Food risk in Ireland: consumer perceptions, trust and dependence

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Abstract: It has long been acknowledged that consumer confidence, risk consciousness and consumption behaviours alter in times of food crisis, often influenced by the significant media attention given to such issues. What is less apparent, however, is how consumers conceptualise, respond to and mitigate food risk in everyday, non-crisis scenarios. Drawing on empirical research conducted with consumers across the Republic of Ireland, this paper addresses this gap by examining how consumers assess and perceive food risk outside of the specific conditions created by major food scares such as BSE. Unpacking results from eight consumer focus groups, several themes are explored in this regard relating to everyday consumer perceptions, awareness, experiences, expectations and connectivity with food risk. Providing conceptual and empirical insights, this includes exploration of themes concerning: (1) food risk consciousness and the presence of a variegated food risk society; (2) perceptions of risk coming from the 'outside' into Ireland and related spatiality of trust; and (3) differences between consumer food risk beliefs and practices. Unpacking the conundrum of low consumer awareness of risk in the face of increasingly risky and complex contemporary food chains, this paper is relevant to food practitioners, policymakers and scholars alike. It demonstrates the value of including consumer opinion in food risk regulatory agendas to increase transparency, accountability and trust in food governance systems. The need for increased consumer reflection on food risk is also proffered, linking this with broader requirements to challenge prevailing risky food provisioning systems.

Keywords: food risk, governance, perceptions, trust, consumers, Ireland.

Introduction

Safe food is essential for basic survival but also incorporates aspects of identity, pleasure, and well-being. In Ireland, as in many other countries, food also demonstrates considerable economic value, with significant dependence on agriculture for tourism, revenue and employment evident throughout Irish history (Tovey 2007). The importance of safe, high quality and healthy food thus incorporates social and economic dimensions, providing a reasoned justification for research attention to food risk management arenas. Indeed, the need for effective and efficient food risk governance is further apparent as food production techniques continue to intensify, producing new and increasing risks to human health and food industry reputation. Chemical, microbial, technological and

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physical food risks, both real and perceived, are commonplace, and now globally distributed (Dreyer *et al.* 2010). Representing distinct hazards with potential to cause harm (EEA 2011), food risks can further intensify to produce wider food scares or crises. Indeed, incidences of BSE (*bovine spongiform encephalopathy)*, foot and mouth, avian influenza, dioxin contaminations and E.coli outbreaks punctuate food chain histories worldwide. Ireland has been no exception to this, experiencing, for example, BSE scares throughout the 1990s, foot and mouth disease in 2001 and the pork dioxin crisis in 2008.

Despite significant shifts in food risk governing arrangements induced by recent food crises (Holm and Halkier 2009, Devaney 2013), European consumers reportedly express little confidence in the safety of their food supply and remain sceptical of the food governing structures currently in place (Cnudde 2005, Wentholt *et al.* 2009). This has been exacerbated by the 2013 horsemeat controversy, with just 70% of consumers reported to have confidence in the safety of food bought in supermarkets (*Which* 2013). This compares with 90% expressing confidence before the incident. Public perceptions of food risk are also found to vary internationally. For example, see Berg (2004) on irregular food trust patterns across Belgium, the UK and Norway, and Houghton *et al.* (2008) regarding fluctuating food risk management perceptions across Europe. These differences have resulted in calls for further food risk and governance perception research at local and national scales.

However, while interesting and informative work has been conducted regarding food risk governance across Europe, these studies have tended to be restricted in scope (typically focusing on food crisis contexts) and methodology (primarily quantitative studies). For example, see Hinchliffe (2000), Houghton *et al.* (2008) and Casey and Lawless (2011). Such limitations have resulted in a lack of in-depth, qualitative analysis that incorporates emotions, lived experiences, attitudes and feelings to assess how food risk is conceptualised and impacts in everyday, non-crisis scenarios. Equally, Ireland has been largely excluded from comparative analyses of European food risk, despite its coveted food reputation. Responding to these gaps and progressing food risk literature and policy alike, this paper draws on a wider qualitative research project that examined both expert and lay food risk and governance perceptions in Ireland. Given the detailed analysis of expert positioning in Devaney (2013), this paper examines how publics respond, resist and engage with food risk during food 'peace-time'; that is during a period with no major indigenous food risk events.

