Negotiating healthy eating

Lay, stakeholder and government constructions of official dietary guidance in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis approaches dietary guidance as socio-culturally produced and comprised in a specific historical context. The work is premised on the position that ideas and understandings of healthy eating are discursively constructed, and that we form our understandings of the world, ourselves and others through discourse. The theoretical approach builds on the Foucauldian notion of governing, which includes how the state governs people through strategic techniques and individuals’ self-governing in relation to discursive norms related to official institutions. The four studies included in the thesis therefore explore how healthy eating and official dietary guidance are negotiated and constructed from stakeholder, lay and policy perspectives. Paper I takes a stakeholder perspective on “appropriate” national dietary advice by exploring 40 written responses to updated official dietary guidelines. Paper II and III focus on lay people’s discourses on dietary guidance and healthy eating by examining their written correspondences (727 and 60 digital messages, respectively) with the Swedish Food Agency. Paper IV examines how the Swedish Food Agency’s official dietary guidelines frame the interplay of public health concerns and environmental concerns in making food choices.

The findings demonstrate the dominance of a nutrient-centered and scientific discourse in communication (arguments, statements, instructions and questions) related to official dietary guidance in the Swedish context, even among non-professionals (in stakeholder responses, lay messages and the official dietary guidelines). In lay people’s communication with the Swedish Food Agency, both resistance to and internalization of official dietary advice are expressed within this dominating discourse. Resistance is additionally expressed through emotional language and by referring to alternative authorities, including personal experiences. The nutrient-centered and scientific discourse builds on the basic assumption of individual responsibility for health and the taken-for-granted nature of the primacy of physical health. Environmental perspectives come secondary to nutrition, which is demonstrated by their subordinate status in the official dietary guidelines and limited presence in lay people’s correspondences. Most socio-cultural, emotional and structural aspects on eating are made invisible by these discourses, in which food figures as scientifically quantifiable or functional in relation to physical health. However, in the official dietary guidelines from 2015, an additional discourse of cultivating certain tastes as a key to a sustainable diet constructs an ‘ideal eater’ with ‘middle-class’ aspirations.

Keywords: dietary guidance, official dietary guidelines, healthy eating discourse, holistic dietary advice, reductionism

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List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.


Reprints of Paper I and II were made with permission from the respective publishers.
Contributions

The contribution of Karolin Bergman to the papers included in this thesis is as follows:

All papers
Wrote the application for ethical approval together with supervisors.

Paper I
Collected the data independently. Designed the study together with supervisors. Analyzed the data together with supervisors. Drafted the first manuscript with supervisors. Co-revised the manuscript with co-authors.

Paper II
Collected the data independently. Designed the study together with supervisors. Analyzed the data together with supervisors. Drafted the first version of the manuscript. Co-revised the manuscript with co-authors.

Paper III
Collected the data independently. Designed the study with supervisors. Analyzed the data with feedback from supervisors. Drafted the first manuscript. Co-revised the manuscript with co-authors.

Paper IV
Collected the data and designed the study. Analyzed the data with feedback from co-authors. Drafted the first manuscript. Co-revised the manuscript with co-authors.
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In this thesis, I have approached dietary guidance as a social and cultural phenomenon in a certain historical context and illuminated discursive negotiations of healthy eating in communication related to official dietary guidance. The thesis focuses on the Swedish Food Agency’s1 dietary guidelines and public communications with the Agency, covering a period during which the official dietary guidelines were updated with regard to both health and environment and issued to the Swedish population in 2015. My work is premised on the position that ideas and understandings of healthy eating are discursively constructed. This means that the language we use to talk about food shapes our relation to the practice of eating as well as our own (and others’) bodies (Coveney, 2006; Foucault, 2002/1972). Discourses on healthy eating and dietary guidance are therefore important in people’s everyday life and to experiences of health and wellbeing, regardless of whether or not specific dietary advice is followed.

Compared to expert formulations, lay people generally include broader meanings in healthy eating, incorporating bodily experiences of food as well as social and emotional wellbeing (Bisogni, Jastran, Seligson, & Thompson, 2012). However, in studies on awareness and understanding of dietary advice, participant knowledge about the principles of healthy eating found in official dietary guidance is quite extensive (Brown et al., 2011; Haack & Byker, 2014; Rooney et al., 2017), indicating familiarity with the prevailing official discourses. Qualitative studies have also confirmed spontaneous recitation of official dietary advice in conversations on the topic of healthy eating (Bouwman, Te Molder, Koelen, & Van Woerkum, 2009; Johansson & Ossiasson, 2012; McPhail, 2013; Parker, 2012; Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman, & Beagan, 2008). Adding to this, official dietary advice also figures in societal discourses on healthy eating in parallel with advice from many other sources (Dodds & Chamberlain, 2017; Jauho, 2016). While people are familiar with official healthy eating discourses, studies on individual attitudes toward official food guidance often conclude that participants seldom aim to follow official advice and often misinterpret the details of specific advice (Brown et al., 2011; Haack & Byker, 2014; Rooney et al., 2017). Nevertheless, studies of population food

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1 The official English name for the agency between 2001 and 2019 was the “National Food Agency;” which has also been used in Paper I and II in this thesis.
consumption patterns intended to evaluate the effects of official dietary guidelines are widespread. These kinds of studies have repeatedly reported low conformity with dietary guidelines at the population level (Amcoff et al., 2012; Dijkstra, Neter, Brouwer, Huisman, & Visser, 2014; El Ansari, Suominen, & Samara, 2015; Haack & Byker, 2014; Vandevijvere et al., 2009).

Despite minimal evidence of direct realization of recommended eating habits, dietary guidelines, as a policy tool, are applied in many countries as a public guide to healthier food habits and to prevent non-communicable diseases among the populations (World Health Organization, 2006). Experts developing these official guidelines describe how to practice healthy eating from selected perspectives, mainly relying on evidence-based nutritional health research and national consumption patterns (Bechthold, Boeing, Tetens, Schwingshackl, & Nöthlings, 2018). Thus, dietary guidance based on certain limited perspectives constructs a particular way of approaching healthy eating, which likely leaves out important social and structural aspects of daily life (Baum & Fisher, 2014; Ioannou, 2005; Lindsay, 2010). While privileged people are more prone to feeling empowered by such guidelines, others are more likely to feel alienated, depending on the discursive inclusion or exclusion of people with different resources and prerequisites (Smith & Holm, 2010).

With this said, I will explore both official dietary guidance as a social and cultural product and related discourses on healthy eating in Swedish texts produced by official authorities, societal stakeholders and lay people. Because the way we express ourselves is influenced by and at the same time creates our understandings of social phenomena such as healthy eating (Burr, 2015), it is important to study how these discourses are circulated and what they teach us about living a “good” life and being a “good” person.

Dietary guidance practices

Dietary guidance is socially and culturally produced, as well as included in a specific historical context through the influence of different actors. Therefore, in this thesis, I consider specific guidance on diet to be a result of historical changes that mirror legitimate knowledge at the time (Crotty, 1995; Mudry, 2009; Nestle, 2013). As there is no clear consistency concerning the use of concepts related to dietary guidance, I will refer to dietary guidance as communication aimed at changing the public’s food habits or providing knowledge about good food habits to the public. Dietary guidance, in this broad conceptualization, generally comprises advice on food intake that has been translated from nutritional intake recommendations. Several pieces of advice on different aspects of food, diet and eating promulgated by governmental agencies generally make up official “dietary guidelines.” These guidelines often include advice on physical activity as well. When dietary guidance for populations was first introduced, the focus was primarily on promoting
foods that contain protein and energy and that would foster individuals for a strong nation by giving advice on how to feed families. Later, specific nutrition recommendations were elaborated to create advice on individual nutrient intake, and subsequently dietary guidance were developed to influence aspects of total diet with the prevention of chronic diseases in mind (see, e.g., Ridgway, Baker, Woods, & Lawrence, 2019). In the following sections, I will first outline a background on the progress of nutrition science and dietary guidance as it has been developed in the historical context of the US, mainly because most research on the topic takes this perspective. Following this, and in relation to the US development of dietary advice, I will provide an account of the Swedish context during the same period.

The origin and development of official dietary guidance

Official dietary guidance formulated by state authority experts on the basis of scientific evidence is often treated as a source of neutral and factual knowledge (Turner, 2001). But, in fact, as I will show in this section, it is a product of the historical context at the time, colored by prevailing ideals and closely aligned with scientific developments in nutrition science. At the end of the 19th century, governments began funding biomedical and nutrition science and considered public nutrition to be part of their responsibilities (Smith, 2013). This was an important prerequisite for the issuing of official dietary guidance that was to come some decades later. German and American biochemists, among the most prominent Justus von Liebig, laid the foundation for nutrition research as a scientific genre in the middle of the 19th century, discovering the significance of protein to human growth and macro-nutrients as energy providers (Cannon, 2005; Kamminga & Cunningham, 1995). In the late 19th century, the American chemist Wilbur Atwater and his colleges conducted research on human metabolism and established the metaphor of the body as a machine, where food stuff functions as fuel for the body (Aronson, 1982). These new discoveries on the components of food and their physiological functions in combination with economic concerns to secure access to food (especially among the poor) led to ideas about “rational nutrition” based on these variables (Treitel, 2008). Mudry, for example (2006, 2009), argued that with science and quantification as the basis for understanding the quality of food, discourses of logic and reason took precedence over taste and appetite in judging what constituted “good” and “bad” food choices.

