

UNEARTHING PARADOX

Organic food and its tensions

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Abstract

Consumer behaviour in the organic market has been the focus of numerous studies. However the research does not produce consistent results and fails to explain why around 60% of consumers switch between organic and conventional food on a regular basis. This article explores this 'switching' behaviour and identifies the need to look beyond reasons such as cost and availability. It then highlights inconsistencies that exist in this market and explores these using the concept of paradox. The aim is to provide insight into the complexity and ambiguity of consumers' experiences in the arena of organic food. This is done through three studies exploring different perspectives on consumers and organic food in Canberra.

Keywords

Organics, Canberra, consumer behaviour, ethical consumption

Introduction

Consumer behaviour in the organic market has been the focus of numerous studies. These studies explore this behaviour using many different marketing and consumer behaviour frameworks. However, this research does not produce consistent results and fails to explain why around 60% of consumers switch between organic and conventional food on a regular basis (Henryks, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2010). This article

examines the suggested reasons for this ‘switching’ behavior and provides explanations for why it is important to look beyond reasons such as the price premium that organic food attracts and the often unpredictable availability of organic food. It then identifies inconsistencies that exist in this market and explores these using the concept of paradox. The aim is to provide insight into the complexity and ambiguity of consumers’ experiences in the arena of organic food. This is done through three studies exploring different perspectives on consumers and organic food in Canberra: consumers that switch between organic and conventional food; volunteers in a school kitchen garden program and research examining the relationship between organic community gardening and organic food purchase.

The term ‘organic’ is open to many interpretations. However, this article will examine the term from the point of view of the organic movement¹ where it refers to food and products that are grown and processed without the use of artificial pesticides or chemicals and which are not genetically modified.² This includes processed food and fresh produce but also extends to products such as clothing, textiles and personal care products (Henryks, 2009). However, this article focuses solely on organic food. Products that are ‘certified organic’ are differentiated from those that are simply ‘organic’ in that they are defined by a certification standard. This standard varies from category to category but in each case provides a strict set of guidelines that producers and processors must follow if they are to attain and maintain certification. Records need to be kept and audits are carried out annually. Auditors trace the certified food from seed to sale (or, in the case of animals, from birth to sale) to ensure that organic principles and practices are maintained.³ In Australia, the certification bodies are responsible for maintaining the organic standard; however, there are currently eight certification bodies which each have their own certification symbol. Whilst the organic issue can be explored in relation to conceptions of, and farming initiatives related to, naturalness, sustainability and ethical practice, this article looks exclusively at organic food.

Context and methodology

There exists a large body of literature examining why people buy organic food. This research examines many facets such as: motivations for and attitudes towards purchase (McEachern and McClean, 2002; Baker et al., 2004; Davies et al., 1995; Fearn, 2008; Hughner et al., 2007; Lea and Worsley, 2005; Lyons et al., 2001; Sloan, 2002; Zanolli, 2004); behavioural data exploring purchase patterns (Finch, 2005; Lockie et al., 2002; Pearson, 2002); market segmentation studies examining the market as a whole (Cowan and Roddy, 1996; Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002; McEachern, 2002; Lockie et al., 2002); and market studies identifying the size of the market (Mitchell et al., 2010; Willer and Kilcher, 2010). However, this research does not produce consistent results and fails to provide a cohesive understanding of buyer behaviour in this market (Henryks, 2009). Further, this research fails to explain why around 60% of consumers switch between buying conventional and organic food on a regular basis (Mitchell et al., 2010). Previous research has argued this is predominantly due to reasons of cost and availability (Latacz-Lohmann and Foster 1997; Lockie et al., 2002; McEachern and Willock 2004; Riecks et al., 1997; Shepherd et al., 2005; Zanolli, 2004); however, it has also been argued that this may be a limited approach to the issue (Henryks, 2009). The higher cost of organic food may be a factor limiting consumer uptake, but the issue is not always one of affordability. It can also be related to what is valued by consumers (Henryks, 2009). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the average Canberra consumer household spends \$18 per week on fresh fruit and vegetables and \$67 on fast food, alcohol, confectionery, soft drinks and junk food (ABS, 2006), marginally higher than the national average of \$17 and \$63 respectively. This indicates that many consumers choose to spend money on food and drink items other than fresh fruit and vegetables. It is not our intention to suggest that everyone can afford organic food, or that they 'should' choose organic food. Our aim is to further understanding of the organic market in a specific urban location (Canberra) and to highlight the fact that consumers make choices which are not always based on cost.