The following section establishes the conceptual underpinnings of the paper, particularly drawing on Beck's (1992) risk society thesis and differentiated understandings of risk perceptions and trust. The research methods for the paper are described thereafter, detailing the process of conducting empirical focus groups with consumers across Ireland. The paper then splits analysis into three key themes. These relate to conceptualisations of a variegated and dynamic food risk society at the local scale, perceptions that food risk comes from the 'outside' into Ireland and differences between reported and actual consumer food risk

behaviours. The paper concludes by suggesting a need for consumer reflection on food risk in everyday life, linking this with broader requirements to challenge prevailing risky, unsustainable food provisioning patterns.

Literature Review: risk, food and governance

While there is not a universally agreed definition of risk, in general, a divide can be drawn between realist and constructivist perspectives. The former emphasises the actuarial, quantitative and statistical properties of risk (including measuring the probability of a risk event occurring), while the latter maintains that risk is socially created and influenced by cultural dimensions, imaginations and knowledge bases (Rasborg 2012). Regardless of these varying definitions, Beck (1992) reports recent broad shifts in risk understandings, culminating in the emergence of a whole new type of society, the 'Risk Society'. Marking significant shifts in risk profiles, awareness and experiences, society is perceived to have progressed from an era of classic, capitalist and industrial modernity into a new reflexive, second modernity. The consequences of previous industrial and technological developments have emerged to disrupt societal actions. This includes the proliferation of low-probability, high-consequence and large-scale hazards that traverse geopolitical, geospatial and generational boundaries (for instance, global warming or food crises) (Beck 1992).

Moreover, as a result of recent technological developments, various uncertainties have emerged in the risk society, including when predicting the consequences of new technologies. This has challenged trust in, and responsibilities of, regulatory institutions (Beck 1992, Hanlon 2010). Indeed, Beck (1992) reports a simultaneous societal dependence on scientific expertise to measure, determine and lessen risks, alongside decreased levels of public trust in these sources. Finally, Beck (1992) notes an increased reflexivity in late modernity, primarily manifesting as a societal critique of scientific, modernisation processes. As such, the individual consumer plays a greater role in risk discourses to understand risk, make decisions, challenge experts and develop new certainties.

Some aspects of the 'Risk Society' have been reported to develop in real world cases, including in relation to BSE in Britain (Hinchliffe 2000) and foot and mouth disease in Ireland (Tovey 2002). However, challenges to Beck's thesis also exist. For example, Tovey (2002, p.28) notes how the local response to the foot and mouth crisis in Ireland, while firmly grounded in the scientific advice, leadership and rationale 'of technical bodies of knowledge', lacked a dimension of reflexive responsiveness. Tovey (2002) instead reports that no reflexive questioning occurred regarding the impact of the profit-driven food industry on food safety or animal welfare. Additional critique of Beck's thesis includes questions from Rose (2000) regarding its global application and Latour (2003) concerning its lack of emphasis on social and material complexity. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Beck's conceptualisations are still central to multiple academic discussions on risk. Therefore, rather than dismissing his ideas entirely, they should be applied with caution and an open mind that alternatives, or indeed

only partial 'Risk Society' features, may exist.

Additional important contributions to current understandings of risk revolve around conceptualisations of trust. What constitutes trust, how to create and maintain it, how to recover it when it has been lost and how it influences public behaviours are issues that are preoccupying politicians, academics and regulators alike. In the food arena, this is particularly true given reported levels of low public confidence in European food governing structures (Frewer *et al.* 2002, Cnudde 2005, Eden *et al.* 2008a, Wentholt *et al.* 2009). Personalised levels of trust in food are reported to vary from a naive, blind type of trust that only becomes real when one feels distrust, to a trust based upon a conscious praxis where precautions are taken to feel secure (Berg 2004, De Jonge *et al.* 2008).

Utilising case studies of Belgium, Britain and Norway, Berg (2004) explores the extent to which food scandals affect consumer confidence and trust in food safety. Berg (2004, p.31) hypothesises that, just after a food crisis, a 'risk-reducing mechanism' operates whereby national food scandals lead to increased levels of cautious food safety behaviour and a greater proportion of mistrusting consumers. However, being sceptical requires effort, therefore as time progresses, a 'complexity-reducing mechanism' operates whereby consumers view the food system as too complex for their consideration and so tend to trust food chain actors again. More recently, trends of mistrust are also reflected in Jackson's (2010, p.147) conceptualisation of the 'age of anxiety' believed to have emerged in Western nations, fuelled by the variety of food crises experienced of late.

