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Preventing anxiety: a qualitative study of fish consumption and pregnancy

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Starting from theories of anxiety as social practice, this article explores the contested landscape of health, risks associated with fish consumption and pregnancy in Sweden, and the way risk communicators and pregnant women navigate this landscape. This article argues that the risk analysis by the Swedish National Food Administration is a good example of the practices of definition and annihilation of subjects and objects of anxiety. It shows that the creation of anxious subjects is counteracted by two means in the brochures and on the website of the National Food Administration (NFA): by placing information about pregnancy and fish within a risk discourse, and by liberal governance. This article concludes that, although pregnant women manage and control anxiety during pregnancy by several practices, this strategy by the NFA does not make them feel safe and secure, which is the basic duty of the NFA, but rather bolsters their feeling that you cannot ever feel safe, you always have to anticipate that something bad might happen.

Keywords: consumption; health; prevention

Introduction

Sweden has a long tradition of fish consumption. Fish is perceived as a healthy and necessary part of the diet, not least by authorities such as the National Food Administration (NFA). Today, the NFA recommends two to three servings of fish a week for all Swedes. In recent years, the healthiness of fish has, however, been seriously contested. For more than 30 years, fish has been increasingly drawn into discourses of risk and anxiety, as various health dangers have been detected. The most notable risks involve pesticide residuals and Listeria in fish. Fish consumption now resides in a misty domain of health, risk, and the sciences of toxicology and nutrition (Ådnegård Skarstad 2008). This is particularly true for pregnant women, who have increasingly been identified as the main risk group by the NFA.

Starting from theories of anxiety as social practice (Jackson and Everts 2010), this article explores the contested landscape of health, risks associated with fish consumption and pregnancy, and the way risk communicators and pregnant women navigate this landscape. The study is part of the ERC-funded program Consumer Culture in an Age of Anxiety (CONANX), which focuses on anxiety at the...
intersection of markets and morality, trust, risk and health, where one of the work packages is specifically devoted to consumer understandings of risk, anxiety and trust (http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/conanx/index.html). Research that forms the background to the program has shown that fear is ‘a social or collective experience rather than an individual state,’ and that fear is ‘embedded in a network of moral and political geographies’ (Pain and Smith 2008). Furthermore, sites of social anxiety are converging with discourses of risk, frequently containing a strongly moral dimension which Hier (2003) describes in terms of the ‘moralization of risk.’ Hier identifies a growing tension between the ‘techno-scientific rationalities’ of expert systems and what he calls the ‘social rationalities’ of everyday living. The gap between these different rationalities is a fertile ground for the development of social anxiety, as this and other studies from the CONANX program show (Milne 2011).

In this article, I will give a brief overview of risk communication about fish to pregnant women in Sweden, and discuss the risk management and risk communication practices of the NFA. I will then go on to discuss women’s strategies and anxieties about fish during pregnancy from a perspective that focuses on everyday practices and attunement. I use theories on the modulation of affect that have been developed in the program to discuss the difficulties of risk communication and the unpredictability of the consumers’ responses (Milne et al. 2011).

Anxiety as social practice

Jackson and Everts (2010) explore anxiety as a social practice that consists of a combination of affective experiences, bodily reactions and behavioral responses (Wilkinson 2001). They argue that anxieties emerge through an ‘event’ that disrupts everyday life by forcing a realization of mortality or meaninglessness. It is through the event that the ‘wholesome experience of one’s being-in-the-world collapses into subjects and objects of anxiety’ (Jackson and Everts 2010, p. 2798). The disintegration of everyday life leads to the adoption of a set of practices in order to manage the anxiety. The first of these is the practice of framing, or defining, the event that produces anxiety. Here scientific or expert practices are of particular importance. Consumers also engage in various practices to keep themselves informed, and to understand what is going on. The second practice is that of annihilation, which includes all the actions and statements that are specifically designed or employed to destroy the objects and subjects of anxiety. If annihilation of the object is not possible or only partially successful, such as is the case of pesticides or listeria in fish, a third practice is employed, based upon the constant effort that is required to retrieve people from their anxious subject positions. In this case, the creation of anxious subjects must be constantly combated.