Further, the notion of availability within existing research is used as a synonym for 'not convenient'. Organic food is not as easily available as its conventional

counterpart and therefore often requires more effort to purchase. As the majority of Australians do their shopping in supermarkets and most supermarkets only supply a limited range of organic food, those committed to, or even interested in, organic food will often need to seek it elsewhere, be it farmers' markets or specialty food shops. As Lyons et al. (2001: 204) point out, "unavailable" for consumers means "not easily available from the supermarkets where I shop". However, since the research for this article commenced in 2006, many changes have shaped the availability of organic food in Australia including the sale of Macro Wholefoods (a chain of organic shops) to one of the key players in the Australian food industry, Woolworths, in 2009 (Speedy, 2009: np). Since purchasing Macro Wholefoods, Woolworths has launched an in-house organic range of food products branded as Macro Organic. This has substantially increased the range and availability of organic food in a retail outlet which, alongside Coles supermarkets, has been estimated to account for between 70–75% of food sales in Australia (Lyons, 2007). Further, some research has suggested that as consumers become more committed to the notion of organic food, they are willing to invest more time and effort in seeking it out and, thus, increase their consumption (Nourish Foods, 2005). While this may be intuitively true it is far from clear in the literature and further research is required to substantiate this claim. Furthermore, little research has been conducted into the factors influencing this commitment.

Consequently, despite the plethora of research into the organic food market, only a fraction of which has been cited here, there are few clear answers to key issues that exist in this market. The aim of this research is not to 'solve' these issues, but to further understanding of the multiple contradictions that exist in this area specifically through the lens of the Canberra market. Canberra differs from other Australian cities both demographically and in terms of the presence of two highly successful farmers' markets that service the region. Demographically, Canberra residents have higher education compared with other capital cities and also have a higher average income (ABS, 2008). Between them the two farmers' markets in Canberra attract crowds of around 13000 people on an average weekend. One, the larger of the two, is located north of the city (Capital Region Farmers' Market) and operates on a Saturday whereas the smaller market (Southside Farmers' Market) is

located south of the city and opens on a Sunday morning. Their locations mean that the majority of Canberrans have a farmers' market within fifteen kilometres of where they live. One of the factors that differentiates the larger Canberra farmers' market (Capital Region Farmers' Market) from many of its counterparts in other states is that it operates under very strict guidelines as to who is permitted to set up shop in order to maintain its authenticity as a genuine farmers' markets rather than selling produce purchased from the wholesale fruit and vegetable markets. Farmers' markets are promoted as selling produce straight from the farmer to the consumer⁴; however, there has been some concern that not all vendors at Australian farmers' markets are selling their own produce.⁵ Different farmers' markets have various ways of addressing this issue. Some do so with accreditation that provides shoppers assurance that farmers' markets have stallholders that either grow or make the produce (for example the Victorian Farmers Market Association) and other markets that choose to implement their own auditing of vendors (for example the Capital Region Farmers' Market in Canberra allocates \$15,000 per annum to spot check vendors). Although these farmers' markets do not sell solely organic food, it is available. Recent research indicates that consumers often conflate organic and fresh food from farmers' markets (Radman, 2005). These assumptions are evident amongst Canberra consumers (Henryks and Pearson, 2010).