Drawing on evidence of changing risk perceptions and levels of trust, it is important to examine consumer perceptions of food risk and related risk avoidance strategies in everyday scenarios. This is crucial to assess levels of local reflection on food choices to inform future food risk communications, management and policy. After all, drives for increased country-of-origin labelling in the wake of the horsemeat scandal (Baroke, 2013) will prove ineffective if consumers neither take the time to read labels nor trust them in everyday realities. This paper explores these issues in an everyday, non-crisis, Irish context.

Research Methods

While baseline food risk perception knowledge exists from numerous non-academic surveys (FSAI 2003, 2009, Irish Council for Bioethics 2005, Eurobarometer 2010, *Which* 2013), this tends to focus on individualised consumer reactions rather than exploring how consumers form and justify their views. A need existed to examine consumer food risk perceptions in a way that is more reflective of how people behave and interact in everyday scenarios. The focus group method proved beneficial in this regard. The analysis that follows incorporates results from eight consumer focus groups conducted across the Republic of Ireland.

Although not statistically representative of the entire Irish population, hosting eight focus groups allowed for snapshots of opinion to be obtained from multiple consumers (49 in total) across a variety of demographics known to influence risk behaviours. This includes gender, age, education, living environment and income

(Hoffmann 2000, Fischer and Frewer 2008, McCarthy and Brennan 2009) (see Table 1). To recruit members, a natural focus group method was adopted whereby participants were drawn from pre-existing groups such as sports or social clubs (Holbrook and Jackson 1996). Purported advantages of this recruitment method, as opposed to engaging groups of strangers, include reduced anxiety amongst participants and increased willingness to participate and debate with familiar group members. Geographically, the focus groups were held across three provinces of the Republic of Ireland (Leinster, Munster and Connaught) with a focus on the major cities of these regions and surrounding rural areas (Dublin (3), Cork (2) and Galway (3)).

Table 1: Focus Group Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Living Environment	Education	Income	Location
FÁS Group	Male	30-65	Urban	Lower	Lower	Dublin
Community Gardeners	Mixed	30-65	Urban	Mixed	Mixed	Cork
Retirement Association	Mixed	66+	Rural	Lower	Lower	Cork
Students	Female	18-35	Rural	Higher	Lower	Dublin
Office Workers	Mixed	36-55	Urban	Middle	Mixed	Dublin
Sports Players	Male	18-35	Rural	Middle	Lower	Galway
Mindful Parents	Mixed	26-45	Urban	Mixed	Mixed	Galway
ICA Group	Female	56+	Rural	Lower	Mixed	Galway

Drawing on the benefits associated with the 'natural' focus group method (Holbrook and Jackson 1996), email contact was made initially with perceived gatekeepers of local community groups. This initial email detailed the research purpose and requirements for the focus group setting. Follow-up emails and telephone conversations subsequently occurred with gatekeepers, building rapport with these participants who undertook responsibility to recruit additional members to the session. The focus groups were subsequently conducted in May and June 2011, and included groups of female students, young male sports players, a mindful parenting group, male FÁS (unemployed training course) participants, Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) members, community gardeners, a retirement association and a group of office workers. A flexible topic guide, developed from an earlier literature review, discussions with other experts and a pilot focus group, was utilised to steer focus group discussions.

To examine further how food (in)security is embedded in everyday Irish life, a food product exercise was also conducted in each focus group session

akin to McCarthy *et al.* (2006). This involved presenting participants with three food items to allow them to contextualise their food safety concerns and better verbalise the reasoning behind their anxieties. To elicit concerns from across the food chain, consumers were presented with a branded bacon product, imported organic apples and non-genetically modified (GM) baked beans. Each focus group session was digitally recorded to allow the facilitator to remain engaged with participants. All eight focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim for analysis, while the data management package NVivo was utilised to help make sense of the unstructured responses obtained. The analysis phase followed descriptive (according to schedules of questions) and conceptual coding techniques (according to emergent themes) (Kitchin and Tate 2000), allowing for the discovery of patterns, identification of themes and development of meaningful conclusions. While many issues arose across focus group sessions, three marked themes repeatedly surfaced, representing distinct reference points for consumers when thinking about everyday, non-crisis food risk. These are explored next.

