I can hear your mother in her Welsh kind of way, "I hate waste. I hate waste"*. Ted explains that his mother's response is partly due to *having to feed so many hungry mouths*, but also on the fact that *she grew up in the 1920s when there wasn't much around*. *'Everyone's got parents, grandparents like this'*. He goes on: *'the reason she did it is because she had to stretch food out, but the reason someone like me does it is because this stuff's precious, it shouldn't be thrown away. It's been grown and nurtured and cooked'* (Fieldnotes 23-12-2010)



Conclusions

- Practice theory helps explicate complex negotiation of different, often competing discourse and sources of knowledge.
- Practices emerge from reasoned and practical logics, within which food safety is one dimension.
- Perceptions of responsibility for food safety is diffuse and not attributed to 'external' agents

*“Ultimately you have to make a decision as to whether or not you’re gonna eat something... it’s a **shared responsibility**. **Almost every stage there is an element of responsibility** (...) the government oversee to try and make sure that by the time it gets to you, it’s, there is nothing dangerous in it and then **it’s your responsibility from that moment onward**” (Steve, 30)*

*“...you can leave a chicken in the fridge for three weeks then cook it, so then it’s your responsibility in that way... **whatever goes into our mouth you’re responsible**, the person themselves responsible” (Dave, 35)*

- **Consumers as final arbiters of food safety in the home.**