Another unique aspect of the local food distribution systems in Canberra is that it has two farmers' retail outlets. Several others have since been established in Goulburn, Mudgee and Orange but, with the exception of the Goulburn outlet, they tend to focus on locally made produce such as olives and preserves rather than fresh fruit and vegetables. The Canberra outlets are run by the same family and emerged from business generated from selling their organic produce at both of the farmers' market. The Pentony family started Choku Bai Jo (Japanese for 'Direct Selling Place') in north Canberra as an outlet for their produce. They were growing more than they could sell at the farmers' markets and saw an opportunity to provide an outlet that could service people on a more regular basis. The success of their north Canberra outlet prompted the family to open another store in the city's south in January 2011. The retail outlets differ from typical fruit and vegetable stores in that they only open for limited hours (2-7pm Monday to Friday and 8am-1pm on Saturday mornings)

and they only stock Australian fruit and vegetables. Vegetables are picked daily for their store and they also stock a range of produce from other local growers. All local food is labelled with the number of kilometres it has travelled from grower to the store. Their stock is supplemented by produce from the wholesale markets but this is clearly identified in the store. Although the Pentony's farm is certified organic, this is not the case with all of the produce they stock. Again, certified organic produce is clearly labelled giving customers a clear choice of products.

This research examines three different studies related to organic food to identify and map inconsistencies, paradoxes and tensions that operate in this arena. The key issue is the gap between consumer attitudes/beliefs and actual buyer behaviour. That is, some consumers espouse attitudes which indicate that they are positively predisposed to organic food yet do not always purchase it. This is consistent with similar research in the area of environmental or green marketing (Schlegelmilch et al., 1996; Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; Chamorro et al., 2007) where there often exists a gap between consumer attitudes and their behaviour. In-depth research by the authors of this article has identified further inconsistencies in this market. One way of exploring these inconsistencies is using the concept of paradox. Paradox can be defined as a self-contradictory statement or a person exhibiting contradictory statements (Rappaport, 1981). Paradox has been explored in the organisational behaviour literature in an effort to "contribute insights more in tune with organizational complexity and ambiguity" (Lewis, 2000: 760). Also in the field of organisational behaviour, Cameron and Quinn (1998) use paradox as a way of moving "beyond oversimplified and polarized notions to recognize the complexity, diversity and ambiguity of business and organizational life" (O'Driscoll, 2008: 95). It is this diversity and ambiguity that is often central to the understanding of consumer behaviour. By choosing to examine these contradictions it is hoped that the richness and depth of Canberra consumers' everyday life experiences can be given a voice.

The notion of paradox has had little attention in the consumer behaviour literature. Two notable exceptions include an examination of the paradoxes of technology consumption (Mick and Fournier, 1998) and the work of Otnes et al. that examines consumer ambivalence (1997). These studies make a significant contribution to the

field through their efforts to acknowledge the complexity of consumer behaviour, thus enabling the development of richer understandings of consumers in local contexts. However, and as O’Driscoll notes, “we might conclude that marketing theorists’ embrace of the concept of paradox has been circumspect” (2008: 98). By exploring this notion in the context of organic food, we aim to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by providing insight into the complexity and ambiguity of consumers’ choices in one specific arena.

This article examines three research studies exploring different aspects of organic food purchase and consumption in the Canberra market. The first is a study examining consumers’ switching behaviour in the organic food market. Currently it is estimated that around 60% of consumers switch between buying organic and conventional food (Mitchell et al., 2010). This is up from 40% several years ago (Lockie et al., 2002; Pearson et al., 2007). To gain a greater understanding of this behaviour, in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 household shoppers who purchased at least three organic items a week, but for whom this was not the majority of their shopping. This study was undertaken in 2006–07. In the findings below they are referred to as *Organic Switchers*.