The new science of nutrition and early advice

Wilbur Atwater, influential in federally funded research, and later also influential in the formulation of dietary guidance at the recently founded U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), began promote a scientific understanding of food among the public, both through USDA channels and the media (Aronson, 1982; Mudry, 2009). He identified problems in the American diet and gave
suggestions for how to eat better in accordance with bio-chemical knowledge about food components. Protein and energy needs, as well as economic rationales, were the basis for how Atwater recommended people eat, and he was convinced that nutrition could save the health of the people and the wealth of America, if people could only learn to choose foods on the basis of protein, fat and carbohydrate content and in relation to economic cost. If workers learned how to eat scientifically, their wages would suffice for proper food (Aronson, 1982; Carpenter, 2003a). Thus, by relating this new knowledge of the functionality of food and the body to the labor situation and workers’ living conditions, Atwater was approaching a new field of scientific studies with social implications (Aronson, 1982). In this way, nutrition was constructed as a social problem, defining the poor as the problem because of their “extravagant” diet. Atwater’s dietary information was aimed at the housewife, who was considered responsible for the family’s nutrition and wellbeing, and encouraging housewives to cook more wisely (according to nutritional principles) was also supported by the home economic movement, which attributed poverty to a lack of domestic skills (Aronson, 1982). Women were also the prospective recipients of the dietary guidance that would come in the early 20th century, based on the idea that educating present and future housewives was essential to achieving the best diet for the family (League of Nations, 1937).

The first American official guidance on food choices targeting the general public was elaborated by nutritionist Caroline Hunt and published by the USDA in 1917 (Davis & Saltos, 1999). The guide was called “How to select foods: What the body needs.” It was built on the logics drawn from Atwater’s research on food components and food as the energy source for the body’s physical needs. Five food groups were established based on their composition of fats, protein and carbohydrates as well as function in the body (Hasselrot, 1990; Mudry, 2009). An updated version of the guide was created during economic hard times in 1933, additionally encouraging people to balance food choice on nutritional grounds and in relation to economic cost. This led to the development of four economic levels of diets that would meet the nutritional requirements of families with different economic situations (Mudry, 2009).

Besides the economic perspective on food choice, vitamins were the novel focus in the food and health research conducted during the first decades of the 20th century. Deficiency diseases were discovered, and research interests focused on the impact of micronutrients, i.e. vitamins, in the diet. Most of the vitamins and their basic functions in the body were mapped during this period (Carpenter, 2003b). Food was now not only seen as fuel for the body, but also as having other functions for bodily health and disease prevention (Carpenter, 2003b), and this would later be captured in how dietary guidance was formulated and justified.

In the 1940s, wartime demanded a healthy population of properly fed Americans, and a healthy diet among the population was considered crucial to
being strong as a nation. “Recommended daily allowances” for specific nutrients were calculated to prevent nutrition-related diseases (Mudry, 2009). In 1943, the “National Wartime Food Guide” was published alongside the recommended daily allowances, presenting seven food groups from which to eat every day to cover energy needs. The food groups were now also considered in relation to the vitamin and mineral content of food. The food guide came along with a message: “US needs us strong – Eat the basic seven every day” (Jahns et al., 2018). In the center of the seven food group “pie” was a picture of a happy family walking forward (Jahns et al., 2018). This was the first food guide to include pictures of what foods to eat instead of written instructions (Mudry, 2009).

From sufficiency to abundance

After the World War II, in the 1950s, rationing days were over and plenty of food was available to Americans (and as well to populations in other wealthy countries) (Mudry, 2009). An assumption that food availability reached all Americans was made, and the implications of overconsumption became the focus of concern. In reality, however, some people of weaker socioeconomic or racial status were still suffering from malnutrition. The more flexible food guide of 1956 was simplified to 4 food groups, with specified relative servings of which were meant to balance foods in individual quantities (as much as wanted) (Mudry, 2009). Concerns related to chronic diseases were raised in the 1950s following epidemiological studies, and saturated fats and fibers were targeted in the diet for further investigation by researchers (Carpenter, 2003c). These research findings preceded a shift in the type of guidance, from focusing on adequate nutrient intake to focusing on total diet and avoiding excessive intakes of nutrients associated with diseases of affluence (Davis & Saltos, 1999).

In the 1970s, many Americans consumed more food than they needed to meet their energy and micro-nutrient needs, and diseases resulting from overconsumption (cardiovascular disease, obesity and cancer) were rising (Davis & Saltos, 1999). Dietary guidance with a focus on total diet was issued in the US in 1977. These “dietary goals” put forward the relation between dietary fat and cardiovascular diseases as a reason for limiting fat intake. They also built their recommendation to limit salt intake on a salt-hypertension hypothesis (Truswell, 1987). The message in 1977 was changed from earlier formulations of “eat more” to the opposite “eat less,” especially regarding foods high in fats and sugar. Fifteen years later, in 1992, these “dietary goals” were illustrated by a food pyramid, with the addition of upper limits to stay below for certain foods if one was to stay healthy. The pyramid included a message of variety, proportionality and moderation (Davis & Saltos, 1999). During the 1980s and 1990s, concerns increased about obesity and the fat content of the diet. Guid-
ance in the 1980s emphasized a moderate lifestyle where saturated fat, cho-
lesterol, salt and sugar should be avoided (Davis & Saltos, 1999; Mudry, 2009).

Since the 1980s, official dietary guidance for Americans has been revised
every 5 years on a scientific basis (Davis & Saltos, 1999). Internationally, in
the 1980s official documents for dietary guidance targeting total diet were
published in at least 13 countries including the US, Canada, Australia, Japan
and several European countries (Truswell, 1987). They had several common-
alities, among which the most frequent recommendations were to limit fat,
sugar and salt. Several countries also recommended eating a variety of foods
and increase intake of fiber (Truswell, 1987).

Official dietary guidance has been criticized (mostly by social scientists)
for presenting food and eating in ways that are not relatable to everyday life
(Baum & Fisher, 2014; Ioannou, 2005; Lindsay, 2010). However, the Austral-
ian nutritionist Patricia Crotty (1995) has also argued that to avoid trying to
make consumers experts on nutrition, the experts should become familiar with
the realities of food and eating in people’s everyday life to find other ways of
promoting health. In addition to this, people in the general public have also
been found not to comprehend the concepts used to guide healthy eating as
intended (Brown et al., 2011; Rooney et al., 2017). To communicate healthy
eating to the populations in an understandable way, since the 1990s the World
Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization
(FAO) has recommended that governments apply the concept of “Food-based
dietary guidelines” (FBDGs), which is understood as expressing nutrition
principles primarily as food choices (World Health Organization, 1998). The
idea of FBDGs is that they should be based on what can be achieved realisti-
cally in the socioeconomic context and take the customary dietary pattern into
account. Moreover, when FBDGs cannot be expressed as foods, they should
be written in a language that avoids the technical terms of nutritional science
(EFSA [European Food Safety Authority] Panel on Dietetic Products &
Allergies, 2010; World Health Organization, 2006). By the 2010s, most of the
European countries (34 countries) had implemented FBDGs in similar ways,
with food categorized into 5-6 groups and visualized most often in a pyramid
shape (Montagnese et al., 2015).

**Broadening the scope of dietary guidance**

A recent addition to the rationales and perspectives behind official dietary
guidance is the incorporation of environmental aspects (Fischer & Garnett,
2016; Jelsøe, 2015; Lang & Barling, 2013). Discussions on possibilities to
combine health-centered dietary advice with broader sustainability perspec-
tives, however, were present already during the 1960s-80s (Freidberg, 2016;
Gussow, 1999). Scientists now agree on the environmental implications of the
food system, but how (or whether) we should incorporate these concerns into
dietary guidance is less clear (Garnett, 2014; Lang & Barling, 2013; Nelson,
Suggestions regarding integrated dietary guidance were presented in some countries the late 20th century, but were never published due to controversies and (industrial) protests (Freidberg, 2016; Jelsøre, 2015). However, after these first attempts, environmental aspects have been introduced into some countries’ official advice, Sweden being among the first to do so in 2015 (Fischer & Garnett, 2016; Jelsøre, 2015; Lang & Barling, 2013).

To summarize, the development of dietary guidance and its associated nutrition science have undergone some major shifts that can be conceptualized in relation to different eras or paradigms (Biltekoff, 2012; Ridgway et al., 2019; Santich, 2005; Scrinis, 2013). In a recent paper, Ridgway and coauthors (2019) summarized the development into three eras. First, the “Foundation era” began with the chemical revolution in the 18th century, involving food chemistry as a research area focusing on macronutrients and energy content by the end of the 19th century. Second, the “Nutrient deficiency era” began with the discovery of vitamins at the beginning of the 20th century. After World War II, with the emergence of chronic diseases, a third era “Dietary excess and Imbalances” was identified. Last and still ongoing, a “food system sustainability era” has been suggested with roots in the 1970s, acknowledging the environmental consequences of food consumption and production (Ridgway et al., 2019).

