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Trusting, Complex, Quality Conscious or Unprotected?

Constructing the food consumer in different European national contexts

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Abstract

In the new European food policy following the BSE crisis, *the consumer* is called upon to take an active and responsible role. But in the political and organizational restructuring processes following the European Union policy, diverse constructions of the food consumer can be identified in different national contexts. The article analyses the discursive framings of the food consumer in four national settings: Norway,

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Denmark, Italy and Portugal, based on interview data from a comparative research project, TRUSTINFOOD. The main discursive framings that in each national context were shared by all types of actors in the food sector were: 'the trusting consumer' (Norway); 'the complex consumer' (Denmark); 'the quality conscious consumer' (Italy); and 'the unprotected consumer' (Portugal). These consensual constructions tie in with national survey results illuminating consumers, self-understandings of individual agency and acting. But consumer responsibilities for food issues also fuel conflictual representations, in the northern countries between different food issues and in the southern countries between different types of actors. Both consensual and main and conflicting framings relate to national organizational institutionalizations in the food sector. It is concluded that references to *the European consumer* are misleading.

Key words

Europe • food policy • food safety • governance • nutrition

INTRODUCTION

Issues raised around food are debated today with growing intensity, including the roles and responsibilities of consumers in dealing with them. In the 1990s, European societies witnessed a number of so-called food scandals and debates in the media. These concerned, among other things, the BSE outbreak, new challenges introduced by genetically modified (GM) foods, animal welfare in agriculture and new hygiene problems such as salmonella. Food has become politicized, and ethical concerns relating to food production and consumption mobilize a greater number of consumers and organizations than ever before. A wide plurality of social actors is involved in the production and distribution of food and its regulation — from farmers and food industry producers to retailers and caterers, together with public authorities, scientific experts, consumer organizations and, finally, individual consumers. Current debates and controversies about food-related topics such as safety, quality, ethics and nutrition, have brought into question the roles of, and distribution of responsibility among, social actors in handling and solving food problems.

In the debates about the regulation of food, the role of individual consumers has become an issue. The 2000 European Union (EU) food safety policy allegedly puts consumer interests before producers' interests and ascribes a new, active role to consumers. According to the EU white paper on food safety, the consumer is to be fully recognized as a stakeholder and included in dialogue and discussions about all aspects of food safety. Further, individual consumers are assigned with responsibility to make informed choices on the market (EU Commission, 2000). In scientific debate, this new role of consumers is reflected in discussions about what is

often called 'political consumerism'. These discussions look at ways in which individual consumers can exert political or societal influence via their market purchases and everyday routines. They reflect the ways in which individual consumers in society are being ascribed various responsibilities in the handling of societal problems (Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004). In societal debates about food, different definitions of the consumer role can be found. Societal actors draw upon such definitions in their 'framing' (Benford and Snow, 2000) of the consumer.

In this article, an empirical analysis is presented that describes, analyses and compares patterns in the framings of food consumers among social actors in four European countries: Norway, Denmark, Italy and Portugal. The analysis is based on data from a comparative European research project, 'Consumer Trust in Food: A European Study of the Social and Institutional Conditions for the Production of Trust' (TRUSTINFOOD), which investigated the social conditions of consumer trust in food in Europe (<http://www.trustinfood.org>). Our purpose is to examine various constructions of the consumer that are used in different national contexts in Europe. First, the article briefly outlines key theoretical starting points for the analysis, namely, a framing analysis and a governance perspective. We then explain the methodologies of the TRUSTINFOOD project, which provided the empirical material for the analysis. Third, we describe patterns of both consensual and contested discursive framings of the food consumer in the four national settings and discuss these in relation to survey results from the same countries. Fourth, the framings of the food consumers are discussed in relation to the institutional features of each country. Finally, we set out our conclusions.

THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS

In this article, we analyse the patterns in the explicit discursive constructions of the role of the ordinary food consumer in relation to various food issues, and the positions of consumers in relation to other societal actors in the field of food — for example, public authorities, the food industry and the retail sector. Hence, we are dealing with discursive constructions of one societal actor (the consumer) in the specific configurations of issues, actors and institutionalizations in the field of food. In order to analyse such constructions, we have taken as a starting point a combination of framing analysis and a governance perspective.