The second study examines the role of organic food in the lives of adults involved on a volunteer basis with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden, a school kitchen garden in Majura Primary School, Watson, Canberra, in 2010. The school kitchen garden is run on organic principles and the research examines whether the volunteers’ engagement with organic principles in the garden translates to their daily lives in the form of purchase and consumption of organic food. In depth interviews were conducted with seven volunteers. They are referred to as *School Kitchen Garden Volunteers*.

The final study looks at the relationship between organic community gardening and organic food purchasing with respect to the lived experiences, behaviours and beliefs of community gardeners. This is explored through data gathered from participant observation, informal conversations, and indepth interviews with twenty community

gardeners in Canberra from late Spring to early Autumn of 2009–10. These participants are referred to as *Community Gardeners*.

Each of these studies was conducted using an interpretivist approach (Neuman, 2006) and within a social constructivist framework (Crotty, 1998) to produce a “thick” (Geertz, 1973), rich and in-depth description of the issues under investigation. All three studies were comprised of participants that had some connection to organic principles in their lives: be it through personal consumption, growing organically or participating in a community program run on organic principles. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes emerging from the interview transcripts (Minichiello et al., 2008). Specifically, the transcripts were examined to identify the relationships between espoused organic values/beliefs and the actual consumer behaviour and practices of participants. One of the emergent themes was the incongruities in the stories participants were relaying. Our intention in identifying these inconsistencies is not to pass judgment on our participants but to illuminate an aspect of existing behaviour in this market in an effort to shed light on its paradoxes and tensions. The three areas of research all lead to the identification of inconsistencies and incongruities between the beliefs and behaviours of the participants. To develop further understanding of the market we must explore the contradictions which make up the everyday experiences of consumers.

When examining the findings from these three studies, paradoxes, tensions and trade-offs in organic consumption were identified. These have been grouped into three categories. The first two appear to be underpinned by often unacknowledged inconsistencies in beliefs, values, behaviours and practices. These are identified in narratives, firstly, where there are gaps between cognition and behaviour, and, secondly, where there is a sense of disconnection articulated between practices of production and consumption. The third category is comprised of those participants who consciously acknowledged the tensions and inconsistencies in their beliefs and practices but sought to actively justify these through trade-offs. Intuitively whilst it may be expected that those engaged in the production of organic food may be more inclined to also be organic consumers/shoppers, this was not found to be the case consistently.

Paradox one: the gap between cognition and behaviour

Consumers can hold strong and passionate views on a topic yet this does not necessarily translate to behaviour. This gap between belief and behaviour can be viewed as a paradox; that is, consumers hold a view but do not act in accordance with it. In the case of these studies, some participants believed that organic food tasted better yet did not purchase it that often. For instance, one participant in the Switcher research stated that they shopped for organic food in bursts but the remainder of the time bought conventionally produced foods, noting that “Once every three to four weeks I go and buy everything organic at the organic shop” (Organic Switcher). This person believes organic food tastes better, asserting that “organic food has stronger flavours... organic chicken really does taste like chicken used to taste when we were kids,” and is better for the environment, but their beliefs do not translate to consistent behaviour.

The health benefits of the chemical-free nature of organic food were important to some participants but, again, they did not necessarily shop in accordance with these views. Participants did not see a contradiction in these instances. Conventional, or food not grown organically, and cheap food were considered by one participant to lead to illness: “I think you can buy really cheap food [referring to fruit and vegetables] and probably get sick”; and several minutes into the interview, “if it’s cheap I’ll buy lots of it” (Organic Switcher). She did not recognise the apparent contradiction in these statements. Another Switcher explained her concern in relation to chemicals in food and personal care products yet did not see any contradiction between this and smoking cigarettes: “You don’t want to be ingesting all sorts of strange chemicals” followed by: “is it alright if I have a cigarette?” (Organic Switcher). Interestingly, she did not view this as a trade-off between eating (chemical-free) organic food and therefore being able to engage in some ‘unhealthy’ behaviour. When questioned further about this incongruity, she became defensive about smoking and claimed not to see a link between it and her concerns over chemicals.