Research Results

Food risk consciousness: the prevalence of a food risk society

Drawing on 'Risk Society' (Beck 1992) and 'age of anxiety' (Jackson 2010) literature, one would expect to find an increased food risk consciousness amongst consumers in Ireland. Instead, quite the opposite was found. From focus group discussions, it became apparent that food safety does not dominate everyday concerns. Indeed, while some risk avoidance strategies are adopted (including the consultation of 'best before' labelling), many consumers simply assume and trust that food in Ireland is safe. Exemplifying this, opening questions in the focus group, concerning everyday food habits, failed to highlight specific food risk anxieties. Indeed, consumers revealed their food risk concerns and related avoidance strategies only when they were probed directly. This suggests a multi-level reaction to food risk; one practical reaction that allows consumers to eat in the everyday free of continuous anxiety, and a second underlying, emotional reaction when probed or when a risk event occurs. Such results imply the existence of a dynamic food risk consciousness that ebbs and flows according to external conditions. This was true for the majority of participants aside from the male sports players who reflected the reported tendency for young white males to consistently possess lower risk perceptions compared to other demographics (Slovic 1999, Finucane *et al.* 2000).

Nonetheless, even when probed directly in the food product exercise, food risk was not a dominating concern for the majority of consumers. Instead, many spoke of intrinsically trusting the three food items presented in the session based on brand awareness, aesthetics, retailer credibility and familiarity. Further, while some concerns arose regarding chemical content (even regarding the organic apples), other anxieties regarding food sustainability and nutrition also featured. For example, several participants contested the organic quality of the apples given the significant food miles travelled (either from Argentina or the USA). Such

responses reflect broader realities of food having different meanings for different people, with expectations that food is never just one thing (for instance, *either* safe *or* sustainable). Rather, food represents a mingled entity, encompassing numerous dimensions and expectations.

A continuous food risk consciousness appears to be absent in the everyday Irish context. In its place, a partial or variegated food risk society exists with evidence of both supporting and contradictory elements to Beck's (1992) all-encompassing thesis. On one hand, supporting risk society characteristics, some consumers questioned the development of food risk as a result of agricultural intensification, industrialisation and globalisation. Drawing comparisons to a safe and natural past, many referred to the development of new diseases and technologies of late, perceiving food to be riskier now than ever before. This reflects the irony proposed by Beck (1992) where despite increasing risk governance frameworks, publics view risk to be more extensive in life. With several participants contending that previous generations never suffered harm from food, such responses resonate with broader tendencies to view past experiences with positive memories to provide 'ammunition to rationalize' current fears (Cowley 2008, p.1046).

As a result, some groups (particularly the mindful parents) self-reflexively revert to 'grow it yourself' (GIY) schemes and organic produce to avoid food risk, while many retired participants monitor their diet carefully to avoid health-related risks. Further echoing characteristics of Beck's (1992) risk society, some consumers (particularly younger students and sports players) alluded to a growing individualisation of risk, identifying it as a personal responsibility to educate oneself and navigate food risk in daily life. This mirrors the broader, neoliberal individualisation of life reported to be occurring as Western societies shift away from collectivism to more individualistic lifestyles (Barnett 2005). A perception that the necessary information is available augmented such beliefs in this research context, with responsibility now believed to rest with consumers to seek it out.

Lastly, echoing a final risk society theme, a simultaneous reliance on, but mistrust of, science to determine and lessen new food risks was obvious. For example, the motives and independence of food research (particularly GM-related) was questioned by multiple groups, including FÁS, parent and office participants. Indeed, some FÁS members perceive the food industry to have influence over all scientific food research conducted, hampering trust in related results. Further scepticism was detected amongst office workers, parents and students regarding the bounded, limited and incomplete nature of science. Resonating with broader tensions between food innovations and later implications mooted by Davies *et al.* (2014), this particularly concerned both what science has yet to reveal and criticism of past risk assessments that determined unhealthy food products as safe. For example

> "What research has not found yet [is concerning] in terms of, you know, what they're saying is safe for them to do with food now but we'll find in time it isn't".
>
> (Anne, Mindful Parents)

However, precluding the development of an all-encompassing food risk society in Ireland, many consumers also stressed a significant lack of control over food risk, contradicting Beck's (1992) thesis regarding a growing individual ability to manage risk. Feelings of exasperation, frustration and fatalism were associated with GM, chemical and even GIY food risks when probed, particularly amongst student, gardening and FÁS participants. This echoes Shaw (2002, p.284) who highlights a degree of 'fatalism' associated with GM food consumption by UK consumers, and Brunel and Pichon (2004, p.373) who note degrees of food risk fatalism (defined as the 'irremediable acceptance of the event') amongst French consumers. In this research, such beliefs were fuelled by perceived income and choice limitations. A feeling that food can never be 100% safe was expressed by many, with inevitable degrees of risk associated with modern food provisioning, from allergies to chemical content. This reflects risk inevitability concepts of Hinchliffe *et al.* (2013) regarding the reality of permeable, incomplete and unsuccessful biosecurity strategies that fail to keep risk out. For instance:

> Aisling: Like I find that's so frustrating, it's just like you can't avoid it like, you know, like unless you're going to grow all your own food [laughs]
> Julia: Yea go out and catch your own fish!
> Aisling: Like it's not even possible, like no matter how conscious you want to be of these things. It is kind of almost impossible to do everything well.
>
> (Female Students)

Meanwhile, contradicting previous references to the growing individualisation of food risk, the majority of consumers (including from ICA, student, sports, gardening, FÁS and retirement groups) attributed food risk responsibility to broader state structures such as government departments and semi-state actors. References to the Department of Agriculture and Bord Bia were particularly dominant. This suggests a co-existence of both individual and state responsibility to manage food risk, with state structures perhaps necessary, given the rising complexity of the food chain. Necessitating the governance of food risk beyond the individual consumer is reflective of representative democracy ideals (Besley and Coate 1997) whereby consumers do not need to be aware of, or mitigate, food risk in everyday life as institutions have instead been established to take decisions and precautions on behalf of publics. A key element for publics is, therefore, to have trust in the transparency, intentions, performance and accountability of these organisations, something that may be difficult given Beck's (1992) dependency thesis regarding increased public dependence on, yet simultaneous distrust in, scientific institutions.

Finally, opposing Beck's (1992) ideals of citizen empowerment and sub-political decision making in the risk society, a lack of consumer engagement with

food risk governance processes was obvious. While a lack of awareness of relevant communication channels may account for part of this (particularly for enthusiastic retirement and ICA participants), a distinct unwillingness to engage emerged amongst male FÁS participants and sports players. Such findings contradict Beck's ideals of societal empowerment, knowledge seeking and participation in the risk society.

Overall, such variegated risk society findings are in keeping with literature that highlights the appropriateness and application of *some* risk society features rather than all. While contradicting Hinchliffe (2000) who noted broad cultural change towards risk society behaviour during the UK BSE crisis, such findings resonate with incomplete risk society characteristics uncovered by Benn *et al.* (2009) regarding toxic waste management in Australia, and Tovey (2002) concerning foot and mouth in Ireland. The findings further suggest a tendency for such societal features to ebb and flow in the food risk context specifically. In this way, the risk society thesis can be used more fluidly, with evident elements of Beck's (1992) concept apparent in some consumer responses, and others entirely absent or contradicted. Therefore, while useful as a framework to analyse the landscape of food risk perceptions and behaviours, Beck's thesis does not represent an over-arching explanatory theory in this non-crisis, Irish context. Consumer food risk perceptions are, instead, inherently personal, emotional, deliberative and conflictual and subject to a variety of interests, cultural influences, external forces and levels of trust and dependency.

Risk from the 'outside': patriotic understandings and the mobility of food risk

Introducing geographical and scalar elements, the second theme worthy of expansion in light of established policy, literature and media attention, relates to perceptions of food risk coming from the 'outside' into Ireland. Concerns for uneven food safety standards worldwide featured in such discussions, with many choosing to buy Irish products as a local response to avoid food risk. This was evident through repeated consumer references to the safety, quality and high standard of Irish food; the dangers associated with produce coming from abroad; health and safety fears when consuming food abroad; and the need to utilise Irish resources to grow food. For instance:

> "I'd definitely be more confident buying food here than I would abroad"
>
> > (Caoimhe, Students)

> "Yea [GM] is something that I'd associate it with happening in America or something, you know? I just, you wouldn't think of it here"
>
> > (Donal, Sports Player)

Reflecting the importance attributed to country-of-origin in creating trust in food products (Hoffman 2000, Knight *et al.* 2007), the geographical imagination of the consumer came to life in these contexts, with various images of unknown, unsafe and untrustworthy outside 'others' conjured up by research participants. Relating to other places, other food industry members and other national governing structures, this reflects concepts of the dangerous 'outside' mooted in biosecurity literature. For example, see Barker (2009) regarding native species protection in New Zealand and Hinchliffe *et al*. (2013) on the construction of blame in biosecurity contexts. Thus, although globalisation is envisaged to have detached food from place and nature (Tovey 2007), patriotic desires to 'Buy Irish' remain strong amongst participating consumers.