Jackson and Everts (2010) contend that any kind of social anxiety can be understood more thoroughly by focusing on these interweaving sets of practices. To understand the outcomes of a given social anxiety, we need to examine how the whole flow of everyday life becomes reworked in the face of the disruptive state of anxiety, and we need to understand how they are articulated within different ‘communities of practice,’ from the way in which government institutions are organized to identify and handle possible outbreaks of anxiety to the way in which our everyday practices of shopping, cooking and eating are affected.
Materials and methods

This article draws on a study conducted during 2010 which used several materials and methods. For an historic overview, all editions of information manuals on dietary advice about fish produced by the NFA from 1968 up to 2009 were studied, a total of eight editions. Texts, pictures, and communication strategies in the brochures were scrutinized and compared. To get an overview of the process of risk analysis by the NFA, a group of officials who are responsible for the risk analysis process were interviewed. I spent 1 day visiting the agency in Uppsala, where I conducted a 2 h interview with the group of four persons, and a shorter separate interview with the person responsible for risk communication. I was also given names of senior employees who could tell me more about the NFA’s former work with fish. I took the opportunity to e-mail some more questions after my visit, and was given prompt and informative answers.

This article also draws on a number of interviews with a group of nine women with small babies. In Sweden, all parents are invited to attend parents’ group meetings at maternity care centers during their pregnancy and the first months after the delivery. I was allowed access to one of these groups, and the women agreed to meet with me specifically to discuss the issues I was interested in. I arranged a first group discussion at the maternity care center, when the babies were 5 months old, which focussed on the issue of information about fish during pregnancy. During the following months, I conducted five individual follow-up interviews and took part in three group discussions on this issue. The interviews and discussions were done at the homes of one of them, or on one occasion during a picnic in a park. They were tape recorded and transcribed and resulted in a little over 100 pages of written text.

The women were all first-time mothers, aged 25–34 and lived in a central part of Gothenburg. They had not known each other prior to their pregnancy, but had been part of the same parents’ group at their local maternity care center, since their births were planned for the same month (January 2010). They continued to meet every Tuesday during the first year of the parental leave (which is 18 months in Sweden, the mother usually takes her leave during the first year). They had urban lifestyles, liked to stroll around the city streets and parks with their babies, socializing with friends, shopping, having a cup of coffee together, etc. They were socio-economically diverse. There were service workers (such as a shop assistant), professionals (such as a nurse), and academics (such as a bio-technician working at an advanced level in a major pharmaceutical company).

I conducted interviews with two of the midwives at the maternity care center that the women attended, and who had conveyed the information and brochures to them. I also studied the discussion forum on the NFA website and its information site on Facebook aimed at pregnant women, and the questions and answers posted there. Finally, I contacted representatives of the Maternal and Child Health Psychologists’ Association. Their members support local midwives in their contacts with pregnant women, and they have considerable expertise in women’s worries during pregnancy throughout Sweden.

Anxiety prevention

The practices of risk analysis by the NFA are a good example of the practices of definition and annihilation of subjects and objects of anxiety proposed by Jackson.
and Everts. Risk analysis is about making dangers manageable by turning them into risks. It is about preventing anxiety in a sensible way, without frightening consumers. This is the mission of the NFA, I was told, and this is the daily task of about 300 persons working in the three separate departments of risk evaluation, risk handling and risk communication.

At the start there is no risk, just a possible danger, and the duty of the risk evaluators is to assess whether the danger is a risk, and thus can be passed on along the risk analysis chain. Risk evaluation is described as a strictly scientific process. It is about 'weighing the danger (of a substance) against the likelihood that something will happen and how many might be affected,' according to the officials. There are ‘tolerable intakes,’ and security factors, the amounts of for example dioxins in fish must be 100 times less than what has been proven harmful in animal studies. If the risk evaluators conclude that a large fraction of the population will consume an unacceptable amount of the food, danger has turned into a risk and the case is passed on to the risk handlers.