Another Switcher also believed that the chemical free aspect of organic food was important (as was taste): “I feel healthier if I’ve had more organic fresh fruit and veg and it’s this whole ‘I want to know what I’m putting in my body’... In your head you know it [organic food] is better for you”, yet she did not actively seek it out. She noted that: “It [organic] is more about taste and freshness and knowing what’s in it [chemicals]”, but only buys it occasionally depending upon her need for special ingredients for cooking: “if a Bill Granger⁶ recipe calls for organic chicken I’ll get that” or if she happens to notice it when shopping “when it’s in my face I’ll buy it” (Organic Switcher).

Buying locally was key for some participants. A School Kitchen Garden Volunteer acknowledged that organic food assisted people in being more connected to the earth yet shopped for local food over organic due to her preference for shopping at the farmers’ market. She clearly articulated the contradiction in her views and concluded that it’s possible she valued ‘local’ food over organic food when forced to choose. Another School Kitchen Garden Volunteer did admit to feeling guilty over not shopping in line with her beliefs: “I have to confess I don’t shop at either of those places [the farmers’ market or local farmers’ market retail outlet] as often as I should, to follow my alleged convictions”. Yet despite these feelings of guilt, the paradox remains: she both believes in shopping locally and does not shop locally often. Somehow, for this participant the convenience and habit of her current shopping regime predominate. She was not alone in this view: “I have the aspiration [to shop at local food outlet and farmers’ market] but I’m not always able to meet them... I’m passionately committed to organic food and local food” (School Kitchen Garden Volunteer). This participant shops at a major supermarket because of time pressures. Indeed, some participants reported that the limited operating hours of the farmers’ markets and outlet stores made them difficult to access. This was echoed by many Community Gardeners who cited convenience and time pressure as reasons for shopping at supermarkets. One Community Gardener, who strongly emphasised the value of shopping locally to reduce food miles and thus his carbon footprint, acknowledged he didn’t always do this: “But again I mean I don’t... I’m not as probably... I don’t take it as seriously as I should in terms of say purchasing

decisions". This gardener expressed a sense of guilt, but felt unable to remedy it in the foreseeable future.

Animal welfare also presented as a paradox amongst both School Kitchen Garden Volunteers and Organic Switchers. There was increasing knowledge about farming practices which may not care for animals in ways which certified organic animal farming did (for example access to pasture in free-range chicken systems). However, participants still shopped for conventional meat at mainstream supermarkets, resulting in a gap between their espoused beliefs and their behaviour: "You know being exposed to a bit more of that [information about industrial animal farming] has helped me choose... I still buy steak from Woollies sometimes" (School Kitchen Garden Volunteer). School Kitchen Garden Volunteers talked with other volunteers who had different knowledge of animal farming practices, and, while this helped increase awareness, it did not necessarily lead to behavioural change.

Interestingly, animal welfare did not emerge as an issue for Community Gardeners. It is possible that this stems from the fact that meat-eating was not specifically included in the researcher's interview guide and that all but one of the interviews was carried out in the gardens themselves, surrounded by fruit and vegetables. However, when meat-eating was raised by participants it was related specifically to issues of human health, rather than animal welfare. Indeed, one participant sought out organic meat as part of her broader health initiatives which ranged from concern related to the chemicals in the food provided to animals to the plastic wrappings it was sold in.

The gap between attitudes and behaviour has long been explored in the domain of consumer research (Shaw et al., 2007; Vanhonecher et al., 2008). Similarly, these studies provide several examples that highlight the gaps in relation to consumer beliefs and attitudes around organic food and actual behaviour. In the main, participants could see these 'gaps' but chose (sometimes unwillingly or uncomfortably) to live and act with these contradictions in their lives. However, in

some instances, participants justified these ‘gaps’ and in others, simply chose to ignore them.