The country-of-origin of meat in particular posed concern for many participating consumers regarding quality, freshness and safety. For instance, retired participants spoke of a tendency to avoid foreign meat and mistrust the inspection of imports coming into Ireland. This reflects 'othering' concepts explored by Jackson (2010) regarding consumer food risk anxieties in the UK where the creation of a defined 'other' (distinguished by gender, race, nation or generation) was utilised to shift blame for food risk events. Complicating patriotic trust, however, suspicions arose amongst some consumers regarding the authenticity of country-of-origin labelling, with several references to prevailing loopholes in labelling legislation. This disrupts patterns of reliance and confidence in 'buying Irish' as a personal risk avoidance strategy and reflects a mistrust in food assurance schemes cited by Eden *et al.* (2008a) in the UK. Nonetheless, other Irish labelling was associated with creating trust, including pictures of farmers on produce (students), 'guaranteed Irish' assurances (sports players) and the Bord Bia quality mark (ICA participants). Such responses suggest a continuing level of comfort inspired by Irish products, echoing Guéguen and Jacob (2012) regarding consumer willingness to choose and pay more for domestically produced goods.

For the majority of consumers, however, patriotic trust in Irish food was not directly linked to any one causal factor such as a trustworthy Irish food industry or reliable national food safety governing actors (factors predicted to create a positive country image by Knight *et al.* (2007)). Rather, reflecting dimensions of unconscious trust (Berg 2004, De Jonge *et al.* 2008), this trust was assumed and represented a 'gut instinct' for many. As such, language relating to emotions and feelings dominated these discussions. Personal experiences with food risk were nonetheless also called upon to shape opinion of Irish food safety. For instance, one sports player joked that he had not experienced food poisoning in twenty-two years. Similarly, for one office worker, the fact that her food shopping routines have not yet caused any health impacts suggests to her that these practices are safe. Thus, not getting sick from food appears to develop a form of experiential trust for some Irish consumers. This is similarly contended by Jackson (2010) who correlates consumer food anxieties with life history evidence. However, as highlighted by Fischer and Frewer (2008, p.2878), few consumers are 'knowingly affected by food-related illnesses', so the actual effect of unsafe food is unlikely

to impact on behavioural or psychological constructs. Further, the rather invisible, accumulative effect of some food risks (for example, chemical risk) may also prevent consumers from perceiving problems with current food routines.

Finally, consideration of scalar elements is central to discussions of risk coming from the 'outside'. More specifically, it is interesting to explore demarcations of who and what is 'inside' and 'outside' (and therefore trusted or not trusted). In this research, a distinct spatiality of trust was obvious. More precisely, the highest level of trust was attributed to local level actors (including butchers, farmers' markets and neighbours) by office workers, mindful parents, retired participants and community gardeners. Echoing the importance of interpersonal ties in food purchasing routines (Sage 2003), consumers expressed feelings of reassurance, confidence and unquestioned faith when it came to sourcing food (and risk advice) from such individuals. Perceptions of safety were especially inspired by the perceived accountability of local actors, with additional perceptions of increased quality, freshness, transparency and choice also featuring. This echoes Grunert (1997, p.157) who found that 'place of purchase' significantly influenced beef quality perceptions among German, French and Spanish consumers, with 'the butcher… regarded as a sort of guarantor of high quality'.

Moving up the food chain, retailers and the food industry were especially mistrusted by consumers interviewed, with particular doubts arising regarding the intentions, carelessness and honesty of these food chain actors. A perceived continuous drive for profits led consumers to believe that public health is only of remote concern in these corporate environments. For instance, suspicions particularly arose regarding perceived changes to expiration date labels that enable retailers to sell meat past its use-by date. Meanwhile, despite attributions of responsibility to national state structures to govern food risk, reported consumer trust in such actors was mixed. Some participants simply expressed 'hope' that these structures abide by consumer interests (ICA and retired participants) while others dismissed the intentions of state bodies, including the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) (mindful parents and FÁS participants). For example:

> *"*Government are not for the people, they're like the parent company of all the corporations in Ireland. That's what most of governments are, they're not for the people"
>
> (Gary, Mindful Parents)

With several consumers perceiving industry and government to withhold information to protect industry reputation, such responses contradict aims of recent food safety governance reforms to restore public confidence in food management structures (Holm and Halkier 2009). Trust in supranational food governing actors was similarly varied. For example, some retired participants criticised Ireland's membership to the EU, perceiving it to have lost agricultural and food autonomy as a result (reflecting 'anti-EU feelings' similarly explored by Ivaldi (2006, p.66) in France). Contradicting this, a belief that supranational bodies possess more

expertise and capabilities to manage food risk was obvious in other groups, with gardeners and students perceiving enhanced risk detection mechanisms at the EU scale.