Framing analysis looks at discursive simplifications of complex communications (Klintman, 2006), and studies of framing and frames are based on text analysis. Frame analysis shares some main assumptions with

other social co-constructivist approaches to communication: social actors create, negotiate and change socio-cultural meanings in communication, and thus the interaction of all types of communication in society plays an important part in shaping social reality. The substantial meaning of a phenomenon — for example, consumer responsibility for food safety — is in principle open and flexible; but in acts of communication, concrete situational fixations of meanings take place (Garfinkel, 1967: 4—7; Goffman, 1974: 560—3). But the production of meaning is far from only situational. It takes place in relation to more generalized repertoires of meaning in society (Hall, 1997: 61-3; Potter, 1996: 115-16). Discursive constructions, communications and texts can be seen as symbolic resources that societal actors can draw upon in order to enable and legitimize their practices and strategies in their field (Thompson, 1995: 26—31).

By drawing upon a particular construction of the food consumer, another actor of the food field can strategically legitimize particular ways of defining food policy problems, solutions and responsibilities. Hence, when framing issues and actors, organizational actors mobilize discursive constructions in their strategic interactions with other actors (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613—14). This implies that framing is often an important element in processes of contestation in societal fields (Benford and Snow, 2000: 625). One example is the disagreements and negotiations about the content of food labelling schemes for organic food (Klintman, 2006), where the contestations and tensions are about uncertain knowledge, scientific complexity and simplified, standardized codes and rules. Framing analysis is thus particularly useful when examining discursive constructions in relation to policy issues (Laws and Rein, 2003) of, for example, the agency of ordinary consumers with respect to food issues such as those included in our analysis: food safety, food quality, nutrition and food ethics.

A *governance perspective* underlines that framing and the use of frames takes place within field-specific organizational and discursive institutionalizations. Institutionalization here refers to the stabilization of mutually recognized rules and resources that constitute social and societal relations in a way that enables and limits the options of societal actors (Giddens, 1984; Thompson, 1995). Governance thinking assumes that it is the relations and institutionalizations among all types of societal actors that must be included in analyses of policy issues and processes (Marks, 1996; Pierre, 2000) — not only actors' relations with the state. An example is one of the main devices of the new European food safety policy, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP), where responsibility for controlling food safety is placed within the food industry itself. This crosses the

traditional boundaries for the public—private divide in that it involves private actors in responsibility for public food policy (Henson and Caswell, 1999). Furthermore, in a governance perspective, interaction between societal actors is one of the central concepts (Kooiman, 2000: 142—3), and governance thus draws upon the same communication perspective as is implied in frame analysis.

EMPIRICAL METHODS

The analysis of the constructions of food consumers offered here draws on data produced as part of the TRUSTINFOOD project. This project included a survey among food consumers and qualitative studies based on documentary analysis and personal interviews about the social and institutional conditions under which consumer trust develops in six European countries and at the EU level.

The analysis presented in the following is based on interview and survey material about two northern European countries (Denmark and Norway) and two southern European countries (Italy and Portugal). Interviewees were selected according to seven positions in the food system, which the TRUSTINFOOD project defined as key areas; thus, producers, manufacturers, retailers, public authorities, scientists, media and consumer organizations were interviewed — a total of 20—30 persons in each country. The interviews focused on personal experience and understandings of the workings of the national food sector, with special reference to the production and maintenance of consumer trust in food related to five food issues: food safety, food quality, price, ethics and nutrition. An interview guide¹ was used that was open ended and invited informants to offer narratives about practices and concerns seen from their organizational position in the food sector. Follow-up questions aimed to deepen the understanding of the issues and themes brought up by informants.

The interviews were semi-structured and qualitative (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; McCracken, 1988). They were carried out between January and November 2003 by the third, fourth, fifth and sixth authors of this article. All interviewees were promised confidentiality and offered an opportunity to read and comment on any quotations used in publications from the interview. The analysis presented here focused on informants' descriptions of, and reflections about, the position and role of national consumers. The interviews were first coded with a simple form of index coding, which identified themes covered in specific segments of the text (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). A few examples of codes are: safety, quality, ethics, consumer position and consumer agency, plus a series of categories

about other actors, position and agency. The coding of text segments could overlap totally or partially and several codes could be assigned to each segment, thus helping to identify segments where 'consumer agency' appeared in the context of 'ethics' or 'nutrition'. The resulting material was then interpreted using text-analytical methods relating coded segments to each other in order to identify the ideal—typical framings (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002). Hence, although the interview excerpts presented in the following pages derive directly from the interviews, we, as authors, are responsible for the interpretation of the quoted remarks.