The Swedish development of dietary guidance

In Sweden, dietary guidance progressed in parallel with the American development and was also influenced by international scientific advances in nutrition science, the main elements of which I outlined in the section above. Political interest in the importance of diet in strengthening the Swedish population was increasing in the 1930s, and through the identification of vitamins, the idea of a nutritionally well-balanced diet for bodily functions also grew (Olsson, 1997; Qvarsell, 2005). After years of deliberation including an official investigation initiated in 1935 (Olsson, 1997), a state institute for public health was founded in 1938, focusing on preventive measures for public health (Sundin, Hogstedt, Lindberg, & Moberg, 2005). This included responsibility for food hygiene and food control, as well as investigating and mapping food habits in the population (Qvarsell, 2005). At this time, Sweden was experiencing an economic crisis and faced problems related to unemployment and poverty among the elderly and families with many children. An extremely low birth rate also worried politicians (Lundberg & Åmark, 2001). A population expert commission was appointed as part of a welfare policy development project. The commission concluded in their report “Betänkande i näringsfrågan” [Report on the issue of nutrition] that an improvement of the population’s diet would probably give the greatest result in relation to population health compared to other possible reforms (SOU 1938:6). Thus, the need for
action on the population’s diet was identified and related to two main problems: ignorance and poverty. The main ideas for tackling the problems were to provide general economic support and educate individuals (SOU 1938:6). However, no specific action on nutrition was taken in the short term by the government. Information on food and health was instead published by health authorities, independent experts and non-governmental organizations, focusing on vitamins in particular, but also on sugar as a good source of energy (Callmer, 2009; Torell, 2013). Sweden acceded to the international political body The League of Nations’ conceptualizations of certain foods as “protective” (i.e., milk and leafy vegetables). These foods were believed to be of extra importance to nutritional health (owing to their calcium and vitamin A and C content) compared to other foods that mainly contributed energy (Abrahamsson, 1963; Hasselrot, 1990). Although several international models for dietary guidance were in use (Hasselrot, 1990), there was no consensus on best practice or publication of official advice. Similar to American ideas about food and health responsibilities, the housewife was the prospective recipient of information, and was expected to assume responsibility for providing healthy food to the family, in the long run safeguarding a healthy population (Hirdman, 1989; Palmblad & Eriksson, 2014).

During World War II, population health in Sweden improved, and this has, according to Sundin et. al. (2005), partly been related to food restrictions (less availability of foods rich in fat and sugar) that could potentially have had an impact on mortality due to cardio-vascular diseases. A Swedish version of the US pie-shaped food guide, “kostcirkeln” (the food circle) composed of seven food groups, had been elaborated during the 1950s inspired by the American model (Palmblad & Eriksson, 2014), and was officially released by the State Institute for Public Health in 1963 (Westin & Wretlind, 1963). The tool aimed to help housewives and other food planners bring about a well-balanced diet with respect to calories and nutrients (Westin & Wretlind, 1963).

At this time (the 1960s), attention was directed to changes in the population’s diet and conditions of daily work. Increased mechanization had contributed to less physically demanding work, and at the same time the proportion of fat and sugar in the diet had increased at the population level (Blix, Wretlind, Bergström, & Westin, 1965; Isaksson, 1966). Two influential medical reports on the Swedish “folk-diet” were published in the mid-1960s. These addressed the importance of sufficient nutrients in the diet of low-calorie consumers (Blix et al., 1965; Isaksson, 1966). Some years later, in 1968, a report on “Medical aspects of the diet in the Nordic countries” (Medicinska synpunkter på folkkosten i de nordiska länderna) was jointly published by medical societies in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The report considered the development of dietary habits and the relation between diet and chronic diseases, providing recommendations involving both fat quality and the proportion of fat in the diet (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014; Svensk förening för näringslära & Svenska läkaresällskapets sektion för näringslära,
1968). It also included food-based advice (Becker et al., 2004). This type of comprehensive advice with a total diet focus was new at the time and has been called both the first “dietary guidelines” (Crotty, 1995) and the first “dietary goals” (Truswell, 1987) by Australian nutrition scholars. A distinctive feature was the practical conclusion that if the Nordic peoples were to achieve recommended levels of vitamins and minerals with a diet low in energy (appropriate to increasingly sedentary work), a reduction of dietary fat was needed in favor of other nutrient-rich foods (Crotty, 1995; Truswell, 1987). This argument for decreasing the proportion of fat in the diet differed somewhat from otherwise rather similar American dietary advice, which justified changes mainly in relation to the risks associated with coronary heart disease (Truswell, 1987).

Moreover, in 1969, the National Board of Health and Welfare appointed a Swedish medical expert group (MEK) to work with issues of diet and physical activity (Socialstyrelsen, 1971). In 1971, the MEK published a comprehensive document as a basis for the planned 10-year investment in “Diet and physical activity” (Socialstyrelsen, 1971). This material was later adapted to serve as brief consumer information (Thille, 1978). During the 1970s, the MEK regularly published information on diet and physical activity and implemented several health information campaigns, often in collaboration with food interest organizations or enterprises (Carlsson & Arvidsson, 1994; Sandberg, 1999), of which a campaign on bread consumption received a great deal of attention among the Swedish population (see, e.g., Eriksson, 1991). A new governmental body for food issues, the National Food Administration, was established in 1972, with food chain responsibilities including additives, fortification and labelling (Statens institut för folkhälso, 1971). During the early 1970s, food prices increased rapidly in Sweden and dietary guidance aimed at promoting nutritious and affordable food. Joint efforts from governmental agencies and the Swedish cooperative union resulted in a division of foods into daily basic foods and more expensive additional food, which was visualized in a pyramid shape in 1974 (Hasselrot, 1990), and later served an inspiration for the American food pyramid (Davis & Saltos, 1999; Möller, 1992). At the time, Sweden had two visual tools for good food choices, the pyramid and the food circle, which until today has been updated twice (in 1979 and 1991) (Palmblad & Eriksson, 2014). In the late 1970s, a Nordic conference on nutrition was held (1977), which later led to the first publication of Nordic Nutrition Recommendations in 1980 (Bruce, 1997).

From the 1980s, the focus of public health in Sweden was turned to equity in health and social determinants of health. Responsibility was moved to the local level, and much of public health activity was located at the municipal and county council level (Kugelberg, 2013). In the late 1980s and early 90s, the National Food Administration introduced two new pedagogic tools for healthier food habits (Bruce, 1997; Palmblad & Eriksson, 2014). First the “key

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2 The official English name for the “Swedish Food Agency” until 2001.
hole” in 1989 (Boija, 1989), which is a label for finding healthier choices when purchasing foods, and second, the “plate model” in 1992 (Lindvall, 1992), which depicted proportions of different categories of foods on a plate. Both tools are still in use today in parallel with official “dietary guidelines,” which have been published in two versions during the 2000s. In 2005, five pieces of advice were published in relation to one main question: “Would you like to eat healthily?” The set of advice referred to the six food groups defined by the Swedish Food Agency as the “biggest problem” in the Swedish population’s diet, and aimed to encourage better food habits in a positive way (Enghardt Barbieri, 2013). In 2015, the guidelines were updated to a more extensive set of ten pieces of advice, including physical activity and environmental perspectives on food consumption (Brugård Konde et al., 2015).

Current dietary guidelines in Sweden and the incorporation of environmental perspectives

The Swedish Food Agency is the authority responsible for nutrition in Sweden. Its mission is to work for “good food habits” (Livsmedelsverket, 2019), support consumers’ ability to make informed choices about healthy and safe food, and more specifically also to inform consumers about relevant dietary advice (SFS 2015:294). The agency is also charged with acting in a way that contributes to the achievement of environmental goals as determined by the Swedish Parliament (Riksdagen) (Regeringskansliet, 2009). However, the task of dietary guidance is a small part of all the responsibilities of the authority (Mattisson, Eneroth, & Becker, 2012; Regeringskansliet, 2009). Dietary guidelines in Sweden are based on the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (latest update 2012) (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014) and evidence concerning studies on the health effects of certain foods or dietary patterns. They focus on the most important diet-related health problems in the population and suggest changes based on common dietary habits in Sweden as well as the supply of available foods (Mattisson et al., 2012). Implementation of the current guidelines from 2015 was also guided by the Swedish national environmental objectives (see, e.g., Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2018) and scientific reports on food and environmental impact (Brugård Konde et al., 2015). The incorporation of environmental perspectives into the Swedish dietary guidelines is an accomplishment that only a few countries have succeed with thus far (Bechthold et al., 2018; Fischer & Garnett, 2016). However, there are ongoing discussions in other countries about sustainable diets and how to handle the combined perspectives of nutrition and environment (Lang & Barling, 2013). Integration of environmental concerns into traditionally health-based dietary guidelines is not an uncontroverisal task, and in several instances it has caused controversies and conflicts. Also in Sweden, the launching was preceded by a long process involving the withdrawal of an
earlier suggestion considered to be in conflict with EU regulations on free trade (Jelsøe, 2015).