Finally, there was limited mention of global food governing actors within focus group discussions, suggesting a majority association of food risk governance with national and local scales. This comes in spite of the complex nature of international food trade that calls for effective and efficient global governing structures. Certainly, very few consumers appeared aware of the bodies operating at international scales to manage food risk, such as the World Health Organisation or Codex Alimentarius. Instead, scalar responsibility and related trust extended down to personal consumer and household levels. However, mixed perceptions ranging from food risk being inevitable, to personally controllable, complicates a straightforward reading of consumer trust at this most intimate scale. These alternative spatialities of attributed responsibility and trust are summarised in Figure 1 and highlight the importance of conducting locally-based analyses of food risk perceptions.
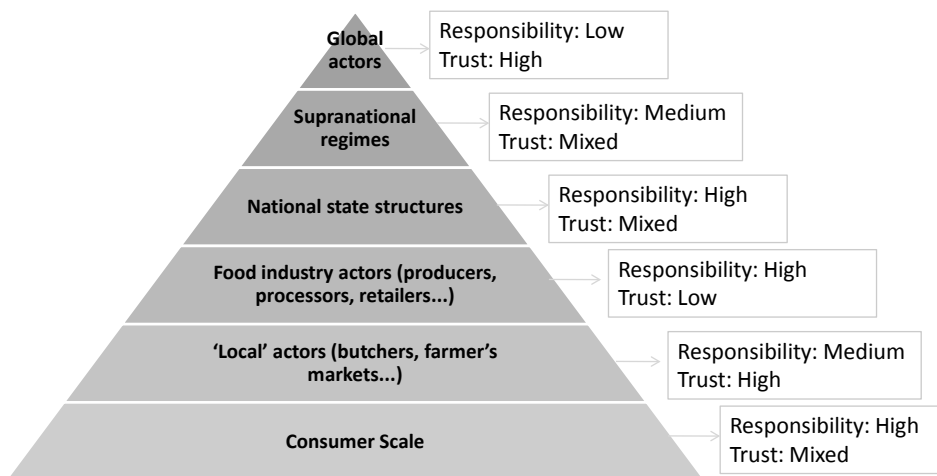

Figure 1 Spatiality of trust in Irish food risk governance

'Do as I say, not as I do': consumer practice versus theory

Finally, linking with previous findings, the third focus group theme notes significant differences between what consumers say, believe and feel and how they behave in practice. This theme was particularly obvious given the number of food risks cited when probed, compared to descriptions of everyday food habits. Indeed, reflective of inconsistent risk society responses, several respondents admitted to not even thinking about cited food safety fears in everyday scenarios. For example, many

conceded to making limited efforts to adjust purchasing routines, investigate food labelling or seek out non-GM produce. This came in spite of cited concerns for country-of-origin labelling, risk from the 'outside', new diseases, scepticism of food research and mistrust of GM technologies. Such responses reflect findings from FSAI (2009) where only 3% of consumers surveyed reportedly seek out country-of-origin information from foods, despite 74% attributing importance to its presence on labels. Shaw (2002) noted similar traits in UK consumers reporting concern for GM but doing little in practice to avoid GM products. Excerpts from focus groups illustrate this mismatch effectively:

> "I just eat and drink or eat whatever I like, I wouldn't be thinking about it actively while I'm talking [about risks]."
>
> (Julia, Students)

> "I think a lot of us, whatever you're given, you eat it and that's it!"
>
> (Donal, Sports Players)

The responses above additionally reflect behaviours explored by Eden *et al.* (2008) whereby sceptical consumers are reported to do very little to appease their anxieties in everyday life. This may be reflective of a broader food risk fatalism, whereby consumers believe that there is little they can do to avoid food risk without incurring significant monetary or temporal costs. Indeed, given the rise of supermarket power in determining diets (Tovey 2007, Hinchliffe *et al.* 2013) and restraints pertaining to economic recession, the limited availability of food alternatives is a reality for many. However, Eden *et al.* (2008) conclude that a strategy of ignorance can also be deliberately employed to avoid having to confront unpleasant risks and subsequently disrupt existing routines and established relationships. In this research, as with Eden *et al.* (2008, p.629), acknowledgement of food safety concerns in everyday scenarios may therefore be too problematic for consumers and 'challenge existing shopping practices'. Operating with a level of ignorance, distractedness or denial regarding food risk could represent a specific strategy adopted by Irish consumers to make life easier. Consumers cannot be continuously preoccupied with risk without significant consequences to mental health and well-being. It is not practical, realistic or healthy to be anxious about food risk consistently. Such findings help to explain some of the evident gaps between consumer practice and theory in the Irish food risk context.