The qualitative interview data were supplemented with data from the quantitative survey carried out in the course of the TRUSTINFOOD project. Simple random samples of 1000—2000 individuals aged 18—80 in each of the four countries were drawn from national pools of telephone numbers. The interviewees were asked over the telephone (computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI)) about their views on food, actors in the food system, and on their understanding of the role of consumers. Only results regarding respondents' views on their own agency as consumers are included here. A full analysis of national variations in consumer trust and consumption practices can be found in Kjsernes et al. (2005) and Poppe and Kjaernes (2003).

DISCURSIVE FRAMINGS OF THE CONSUMER

The four countries included in the analysis have all gone through comprehensive institutional and political change in the food sector following the 1996 European BSE crisis (Domingues et al., 2004; Ferretti and Magaudda, 2004; Nielsen and Møhl, 2004; Terragni, 2004). In all countries, the new EU food policy has been a main reference for changes, leading to increased focus on the responsibilities of market actors for food safety. Principles of transparency, HACCP, and increased consumer information are on the agenda (Halkier and Holm, 2006). However, even though the course of change is similar, the initial institutional arrangements and the structure of the food sector vary considerably between the four countries, as does the role and position of different actors in the food sector (Domingues, 2006; Ferretti and Magaudda, 2006; Nielsen, 2006; Terragni, 2006). These institutional differences are partly reflected in variations in the ways consumers are framed in the four countries and in the specific food issues that are prominent in the interviews when the position of consumers is discussed.

In the first part of the analysis, the main discursive framings in each of the four countries are identified. These refer to discursive constructions that

are expressed by all the different types of societal actors in a country (i.e. shared by public actors, private market actors and private/public civil society actors). Thus, the main discursive framing of a national setting is the framing around which consensus among societal actors appears to be produced. This part of the analysis thus focuses on variations between national settings. Our analysis indicates that the main discursive framings are as follows: in Norway, the consumer is framed as 'the trusting consumer', in Denmark as 'the complex consumer', in Italy as 'the quality conscious consumer', and in Portugal as 'the unprotected consumer'. The issues around which these main framings appear vary in the interviews. In Norway, food safety is central, in Denmark safety, price, quality and ethics are discussed, in Italy food quality dominates, and in Portugal safety and quality stand out.

However, in all four national settings, obviously, constructions other than the main discursive framing are also expressed. These are the constructions particularly drawn upon in contestation processes. Thus, the second part of the analysis deals with variations between types of actors and types of food issues within each of the four national settings. In the following, both analyses are presented country by country. We begin in the north.

Norway

The main framing of the Norwegian food consumer is the *trusting consumer*. 'Ola and Kari' are perceived to be satisfied with what they have. 'Norway is not a gourmet land' says one informant. Norway is regarded as a place at the end of Europe, thus trends emerging in other European countries will arrive later on, if they arrive at all, in Norway. 'We sit here with our red stocking cap and we are actually pleased with it' (retailer). An understanding that is often offered describes 'Norwegianity' as a special kind of bond that ties together consumers, producers and public authorities. This serves as an explanation of the relative simplicity and absence of problems in the Norwegian food system.

Norwegian consumers seem to have gained some indisputably basic rights. Certainty about food safety is one of them. 'The experience of Norwegian consumers is that food in Norway is safe' (public actor). Norwegian consumers are seen as better off than consumers in other European countries, even in other Scandinavian countries with generous welfare provisions. Denmark, for example, is seen by Norwegian actors as more industrialized and polluted than Norway; the Danes cannot consider safety as 'taken for granted' as Norwegians do:

In countries like Germany and Denmark, environmental awareness becomes higher when people find out that the water they drink is polluted . . . A Norwegian can just drink from a brook in the mountain and think that all is very healthy, pure and good. We do not think that our world is spoiled as in other societies where people live much closer to each other than we do. (market actor)

This framing of the Norwegian consumer as trusting and satisfied was often used by the informants to explain the limited diversification of the Norwegian food supply. Organic products have only recently (and with a limited choice) entered the main distribution channels, and local food products are hardly to be found (Terragni, 2004).