Paradox two: disconnection between production and consumption (purchasing)

This research has found no direct link between those engaged in the production of organic fruit and vegetables and those who purchase organic food. Whilst many participants avoid the use of insecticides and pesticides on the food they grow the majority were not overly concerned about their use on the food they purchase. Indeed, participants seem to be able to separate their passion for gardening organically from their purchasing behaviour. Greater understanding of this paradox will assist in understanding the motivations, or lack thereof, for the purchase of organic products.

The Community Gardeners in this research are members of gardens run by the Canberra Organic Growers Society, and, as such, organic production is mandatory. However, none of the research participants reported feelings of hypocrisy or contradiction in not purchasing organic foods. Indeed, whilst many enthused about the virtues of “knowing what was in the food” they grew themselves, they were relatively unconcerned about the food they purchased elsewhere with seventeen of the twenty participants stating that they did not actively seek organic foods. Only one interviewee consistently purchased organic products with an additional two making an effort to purchase mostly organic food. The majority (eleven) did not express a desire to purchase organic food. For many this was related to the fact that they were able to produce the majority of their own vegetables in the garden (particularly leafy greens, a food source some feel is more readily contaminated with chemicals than others). Often Community Gardeners were only buying fruit, such as oranges, which have skins that are removed and a perceived lower risk of chemical contamination.

Community Gardeners reported that much of their diet is sourced from their garden plot and, thus, is already organic. This may impact on their purchasing decisions. This was also apparent for some Organic Switchers for whom growing their own vegetables resulted in purchasing less organic food: “In the last couple of years we’ve gotten... into growing our own vegies and that’s taken a lot of pressure off. I no longer feel the need to buy organic” (Organic Switcher). For this participant, there existed a causal link between growing and purchase of organic food which was based on her ability to grow her own food, therefore decreasing the need to purchase the quantities she had in the past. As the quantities were less, any related health or environmental concerns relating to the purchase of non-organic food were greatly reduced. However, overwhelmingly, the Community Gardeners indicated they were not concerned about eating non-organic foods. This view is represented by one participant with a long association with, and commitment to, organic gardening (except for the use of some snail bait in her home garden where she did not grow food), who, when asked whether she purchased organic foods noted: “Oh no... I’m not that precious”.

A lack of concern on the part of Community Gardeners surrounding the purchase of organic food can also be related to the expression of a somewhat ambivalent attitude to organic gardening principles. Whilst all adhered to the requirements in the seven community gardens where the research was conducted, of the fourteen people who also grew fruit and vegetables at home, only six declared themselves to be organic gardeners. Seven stated they were mostly organic and one described herself as “not philosophically organic”, but rather a: “low industrial chemical input integrated pest management gardener”. Those who are mostly organic continue to use some chemical fertilisers and pesticides in their home gardens, albeit less, and in a more targeted manner, than before they joined the community garden. Half of all participants cited the organic rule as an important factor in their decision to join the garden, whilst two simply wanted more space to garden. All other participants liked the idea of the garden being organic, but did not identify this as a motivating factor. Mostly people gardened in these plots because they wanted more space or were unable to grow at home, rather than being driven by the organic element.

Three of the Community Gardeners were very much opposed to shopping at large supermarket chains. However, the majority were motivated by price, quality, access and habit in their shopping practices, rather than organic credentials. One participant noted that: “I don’t necessarily make a conscious decision to specifically buy organic... if you see this sad organic carrot, and it really is a very sad organic carrot, why would you buy it?” Indeed, organic production (outside of their garden plots) was not necessarily equated with quality food. Two participants enthused about the quality and cheapness of fruit and vegetables from the ALDI supermarket. For these two it was important to buy food that was in season, cheap and tasted good. When asked again if she purchased organic foods, one noted that she preferred produce that is “tasty” [rather] than that one that it is healthy for me”. This seems to indicate a belief that organic foods provide a healthier option, but the belief did not produce any behavioural changes in purchasing decisions for this consumer.