The 2015 Swedish official dietary guidelines – with the main message “Find your way to eat greener, not too much and be active” – emphasize the importance of not only looking at single food groups, but seeing the whole perspective of food habits altogether (Brugård Konde et al., 2015). The guidelines are published as a booklet (also digitally published on the website www.livsmedelsverket.se) providing a “holistic approach” and framing health and environmental concerns under the umbrella concept “a healthy whole.” The guidelines comprise ten pieces of advice based on six different food groups, plus sugar, salt, energy balance and physical activity. The messages are built on the principle of recommending more, less or switching certain food groups and food components. On each spread in the booklet, one page presents the message followed by tips on “how to make it work” and a box with arguments for why one should eat as recommended. Each piece of advice is illustrated with a colorful photograph (Livsmedelsverket, 2015).

The Swedish context for nutritional health promotion activities
Sweden, as one of the Nordic countries, is a “welfare state” with extensive social security schemes that benefit the entire population, or at least the vast majority (Rothstein, 2011). Universalism has been one of the basic principles of the welfare state, but public solutions are now mixed with increased privatization, presenting a new kind of welfare with a more restricted system (Lundberg & Åmark, 2001). One of the other cornerstones of Swedish democracy is the principle of open access to official documents, and this principle is a historical legacy of public transparency of insight into the activities of public authorities (Bergström & Ruotsi, 2018). Open access to public documents is often referred to as characteristic of the Swedish way of government, although similar rules have now been established in many other countries as well. This type of openness to the governing system is believed to impede corruption and thereby build public confidence in the authorities (Bergström & Ruotsi, 2018). In international comparisons, Sweden is correspondingly ranked as a state with low levels of corruption, and people in the Nordic countries also feel that corruption is not widespread (Bergström & Ruotsi, 2018; Rothstein, 2011). Another important factor affecting how the welfare state is perceived is social trust, with respect to which Nordic people also differ from people living in other countries regarding their high levels of public confidence (measured as trust in unknown people) (Rothstein, 2011).

Concerning management of food-related issues, and especially expertise on nutrition and health, the Swedish Food Agency (governed by the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation) is assigned responsibility (Regeringskansliet, 2009). The Swedish Food Agency was founded in 1972 (Statens institut för folkhälsan, 1971) and is now, at the beginning of the 21st century, known by
the majority of Swedes (Holmberg & Tryggvason, 2014). According to a national survey of the public, public opinion about the authority is mainly positive as well. Half of the 67% of respondents who were familiar with the Swedish Food Agency felt the agency managed its task well, while only a tenth expressed the opposite opinion. These results were consistent regardless of the respondent’s socioeconomic status (Holmberg & Tryggvason, 2014). Among Swedish authorities, the performance of the Swedish Food Agency is ranked in the middle by Swedish national survey respondents (Arkhe & Holmberg, 2017; Holmberg & Tryggvason, 2014). Evaluations carried out by the Swedish Food Agency itself (n=1000) show higher rates of knowing about the agency and its tasks, where only a fifth (20%) report not having heard about the Swedish Food Agency’s dietary advice (Enghardt Barbieri, 2013). Even though awareness of official dietary advice seems to be high among the population, few respondents said that they followed the agency’s specific advice (14%) or would turn directly to it for advice (5%) (Enghardt Barbieri, 2013). However, education about food and health is included in the Swedish elementary school (Berggren et al., 2017; Quennerstedt, Burrows, & Maivorsdotter, 2010), where many students become familiar with the advice and pedagogical tools of the Swedish Food Agency, such as the food circle (Hasselrot, 1990).

While positive framings of the Swedish Food Agency predominate in the surveys mentioned and trust in Swedish authorities can be considered relatively high, critique has been offered in less formal contexts. In media debates (see, e.g., Litsfeldt, 2016; Ravnskov, 2009), blogs (see, e.g., Eenfeldt, 2013; Fernholm, 2019), and social media networks (see, e.g., “We who do NOT believe in advice from the Swedish Food Agency; www.facebook.com/groups/667917029919842/about/), the Swedish Food Agency and other nutritional experts have been challenged on what constitutes healthy eating, and the basis for how this kind of advice should be produced. This critique stems mainly from proponents of the Low-Carb/High Fat (LCHF) movement operating through social media and blogs (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Holmberg, 2017). LCHF proponents in Finland have also expressed similar disbelief and doubt through social media regarding authoritative dietary guidance (Jauho, 2016). However, studies in Denmark and Norway point to people’s ambivalence toward official health promotional guidelines as one source among many, in one respect expecting to be governed by these means (Hervik & Thurston, 2016), and at the same time having a pragmatic relation to them, implementing parts that fit into already established practices of everyday life (Halkier, 2018). While scholars suggest that a change toward less public trust in authorities occurred during the past century (Bildtgård, 2008), others argue that there is not much long-term empirical support for this (Kjærnes, 2013). Studies on trust in food, and in the institutions that ensure food safety, have not focused on the context of health promotion, but mainly on food safety related to disease outbreaks, contamination with toxic substances and GMOs (Kjærnes, Harvey, & Warde, 2007).
Discourses of health promotion and dietary guidance

As illustrated in the previous section, dietary guidance and nutrition policies are generally products of a certain historical context. Additionally, they are discursively constructed, which means that the language and framings of policies (and healthy eating discourses in general) construct situated meanings that are imbued with certain values. For this reason, guidance based on scientific evidence, offered by official agencies or authority experts, does not simply reflect neutral and factual knowledge (Turner, 2001). For example, policy discourses convey and create knowledge, values, and understandings of ourselves as well as others (Bacchi, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2003). Some discourses on health promotion and policy are more prominent than others, including concepts of health as a super value, individualization of health responsibilities and notions of lifestyle, choice and risk (Petersen & Lupton, 1996).

Healthism and medicalization

Public health discourses often take on individual health as a generally applicable priority, considering health to be a principal value for everyone. The taken-for-granted nature of health as a primary value or a “super value” was acknowledged and analyzed in the American context almost half a decade ago (Crawford, 1980). Crawford (1980) conceptualized the centrality of health “healthism” and explained it as “the preoccupation with personal health as a primary - often the primary - focus for the definition and achievement of well-being” (p. 368, emphasis in original). Expectations regarding health consciousness are now normalized and practically unavoidable in Sweden as well. Health as a central concern prevails and infiltrates more and more areas of life, such that lifestyle choices and practices increasingly involve considerations of health (Cheek, 2008). In his studies of health promotion discourses in Swedish government official reports 1930-1990, Olsson (1997) revealed how, during the period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, health came to pervade all aspects of individuals’ everyday life (Olsson, 1997). More recently, the centrality of health as a primary value has been captured in interviews with Danish consumers (Kristensen, Lim, & Askegaard, 2016), and in a study of Swedish health magazines, it was discursively related to success, happiness and beauty for women (Tolvhed & Hakola, 2018). This interpretation of health occupancy in western societies has been taken even further by Pelters and Wijma (2016), a Swedish sociologist and medical doctor, respectively, who suggested that health can now be viewed as a religion, including an emotional commitment to the seeming rationality of health practices.
The centrality of health can also be linked to the concept of medicalization (Crawford, 1980), understood as a context in which medical values and principles have an impact on many other areas of life. Medicalization can be explained as the process whereby problems that were previously considered of social or cultural origin come to be treated as medical problems through the application of medical definitions and/or treatments (Conrad, 2007). Medicalization has especially impacted the definition of normality and deviation, such as when deviant behavior is described in terms of illness (Crawford, 1980). In the case of food and eating, medicalization is related to conceptualizations of foods and diets as having curative or health-enhancing capacities, as well as to defining deviant eating practices (such as under- or overeating) in medical terms (Mayes, 2014a, 2014b).

Individualization of health responsibilities

Healthism builds on the assumption of individual responsibility for health, which is now taken for granted and widely expected as a virtue of a good citizen and a sign of individual autonomy (Crawford, 2006). In the Swedish context, a shift to the individualization of health responsibilities has been demonstrated in discourses related to the welfare state (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2010), health promotion (Olsson, 1997; Palmblad & Eriksson, 2014) and the media (Tolvhed & Hakola, 2018). Palmblad and Eriksson (2014), who outlined changes in Swedish health promotion approaches from the 1930s to the 1990s, found that while responsibility for population health was previously a collective task governed mainly by central societal reforms, responsibility for people’s health has shifted and become an individual task to be monitored according to information provided by the state (Palmblad & Eriksson, 2014). A similar development was described by Olsson (1997), who studied health promotion discourses in Swedish government official reports from the same period. Personal responsibility for healthy eating was also emphasized by consumers in Denmark, who considered healthy eating to be an individual, private matter (Kristensen et al., 2016). According to Crawford (1980), the assumption of individual responsibility for health paves way for a new form of moralism, where healthy behavior is equivalent to overall “good living.” With responsibility placed on the individual, health and illness are easily conceptualized as the results of individual choices and lifestyles (Crawford, 1977).