Therefore, a central element in the main framing of the Norwegian consumer as the trusting food consumer is the satisfied consumer. Most of the Norwegian interviewees appear quite certain that, as consumers, they trust the Norwegian system. The problem for the various social actors seems to be how to administer this high trust and maintain traditional Norwegian food production and retail in an increasingly international food market. In relation to this, consumers are seen not just as satisfied and trusting subjects, but also as *partners* or *customers in a contractual relation* designed to maintain and ameliorate the Norwegian food system. This framing of the consumer as a partner is found among public authorities, farmers and consumer associations: 'Cooperation with consumers' organizations and other actors is important for increasing food variety and diversification. A better supply to the supermarkets will not arrive by itself (public actor). An example of this partnership can be traced in Matpolitske Forbrukerpanel (Consumer Panels on Food), a joint initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Consumer Council. Here, ordinary consumers from different parts of the country meet in discussion groups to talk about various food issues.

The food manufacturers and retailers construct Norwegian food consumers as customers who are to be satisfied. But Norwegian customers are relatively easy to satisfy:

Prices, prices, prices . . . It is so sad that we lack so much in fantasy. Yes, you hear people speaking about a larger segment of the 'gourmet niche'. But I doubt it. I think that the situation is quite stable and that people here in Norway, for one or another reason, only care about prices, (retailer)

Among societal actors in the four national settings, Norwegian food system actors express the least variation and the most consensus in their discursive framing. When they are talking about food issues, such as safety, ethics or food quality, a shared understanding of consumers as trusting seems to prevail. However, when the actors are talking about nutritional issues, variation between the types of actor becomes apparent.

Two contrasting repertoires can be distinguished here. That is, there seems to be a division between public sector actors, on the one hand, and private market actors, on the other. Representatives of the state — both those who are engaged in regulation and those who work with information and in education of the public — tend to take what appears to be a paternalistic approach in which consumers are seen as subjects who have to be protected from false 'prophets' in nutrition:

It is the former Nutritional Council which has the responsibility of giving dietary advice . . . and we have precise criteria that have to be satisfied by our research . . . But it is clear that other nutrition prophets do not submit themselves to the same criteria . . . Fedon Lindberg [a well known medical doctor] has made a number of studies, but we do not think that this is enough. We have different criteria that we have to satisfy before we go out and give dietary advice to people, (public food expert)

Market actors do not enter directly into this debate. Apparently, they do not see it as their responsibility to get involved in what consumers buy and eat: 'It is a choice and the consumer has to make that choice. It is not our responsibility to be the consumer's nanny . . . And at the end we see that fat is not so bad anyway . . . [laughs]' (food producer). Thus, Norwegian market actors see the responsibility for ensuring that consumers eat nutritious food as one that rests with consumers themselves. This contrasts with the public actors, who frame consumers as in need of protection.

Denmark

The main discursive framing of the Danish food consumer is best described as the *complex consumer*. Danish social actors tend to agree in ascribing several, in some ways contradictory, characteristics to Danish food consumers. Consumers are represented both as ordinarily quite *trusting*, but also as rather *hysterical* when ordinary circumstances are problematized, as they were, for example, during the BSE crisis. Interviewees often stressed general trust in Danish authorities as significant for the proper functioning of the Danish food system, especially in the area of food safety. Statements

such as 'Danes trust authorities', 'the majority place great trust in our inspection system' and 'the common idea [about food safety] is, I think: "ah . . . they've got it pretty much under control"' are spread across the interview material. Among producers and manufactures especially, such views are tied to statements about how Danes prefer Danish rather than foreign products, an attitude that is considered warranted and acceptable. However, when talking about the BSE problem and the measures taken by the Danish state, consumers are indirectly constructed as hysterical:

I think perhaps that they are a bit hysterical . . . It is obvious that they [the authorities] go in for consumer pleasing. I won't even say consumer safety, because there are a lot of experts who think you could achieve the same safety by being less radical in slaughtering livestock, (market actor)

Duality is also evident in other repertoires of framing the consumer. Danish food consumers are, on the one hand, seen as being obsessed with price: 'In Denmark, the price is decisive. It is one of the main arguments for Danes when shopping . . . People simply do not want to look ridiculous at their own expense' (public actor). Price is even seen to tend to crowd out concerns about other matters, such as quality:

One can buy chicken enormously cheap. The consumers must know that these are not chickens that were raised in a branch of Old McDonald's farm. I mean, they must know that! With those prices for chicken, they have to be ruthlessly industrialized products, how else would it be possible? (market actor).

