How Do Consumers Solve Value Conflicts in Food Choices? an Empirical Description and Points For Theory-Building

Harri T. Luomala, University of Vaasa
Pirjo Laaksonen, University of Vaasa
Hanna Leipamaa, University of Vaasa

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In this paper, the value conflicts that consumers may experience while making food choices are addressed. On the basis of a literature review, there may exist several food-related value conflicts including novelty vs. tradition, health vs. indulgence, economy vs. extravagancy, convenience vs. care, technology vs. nature, and others vs. self. The key empirical issue of this study was how individuals phenomenologically experience these different food-related value conflicts. Our empirical data was qualitative and consisted of collages and interviews. Our data suggests that the most common food-related value conflicts are those between convenience and care and between health and indulgence. These two conflict experiences are described and analyzed in depth. The paper concludes by showing the relevance of attribution and balance theories in moving consumer research toward conceptualizing value conflicts in food choices.

Consumer choices are a common yet complex research phenomenon. Especially, in the case of food, consumers encounter multiple choices on the daily basis. In itself, food and eating are by their nature dynamic phenomena full of changing psychological, social, cultural and economic meanings. Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, and Devine (2001, p. 189) have illustrated this inherent dynamism and complexity in food choices and eating.

“The abundance and variety of foods from which to choose is extensive. Social changes such as the increased participation of women in the work force lead to reduced time available for food selection and meal preparation, which further complicates food choice. Contemporary consumers have fears and conflicts involving food and health, and social norms about food and meal composition that guided previous generations appear to be eroding, leaving people with a lack of structure related to food and eating behavior.”

For the majority of the consumers, food is involving in one way or another. For instance, in their study comparing food-related lifestyle segments in France, Germany, UK, and Denmark, Brunso, Grunert, and Bredahl (1996) found that Germany had the largest segment of uninvolved consumers which was still smaller than one-fourth of the consumers studied. This implies that consumers associate a variety of values with food. Values are often seen as synonymous with goals (especially general ones) which are receiving more attention from consumer researchers. For example, Bagozzi and Dholakia (1999) stress that “we know little about what consumption goals are, how they are represented in memory, how they come about and change, or how they are pursued and achieved.” According to Martins and Pliner (1998), people seek sensory enjoyment, economy, health, convenience, emotional experiences, familiarity, novelty, and ways of impressing others from their food choices. A natural consequence of this multitude of food-related values is that sometimes value conflicts arise. The conflicts happen when “values are contrasted with each other and juggled according to their significance for a particular food choice” (Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, and Winter-Falk 1996, p. 257).

It is exactly these conflicts in food choices we are interested in our paper. How usual is it that consumers experience value conflicts when choosing what to buy for food? What kinds of value conflicts are most common? Under what circumstances do the conflicts emerge? How do consumers solve these value conflicts? These are questions we try to answer in our research. On the basis of the preceding discussion we set three objectives for our paper. First, to review the existing literature concerning food choices in order to identify the nature of potential value conflicts. Second, to empirically explore the extent and nature of the value conflicts consumers face in their everyday lives. Third, to offer conceptual ways and ideas to advance theorizing about value conflicts in food choices. Not so long ago Steenkamp (1996, p. 16) stated that “consumer behavior with respect to foods has not attracted much systematic attention by consumer behavior researchers.” The situation has improved since then, mainly thanks to the Danish research program and group MAPP. In line with this development, we hope to contribute to food consumption research by giving both theoretical and empirical attention to a poorly-researched phenomenon in order to provide building blocks for food-consumption theory generally.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section we consult the psychological, sociological and cultural literatures concerning food choices to review the repertoire of potential value conflicts. In the third section we briefly describe the method and data we used. The results of a qualitative pilot study are reported next. Lastly, we introduce two theories that can be harnessed to forward the conceptualization of value conflicts in food choices.

WHAT KIND OF VALUE CONFLICTS THERE MIGHT EXIST IN FOOD CHOICES?
We decided to organize the following discussion according to juxtapositions found in Warde (1997), Ekström and Askegaard (2000), and Mäkelä (2002). These juxtapositions include novelty vs. tradition, health vs. indulgence, economy vs. extravagancy, convenience vs. care, technology vs. nature, and others vs. self.