The risk handlers consider other things than pure scientific facts. They have to weigh risks versus public anxiety (and maybe other aspects such as the possibility of banning a product). Often there is not a great risk but a great concern among consumers, and then the risk handlers decide that the NFA needs to improve communication about the case with consumers. The case is passed to the risk communication department.

The risk communicators have used essentially the same strategy to inform expectant mothers about risks for many years: divide fish in three categories, namely fish you can eat as often as you like, fish you should eat only now and then, and fish you should avoid altogether. The species in the three categories remain the same over time. From this point of view, it is easy to do the right thing. In recent years, the brochures have been supplemented by a Facebook site and a pocket guide that can be downloaded and printed from the website. The latest innovation is a system in which it is possible to send text messages from a cell phone, and receive answers from officials at the NFA right away. The information is consistent, independent of the communication channel used.

The NFA is a well-functioning machine for anxiety prevention. Framing dangers as risks that can be calculated, and thus managed, is the NFA’s way of preventing anxieties becoming uncontrollable and giving rise to panic. It is also its way of eliminating responsibility. If the officials perform their duties of risk analysis correctly, they have no responsibility if something goes wrong and unwanted effects occur. The staff can handle all known risks, they argue.

Obviously, risk analysis is not a neutral instrument. As Ådnegård Skarstad (2008) shows in her Norwegian study of fish and health, practices of risk assessment contribute to shaping the definition of fish as food in a specific way: as an issue of risk or non-risk, which in turn makes it difficult to establish fish as healthy. This suggests that rather than being a neutral tool, risk assessment is a technology with the potential of transforming the cultural position of fish.

**Fighting the anxious subject**

As stated above, if annihilation of the object is not possible or only partially possible, constant effort is required to counteract the creation of anxious subjects. In the
brochures and on the website of the NFA this is done by two means: by placing
information about pregnancy and fish within a risk discourse, and by liberal
governance.

Only one substance is mentioned in the 1971 brochure, mercury, and fishermen
and anglers are highlighted as the main risk groups. We learn from the 1992 edition
that a very small amount of mercury can harm the nervous system of the fetus, and
the risk scenario is broadened to include another five harmful substances, including
caesium. Listeria is introduced in the 2003 brochure, and expectant mothers are now
warned of eating marinated and smoked fish, and sushi that has not been freshly
prepared and recently wrapped. Listeria can harm the fetus and cause miscarriage,
we learn. Not only water and fish may be dangerous, but also packaging. The 2009
brochure includes a further range of harmful substances in other kinds of food, such
as caffeine, vitamin A (in liver), vitamin pills, ginseng and other health food products
and, of course, alcohol.

Coupled with a changing riskscape, the increasing fusion of health and risk
information, and toxicological and nutritional facts, pointed to by Ådneård
Skarstad (2008), is obvious. You must not only avoid harmful substances: you must
ensure that you consume a whole range of healthy substances: vitamin D and omega-
3 from fish (omega-3 is mentioned for the first time in the 2003 edition), and folic
acid, iodine and iron from other foods. A landscape of good and bad substances
opens up.

This is consistent with Ruhl’s Canadian study of information manuals given to
pregnant women (Ruhl 1999). There is now no ‘no risk’ category in these manuals,
she argues. Threat is everywhere; no one is entirely safe, merely more or less
statistically vulnerable. Ruhl concludes that more than anything else the ‘risk society’
exists in perpetual anxiety, because the things most feared (pollution, toxic side
effects, miscarriage, deformed babies) are only visible when their effects are
manifested. This climate of fear and anxiety exists in a complex dialectic with science,
being both fuelled by and allayed by science. This dichotomy arises because it is
scientific progress that results in the potential for identifying risk factors and thus
proliferating ‘risky’ situations – and the advancement of prenatal diagnostic
techniques, for instance which illuminate a whole new set of ‘risk factors’ (Ruhl
1999, p. 102).