Lifestyle, choice and risk

The notion that a set of voluntarily applied habits jointly make up a person’s “lifestyle” emerged during the 1960s and has since that time been a basic assumption in many health promotion activities (Coveney, 2006). Together with an emphasis on lifestyle as central to health, individual choice is stressed in
health promotion discourses and reflective of the idea of rational and responsible persons (Ioannou, 2005). Crawford (1977) suggested that the perspective on health and illness as controllable through individual choice and behavioral change includes the underlying assumption that if individuals take appropriate action and change their lifestyle based on healthy practices, they can avoid most diseases. Thanem (2009) demonstrated how these emphases play out in a UK state campaign to increase people’s consumption of fruits and vegetables. The campaign (‘5 a day’ launched in 2002) targets the individual by offering suggestions of many choices that appeal to individual taste, wellbeing and self-interest (Thanem, 2009).

Expectations regarding individual responsibility in Swedish policy documents are also communicated through arguments about lifestyle and good choices (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2010). Michailakis and Schirmer (2010) argued that, by focusing on individual choices in relation to lifestyle and health, the welfare state can separate people into agents and victims of illness. Those who fail to live up to preventive requirements regarding nutrition, physical activity and other health-related lifestyle habits can be seen as agents who are responsible for health consequences, while those who have acted according to preventive standards can be considered victims of illness due to factors beyond individual control (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2010). (Olsson, 1997) also revealed how, by the end of 1990s, discourses on lifestyle and individual choice in Swedish health promotion documents were linked to an increased focus on risks. This development is also confirmed in a study of Nordic health policies, where the individual’s integrity and free choice are explicitly expressed as the basis for policies (Vallgårda, 2011).

Dietary guidelines have been found to frame certain behaviors as problematic by employing a risk discourse that puts the entire population “at risk” for the consequences of unhealthy eating (Coveney, 2006; Lindsay, 2010; Petersen, Davis, Fraser, & Lindsay, 2010). Individuals are often expected to identify themselves as “at risk” and to act voluntarily to reduce exposure to risk through self-control or self-improvement. By emphasizing healthy choices, responsibility for avoiding risk and realizing a “good lifestyle” is placed on the individual (Coveney, 2006; Lindsay, 2010; Petersen et al., 2010).

Nutritional reductionism and quantification

In dietary advice, risk is often related to individual intake of certain nutrients, and social scientists have criticized official dietary advice, especially in America, for employing a reductive discourse that focuses too narrowly on nutrients and quantities (Bonotti, 2015; Mudry, 2009; Scrinis, 2013). Principles of recommending and classifying foods based primarily on their nutrient profiles and their consequences for various health parameters are elements of this nutrient reductive discourse, which Scrinis termed “nutritionism” (2008). Scrinis
argued that, by framing healthy eating in terms of the need to increase or decrease specific nutrients and food components, public health experts have promoted nutrient-focused dietary advice ever since the 1970s. Nutritionism, however, can be traced further back in time. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, when macronutrients were discovered and energy began being calculated as calories, a reductive and quantifying discourse on food and eating was emerging. Scrinis called this era focusing on proportions and quantities of nutrients in food “Quantifying nutritionism.” Following this, healthy eating discourses focused on nutrients to avoid what was labelled “Good and bad nutritionism.” And most recently, in the late 20th century, a “Functional nutritionism” developed, focusing on nutrients and their special functions in relation to physical health. This development was first driven by scientists, then public health experts, followed by the food industry (Scrinis, 2013).

Nutritionism has not only come to be the dominant discourse in dietary guidelines, but is also embedded in wider policy and the popular discourses, to such a degree that we regard it as common sense and do not notice it (Fairclough, 1992; Mayes & Thompson, 2015; Scrinis, 2008). Scrinis exemplified the common terms introduced by nutrition experts – nutrient density, high or low glycemic index, empty calories, refined carbs and solid fats – that now are commonly used in what he calls “nutrient-dense” communication about food (Scrinis, 2013). In addition to a nutrient reductive presentation of healthy eating, Mudry (2009) argued that official (American) dietary advice builds on numeric measurements and calculation of food and food components, making it possible to judge food on a one-dimensional quantified scale. Food has in this way been made known through the quantified “limits of calories, servings and nutrients” (Mudry, 2009, p. 90). More recently, a Canadian linguist, Rachul (2019), addressed similar critique of Canada’s official dietary guidelines: “Eating well with Canada’s Food Guide” from 2016. Advice in this guide was formulated by abstract scientific constructions and quantification through food guide servings, framing healthy eating as “adequate nutrient intake” (Rachul, 2019). According to Scrinis and Mudry, by using standardized measures, nutritionism and quantification demarcate what we know about food and how we can control it (Mudry, 2009; Scrinis, 2008). Critiques of nutritionism have also argued that nutritional reductionism is an important prerequisite for public health strategies based on individual responsibility. If we consider food as containers of components that cause or prevent disease, we can choose the best composition of these components and thereby be regarded as responsible for health outcomes based on the choices we made (Mayes & Thompson, 2015).
Lay people’s conceptualizations of healthy eating

Lay people’s conceptualizations of healthy eating have been found to include multiple meanings. An attempt to get an overview of the different meanings lay people relate to healthy eating has been made by Bisogni and co-authors (2012) in a review of qualitative research. They concluded that healthy eating can be conceptualized in a wide range of ways and that people in many cases have a holistic view that incorporates healthy eating into social, spiritual and physical wellbeing. However, the studies in the review were difficult to compare and the findings were drawn from different contexts and methods. In any even, the authors emphasized the diversity of ways in which people relate to healthy eating, for example properties of food and physical outcome, eating practices, production and processing of food, meanings related to restriction/control, psychosocial wellbeing, family life and religious practices. Feelings and beliefs about healthy eating were shown to be complex and multifaceted, and often related to previous experiences and personal knowledge (Bisogni et al., 2012).

Regarding perceptions of healthy foods, Bisogni et al. (2012) concluded that people in general essentially associated healthy food with fruits and vegetables. The prevailing understanding of fruits and vegetables as healthy foods has also been confirmed in another review study by Paquette (2005). In Paquette’s review, meat, low levels of fat, salt and sugar, as well as the concepts of balance, variety and moderation, mirroring common dietary guidelines themes, were also found to be central in public perceptions of healthy eating since the 1980s. Additional notions of eating healthily included the importance of freshness and natural foods (no processing) as well as restricting foods in dieting regimes (Paquette, 2005). Very similar conceptualizations of healthy foods have recently been found in an Australian study as well (Mete, Shield, Murray, Bacon, & Kellett, 2019). While participants in this Australian study recognized the difficulties of implementing healthy eating in daily life, Dutch consumers in a previous study constructed their ways of eating as naturally healthful, as uncomplicated and a routine in everyday life (Bouwman et al., 2009).

In Danish studies on lay conceptualizations of healthy eating, embodied experiences and experiences of wellbeing were central to perceptions of healthiness. These respondents turned to bodily appearance and weight – as well as to feelings, taste and other personal values – to judge the healthiness of foods (Kristensen, Askegaard, & Jeppesen, 2013; Smith & Holm, 2010; Sørensen & Holm, 2016). Even though Danish respondents in many ways agreed with the Danish dietary guidelines’ descriptions of healthy eating, they included broader meanings (regarding the concept of healthy eating) and employed other criteria for what constitutes healthy eating that differed substantially from official advice (Sørensen & Holm, 2016). What in the end was considered to be healthy food also differed across individuals (Kristensen et
al., 2013). People with a higher education and considered to have a normal body mass index (BMI) were more likely to adopt and also appreciate official healthy lifestyle advice, while the same advice gave rise to stress and conflicts in everyday life for those with a lower education and higher BMI (Smith & Holm, 2010).

A recent Danish study also looked into the meaning of health among Danish consumers of organic foods (Ditlevsen, Sandøe, & Lassen, 2019). Three main understandings were found: health as purity, health as pleasure and a holistic perspective on health related to the state of the earth as well as people’s health. In general discussions on healthy food, a nutritional and biomedical perspective was dominant and taken to best determine the quality of food (Ditlevsen et al., 2019). Thus, while lay people are familiar with nutritional measures of health, they incorporate it into broader contexts of healthy eating where social, emotional and ethical perspectives are just as important.

