

## WP 4b: The Contested Domain of Fish Consumption in Sweden

This project studies how risk and anxiety about consuming fish during pregnancy is framed, handled and circulated by officials at the Swedish National Food Administration (NFA) and by pregnant women.



### Methods:

Studies of information manuals on dietary advice about fish and pregnancy; Interviews with officials at the NFA; analysis of discussion fora on the NFA website and its information site at Facebook; interviews with a parents' group in Gothenburg; interviews with midwives at a maternity care centre.

### Findings:

- The objective of the NFA is to promote the capacities of pregnant women to act rationally in encounters with potentially harmful fish (i.e. to **modulate their anxieties**). This is done by two means:
  - Placing information about pregnancy and fish within a risk discourse (warning but not frightening)
  - Using **liberal governance methods** (not prescribing but advising, leaving the decision to individual women)
- Women are interested in information on how to behave to protect the fetus:
  - They are aware that the **everyday practices** of shopping for food, cooking and eating need to be reconsidered when they become pregnant
  - They **actively seek advice** from many different sources, including the NFA
- The NFA's communication does not always generate the desired affective responses:
  - Women's everyday lives are filled with **competing discourses** about health, food and pregnancy from experts as well as lay people, family and friends
  - The information from the NFA is packed with **moral discourses**, including discourses about good motherhood and the female body, and is presented in a moral tone
- Women develop practices to **handle anxiety** about fish and pregnancy:
  - They improve ways to **attune themselves** to the information, and use a variety of sources to make decisions about their food and eating practices.
  - They learn ways to handle the situation, including the use of **rules of thumb**, and how to avoid potentially risky situations and meetings with harmful fish
- Only when attunement is not enough, and something unexpected happens, does a **sudden panic** arise, before the women's cognitive processes catch up and they are in control again.



The NFA's ambition to give friendly advice and leave the decision 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 women's feeling that you cannot ever feel safe, you always have to anticipate that something bad might happen. The use of **interactive means such as Facebook and SMS** is not only a good way to fight the anxious subject which would meet the women's preferences. It is also a way of keeping pregnancy and fish steadfast within the realm of risk and anxiety.

### Key Publications:

Milne, R., Wenzler, J., Brembeck, H. and Brodin, M. (2011) Fraught Cuisine: Food Scares and the Modulation of Food Anxieties. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 12 (2): 177-192.

Brembeck, H. (2011) Preventing Anxiety: A Qualitative Study of Fish Consumption and Pregnancy. *Critical Public Health*, in press.