Explaining gender differences in the perception of food-hazards

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Abstract - Several studies revealed systematic gender differences in the perception of food-hazards with women being frequently more concerned than men. This paper proposes a study design for investigating the underlying reasons for these gender differences systematically. The study is based on a contextualist psychological approach to risk perception in order to understand what meanings men and women attach to food-risks by uncovering women’s and men’s cognitive structures related to food-hazards. In this regard, special emphasis is put on the means-end-chain theory which is proposed as the appropriate methodology and the laddering technique as derived method.¹

INTRODUCTION

During the last years we acknowledge increasing awareness among the majority of the population that food is not safe per se. Many studies revealing hazards related to the consumption of certain food products and several food crises at national and international levels have increased consumers’ uncertainty regarding the purchase of food. Thus, consumption decisions have become decisions under uncertainty where neoclassical economic theories with their focus on the rationality of the “homo oeconomicus” have only a limited explanatory power. While food safety regulation is based on the analysis of risk probabilities with the aim to reduce scientific uncertainty (CEC, 2000) consumers’ economic decisions are socially and culturally embedded, especially in the case of uncertainty. One important element in decision-making under uncertainty is people’s perception of risks that appear to differ between people, especially between women and men.

Several studies revealed systematic gender differences in the perception of food-hazards: these studies found that women tend to worry more about many food-hazards and judge many food-hazards as more probable than do men (e.g. Dosman et al., 2001; Roosen et al., 2005; Setbon et al., 2005). However, studies investigating the underlying reasons for these often stated gender differences are lacking any systematic relation to gender theory (Gustafson, 1998).

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This paper presents an approach and a study design for investigating gender differences in food-related risk perception systematically.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For analysing gender differences in food-risks perception we follow a psychological contextualist approach to risk perception as proposed by Jackson et al. (2006):

For one, we follow a psychological approach as we are interested in risk perceptions and risk constructs out of the perspectives of individuals. While we deny viewing gender as a sum of attributes as do individualist approaches to gender, we suppose that socialisation processes and contexts influence people’s self-concepts, identities, world views, preferences, values and expectations (Wharton, 2005, p. 9; Gustafson, 1998, p. 809). Thus gender differences in norms, values etc. are also expressed at the individual level through e.g. differences in risk perception. However, these preferences, values etc. are not stable across situations but do strongly depend on the situation and social context.

Getting a broad idea of individual’s risk constructs demands thus further a contextualist approach to risk. According to contextualist thinking risk is culturally and socially embedded and focuses on the meaning of hazards for individuals and groups. As a consequence, our research will thus be guided by the central question of how people perceive risks. Even though empirical studies have found consistent gender differences in food-risk evaluation we do not take them for granted but try to find out what meanings individuals attach to several food-hazards and analyse in a second step if there are gender effects.

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

In order to understand what meanings men and women attach to food-hazards we will try to uncover women’s and men’s cognitive structures related to food-hazards.

Cognitions are a product of past experience and information which are strongly influenced by people’s living conditions, life-style and responsibilities etc. of which some may have a gendered nature. Thus differences in risk perception may result from differences in previous knowledge structures.

Different models have been developed for presenting knowledge structures. One of the most
important ones is the means-end-chain theory developed by Gutman (1982) and Olson and Reynolds (1983). It presupposes that knowledge is organised hierarchically and that the evaluation of a product/issue etc. is always embedded in how it is connected to the attainment of principal life values. It has been developed for advertising research to explain subjective product perceptions in revealing the relationship between attributes the consumer associates with a product (the means), over consequences perceived by the consumer to the attainment of basic life values (the ends) (Gutman, 1982; Olson and Reynolds, 1983).

The most prominent way to create means-end-chains is the laddering technique which has been developed by Gutman and Reynolds (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) to measure individual and aggregated means-end-chains. With the laddering technique we will be able to investigate the cognitions individuals have with regard to a given food-hazard in laddering the lower order attributes individual associate with a food-hazard through the consequences to the higher order values. According to Walker and Olson (1991) a person’s basic values are relatively stable, but different aspects of a person’s self-schema are activated in different situations.

The laddering technique allows us to investigate the influence of values in a concrete manner as values in question will be elicited with regard to three specific food-risks: a natural food-risk, a technical food-risk and a still less known one, like the use of nanotechnology in food production. We wonder if individuals or groups of individuals differ in how they mentally link food-hazards to the attainment of basic life values and in their aspects of self-schemata activated when specific food-hazards are regarded. Regarding gender differences our study tries thus to answer the following principal questions:

- Do women and men differ with regard to type of attributes, consequences or values they associate with a food-hazard?
- Do women and men differ in the strength between certain cognitions?
- Do men and women differ in their complexity of cognitive structures regarding food-hazards?
- Do men and women differ in the vividness of the image of a food-hazard in question?

**RELEVANCE**

How people perceive risks and which kind of risks motivate their behaviour in which way is a crucial question in consumer research (Mitchell, 1999, p. 165).

Investigating food-risk cognitions may on the one hand contribute to a better understanding of people’s risk perceptions in general. Getting to know people’s food-risk constructs is important for understanding people’s risk evaluations and will contribute to research that is interested in explaining individual differences in risk perception. Furthermore, people’s risk constructs are interesting for risk communication strategies.

According to the idea “(...) that risk is culturally conditioned: what one defines as dangerous depends on where one stands (...)” (Jackson et al., 2006, p. 11), it may reflect gender relations in our society. What people or groups of people are concerned about and why they are concerned about it can reveal their role and status in society.

**REFERENCES**