**Lay use of nutritionism and scientific discourse**

Although lay people apply broader meanings to healthy eating compared to expert definitions, the understanding that specific nutrients are essential to health is well-established. Scrinis (2013) argued that nutritionism has shaped ”nutricentric persons” and formed people’s ways of understanding and engaging with food today. He suggested that people manage and relate to food through nutritional concepts and categories and look upon food with a “nutritional gaze,” meaning that they understand foods as being carriers of nutrients (Scrinis, 2013). Several qualitative studies exploring people’s understanding and construction of healthy eating have noted that participants employ nutritional concepts in ways similar to those described by Scrinis. In interviews, people often echo or reiterate nutritional recommendations and formulations of official dietary advice when describing healthy eating (Bouwman et al., 2009; McPhail, 2013; Parker, 2012; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2008). This has also been indicated in Swedish studies, both in children’s (Berggren et al., 2017) and in families’ discussions of healthy eating (Johansson & Ossiansson, 2012). In more general discussions, healthy eating is described in terms of food properties and their effects on health, placing the focus on the nutrient level of foods (Ditlevsen et al., 2019; Madden & Chamberlain, 2010; Parker, 2012; Potter et al., 2016). An understanding of healthy eating in terms of the health effects of foods and nutrients was conceptualized as “Mainstream healthy eating discourses” by Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2008), indicating its prevalence in everyday conversations.

The use of a nutritionist discourse by non-professionals in the Nordic setting is perhaps most studied in the argumentation for special diets focused on limiting carbohydrates, the so-called Low-Carb/High Fat (LCHF) diet. Proponents of such diets in Sweden and Finland are very active on social media, and their application of scientific arguments and nutritionism has been studied in
those channels (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Holmberg, 2017; Huovila & Saikkonen, 2016; Jauho, 2016). Scientific language similar to that of nutritional recommendations characterized lay people’s argumentation for LCHF diets in Finland (Jauho, 2016). Their arguments also included claims that certain nutrients posed specific risks to physical health, and that disease could be the consequence of “bad” diets (Jauho, 2016). Likewise, healthy eating advice given by Finnish bloggers incorporated quantification and abstract terms of nutritional science. These bloggers create trustworthiness by citing experts, research studies and nutrient measures, at the same time as they connect scientific discourses to anecdotes concerning their own personal experiences (Huovila & Saikkonen, 2016). Similarly, the influential Swedish LCHF bloggers argue their case in Internet debates by promoting the “right” composition of nutrients for dietary health, and criticizing food and nutrition authorities and advice using scientific discourses (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012).
Theoretical framework

Social constructionism – the perspective of this research

This thesis takes a social constructionist perspective on dietary guidance and healthy eating. This means that rather than seeing dietary guidance and healthy eating as mirroring objective scientific facts, they are seen as social and cultural products created through human interaction and specific to the historical time. When viewed as social constructs, dietary guidelines are not value-free, but rather reflective of social ideals and socially contextual; they convey norms concerning what it means to be a “good eater” or, ultimately, a “good citizen” (Biltekoff, 2012; Lupton, 1995). While a good deal of research has focused on aspects such as attitudes, knowledge and adherence to dietary advice, relatively little is known about the social constructions of healthy eating in this context. This is particularly true of the Swedish setting, and thus I hope this thesis can help promote this perspective on dietary advice.

Social constructionism entails four basic cornerstones: “a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge,” “historical and cultural specificity,” “knowledge is sustained by social processes” and “knowledge and social action go together” (Burr, 2015). In contrast to the positivist stance on what we know based on objective scientific observation of things and people, social constructionism questions what we treat as taken-for-granted truths. The way we as humans understand the world and the categories we use to describe it are constructed by us. The categories and concepts we have established are specific to the cultural and historical context in which they are used, and change with time. Therefore, what we know, or consider to be knowledge, is seen as a co-product of social relations, and what we consider to be the “truth” is seen as the accepted ways of understanding the world at a specific time. These ways of constructing events and social phenomena also create certain prerequisites for human action, they have implications for what do (or do not) constitute legitimate actions for people. Thereby, these constructions are also connected to power relations and ideas about how we ought to treat each other (Burr, 2015).

Because social constructionism considers knowledge to be a product of human interaction, language becomes central to what we know about the world. From a social constructionist perspective, language has no universal meanings and is neither value-free nor transparent, but is in itself taking part in the construction of reality (Burr, 2015; Cheek, 2004). The role of language in our
understandings of the world and constructionist thinking at large has been influenced to a great extent by European thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault (Burr, 2018). This thesis builds on some of the concepts developed by Michel Foucault, which I will present below.

**Foucault, discourses, knowledge and power**

Michael Foucault was a French thinker – philosopher and historian of ideas – whose interest in how power and knowledge are played out through language and social practice has created a theoretical foundation for constructionist research from the second half of the 20th century onwards (Burr, 2015). Power, according to Foucault, is omnipresent, productive and always relational (Foucault, 1978). In Foucault’s thinking, power is closely related to knowledge. What we consider to be knowledge is seen as a particular version of reality that has received the status of truth, and is thereby united with power (Coveney, 2006).

The production of knowledge and construction of particular versions of “truths” are, in Foucault’s view, the result of discursive practices (Foucault, 2002/1972). The social world is thought to be constructed through discourse, which both enables and constrains actions and grants the authority to speak (Dunn & Neumann, 2016a). Broadly, a discourse can be seen as statements, representations, and images (spoken, written, thought or enacted) that construct objects, subjects and events in certain ways (Burr, 2015; Cheek, 2004). The concept of discourse has a wide range of meanings and definitions as well as theoretical underpinnings (Cheek, 2004; Dunn & Neumann, 2016b). Foucault delineates discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 2002/1972, p. 54). It is through discourse that we form our understandings of the world, ourselves and others. There are many circulating or competing discourses that produce different versions of events, objects, subjects and so forth (Coveney, 2006; Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000). Some discourses, however, are more predominant than others and are more likely to be taken for common sense, or to be considered more truthful (Coveney, 2006).

**Governmentality**

Foucault’s notion of governmentality is highly relevant to dietary guidance and principles of public health promotion as means to guide the public toward healthier living. Governmentality can be conceptualized as a collection of tactics to achieve certain ends (Foucault, 1954). These tactics can be described as different techniques to direct human conduct, which can be regulated, controlled and shaped in certain ways. Governmentality covers both aspects of
how state apparatuses and other institutions govern people using strategic techniques, and how people govern themselves in relation to the norms and discourses constituted by social and institutional practices. The welfare of the population is the ultimate goal of such government (Foucault, 1954). Governmentality is often conceptualized as the “conduct of conduct,” which relates to practices aimed at guiding and instructing people toward certain behaviors, attitudes or beliefs (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1988). Governmentality studies, then, focus on the operation of power in different social contexts and the rational techniques of governing in the name of the population’s well and health. This type of disciplinary power can be seen as a system of knowledge (Petersen, 2003).

In the case of public health nutrition, activities such as mapping and categorizing food habits, ill health and different types of eaters on the population level are examples of governmental techniques used when striving for better population health through knowledge (Coveney, 2006). The construction of normality is an important institutional technique of governing, whereby a privileged type of subject or behavior is constructed, often through expert statements or judgements. According to Lupton (1995), experts or expertise are central to discursively produced norms and to governmentality. Experts use statistics and other measures to establish what is considered “normal” – a standard against which individuals can be compared and behaviors evaluated as normal or deviant (Danaher et al., 2000; Lupton, 1995).

Biopower and biopedagogies

Lupton (1995) emphasized that, from this Foucauldian perspective, power is interrelated with the body and the self, on which it acts to shape certain subjectivities – certain ways to look at your own and others’ bodies and identities. Power and knowledge are also tightly linked to institutional practices, for example care systems or pedagogical practices that relate to individuals in systematic ways (Wright, 2004).

Power, as previously mentioned, is always circulating and acts on everyone; therefore subjects are both the products and actors of power mechanisms (Dean, 2010; Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Foucault called the power over life (bios) “bio-power” (Foucault, 1978), describing how this type of power focuses on human beings both as single bodies and as a species. The main function of this type of power is to control populations through the disciplining of individual bodies and strategies that regulate the population (Foucault, 1978). The focus on human beings as bodies concerns how biopower discursively constructs bodies and constitutes self-regulating subjects who work to optimize their bodies according to discursive norms (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1978). The second (species) dimension of biopower seeks control of the population by mapping, monitoring and calculating health parameters, life expectancy
and mortality rates, etc., on the population level. Biopower thus has one side that is specific, biological and aimed at the performances of individual bodies, and one side that regulates, intervenes in and controls populations (Foucault, 1978).

Rabinow and Rose (2006) defined biopower as consisting of three characteristic elements. The first is “truth discourses” about human life that shape subjectivities or identities. The second involves strategies of collective intervention that make these truth discourses possible to speak. And the third concerns the “modes of subjectification” that incorporate how subjects work on themselves in relation to the “truths” and actively contribute to their constitution (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). Thus, discourses of healthy eating produce certain “truths” that are closely connected to institutional practices, which legitimate these “truths.” Individuals work on themselves to reach desired goals within the truth discourse and can then be seen both as constituted by discourse and active in their own constitution. The production of discursive truths or discursive norms is central to understanding how biopower works (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). This system of knowledge seeks to know human beings in certain ways, and individuals are always referred to norms delineated by discourse. However, as power flows in relations, there are always possibilities for resistance, which can take many different shapes (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014).