Novelty vs. Tradition
There exist consumers who consistently want to try out new products, brands, services and experiences. This kind of food consumers can be called either novelty seekers or variety seekers, but, by the same token, there are persons who can be classified as food neophobics (Lähteenmäki and Arvola 2001). They are afraid of new elements in food. In many societies, being open to new thoughts and ideas is valued. Food manufacturers and marketers are continuously bringing new products and brands to markets. Distant ethnic cuisines are introduced and gaining ever-increasing popularity. Magazines offer food recipes that are claimed to be new in one way or another. On the other hand, tradition has become appreciated again. One of the millennium trends identified by Shore and Cooper (1999) was labeled as “origins.” Sometimes traditional food dishes conjure up nostalgia, which has received attention in consumer research lately (e.g. Summers, Johnson, and McColl-Kennedy 2001). Tradition in food choices may be preferred because it creates a sense of security, continuity, and social togetherness. Particularly
on special occasions (e.g. when having foreigners as guests or at Christmas) conventional dishes and foodways are important to many consumers.

Health vs. Indulgence

On the level of values, people in many countries state that health is one of the most important things for them. Especially in Western societies increasing preoccupation with the health effects of modern food can be seen (Caplan, 1997). Government authorities are “preaching” the importance of the food-choice-health linkage and provide norms to guide citizens in making healthy food choices. Food manufacturers and marketers try to capitalize on this trend by offering new foodstuffs and drinks that are supposed to have positive impact on health (so-called functional and/or organic foods). Ironically, the increased health-consciousness has generated anxiety in consumers too. People have started to ask questions such as What can be safely eaten? and Who should I listen to? (Ekström and Askegaard, 2000). However, even the most devoted health grazers do have their weak moments of relapse. Food is one of the most fundamental sources of hedonic experiences in human life. It is not uncommon for people to give themselves permission to indulge in delicious food every now and then (e.g. on holiday or on weekend). Mood experiences have been shown to heighten gourmandizing and excessive drinking (Luomala and Laaksonen, 1999). Perhaps the most gruesome example of these opposite forces at work is the situation in which the self-indulgent relapse is regretted and self-punishment follows in the form of food abstinence and increased physical exercise.

Economy vs. Extravagancy

In every country there is a group of consumers who are very price-conscious. Thrift has been a virtue in many countries (Warde, 1997). Economical emphasis manifests itself in many ways in food choices. Many consumers seek low prices especially on weekdays. Large quantities of dishes that are easy to prepare may be cooked for later use. The “conservative” lifestyle segment found in Bruno et al.’s (1996) study is likely to behave like this. As an echo of the wartime, children are still often asked to “empty their plates.” Although the monetary resources of households have a direct bearing on how much and what food is consumed (Ritson and Petrovici, 2001), even households with moderate or low income are on certain festive occasions extravagant. Extravagancy may mean that there is plenty of something, or that food is basically the same as usual but is done using higher quality ingredients, or that food (or food items) is a rarity. For example, food and wine connoisseurs often want to impress others by offering exceptional wines and exotic dishes (cf. Martins and Pliner, 1998). On these occasions extravagancy becomes a statement of social status, and appreciation of the generous sophistication might be expected.

Convenience vs. Care

It is a general belief that life has become more and more hectic. For some consumers (e.g. career women with children) time is a more valuable resource than money. This has created a natural demand for convenience foods (fully or partially prepared foods, take-away meals, eating in restaurants). According to Candel (2001), a person who seeks convenience in meal preparation is not involved with food products, is not a variety seeker, does not enjoy cooking, and has a heavy burden of obligatory activities. Food provision (planning, shopping, preparing) is still very much of women’s responsibility (Ekström, 1991). Caring diligently that the husband and the children get enough good and healthy food is a part of the stereotypical picture of a “proper housewife”. Care materializes when a woman puts a lot of effort and time into preparation and esthetic serving of food to please her spouse and/or children. Contentment may be felt after role-congruent behavior, but not being able meet the norms, for example by resorting to convenience foods, may also create feelings of shame and guilt.