In the realm of pregnancy, the risks that are the subject of social commentary are
almost exclusively risks to the fetus. This is reminiscent of what Ruddick (1994)
refers to as ‘natal thinking.’ Natal thinking is a state of ‘active waiting’ in which the
relationship between the woman and fetus is characterized by responsibility, care,
and dependence. A major shift in pregnancy discourses in recent years has been the
increasing construction of the ‘fetal person’ (Daniels 1993, Ruddick 2007), which
sees the woman herself as little more than a container for the fetus during pregnancy
(Young 1990, Bailey 2001). While concern in the past was more focused on maternal
health, today it focuses on the health of the unborn child (Brembeck 1992).

None of the NFA brochures, however, present recommendations, prescription or
guidelines: they present solely advice. In communicating with consumers, the risk
communicators are anxious not to be perceived as guardians, to be controlling,
convicting, or as giving lectures or prescriptions. Their ambition is not to tell women
what to do and what not to do. Instead, they want the NFA to be a reliable but
friendly partner, giving consumers good advice that they can follow if they want to.
It must be the consumers’ choice. They do not want to be accused of playing the role
of ‘nanny state.’ They are working in the best interests of the consumers, but are not being bossy and intruding into their lives. They want to behave like modern parents: sensitive to their children’s needs, but always letting them have the last say. On the other hand, consumers are perceived as somewhat wilful and errant children. You never really know how to approach them or how they will react to your advice. All you can do is to be patient and be there if and when they need you.

Ruhl (1999) argues that this model of regulating pregnancy through liberal governance (Rose 1993, Valverde 1996) that is currently dominant mobilizes a discourse of risk, and of risk prevention and reduction that enlists the co-operation of the ‘responsible’ pregnant woman. Responsibility is equated with the capacity to behave rationally: the term presupposes a calculation of expected benefits and risks, and a decision to follow the path with the greatest possibility of benefit with the least risk. In this sense, a discussion of responsibility within liberal regimes is also a discussion of morality – behaving responsibly is a moral act. As argued by Ruhl (1999, p. 96), risk discourses depend on the entrenchment of a sense of personal responsibility, which is downplayed and may be lost if activities are simply forbidden. Casting the pregnant woman as an agent in her pregnancy is not necessarily a negative development – on the contrary, the ‘responsible’ pregnant woman also installs women as active participants in their reproductive capacities.

Modulation and affect

From this overview, it is clear that when women become pregnant and receive dietary advice at the maternity care centers, they enter a contested domain. Different discourses are crowding, being delivered in both verbal and written information: about the female responsibility to care for her body and health, and most pertinently for the body and health of the fetus, and a woman’s duty to listen to the experts but eventually to guide herself. There are also conflicting discourses about fish as healthy and as harmful, with evidence being presented from toxicology on the one hand and from nutrition on the other.

It is also evident that the information from the NFA involves more than rational statements at a cognitive level. It is not only packed with moral discourses: it is presented with an affective tone. Although the affective nature of food is well established, Milne et al. (2011) argue that the importance of affect and emotion in the circulation of information about food remains neglected. Inspired by the ‘affective turn’ in social sciences, the authors ‘consider anxiety as an affect, as a processual transformation of bodily capacity or power to act, conceived as an ability to affect and be affected by others’ (2011). Not only the content of information is important, but its affective consequences, its role in affecting the reader.

As I will show, information to pregnant women about the risks of consuming hazardous fish is especially pertinent in this respect. These are not just any kind of risks, but risks of exactly the existential character that Jackson and Everts (2010) envision, with the power to force a realization of mortality or meaninglessness, in this case of the danger of lethal harm to your unborn child. The NFA states that the consumption of risky fish during pregnancy belongs to the few certain dangers that must be kept as low as possible; substances that cause interference in the reproductive organs or neurotoxicological effects, and thus endanger the survival of the human species.
Milne et al. (2011) suggest, following Massumi (2005), that the movement of concerns, anxieties or worries involves more than a simple linear model of transmission, it is about modulation. In Massumi’s (2005) discussion of fear and efforts to communicate the possibility of terrorist attacks in post-9/11 America, he argues that threat alerts performed the role of affective ‘modulation,’ by which the majority of the US population was brought into a state of continual, but ‘appropriate’ anxiety or fear.