This floating affiliation to organic foods was self-identified as hypocritical by some participants. The community gardens’ research indicates that, for those who express a commitment to shopping for food in particular places, the key motivations are not organic, price, food miles or other environmental concerns. For the majority it was driven by a desire to avoid the dominant chains and to shop locally at commercial markets (though the concern here was largely with purchasing from local shops, not buying locally produced goods). Those who did actively seek organic food did not express concerns about where (so did not articulate concerns about food miles), or from whom (so did not articulate concerns about supermarket chains), they bought the food. This was because they were motivated by health concerns, rather than environmental or economic issues. One participant, with a family history of health concerns, commented that: “the more I read the more I am terrified of what’s going into our food in the form of pesticides... everything you’re eating has got some residue in it”, going on to note that “we try to buy organic. That’s been a big change in our lives... We try to buy free range or organic where we can now. It costs more, but with just the two of us at home you can afford it”. This particular participant enthused about the increasing availability of organic foods in large chains, and saw this as a major benefit. Her concern was with individual health, not buying locally.

The community garden research also indicates that the issue of access, so often referred to as an impediment to the uptake of organics, requires a more nuanced approach. In this study, those who consciously think about where they purchase their fruit and vegetables avoid supermarkets in a bid for independence. They are, in part, motivated to engage in community gardening in an effort to assert independence and control over their food production and consumption. For these people, the commercialisation of organic foods may, in fact, be a turn-off. Two Community Gardeners consciously ceased shopping at a particular Canberra organic store due to a perceived drop in the quality of the produce and the shop's efforts to "increase market share" by incorporating vitamins and supplements.

A curious behaviour gap exists amongst growers of organic food. Interestingly, their organic buyer behaviour (or lack thereof) does not mirror their gardening interest in organic growing. In some instances there were 'rational' reasons for this gap: for instance, due to their own supply of fresh organic produce they did not need to purchase as much. However, in other cases, participants had made conscious decisions to avoid buying organic food due to its increasing mass market nature, a move that is viewed as the antithesis of organic principles which were founded less on the monoculture of mainstream agriculture and more focussed on polyculture in an effort to create a diverse ecosystem.

Paradox three: articulated and acknowledged trade-offs

Trade-offs is one way in which some participants deal with the paradoxes that are identified in this research. Unlike the findings in the preceding sections, here we explore instances where the paradoxes encountered by the researchers are articulated and concretely justified by participants. Trade-offs appear to be a way in which the participants are able to acknowledge the paradox that exists in their organic food beliefs and attitudes and their decision not to buy organic food.

In the study of Organic Switchers all participants were strong supporters of organic food and believed in its superiority to conventional food, despite this belief not always translating to behaviour. One Switcher traded off organic apples for the

opportunity to purchase bulk local apples: “I don’t even ask them about what they treat because I don’t want to know” (Organic Switcher). By not asking, she is able to self-justify her behaviour. Her way of dealing with this was not to ask the farmer about what sprays he used whilst being aware that it’s likely he would have used some form of artificial chemical. Consequently the trade-off was buying locally and cheaply instead of chemical-free or organic apples.

Concerns about added artificial chemicals in meat led another participant to purchase meat which was grass-fed instead of certified organic. That is, she believes and is genuinely concerned about the health implications for growth hormones in meat yet chooses to trade off certified organic meat for grass-fed meat. “Meat—it’s about growth hormones... I know it’s in all of it... or anything that is feedlot... so I’ve been trying to buy King Island beef... I know it’s not certified organic but at least it’s grass-fed” (Organic Switcher). Not all meat sold in Australia has hormones; however, this is something that the participant expressed uncertainty about and felt she was doing ‘the next best thing’ to what she perceived to be hormone-free by purchasing grass-fed beef. She traded off her concerns for growth hormones with price.