Technology vs. Nature

One of the millennium trends uncovered by Shore and Cooper (1999) was transformism. They state (1999, p. 43) that: “Advances in science and genetics have created the biological foundation for the belief in ‘new self’. ... Scientifically-based pharmaceutical, health and beauty products, neutraceuticals, new fabrics and leading edge products are among the categories likely to respond to this trend.” While many American consumers believe that genetic modification of food will result in more healthy and higher quality food, the public reaction in Europe has been much more negative and reserved (Nelson, 2001). For instance, Danish and Swedish consumers in Ekström and Askegaard’s (2000) study used words such as artificial, synthetic, and unnatural to describe genetically modified food. It seems that for some consumers the naturalness of food has become an important choice criterion (the case of organic food products) (Kantanen, 2002). In Scandinavia especially, “technological” food are associated with danger and “natural” food with safety.

Others vs. Self

Here, by “others” we mean both widely-impacting and long-term consequences of food choices for the mankind (e.g. ethicality) and social aspects of eating. Food choices can be seen as moral and ethical utterances which make food also a societal and political issue. People have in addition to their personal welfare started to think about the welfare of other people, animals, and the globe (Mäkelä, 2002). According to Shore and Cooper (1999, p. 42), “attention will turn to family unity, bonds of love and sharing, and the importance of maintaining family ties” (the so-called “unification” trend of the millennium). Planning, preparing, and enjoying food have always had a role in maintaining and developing social relationships. On the other hand, there is a discussion concerning the individualization of societies. For example, Valentine and Gordon (2000, p. 196) assert that “the 21st century ‘consumer’ is a ‘subject’ that continually constructs identities for itself by entering into the process of consumption.” An illustration of expressing one’s individuality by very specific food choices is vegetarians and food connoisseurs (cf. Ekström and Askegaard, 2000).

The value conflicts listed here and summarized in Table 1 arise mainly from sociological research which emphasizes society as a level of analysis. Is it so that consumers also experience these value conflicts at the individual level and if they do, how do they experience them? This is what we wish to find out in the empirical part.

METHOD AND DATA

As the aim was to identify consumers’ potential value conflicts in food choices, two different kinds of qualitative research methods were used to gather the data. First, seven focus group interviews (in the summer of 2001) and after that ten personal interviews (in the spring of 2002) were performed. To supplement interviewing, the collage technique was also used. Visual methods are useful when there is a need to reveal deep and latent thoughts, attitudes and feelings related to a research topic (see e.g. Lieber, 1997; Sack, 1998; Zaltman, 1996). The data was originally gathered for analyz-
ing the relationship between the consumer and food. The value conflicts in food choices, per se, were not the primary focus when the data was gathered. So, here the data is more or less of secondary in nature.

Altogether, 48 interviewees participated in the interviews (38 in focus groups and 10 in personal interviews). They were chosen purposively so that they formed as rich and versatile a sample as possible. There were 29 women and 19 men and their ages varied between 17 and 67. In focus groups the participants were asked to create freely a collage with pictures and words given (170 pictures to each) from a topic “Food and me”. After that each participant described his/her collage to the rest of the group. In personal interviews participants were asked to create “Food and me” - collage in their homes within one week. Pictures were allowed to be chosen freely from newspapers and magazines, except pictures describing food. This restriction was given in order to encourage the participants to use pictures as *metaphors* describing their relation to food. The participants were then interviewed personally mainly on the basis of Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, which is developed for helping revealing consumers’ internal state of mind (Zaltman, 1996, p. 13). All the focus groups and personal interviews were recorded and transcribed carefully afterwards.

To reiterate, the data consisted of both verbal and visual material. In order to reveal consumers’ food-related value conflicts, the transcribed interview tapes were read through several times analyzing the collages at the same time. All the food-related value conflicts that emerged were marked and summed up in order to form a general picture of the magnitude of different conflicts. Special attention was paid to examining how participants felt the conflict, how it was explained and solved and in what context it emerged. Reliability of the analysis was safeguarded by having three coders independently identifying the conflicts in the transcripts and collages.