This resonates well with the objective of the NFA to promote the capacities of pregnant women to act rationally in encounters with potentially harmful fish. Importantly, however, Milne et al. (2011) highlight that the consequences of the circulation of affect are unpredictable. As Massumi (2005, p. 34) suggests, in the case of terror alerts:

...the social environment within which government now operated was of such complexity that it made a mirage of any idea that there could be a one-to-one correlation between official speech or image production and the form and content of response.

Summing up, Milne et al. (2011) suggest that the concept of ‘modulation’ represents a more accurate description of the circulation of affect through multiple media (or ‘milieux’), one that captures fluctuations in affect while remaining sensitive to the unpredictable and uncertain products of affective encounters.

Localizing anxiety

Hello! I was at a spa last weekend and had forgotten the booklet on dietary guidelines for pregnant women at home. I had previously notified the restaurant that I am pregnant. When I looked at the menu there was walleye. I said that I did not think I could eat it. The waiter, however, was confident that walleye from Lake Hjälmaren (close to Stockholm in the eastern part of Sweden) was OK to eat if you are pregnant, that there is no danger at all. He also said that the fish was farmed...

So I ate the fish. When I got home, I saw in the booklet that you should eat walleye a maximum of 2-3 times per year. I would not eat anything that is bad for my baby and felt a bit cheated by the restaurant. I have searched online and found some evidence to suggest that fish from Lake Hjälmaren does not contain as much toxic residue, do you know anything about this? My question is, do you know if it is better to eat fish from Lake Hjälmaren than other freshwater fish, from the point of view of pollution and pesticide residue?

The questioner is a 28-year-old woman who is 5 months pregnant, and the question is one of many similar at NFA’s Facebook site.

The answer is brief and reassuring:

Hello! You need not worry! The fish you ate was farmed, and farmed fish have much lower levels because the feed is ‘clean’ and controlled.

Women are aware that the everyday practices of shopping for food, cooking, and eating need to be reconsidered when they become pregnant to protect the fetus from harmful substances. The nine women interviewed during this study reported that the first thing they did when they found out that they were pregnant, and even at the stage of planning to conceive, was an intense activity of ‘framing,’ of searching for information about diet and risks and how to behave. They had all received the brochures about fish consumption from the maternity care center during their
pregnancy. They all knew about the NFA. Several of them had looked for information about fish at the NFA website, and they trusted without reservation the information they found there. They consider it to be the best and most up-to-date information available. This agrees with the results of surveys carried out by the NFA, stating that 87% of pregnant women are aware of the advice given and brochures published by the NFA.

This also highlights a new space in which the politics of pregnancy is played out in the twenty-first century, through the virtual community of internet chat rooms and health sites (Fox et al. 2009, pp. 67–68). The interviewed women talked in very appreciative terms about the possibility to pose questions on Facebook, and they were lyrical about the new opportunity to ask questions by SMS, which was introduced just before Christmas 2010. ‘It is fantastic’ one of them exclaimed, ‘that you are able to send a query when you are sitting in a restaurant and get an answer immediately.’

It is evident that the NFA advice exists within an ecology of information sources including the media, friends, family, and other sources. Sometimes you also get more or less unwanted ‘good advice’ from complete strangers. As pregnant you become a public person and open to public scrutiny. As one of the respondents in Fox et al. (2007, p. 64) study states: ‘We’ve all had experiences where complete strangers told us what to do, or what not to do.’ Scientific ‘knowledge’ regarding pregnancy is readily available to anybody who wishes to hear it and over time certain discourses (such as the harmful effects of smoking and drinking) become naturalized and seen as ‘common sense.’ Such public ‘knowledge’ is used to construct people in their role as societal supervisors of women’s behavior, and anyone who chooses to deviate from these norms opens themselves up to potential criticisms of their irresponsibility towards the ‘fetal person’ (Fox et al. 2007).

