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Meningsdannelser og handlehorisont i virksomheder med økologisk forarbejdning

The title of this doctoral thesis is ‘Sensemaking and enactment perspectives in companies with organic processing’. As the title indicates, the main focus is to understand how companies make sense of, and acts in relation to, the processing of organic food. The author asks why there are very few explicit reflections, both in the public debate and among companies, concerning the processing of organic food, and seeks the answer in empirical work involving five companies engaged in the processing of organic food. Initially, the thesis discusses the background for the choice of subject by arguing that the lack of value reflections, combined with the very sparse regulation in the organic processing sector, is problematic. This is because the expectations from the public connected to the production and the products as, for example, being healthier, better quality, locally produced or a better choice for the environment, are not necessarily fulfilled. These value-related expectations are different from the expectations connected with conventional food products and are related to the history of organic food production. In organic production, primarily among the farmers, there have always been strong relations to different explicit values, which also today make organic food represent an alternative to the conventional. In processing however, very few of these explicit values are represented, if we look at regulations in the area for example. The two major differences between organic and conventional food production are that the list of additives is more limited in organic, whilst there is also a ban on the use of GMO products. This fact leaves the management of values, in a broader sense, to the single company and thereby opens up the possibility for a wide range of interpretations. Today, the amount of organic products on sale in an ordinary supermarket in Denmark illustrates the variety available. It also reveals an increasing selection of more and more processed and conventional ‘lookalikes’ as organic possibilities, for example freeze-dried soup powder, frozen pizzas or ready-to-eat noodles with different flavours. In the context of EU regulation, there is continuous pressure to add to the list of allowed additives from food companies, which has resulted in an increase in the number of permitted additives. For example, today the use of additives for colouring cheese is permitted, which was not previously allowed. This development is problematized in relation to the expectations mentioned above and in relation to the necessary price premium connected to these products due to the more expensive costs as in the primary production. If organic products end up as conventional ‘look-alikes,’ how can they then represent an alternative and command higher price? This thesis investigates this subject further by gaining knowledge of how the concept of ‘organic’ is comprehended and interpreted within Danish food processing companies. This has lead to the development of the following interconnected research questions: What sensemaking perspectives are connected to organic processing companies? How do they enact the concept of organic in the companies and in the networks around them and what does this mean in relation to practice? Which issues can be placed in the zones of relevance in the companies? 6 The theoretical approach has been related to two main traditions; New Institutionalism and Actor-Network Theory. The overall frame has been to focus on the cultural-cognitive aspects of organisations and relate this to the network activities involving ‘actants’ of both human and non-human origin. Finally, the phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (Schütz, 1970) concept ‘Zones of relevance’ is also used to combine the different approaches into a unifying illustration of the potential for the companies to develop their understanding of the distinctive character of organic production. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick et al, 2005) and enactment are key concepts in the analysis, which are applied in order to determine the identity connected to the specific organic production in each company. In the empirical study, the main methodological approach adopted to examine identity and sensemaking in the companies is the qualitative interview. Interviews were conducted with persons with the main responsibility for organic production in the companies. The focus has been, on the one hand, to try to understand and analyze the sensemaking perspectives in relation to organic processing, whilst on the other, to give an overview of these different sensemaking aspects in relation to the enacting perspectives, which is the potential for developing and acting in networks, in relation the organic identity. The concept ‘zones of relevance’ has been introduced, in order to identify the immediate, and thereby most familiar, issues for the company on which they are acting in the daily practice, and the more peripheral issues. According to Schutz (1970), there are 4 zones of relevance. By crystallising the four zones of relevance for each of the five companies, the purpose is to illustrate the potential for future actions in relation to organic production. The conclusion of the thesis is partly concentrated on the empirical study, and the findings there, and partly on a discussion of the methodological approach and the problems connected to this in a study of this type. In relation to the empirical part, the main finding is that orientations differ depending on whether it is a small or a larger company. I conclude that the three smaller companies enact the concept of organic in greater depth than the larger companies. For one of the larger companies I find clear and explicit limitations towards engagement in developing organic processing values. For the three smaller companies, there is a focus on making products of a distinct character related to quality, processing, or to the story connected to the product. For the two larger companies, the focus is more on making ‘ordinary’ or daily products at an acceptable price. Common to all five companies is a condemnation of the inclusion of more additives in organic production. Another characteristic common to four of the five companies is a quite complex network around the company and for some of them also around the organic production. This indicates a potential for development of the zones of relevance in the companies. Another finding is that in all the five companies there is substantial focus on sales and marketing. This is seemingly an all-pervading element of the companies and their daily acting in relation to organic production. This is in line with what has been one of the main focus points in the history of organic production, since sales were very limited and small in the early period. The finding is also in line with the main focus of the interest group 7 organizing (most) organic companies. Here all employees are educated in sales and marketing. My impression is that this issue therefore receives the highest priority while other aspects of organic production are not in focus in the same way. Regarding the methodological reflections, the main conclusions focus on the discussion of the theoretical and methodological approaches. The multidisciplinary approach has, of course, some advantages and some limitations. The advantages are connected to a more complex and varied look at the material while the limitations are concerned with a more superficial treatment of the approaches used. Also, the issue of whether the use of short time observation and qualitative interviews with a relatively limited number of persons is sufficient in an analysis to, for
example, identity aspects of companies, is discussed. Although there are limitations to the methods used in this project, it is still the conviction of the author that the approach has contributed with substantial material in relation to the issues raised in the research statement. The contribution from future research by in opening the discussion about values in processing organic foods is discussed and finally the use of alternative methodological approaches, specifically the more long term observation for example a method called ‘Shadowing’ is discussed.

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