**FINDINGS**

Table 2 reports the frequencies of the value conflicts in food consumption as identified by the three different coders of the data.

As can be seen from the table, all of the food-related value conflicts could be identified in the data, although there are differences in the magnitudes of the value conflicts. Next, we will phenomenologically explore the two most common value conflicts in food choices, which include the convenience-care conflict and the health-indulgence conflict. The potential reasons for some of the differences in coder frequencies are tackled at the end of this section.

**Convenience vs. Care**

On the basis of our data it seems that many informants felt the need to defend their use of convenience foods and highlighted the occasions on which they put a lot of effort and time into preparing and serving food. Convenience meant using semiprocessed food-stuffs, preparing “easy foods”, and serving snacks. Reasons that justified the use of convenience foods included lack of time on weekdays (mainly work), household obligations, hobbies, and eating alone. On the other hand, care was often associated with gourmet food and food that is prepared all way through and with esthetics in serving and laying the table. Weekends and festive occasions seemed to evoke care (e.g. window-dressing when having guests over) in food preparation and eating. Also family gatherings and social interaction often induced care. The narratives below illustrate some of the points made here.

“And then the food what we have on weekdays. We don’t put that much effort into laying the table, we throw the plates on the table. We are busy, we don’t have the time for it. And tired too, especially now when we have the baby. We have clearly reduced this, and when preparing food for myself I try to quickly do something when I’m alone with the baby, gourmet food is out of the question then.” (female, 26, social worker)

“I do homely food and offer vegetables, but not every day. I cook the dishes my children want me to cook, but I also sometimes buy convenience foods for them. You cannot be perfect every day.” (female, 36, secretary)
“These wine bottles are here because they tell that in our family wine is a part of a good meal. These beautifully laid tables imply that when we invite guests over we have a habit of making food to its perfection and put a lot of effort into serving and table decoration. Then we eat peacefully and without any sense of hurriedness.” (female, 31, forewoman)

### Health vs. Indulgence

It was usual for informants to recognize the importance of healthy eating. It seems that food and health education has been internalized to a great degree, because many informants used words such as “regularity”, “balance”, and “manysidedness”. Also food that was wholly made at home (possibility of controlling what is put into food) and the domestic origin of foodstuffs were often taken as signs of healthiness. For some informants, digressing from the healthy diet caused feelings of guilt and anxiety (one informant even punished herself after “not playing by the rules”). Even the most health-oriented informants agreed that hedonism and self-indulgence are an essential part of their “foodworlds”. Indulgence is ok, if there is some permission for it and it is temporary (many informants were aware of the unhealthiness that goes with food treats). Weather, accomplishments, weekends, festive occasions, mood states can act as permission givers for indulgence. Food hedonism may be focused (e.g. gulping down huge amounts of Mövenpick ice-cream) or comprehensive (e.g gourmet food made of the very best ingredients, extravagance in laying the table and decorating the dining space). The following three narratives shed some light on the issues discussed above.

“Nowadays, it is so that chocolate is a delicacy I often cannot resist. And then we eat a lot of Italian food, even though I have many domestic foods in my collage. This picture of a slim, skinny and healthy woman, it’s the ideal, but I feel that I am this little chubby elephant, who, nevertheless, is happy, even though its measures are not what they are supposed to be.” (female, 27, architect)

“I have used contradictory words in my collage: impulsive, prudent and rational on the other hand, emotional and careless on the other. It is just so, my mood states greatly influence my eating and even my shopping behavior. Sometimes I think that I should skip eating buns and cakes… There are no days that are exactly the same. It depends how I feel.” (female, 23, student)

“On weekdays we try to have healthy food, but at weekends we give ourselves a permission to relapse. Eating goodies while reading or watching movies are examples of relapses. And grilling sausages in the fireplace… I don’t know, but we will always come up with an excuse for eating better and more expensive stuff.” (female, 26, construction engineer)