The mismatch can also be explained utilising 'complexity-reducing' concepts explored by Berg (2004, p.31) who highlights the effort required to remain constantly vigilant following a food scare event. Similarly, Frewer *et al.* (2002) note that while UK beef consumption behaviours altered dramatically around the time of the BSE announcement in 1996, consumers had returned to normal consumption levels by 1997. This is comparable to perceptions uncovered in the food product exercise conducted in this research relating to Irish bacon. Interestingly, the 2008 pork crisis received no attention from consumers, despite

it representing the most recent indigenous food crisis event at the time. This may suggest that the crisis was managed effectively by the FSAI, as suggested by many politicians (Oireachtas 2009) and academics alike (Jacob *et al*. 2010). Alternatively, in keeping with Berg (2004), consumers were perhaps already settled back into pork consumption routines two and a half years on from the dioxin scare. This exemplifies the complexity and embedded nature of eating and related reported tendencies for food consumption to often be enacted in a 'totally unthinking', non-rational and routinised manner (Lupton 1992, p.155).

Thus, preserving risk attention until food crisis events, the perceived time, effort, mental capacity and money required to avoid food risk appear to result in participating consumers operating with a level of distractedness or ignorance in their assessment of food risk in everyday life. This approach to food risk enables participation in an increasingly fast-paced life where, for many, the weekly food shop represents a chore, hassle and routine event. Disinterest, convenience, habit, embarrassment, brand loyalty and/or taking safety for granted may also fuel such behaviours, ultimately allowing consumers to pursue everyday routines uninterrupted.

Conclusion

While public concerns cannot wholly determine food risk governing priorities (for example, for fear of incomplete attention to risks outside of public consciousness (Slovic 1999)), they can provide valuable and pertinent input into food regulatory agendas. Indeed, the qualitative understanding of the perceptions, emotions and trust levels inherent in local food risk practices outlined in this paper is important given the highly personalised nature of food consumption and related difficulties in designing and implementing standardised food risk policies and communications (McCarthy and Brennan 2009). Further, according to Slovic (1999, p.699), incorporating consumer perceptions into risk assessment could make the process 'more democratic, improve the relevance and quality of technical analysis, and increase the legitimacy and public acceptance of the resulting decisions'. In other words, it could achieve a more open, transparent, inclusive and balanced food risk regulation landscape, one that incorporates both 'expert' and 'lay' perceptions. Indeed, as trust in the safety of Irish food already appears evident amongst participating consumers, a need exists now to develop this confidence in related food governing bodies. This could benefit consumer well-being, perceptions of effective government spending and help rid anti-establishment feelings that have recently formed in Irish and other national contexts (Ivaldi 2006, O'Sullivan 2007). This aspect merits further investigation, particularly regarding trust in, and need for, food risk governing bodies like the FSAI.

There is also a more considered reason justifying the need for consumer reflection on food risk. This relates to a need for consumers to be aware of what they are eating to facilitate a confrontation of prevailing industrialised, concentrated, unsustainable and inherently risky food production practices. As with many technologically driven developments (Beck 1992), desires for fast,

cheap and exotic food have increased the risks associated with the food chain as processes of intensification and globalisation were mainstreamed. There is now a need to reflect upon such practices and associated benefits and disbenefits. Rather than being widely accepted, increased consumer reflection concerning the foods that they buy in everyday contexts could spark such a reconsideration and challenge existing norms of contemporary food provisioning.

As this paper reveals, so much of what constitutes our daily diet is connected with trust and dependency, with consumers seemingly accepting what is provided to them without much thought or reflection. Some pockets of consumer revaluations are apparent, as evidenced in the recent growth of GIY, Fairtrade, local food and organic movements. Indeed, the 2013 horsemeat scandal has been renowned for causing consumer reflection on food production methods. However, as mooted in this paper, the longevity of such increased concern is questionable. As a result, this reflection must instead infiltrate everyday food practices to challenge the inherently risky, unsustainable practices of the wider food system and empower publics to call for change in how food is produced.

Acknowledgments

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