On the other hand, consumers are also seen as being worried about issues other than price, such as safety and ethics: 'The media is immensely good at focusing on scandals. And scandals, the more they are exposed, are just as easily believed by people as other things, I'm afraid' (consumer association). Along these lines of framing, all the social actors regard Danish food consumers as both victims of manipulation and independent choosers. Here is just one example:

I believe the consumers, too, carry a responsibility. They shouldn't buy the worst products, because if nobody bought them, there would not be any reason to produce them, right? But it is difficult, because so much is tied to knowledge and attitudes and to what you want to spend your money on, etc., etc. There are a lot of what you would probably call

'socio-economic factors' influencing what people consume,
(consumer association)

The compound character of the main discursive framing of the Danish food actors suggests that there is much more framing variation and less consensus production in this context than in the other Nordic context. The variations in the Danish national setting relate to which food issues are discussed. The Danish consumer is constructed differently in connection with, for example, safety, ethics and nutrition, but within each of these issues Danish food system actors tend to frame the food consumer in the same way.

In general, Danish actors frame the food consumer as someone carrying very limited responsibility for the *safety* of the food products they eat. Here is an example of this. It derives from an interview with one of the public actors, but private actors (both market and civil society actors) tend to express the same view:

The Government sticks to its ambition of a high level of protection on all food products. Also in the future, the authorities will set up a clear framework for food production, so that the Danes can safely eat and drink, (public actor)

The Danish repertoires of framing for *nutrition* and *ethics* are very different. In relation to ethical issues, such as animal welfare and environmentally improved production, Danish consumers are constructed as individuals who clearly have a co-responsibility to respond to the relevant problems by choosing ethical products when shopping:

Primarily, the trade sector is responsible [for quality], but also the consumers — that they are aware that they do not buy these five-for-89.50-chickens; that they choose quality products now and then, (public actor)

This portrayal of the Danish consumer was also found in an earlier study, which showed that consumers are blamed for a decline in food quality in Denmark (Holm, 2003). In relation to solving problems connected with nutrition, consumers are ascribed the main responsibility by all other types of actors. The following remarks, made by a private market actor, illustrate this:

We contribute with our own products and information on the labels, which makes it easier for consumers to see what is good or bad in relation to nutrition, (retailer)

In Denmark, thus, all types of actors appear to agree on the compound character of the food consumer. Variations in framing are related to food issues and not to type of actors.

Italy

The main discursive framing of the Italian food consumer is the *quality conscious consumer*. The consumer is framed as a gourmet if he or she acts in accordance with the Italian food system's trend towards greater focus on quality. This trend is explained by the fact that, in Italy, food quality, especially in typical foods and traditional dishes, has been the main symbolic resource enabling people to deal with food scandals such as the one caused by BSE (Ferrettl and Magaouda, 2004; Sassatelli and Scott, 2001). As a food producer puts it:

So, in my opinion English people think that quality means a food, a dish, a product which in any case does not cause a stomach ache; for us [Italians] quality is something more, something which gives pleasure to the palate. We pay more attention to the pleasure, even though the taste has been lost and we are trying to restore that afresh.

A retailer backs this up with a typical statement:

Italian consumers have a particular palate; Italian consumers are more aware of the cycle of the seasons. English and Swedish consumers, for example, are not so influenced by seasons in buying products.

Quality was used by Italian food market actors as a strategy during the BSE crisis, when demands for reform of public regulation came from the EU. For this reason, the main framing of the Italian consumer is influenced primarily by dominant symbolic repertoires associated with the need for a new food policy in Italy (this policy has been developed in the last few years). However, this framing of the food consumer as quality conscious has a flip-side, which is that consumers who are seen not to behave in a quality conscious manner are perceived as irrational. This comes out when issues related to safety are discussed:

When the consumer reacts to a scandal, he is irrational . . . [In the mad cow period,] the consumer sometimes reacted in a way I could define as unscientific, because, for example, he found refuge in chicken meat, and we know that the chicken also has

many problems. The consumer only thought to avoid the question of beef, he didn't think of, for example, reducing meat consumption in general, (public actor)

In this way, the main framing of the food consumer by the other social actors appears to operate as a kind of 'black box' (Latour, 1987; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985) in which real practices and the specific needs of the consumer are poorly assessed, while the 'output', in terms of market fluctuations, of consumers' aggregated behaviour is what matters most.

Italian framing of the consumer thus displays a strong construction characterized by a focus on high-quality food around which consensus can be produced. However, further, other framings appear to be shaped by the pre-understandings and particular interests of each actor involved in the food system. Deviations from the main framing of the consumer as quality conscious tend to differ with actor type, especially when actors discuss nutrition. The varieties in these more specific framings of the Italian food consumer tended to appear most when the actors attempted, so to speak, to 'fill in the black box' (i.e. describe the real practices and needs of consumers) within the main framing according to their own actor-interests. For the private food caterer, the consumer is constructed as an individual who is incapable of dealing with nutrition — as an actor who 'maybe cannot understand the nutritional information of our products'. But the consumer is also seen as an actor who does not care about nutrition: 'the consumers go to the cinema, to the pizzeria or to the bar without asking themselves too many questions'. This framing simultaneously positions the private caterer as not carrying responsibility for solving the nutritional problems of consumers.