The cumulative result of the wanted and unwanted advice is often overwhelming to pregnant women (Ruhl 1999). Also in their British study, Fox et al. (2007, p. 67) show how freedom of access to information leads many women to feel that there is almost an overavailability of information, making it difficult to decipher what the real ‘risks’ are. Also, in spite of the possibility of instant advice by the use of SMS, much of the discussion in the Gothenburg women’s group resembles the question posed at the NFA’s Facebook site quoted above. Here is an excerpt from a discussion of listeria in marinated fish.

Interviewer: It (Listeria) can also be found in marinated fish...
Kajsa: Yes, I didn’t eat marinated salmon.
Agnes: No, it was the only thing I didn’t...
Linda: Cold-smoked...
Kajsa: Not warm-smoked either. But I did actually. Because I didn’t know...
Karin: I didn’t know
Agneta: I didn’t know either
Eva: No....
Karin: I thought you could eat warm-smoked...
Kajsa: No, apparently not.
Klara: Yes, you can eat warm-smoked...though I don’t think...
Anna: Yes, warm-smoked salmon is OK...but herring
Linda: Yes, it is probably true.
Klara: Yes, you can eat warm-smoked herring.
Karin: I am sure you are right.

Obviously, the NFA’s communication does not always generate the desired affective responses. Anxieties are not only, or not primarily, rational, cognitive or
psychological: they are, as Jackson and Everts (2010, pp. 22–23) state, social, practical and practiced. It is this sense of tacit understanding that anxiety threatens to undermine when people feel unable to deal with the threatening situations in which they find themselves.

Navigating the riskscape

Pregnancy is a biological process, but exists within the social, economic, political, and cultural realms. It is, furthermore, both spatially and temporally limited (Longhurst 1999, p. 89). Women in different places experience pregnancy in a variety of different ways. Individuals may ignore experts and decide for themselves what constitutes healthy and moral self-management (Lindsay 2010, p. 484). Others may seek to balance and combine contradictory imperatives in their everyday consumption practices. It has also been shown that the extent to which women follow or reject advice depends upon several factors including age, education, social class, and the number of previous pregnancies. Women are much more relaxed about following ‘rules’ and more liable to trust their ‘embodied knowledge’ during their second pregnancy (Fox et al., p. 67).

In their study of the production of ‘authoritative knowledge’ in American prenatal care, Markens et al. (1997) argue that women often balance adjustments in their diets to provide acceptable solutions for both themselves and their unborn child. Also the women of this study revealed themselves as active consumers of advice, picking and choosing which bits to follow and actively seeking advice via internet sites, books and magazines. As in other studies of risk perception and risk handling by consumers, these women develop practices to handle the situation and to eliminate the anxiety-producing objects as far as possible. The practices developed include the use of rules of thumb. The most obvious is that since these women are living on the Swedish west coast – and not by the Baltic Sea or close to any lakes – they exempt themselves from the risk group with respect to pollutants and pesticide residuals. They are not at risk since they only eat fish from the clean waters off the west coast. They do not have to worry.

They concentrate instead on Listeria in, for example, sushi and smoked salmon, which are part of their everyday food practices. But although some have been anxious, and some not, none of them have been really afraid of Listeria and they think they have been muddling through their consumption in an ‘OK’ way. The women are well attuned to the communications on listeriosis, which they consider a potential risk in their everyday life. Although this is something they keep in mind more or less all the time, they are not necessarily anxious, but rather are enabled to act. Most develop coping strategies that enable them to avoid anxious encounters and feel safe, even to the extent that some Gothenburg sushi restaurants have started serving mamma sushi (Mummy sushi), which is sushi that is based on avocado, crabfish, shrimp and omelet instead of raw fish, in order to keep their young female customers.