An important observation was that the experiences of food-related value conflicts were not always in terms of the antinomies that emerged from the literature review. For example, the other pole for convenience was in some cases indulgence (“convenience foods taste bad”), economy (“convenience foods are not inexpensive”), or health (“convenience foods are unhealthy”) and not care. Similarly, the other pole for health was sometimes convenience (“healthy foods require effort in purchasing and preparation”), economy (“healthy foods are expensive”), or technology (“healthy foods are genetically modified”) instead of indulgence. It is likely that this is a valid explanation for the differences in frequencies that can be seen in Table 2. One coder may have classified a convenience-indulgence value conflict as belonging to the convenience-care category while the second coder may have classified this conflict as belonging to the health-indulgence category. This issue needs attention in future research.

### DISCUSSION: TOWARDS CONCEPTUALIZING VALUE CONFLICTS IN FOOD CHOICES

In this section we describe how two different theories could be harnessed to advance conceptualization of value conflicts in food choices. These two theories are the attribution theory and the balance theory.

**Attribution Theory**

The origins of attribution theory can be seen in Kelley’s (1967) work (Weiner 2000, p. 382). However, the most prominent developer of the attribution theory as it now stands is Bernard Weiner. Here we briefly introduce the theory, apply it in the context of food-related value conflicts, and make a couple of claims that should be addressed in future research.

The guiding principle of attribution theory is that individuals search for understanding, seeking to discover why an event (especially if it is negative or controversial) has occurred. Inasmuch as the potential list of causes is considerable within any motivational domain, and because the specific causes differ between domains, it is essential to create a classification scheme or a taxonomy of causes. (Weiner 1982, pp. 185-186) Weiner (1982) identifies three causal dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability. Later he (2000) emphasizes the relevance of the last two in the consumer behavior context. According to this thinking, the basic ways of explaining different outcomes are: stable-controllable attribution, stable-uncontrollable attribution, unstable-controllable attribution, and unstable-uncontrollable attribution.
What do then these basic attributions mean in the context of food-related value conflicts? We illustrate these basic attributions by using examples from our data. A value conflict (health vs. indulgence) may arise when a person who has a hedonistic orientation toward food, buys or eats something that is healthy (and by his/her standards often tastes bad). A case of the stable-controllable attribution can be seen when this person believes that hedonism is not just self-indulgence, it is abstinence too: without abstinence or “suffering” there cannot be real eating pleasure. This is one way to resolve the value conflict.

According to our empirical data the convenience-care value conflict may be generated when an individual sees himself/herself as caring about the quality and appearance of food, but buys semiprocessed foodstuffs and uses them in preparing meals (which can be regarded as unhealthy or even dangerous). An example of stable-uncontrollable attribution is when this kind of care-oriented person explains his/her “deviant” behavior as reflecting the current work situation: “My life is so busy nowadays that I cannot follow my principles all the time.” This was one explanation for the convenience-care value conflict that emerged from the data.

It seems that unstable attributions are more common. For instance, when a person, who normally favors organic foods and ingredients, buys and eats technologically engineered food, technology-nature value conflict may be witnessed. An example of an unstable-controllable explanation for this value conflict is a situation in which an organic food favorer has invited guests who are known to like or for medical reasons need technologically engineered food. To illustrate, the guests may be older people with increased risk of heart disease. The hostess, who normally buys “natural” food, may think that “my husband’s parents have high cholesterol levels so this time I buy a box of cholesterol-reducing margarine for everyone to use.” The premeditation of this decision makes it a controllable explanation.

Finally, the unstable-uncontrollable attribution can be illustrated by looking at the economy-extravagancy value conflict. A price-conscious consumer may temporarily give up his/her economic principle due to, say, a negative mood state. For example, a person may after a stressing work week (that was caused by uncontrollable factors) want to give himself/herself a treat by buying filet and red wine instead of the usual minced meat and milk. In other words, the existence of the negative mood gives the permission for the person to behave extravagantly, against the norm that may be long-established and personal. Stories like this were not difficult to find in the data.