A very different framing of the consumer emerges from one of the consumer associations. Here the consumer is seen as someone who has to be informed and protected:

Among consumers there is a feeling of being at the mercy of confusion. There is a growing distance between the consumer and the ability to know products, characteristics — to know the transformation process, to know the raw product, to know who produces food. Before, the production chain was clearly shorter.

Such a framing allows the consumer association itself to be positioned as a vital independent organization representing the interests of consumers. Public sector actors expressed a somewhat similar repertoire.

Yet another framing was expressed by a representative from a large retail chain (the Co-op). Unlike the previous two actors, this actor tends to stress the active role of the consumer in influencing other actors. Consumers and retailers are constructed as mutually dependent on each other:

So, today consumers identify themselves with our position, but we took this position when it was not really clear what the consumer wanted. Because when we do something, we do it thinking about the consumer. This is a big difference and I want to stress it because very few companies can afford that.

This retail chain has made the most effective attempt to actively involve consumers in the decision making of the company. For example, it has set up public consumer tests of products and has given consumers a very active role in food safety. This suggests that more conscious perception of the consumer as a constructed actor directly depends upon the degree of involvement of the same consumer in important stages of production and testing. Real involvement of the consumer in company activity allows the same company to position itself as an institution that speaks on behalf of the food consumer on issues such as nutrition.

In Italy, thus, food quality was a dominant theme in the interviews and consensus prevailed among all types of actors in the food sector that consumers in Italy are quality conscious. Variations in framings appeared between types of actors and in relation to nutritional issues.

Portugal

The main discursive framing of the Portuguese food consumer is the *un-protected consumer*. This characterization is articulated together with a number of related constructions which in turn imply that food consumers are *poorly informed*, *indifferent*, *distrusting* and *passive*. The overall picture painted is of a consumer that has neither the ability nor the interest to deal with food problems involving safety or quality:

the Portuguese consumer is more and more suspicious about the products they buy — and that's mostly due to the mass media's influence . . . People, lacking information and also education, are highly susceptible to the media. That's ironic, for when the nitrofuranes crisis broke out, every single chicken farm was using nitrofuranes and stopped abruptly. Everybody stopped eating chicken: 80 percent of consumers stopped eating chicken. And that was when it was safer to eat chicken . . . and people had

already eaten huge quantities of chicken-meat, filled with nitrofuranes . . . People don't think, you see. (public actor)

Even consumer association representatives participate in this negative portrayal of the Portuguese food consumer:

People have no time to think about it . . . They go to the supermarket and buy food just like they buy detergents, without thinking about it . . . And we think that, in spite of the consumer's concern, and our own concerns as a consumers' rights association, people worry in the beginning but afterwards say, 'Now I won't eat beef or chicken, and that's all.' They don't search for information, they don't care and afterwards they can't cope with the information. And then it starts all over again, and they begin eating chicken or eating beef.

On the other hand, this negative framing does not always involve 'blaming' the consumer. It is often focused more upon the conditions under which consumers act. These conditions include media coverage and, in the following excerpt, the workings of the food control system that leaves consumers unprotected:

Nobody ever gets blamed; nobody ever assumes their responsibilities . . . And then we forget about it — and now I speak as a consumer — and when we do forget about it, when the media forget about it, I feel that sometimes political agendas also let it fade into oblivion. Once it disappears from the political agendas, the institutions also forget about it. And sometimes, I have my doubts that all these things were really solved for good, just because there wasn't any real control, (market actor)

On the basis of the apparent consensus about the characterization of the consumer as unprotected, public and civil society actors ascribe to the Portuguese consumers a lack of responsibility and the role of victims in need of protection. Here is an example from a consumer association:

When confronted with a problem like BSE, we say 'change your consuming habits'; or with a problem like the nitrofuranes, 'choose any other meat of any other origin, choose whatever' . . . so the solutions we present are, one must say, ridiculous when compared to the dimensions of the problem. This is a complex question and one has problems coping with it. The

problem seems so huge that people tend to say, 'There's nothing safe to eat!', or otherwise ignore the problem and put it to one side . . . I've felt that throughout my career as an educator.