Overall lifestyle was another way in which participants attempted to bridge the gap between their beliefs about organic food and their behaviour. In the Switcher study it was common for participants to compare themselves to the ‘other’. The ‘other’ led lives where large quantities of junk food were consumed (“you only need to look in their trolleys at the supermarket”) and low or nonexistent levels of exercise were the norm. These ‘people’ were very unhealthy and the opposite to the participants espousing these views. Consequently they viewed themselves as being able to trade off buying certified organic food in smaller quantities as their overall lives were healthier than those of the ‘other’ who potentially ‘*should*’ be buying organic food because their diets were so unhealthy:

Candidly, I'd like to be all organic but for the reasons I've stated before there are restraints and I – because I live the way I do – and I don't want to big note myself – but because I live the way I do I believe that I can balance that out better

against Big Macs and things like that, which seems to be the fare these days wherever you go. (Organic Switcher)

In all these instances, price is rationalised as being the core reason for the trade-off. These participants openly talked about the higher costs associated with organic food and chose instead to adopt consumption practices which they believed justified and explained their paradoxes. The following quote exemplifies the approach taken in trading off conventional food against organic: “I mean the [organic] milk we buy is horrifically expensive... like if you’re making a rice pudding or something that is going to be cooked for a long time anyway, I... use nonorganic milk” (School Kitchen Garden Volunteer). For this participant, the cost of organic milk could not always be justified. She judiciously chose conventional milk in instances where she was using large quantities and cooking it for extended periods of time.

Trade-offs provide consumers with a means of explaining their paradoxical behaviour. These paradoxes were articulated and examined by participants without researcher prompting. Healthy lifestyles were seen to provide insurance against the need to buy organic.

Conclusion

The three emerging paradoxes amongst Canberra consumers identified in this research lead to more questions than answers. Intuitively we may have considered that people committed to growing organic food would translate this behaviour to other areas of their lives. Similarly, it could be considered that consumers who articulate their beliefs around the importance of consuming organic food for reasons of health, environmental concerns, taste or quality would actually purchase and grow organic food. This research demonstrates that this is not consistently the case.

Further research that specifically addresses, identifies and explores the paradoxes could provide a key to understanding some of the inconsistencies that exist. We know that consumers can rationalise and articulate the reasons why they do not purchase more organic food when they believe in it. Price and availability are the

two main reasons why people claim not to purchase organic food (see, for example, Davies et al., 1995; Jolly et al., 1989; Latacz-Lohmann and Foster, 1997; Lockie et al., 2002; McEachern and Willock, 2004; Riecks et al., 1997; Roddy et al., 1994; Shepherd et al., 2005; Zanolini and Naspetti, 2002). Yet we have argued that we need to look beyond these rationalisations and explore other possibilities. This article endeavours to start this process by mapping out some of the paradoxes that exist with specific reference to Canberra consumers.

Despite the fact that it would be easier for marketers, producers and retailers of organic food to have clear-cut directions so that they can effectively and efficiently target consumers of organic food, the reality of the consumer experience is that multiple truths exist, often simultaneously. By identifying the paradoxes, we are seeking to give voice to the everyday life experiences of Canberra consumers as well as provide a platform for further examination of these issues. Greater understanding of these paradoxes will assist in improving understanding of the motivations for consumption of organic products.

Endnotes

¹ For the purposes of this paper the organic movement is defined as the groups, businesses and individuals that work to further the cause of the production, supply, marketing and consumption of certified organic food.

² A genetically modified food is one derived or developed from an organism that has been modified by gene technology (Food Standards Australia and New Zealand, 2002).

³ The Australian Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce details requirements for farmers and processors (Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, 2008).

⁴ See, for example, the Farmers' Market Association website <http://www.farmersmarkets.org.au/> which states: A Farmers' Market is a predominantly fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and food producers to sell farm-origin and associated value-added processed food products directly to customers.

⁵ This is based on comments from committee members of the Capital Region Farmers' Market and shoppers at these markets.

⁶ Bill Granger is a high-profile Australian chef, restaurateur and food writer.

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