Biopower has been put into a pedagogical context by Wright and Harwood (2012), who proposed the concept of “biopedagogies.” Biopedagogies are practices that urge people to self-regulate or monitor themselves so as to achieve better physical health. Pedagogies, as conceptualized by Wright and Harwood, include all kinds of instructions about how to live a good life. Combined with Foucault’s notion of biopower, “biopedagogies” are those strategies and techniques that specifically target the body. Biopedagogies are to be understood as social practices that produce knowledge and meanings about bodies and lives. They are intimately bound up with modes of subjectification – the way in which individuals shape identities within the mechanisms workings of power and “truths.” Thus, biopedagogies, such as official guidance on healthy eating, have a central place in regulating populations and disciplining individuals (Wright & Harwood, 2012).

Considering dietary guidelines as biopedagogies and as focused on the workings of power, knowledge and truth in healthy eating discourses, this thesis will explore what is taught about living a healthy life (focusing on healthy eating) in these discourses. What knowledge is taken for granted and what knowledge is silenced? What subject positions are offered in official dietary guidelines and what subject positions are taken up by individuals in communication about healthy eating? How is healthy eating constructed by lay people and the Swedish Food Agency? How do stakeholders construct sound dietary
advice? The discursive constructions studied in this thesis will affect understandings of how to act and possibilities to speak, as well as what constitutes legitimate statements and what perspectives are silenced.
Aims and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to explore how healthy eating and official dietary guidance are negotiated and constructed from stakeholder, lay and policy perspectives.

Research questions:

- How do stakeholders and the Swedish Food Agency construct the basis and framing of official dietary guidelines, and what knowledges are produced by these conceptualizations?
- How do lay people engage with official dietary guidance in written communication with the Swedish Food Agency?
- How do lay people use the nutritionist discourse in written communication with the Swedish Food Agency about healthy eating?

Specific aims of papers I-IV:

I To explore how various stakeholders in the food and nutrition field construct and conceptualize “appropriate” national dietary advice, with an emphasis on both content and communication.

II To explore the relation between lay people and the Swedish Food Agency in Sweden by examining lay people’s written correspondence with the authority on food habits and healthy eating.

III To examine lay people’s discursive constructions of nutrition and healthy eating by parsing the terms and grammar they use when they employ nutritionism in written correspondence with the Swedish Food Agency.

IV To critically explore how the Swedish Food Agency’s official dietary guidelines frame the interplay of public health concerns and environmental concerns in making food choices by examining how these guidelines construct a problem for which “a healthy whole” is the solution.
Methods

This section will describe the data and methods used in the separate papers (I-IV). All papers are based on textual data collected from the Swedish Food Agency and analyzed using qualitative methods. An overview of the papers is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Overview of the four separate papers included in this thesis*

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Data

Paper I – Stakeholder responses to the draft of the 2015 official dietary guidelines

Data used for Paper I in this study consist of written responses to the public consultation on the updated 2015 Swedish dietary guidelines. The consultation was part of a long process undertaken before the updated dietary guidelines could be launched, starting with the work on updating the Nordic nutrition recommendations, which are among the grounds for formulating the Swedish dietary guidelines. The call for stakeholders to the consultation was launched on December 17, 2014, with a response deadline on January 31, 2015, thus a period of roughly six weeks, but during Christmas holidays. The consultation process gave other authorities, organizations, industry and the public the opportunity to express their opinions on a suggestion for updating
the guidelines presented by the Swedish Food Agency. Responses were welcome from anyone who cared to express their opinion on the suggestion. The consultation resulted in responses consisting of 46 documents (Table 2). The documents were written voluntarily, and feedback was presented in any format preferred by the respondent.

The updated guidelines were made available to the public on the Swedish Food Agency website together with a brief invitational letter asking for comments, especially on the standpoints taken and considerations made by the Swedish Food Agency in the guidelines (Nordström & Brugård Konde, 2014). Comments were to be submitted by email or regular mail, no instructions on the style or format of responses were provided. The invitation to comment was also sent out as a press release and by email (71 recipients) to special interest groups, either chosen by the Swedish Food Agency or people or organizations that had shown direct interest in the process of updating the dietary guidelines. For example, people who attended or were interested in attending an open hearing about the guidelines before the remittance procedure received the invitation email about the opportunity to submit written comments.

The responses were written by one person or a group of people representing their respective organization. Some of the response documents simply expressed thanks for the opportunity to comment, or were included to provide extra information about a nutrient or foodstuff of interest to the respondent (e.g., a brochure about margarine). There were also some responses that were identical (double copies). Those documents were excluded, and in the end, 40 documents were included in the analysis. These documents varied in extent and depth, from 1 to 17 pages, in total approximately 180 pages, where some chose to comment on certain aspects of the guidelines, while others followed the Swedish Food Agency documents and made comments from the beginning to the end. There were two documents open for consultation, the updated guidelines themselves (12 pages) as well as a background report (57 pages) presenting references and concerns connected to each piece of advice in the updated guidelines. All responses were included in the study, not distinguishing which document they responded to. Treating all responses together also resulted in richer material, as all feedback related to the concept of dietary guidelines in some way. The documents included in the analysis were received from 5 authorities (e.g., the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences), 11 interest organizations (e.g., the Swedish Association of Clinical Dietitians), 17 private companies/associations (e.g., Unilever) and 5 private persons or private companies representing people working with dietary consultation (Table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses (n=46)</th>
<th>Authorities</th>
<th>Interest organizations</th>
<th>Industrial actors</th>
<th>Private actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Included (n=40)</td>
<td>Karolinska Institutet, Dep. of Public Health Sciences</td>
<td>Legume Academy</td>
<td>Arla</td>
<td>ECE Hälsmålskonsult KB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karolinska Institutet, Inst. of Environmental Medicine</td>
<td>Läkare för framtiden [Physicians for the future]</td>
<td>AIVO</td>
<td>Mersmak kommunikation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish Board of Agriculture</td>
<td>Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies</td>
<td>Association of Swedish Bakers and Confectioners</td>
<td>Private, food journalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish Environmental Protection Agency</td>
<td>Swedish Association for Clinical Dietitians</td>
<td>Brämhults</td>
<td>Private, nutritionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences</td>
<td>Swedish Association of Health Professionals</td>
<td>Danone</td>
<td>Unknown sender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish HPH-network</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SMMI [Swedish Food &amp; Environment Information]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish Self-Care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish Society for Nature Conservation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>World Wide Fund for Nature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded (n=6)</td>
<td>National Board of Health and Welfare (courtesy reply)</td>
<td>Swedish Consumer Agency (courtesy reply)</td>
<td>Unilever broschyre (fact sheet)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (double copy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Gothenburg, Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research (courtesy reply)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paper II and III – Lay written correspondences with the Swedish Food Agency

The second set of data in this thesis, used for Paper II and III, consists of digital correspondences drawn from a database at the Swedish Food Agency. The correspondences of interest were communications between lay people and the Swedish Food Agency related to dietary guidance (questions and statements on best eating practices formulated by lay people). Data for this study were requested and could be collected based on the Swedish principle of public access to official records (SFS 1949:105), last modified by SFS 2014:1370.

Collected data include digital correspondences (email and web form entries) occurring between April 27, 2015 (when the updated Swedish Food Agency dietary guidelines were launched) and December 31, 2016. All queries received by the Swedish Food Agency are registered and categorized in the database by agency personnel. During 2016, approximately 6900 queries were registered under main head: 1) Control and Regulation (approx. 3500 posts), 2) Food and Health (approx. 3100 post), 3) Opinions and Comments (approx. 150 posts) and 4) Other (approx. 150 posts). The database is extensive, and under each main category there are a number of sub-groups and sub-subgroups to choose from to finally categorize the subject of the query.

