

Consumer Anxieties about Food

The CONANX programme argues that anxiety is not just a personal pathology to be explained in terms of individual psychology. Rather, our research explores the social condition of anxiety as well as the impact of specific anxiety events like 'food scares'.

Recent survey evidence confirms that there are **high levels of consumer anxiety about food** across Europe. In November 2010, a Special Eurobarometer report on food-related risks found that:

- 48% of those surveyed were concerned that **food may damage their health** (up from 42% in 2005)
- 68% were (very or fairly) worried about the **quality and freshness of food**
- 51% thought that 'food today is **less safe than ten years ago**.

Many commentators have argued that high levels of anxiety are a feature of modern life and that the present can be characterised as an '**age of anxiety**'.



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Modern food anxieties have been exacerbated by an increasing sense of **disconnection between producers and consumers**.

Food anxieties can also be related to:

- The **industrialisation and intensification** of agriculture
- The **globalisation** of food supply chains
- The process of **retail concentration** (with 70-80% of UK grocery shopping coming from the 'big four' supermarkets)
- A series of '**food scares**' in the UK and across Europe (from BSE in cattle and salmonella in eggs to Listeria among older people and E.coli in bean sprouts)
- Increasing concerns about **food insecurity and rising food prices**.

The programme asks:

- How are anxieties '**framed**' by different communities of practice (media, government etc)?
- How do they move between **social fields** (like health, environment and animal welfare)?
- What **conditions** encourage the spread of food anxieties (such as the gaps between lay understanding and expert opinion)?
- How and why are food anxieties **moralised** to varying degrees (regarding the decline of the 'family meal' or rising levels of childhood obesity, for example)?



We understand food anxieties as rooted in the **practices of everyday life** rather than as extraordinary or unpredictable events. Acknowledging that people's anxieties about food are balanced by the pleasures of consumption, we examine how government and other regulatory agencies are involved in a process of **modulating consumer anxieties**. Researching public anxieties in terms of how they are framed and circulate within society leads us to question individualised notions of 'consumer choice' and the highly **moralised language of 'decline'** that pervades contemporary food discourse.

Key Publications

Jackson, P. and Everts, J. (2010) Anxiety as Social Practice. *Environment and Planning A* 42: 2791-2806.

Milne, R., Wenzer, 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.