We hope that these examples have shown that attribution theory is a viable candidate when the food-related value conflicts need conceptual foundations. Our observations give rise to at least two intriguing questions. First, do certain attributions (e.g. unstable-uncontrollable) outnumber the rest? Second, to what extent does the “content” of the attributions vary across different food-related value conflicts? The next step is to increase the formalization of the attribution theory account of food-related value conflicts and of the empirical and analytical approaches to treating food choice-related attributions (cf. e.g. Stratton and Bromley 1999).

Balance Theory

Balance theory considers relations among elements a person perceives as belonging together. These relations may be for dyads, triads, or more complex cases, but all relations are seen from the perceiver’s subjective viewpoint. Two types of relations between separate entities are identified: unit and sentiment relations. A unit relation exists when one entity is seen as belonging to or being a part of the other entity. A sentiment relation exists when two entities are linked because one has expressed a preference or dislike for the other. The theory specifies that people desire relations among entities to be harmonious, or balanced. If they are not, a state of tension will result until perceptions are changed and balance is restored. (Solomon, Bamossy, and Askegaard 1999; Woodside and Chebat 2001).

In the present research context, the entities involved in the relations could logically be person-food product-food value. The existence of food-related value conflict implies the existence of imbalance. On the basis of Woodside and Chebat (2001), there exist three different kinds of unbalanced states in the case of triads. Figure 1 depicts these three potential unbalanced states in the person-food product-food value triad. The first triad illustrates the health-indulgence value conflict, the second triad the economy-extravagancy value conflict, and the third the novelty-tradition value conflict.

The unbalanced state in the first triad is a case where a person values health, but also likes chocolate which is unhealthy. According to the balance theory, there are three principal ways to achieve a harmonious state of being. First, the person somehow manages to turn his/her liking for chocolate into dislike. Second, the person re-evaluates his/her values and reaches a conclusion that health is not important to him/her. Third, the person stops considering chocolate as unhealthy.

The second triad presents the unbalanced state in which the person values economy, but does not like porridge, which is an inexpensive food. The principal ways of resolving this food-related value conflict are the following. First, the person develops a taste for porridge. Second, the person relaxes his/her demands on the value of economy. Third, the person changes his/her view concerning porridge as an economic choice.

The last triad tackles the unbalanced state in which the person does not think highly of traditions, but likes pea soup which is a very

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**FIGURE 1**

Unbalanced states in the person-food product-food value triad.

![Diagram](attachment:image.png)

chocolate + porridge - pea soup

+ person + health - economy - tradition

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The last triad tackles the unbalanced state in which the person does not think highly of traditions, but likes pea soup which is a very
traditional dish in certain countries. Once again, there are three ways to dispel the tension. First, the person stops liking pea soup. Second, the person, for some reason or other, starts to appreciate traditions (e.g. as growing old). Third, the person does not any longer associate pea soup with tradition.

The discussion above raises many interesting questions. In re-establishing the balanced state, which ways are the most logical and feasible and thus dominate. Describing how the process of regaining the balanced state goes about in the case of different food-related value conflicts is another intriguing issue. Beyond triads, more complicated constellations of entities and unit and sentiment relations involved in food choices and consumption should be analyzed (e.g. family food choice and consumption processes). Another promising future research theme is to examine how the changes in perception of different relations can occur. For instance, is it possible to develop a chocolate that is perceived as healthy or a porridge that is perceived as a delicious treat? Should this be done by really changing the product or just by creating a new image for the product? Generally, going analytically through different food-related value conflicts in the case of different food products from the viewpoint of balance theory may produce novel ideas for food product development and marketing.

We conclude with a few words concerning the relationship between the attribution theory and the balance theory. As we see it, the attribution theory can be used to analyze the causal origins of consumers’ food-related value conflict experiences, while the balance theory is useful in understanding how consumers resolve the value conflicts they perceive to exist in food choices. In other words, these theories supplement each other; they can be used to investigate different aspects of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, it would be intriguing to combine these theoretical accounts to scrutinize whether different attributions (e.g. external vs. internal) lead to a selection of certain type of balance regain strategy. The integration of the attribution and balance theories offers a fruitful point of departure for developing many new and interesting research questions for future studies.

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