However, the private market actors express ambivalent constructions of the Portuguese food consumers. As shown above, they construct the food consumer as passive and indifferent. On the other hand, when communicating about specific food issues, for example, quality and safety, they frame consumers as conscious and active partners. This framing is expressed by mainstream food producers:

I think consumers are more certain and trusting. They are aware and therefore they know how and what to choose. They're more selective, and that's a good thing . . . The consumer's attitude, most specifically the Portuguese consumer, has been extremely positive from our point of view.

Alternative producers articulate a similar framing:

As far as we're concerned, the main problem is the chemical agent residues in food products, both vegetable and animal, for we understand that there isn't any real control in this area. This is of great concern to the consumers . . . and that's why they come here to a producers' cooperative.

In Portugal, there is thus consensus among actors in seeing consumers as unprotected. Some variation appears between actors when specifically discussing safety and quality, where some actors see consumers as possessing independent agency.

Consumers' own constructions

One aspect of the discursive constructions of the food consumer is consumers' own constructions of themselves and their social agency. The survey that was part of the TRUSTINFOOD project included questions that addressed different types of consumer participation, how individual consumers viewed their own role in society, and the relative distribution of responsibility for policy issues between consumers and other actors. All of these questions were related to the field of food. Table 1 summarizes results from the four countries discussed here.

Very few Norwegian consumers think that their voice, as consumers, is important. The Norwegian respondents rarely seemed willing to assume responsibility for food issues such as safety and ethics, although more did

Table 1: Views on consumers' voice and responsibility for food issues, and consumers' activities related to the food sector (percentage of populations in Norway, Denmark, Italy and Portugal)

	Norway N = 1002	Denmark N = 1005	Italy N = 2006	Portugal N = 1000	<i>p</i> ^a
<i>Finding that</i>					
Your voice as a consumer matters a lot ^b	8	16	28	30	<0.001
<i>Fully agreeing that:</i> ^c					
Regarding food safety, consumers have more responsibility than government	13	27	31	30	<0.001
Regarding ensuring good nutrition, consumers have more responsibility than manufacturers	38	35	60	45	<0.001
Regarding improving animal welfare, consumers have more responsibility than farmers	5	11	15	10	<0.001
<i>During last 12 months have been involved in the following activities:</i> ^d					
Complained to retailer about food quality	35	21	45	22	<0.001
Refused to buy food types or brands to express opinion about a political or social issue	21	35	24	25	<0.001
Bought particular food to support their sale	31	38	21	14	<0.001
Participated in organized consumer boycott	3	4	13	6	<0.001
Been member of an organization that works for the improvement of food	6	5	4	5	NS
Taken part in any other kind of public or political action in order to improve the food we buy	5	3	8	7	<0.001

^a Chi-square test based on the original range of reply categories.

^b Reply categories: A lot, Some, Little, Very Little, Don't know. For a more distinct pattern only the first reply category showed.

^c Reply categories: Fully agree, Partly agree, Disagree, Don't know. For a more distinct pattern only the first reply category showed.

^d Reply categories: Yes, No, Don't know.

so for nutrition. Norwegian consumers are not very active in any form of consumer participation. This seems to fit the construction of Norwegian consumers as trusting — as individuals who feel little need to assert themselves over food issues.

In Denmark, too, few consumers see their own voice as very important (although twice the number of Norwegian consumers) and few consumers assume responsibility for ethical food issues. Regarding safety and nutrition, around a third of Danish consumers assume responsibility exceeding that of the government and the food manufacturers. Furthermore, Danish consumers are quite active in market-based participation — for example, refusing to buy goods and seeking out alternatives on political grounds. This mixed picture of Danish consumers' own understanding of their responsibility and their role in societal participation on food issues seems to fit the other actors' framing of them as complex consumers. An earlier study has found that the most prevalent construction of the food consumer made by consumers themselves is the consumer as ambivalent (Halkier, 2001: 217-21).

The Italian consumer is more willing to see his or her voice, as a consumer, as important and to assume some responsibility for various food issues. Italian consumers are active both as customers and in ad-hoc organized political participation. This seems to be in keeping with the construction of them as conscious consumers. Bearing in mind that in the Italian context all food issues are associated with quality (Ferretti and Magaudda, 2004), this could fit the main framing of the consumer as quality conscious.