When attunement is not enough

While the risk of listeriosis is a more or less everyday concern for the ‘sushi-generation,’ the young mothers interviewed were not well attuned to other anxieties, such as pesticide residues, in regard to fish and pregnancy. For these young women
living by the ‘clean waters’ of the Swedish west coast, pesticides are not a great worry. Their level of affective attunement is low, such that anxiety emerges in sudden encounters.

In group discussions, some of the women described the bodily activation caused by eating fish from the blacklist, such as Atlantic halibut or Baltic herring. They describe the bodily reaction that came before the intellectual realization of what they had done, displaying vivid gestures of disgust, as if they try to vomit the food out of their bodies. They depicted the panic and showed with facial expressions and body language how they became petrified with fear, calming down only after reasoning with themselves over the actual risk:

  Kajsa: I panicked, I was at a wedding and we had Atlantic halibut and obviously you should not eat Atlantic halibut I had heard from somewhere. I just... Help! [Takes the throat, eyes widened and opens her mouth in horror]... you know afterwards. I had no idea about it.
  Anna: We were in Österlen [in southern Sweden] and then I found that I had eaten Baltic herring two consecutive days. And you should only do that a maximum of twice a year. I realised it afterwards. At first I was terrified.

These quotes describe moments of large and sudden shocks, pre-emptive moments when the possibility of harming an unborn child for life suddenly becomes perceptible. It takes a few moments of pure panic before cognition catches up, the women start reasoning with themselves and the event is orientated, delimited and can be dealt with.

The case of fish consumption among Swedish women again demonstrates the multiple pathways and bodies through which anxiety is produced, notably in the form of encounters with forbidden fish. The world ‘collapses into subjects and objects of anxiety’ (Jackson and Everts 2010, p. 2798). However, as Milne et al. (2011) argue, such events also show the unpredictable nature of institutional interventions into food safety, and the importance of existing bodily activations and social networks in shaping affective responses. Conceived of in terms of anxiety, the production and circulation of anxiety is reliant on the existence of an affective attunement, without which the modulation of affect produces little response.

Conclusions

This study has shown that there is a tension between the expert system of the NFA and the everyday lives of pregnant women in regard to the management of risks concerning fish in pregnancy, and that this tension gives rise to anxiety. The phases of framing, annihilating, and retrieving from anxiety are basically the same, but the logics and contexts are different. The risk analysis of the NFA is a strictly scientific process, and the staff firmly believes that the advice is consistent, transparent and easy to follow. Women’s everyday lives are filled with competing discourses about health, food, and pregnancy from experts as well as laypersons, family and friends. It is also evident that the information from the NFA is packed with moral discourses and is presented in a moral tone. The risk analysis of the NFA can be understood in terms of affect modulation, making aware without frightening.

Affect modulation cannot, however, be understood as a linear exercise of power on consumer bodies. The women in this study develop ways of using information to resist authorities and empower themselves, to attune to the information. They use a
variety of sources to make decisions about their food and eating practices, and place themselves within various discourses of good motherhood, expert advice, food and health that are both time and space-specific. Only when attunement is not enough, when unexpected things happen, does a sudden panic arise, before the women’s cognitive processes catch up and order is restored.

One might conclude that the NFA’s ambition to give friendly advice, a few warning signs in terms of lists of fish with different degrees of alarm leaving the interpretation and the decisions to the women, leads to a strategy that does not make them feel safe and secure, which is the basic duty of the NFA. The NFA rather bolsters the women’s feeling that you cannot ever feel safe, you always have to anticipate that something bad might happen. Although you can keep anxiety at bay most of the time, it is still somewhere in the back of your head, and pops up as an immediate bodily reaction of total fear the moment you realize that you have eaten a piece of Baltic herring. More and more advanced technologies of modulation are needed to keep anxiety about food and pregnancy at bay and to prevent full panic. The readiness of the NFA to always be there to give a helping hand, including the use of instant interactive means such as Facebook and SMS, is not only a way to fight the anxious subject that agrees with the women’s preferences, it is a way of keeping pregnancy and food steadfast within the realm of risk and anxiety.

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