Like the Italians, many Portuguese consumers see their own voice as important and they assume some responsibility for food issues. Around a third see themselves as more responsible than the state for safety and almost half see themselves as more responsible for nutrition than producers. This pattern of self-understanding appears to fit well with the framing of Portuguese consumers as unprotected and thus dependent on their own initiatives. However, the level of active participation of Portuguese consumers in activities such as complaints and boycotts is relatively low, indicating that the scope for consumers' initiatives may be narrow.

DISCUSSION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

The framing and the use of frames in the field of food take place in specific institutionalizations that are not only discursive but also organizational. Both the main framings around which consensus is produced and the frame variations and contestations can be related to specific organizational

various public authorities, which appear not to be very effective, and, on the other hand, a complex market situation in which the strategies of leading food producers and retailers focus on the notion of food quality (Ferretti and Magaudda, 2006; Kjørnes et al., 2007). This Italian institutional configuration of the field of food seems to harmonize reasonably well with the consensual framing of food consumers as quality conscious, which is supported by the willingness of a large number of Italian consumers to see their own agency as important and also to take some action. Furthermore, the different positionings of the public and private types of Italian actors are in keeping with how the frame contestation in the Italian setting runs across actor types.

In Portugal, too, a similar unclear division of responsibility for consumer protection exists. But in contrast to Italy, the public authorities' responsibility for food issues has been unsettled and subject to political controversy to a greater extent and for a longer period of time than it has in Italy. Controversies have been particularly strong over the establishment of a Portuguese Food Agency (Domingues, 2006; Kjørnes et al., 2007). This configuration of the field of food in Portugal fits well with the framing of Portuguese consumers as unprotected. The importance assigned to consumers' own voice that came out in the survey may thus reflect this general lack of clarity and consensus among actors over the distribution of responsibilities for food issues in Portugal (Domingues et al., 2004). Thus, Portuguese consumers may only ascribe more responsibility to themselves because they trust neither public authorities nor market actors.

Variation in discursive framings of the consumer in the Nordic countries (Norway and Denmark) relates mainly to food issues. In southern European countries (Italy and Portugal), by contrast, it relates mainly to types of actor. This suggests that in the Nordic countries, new and emerging problems such as the obesity epidemic and the question of health claims and nutrition represent challenges to rather well-established divisions of responsibilities between societal actors, causing some controversy about who is responsible and in what sense for such matters. In the southern European countries, a system of division of responsibilities is still in the making and this implies that the positions of the different types of actors are still unsettled and a matter of dispute.

CONCLUSION

The discursive framings of food consumers as trusting in Norway, as complex in Denmark, as quality conscious in Italy and as unprotected in Portugal appear to be consensual constructions within each national setting.

However, in each of the settings, individual consumer responsibilities for food issues also fuel conflicting representations. In the Italian and the Portuguese contexts, divergent framings of the consumer are represented across actor types, and in the Danish and Norwegian settings, contestations of framing run across issue types. These variations indicate that there is a distinctive relationship between discursive constructions and national organizational institutionalizations in the food sector.

In the Nordic countries, where institutional division of responsibility is stable, conflicts emerge around new issues, and in the southern European countries, where institutional division of responsibility is not settled, conflicts are expressed about the role of different types of actors. In so far as the institutional arrangements in Portugal and Italy become settled in the future, it may be expected that the responsibilities of each type of actor in the food sector will be less contested. However, the existing institutional division of responsibilities is based on policies responding to food safety issues (Halkier and Holm, 2006). New and emergent themes on the political agenda may challenge this stability and refuel conflicts about the roles and responsibilities of actors, introducing a need for reframing the ordinary food consumer. Nutrition, specifically the obesity epidemic, may present such a challenge

Appeals to 'the consumer' often occupy a prominent place in discussions of today's European political strategies on food (Bergeaud-Blackler and Ferretti, 2006). In a recent empirical study of the governance models and framing opportunities involved in European consumer policies, it has been argued that advocates of *the consumer* concept have to accept conflicting interests among consumers (Striinck, 2005: 227). We agree and suggest that the singular concept of *the consumer* is misleading and impedes informed debate. The complex picture of the various framings and positionings of food consumers that we have sketched in this article points to the need to take into account a plurality of consumer issues and strategies when discussing the role of consumers in food regulation. Further, we argue that the analysis presented here strongly suggests that not only are consumers diverse, but political references to *the consumer* have to be understood in the context of specific institutional configurations in the national fields of food.

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Note

1. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 1 of Nielsen and Mohl (2004).

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