To explore lay people’s relation to the authority and for what purpose they made contact concerning food and health (Paper II), I concentrated on the correspondences sorted into the categories Food and Health and Opinions and Comments, as well as the subgroup Nutrition. Under the heading Nutrition, there were 10 sub-subgroups, four of which – “General dietary advice,” “Food habits,” “Nutritional value” and “Other” – were found to include the type of questions that I was interested in (Table 3). Correspondences concerning other parts of the Swedish Food Agency’s missions, such as regulation and control functions, were not collected.
Table 3. Head category “Food and Health” and its subheadings as an example of the structure in the Swedish Food Agency database. Included categories (Paper II) marked with darker grey and white text (number of posts in 2016 within subheading).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head category</th>
<th>FOOD AND HEALTH 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub group</td>
<td>Other (87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control info.</td>
<td>Microbiology (84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling</td>
<td>Nutrition (600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1244)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start &amp; run a food business (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toxicology (1056)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-sub groups</th>
<th>Other (87)</th>
<th>Control information (84)</th>
<th>Microbiology (600)</th>
<th>Labelling (57)</th>
<th>Nutrition (1244)</th>
<th>Start &amp; run a food business (1)</th>
<th>Toxicology (1056)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bacteria/viruses</td>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Allergy</td>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Allergy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notify a business</td>
<td></td>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td>Allergy</td>
<td>Preschool/school</td>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>Pesticides</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td></td>
<td>Storage</td>
<td>Terms</td>
<td>General dietary advice</td>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pesticides</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pregnant/lactating</td>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Pregnant/lactating</td>
<td>FCMs</td>
<td>FCMs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Food poisoning</td>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>Supplements</td>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>Pregnant/lactating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mold</td>
<td>GMOs</td>
<td>Food habits</td>
<td>GMOs</td>
<td>Supplements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Ingredients</td>
<td>Keyhole</td>
<td>Hygien</td>
<td>Toxins</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCMs¹</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supplements</td>
<td>Nutrition value</td>
<td>Import/export</td>
<td>Myco-toxins</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMOs⁴</td>
<td></td>
<td>Keyhole</td>
<td>Toddlers/infants</td>
<td>Supplements</td>
<td>Natural toxins</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hygiene</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nutrition and health claims</td>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>Meat/slaughter-house</td>
<td>Additives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplements</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nutritional declaration</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Milk/dairy</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment/waste</td>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td>New foods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New foods</td>
<td></td>
<td>FSMP</td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary production</td>
<td></td>
<td>A/F/E</td>
<td></td>
<td>Small scale production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results of the control</td>
<td></td>
<td>Origin labeling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Start a new business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traceability</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>FSMP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSPM⁵</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A/F/E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/F/E⁶</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ (FCM) Food contact material
⁴ (GMO) Genetically modified organism
⁵ (FSMP) Foods for special medical purposes
⁶ (A/F/E) Additives/flavorings/enzymes
During the data collection period (April 27, 2015 to December 31, 2016), a total of 1339 posts were found in the chosen categories. All posts were read through, and correspondences written by private persons (distinguished by absence of profession, affiliation or subject issue, and written with personal interest) were included, while correspondences sent for professional or educational purposes were excluded. Correspondences concerning specific conditions (such as diseases or pregnancy) and technical problems on the website were excluded as well. Occasional regular mail correspondences were also registered in the database, but were not accessible so they could not be included. Excluded were also correspondences between the Swedish Food Agency and the LCHF proponent and physician Annika Dahlqvist, who at the time of data collection had been debating with the Swedish Food Agency both directly and in media for several years.

Correspondences included in the analysis for Paper II amounted to – at the end of the inclusion/exclusion process – 727 posts (Table 4). For Paper III, a smaller sample of the correspondences in the “Food and Health” category in the Swedish Food Agency database was used to examine lay discourses on healthy food and eating. The sample was chosen from the subgroup “Nutrition” and sub-subgroup “General dietary advice.” It was registered in the database during the second half of 2016 (between July 1 and December 31, 2016). The same inclusion/exclusion criteria as described above were applied to this sample. The analysis then included 60 food-related posts from lay people categorized in the “General dietary advice” sub-subgroup during the chosen period. The included posts were relatively short, ranging from 11 to 264 words, with a median word count of 61 per post (greetings excluded).

Table 4. *Categorization of correspondences in the Swedish Food Agency database and number of included and excluded posts in the analysis of Paper II.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head category</th>
<th>Sub group</th>
<th>Sub sub group</th>
<th>Posts in the database</th>
<th>Included posts (Paper II)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food and health</td>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>General dietary advice</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Food habits</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nutritional value</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinions and comments</td>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>General dietary advice</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Food habits</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1339</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Paper IV, two guideline booklets produced by the Swedish Food Agency to guide the population toward more sustainable food habits were examined. The first booklet presents the official Swedish dietary guidelines, released in 2015, called “Find your way to eat greener, not too much and be active” (24 pages). The guidelines “suit most people” according to the information given on the first page of the booklet. The second booklet, called “A healthy whole” (34 pages), includes supplementary material to the official guidelines produced in 2016. Both these documents give recommendations and rationales for changes to the diet as well as for physical activity to live healthier, and they include environmental considerations. The publications are available at the official Swedish Food Agency webpage (www.livsmedelsverket.se), where similar texts are presented as well. The chosen documents represent the main public messages on sustainable eating for personal and environmental health that were central to our aim. The official dietary guidelines released in 2015 replaced an earlier version from 2005. They offer ten main messages, illustrated with colorful photographs. The messages are built on the principle of recommending more of, less of or switching certain food groups and food components. On each spread in the booklet, one page presents the message followed by tips on “how to make it work” and a box with arguments for why you should eat as recommended (Figure 1). The other page is filled with a picture. The environmental aspect of food consumption is a new component of the guidelines released in 2015 (Brugård Konde et al., 2015). The second booklet, “A healthy whole,” is more extensive, giving information on “good food habits, energy balance, and vitamins and minerals that might be difficult to get enough of” (p.3). The booklet also includes sections on aspects of sustainability, Swedish consumption statistics and scientific rationales and references for dietary advice.
More

VEGETABLES AND FRUITS

Eat lots of fruit, vegetables and berries! Ideally, choose high fibre veggies such as root vegetables, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, beans and onions.

FIND YOUR WAY
– how to make it work

GORGEOUS GREENS
Make space for vegetables, and more than as a foundation for your meal! Create beautiful meals with colourful vegetables, root vegetables and beans. Sprinkle a few seeds or nuts over the top. Think green even when you’re eating out or buying ready meals.

ICE IS NICE
Always keep frozen vegetables at home. They’re just as nutritious as fresh ones, and they won’t go all wavy in the fridge. Freeze summer berries to enjoy them with your ice cream or yoghurt in winter!

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE
Roll, chop, grate, steam, roast, grill, eat with breadcrumbs, puree. All kinds of preparation methods and options are available to you!

MIXED TO THE MAX
Smoothies made from vegetables, fruit or berries are one way of making sure you enjoy all the benefits of fresh produce without losing the fibre.

DISCOVER LEGUMES
Make hummus, falafel, bean burgers, chilli or curries, soups or stews from beans, chickpeas or lentils. Use garlic, lime, chilli, curry or herbs to add flavour.

ENJOY SEASONAL PRODUCT
Some vegetables, fruit and berries can’t be stored for any length of time. So take the opportunity to enjoy them when they’re in season. This is when they’re cheapest, tastiest and most eco-friendly.

COLOURFUL IS GOOD FOR YOU
Vegetables, fruit and berries contain lots of vitamins, minerals and other things that are good for you. Protective substances produce the various colours. That’s why eating colourful food doesn’t just look great. It’s good for your health as well.

Lots of vegetables and fruit are rich in fibre, which has all kinds of positive effects on the body. Fibre makes you feel full up and keeps your bowels moving.

Eating lots of vegetables and fruit reduces the risk of problems such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer. It’s a good idea to eat at least 500 grams of vegetables and fruit every day. This is equivalent to two generous handfuls of vegetables, root vegetables, legumes and two pieces of fruit, for example. But increasing your vegetable and fruit intake even slightly is good for your health. Portions aren’t included in these 500 grams, but they’re a good start anyway.

LITTLE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT
High fibre vegetables are an eco-friendly choice. They have less of an impact on the environment than salad greens and can be stored for longer.

Eating fewer and fewer foods that have been grown in eco-friendly ways. Only a very small number of chemicals and pesticides can be used in organic farming, and climate certification is helping to reduce climate impact.
Thematic analysis

The method applied in Paper I and II was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an established method for finding patterns in written data through an iterative process of skimming, reading through and interpreting the material (Patton, 2002). Identified patterns are then sorted into categories and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Paper I: analysis and procedure

The referral documents were requested from the Swedish Food Agency, and all registered written responses to the open consultation on dietary guidelines were given to us. The Swedish Food Agency also provided some additional information about the process of updating the guidelines and the invitation to respond to the suggestion. A preliminary understanding of the content and type of document was gained upon receiving and skimming through the texts. The analysis was then conducted in two steps, the first aimed at identifying general themes. All documents were read through repeatedly by the first author and recurring broad patterns were detected, while increasing familiarity with the data. The thematic analysis employed a social constructionist perspective, with an emphasis on how ideas about dietary advice were constructed in the referral responses (Wortham, 2008). Upon closer reading, general patterns were coded by making marks on Post-it notes at places where a certain pattern occurred in the documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were then formulated based on these initially identified patterns. During an iterative process of rereading the responses and discussing the patterns with coauthors, the initial codes were reformulated. The approach was initially inductive, and the categories identified were data-driven. Parallel to analysis work, reading of relevant literature was carried out, and the final part of the analysis involving establishing themes was more driven by the researchers’ theoretical interest in the concept of dietary guidelines and thereby produced by a more deductive approach. The initial codes were finally sorted into overarching themes, considering different perspectives on the advice and looking for underlying ideas and conceptualizations (Braun and Clarke 2006). These overarching themes focused on the referral responses’ constructions of how advice should be framed and formulated and were developed through discussion with one of the coauthors who had read extracts of the data beforehand. Consensus was reached on two main themes. To organize the data, a spreadsheet was used to collate relevant data excerpts for each theme, while reading the documents again. A deeper analysis of the two main themes was carried out by focusing on similarities and differences regarding the approaches the stakeholders’ used to argue for changes in the guidelines. Lastly, all authors
discussed the analysis and reached consensus on the themes and how to report on them.

Paper II: analysis and procedure

Data for this study (digital correspondences with the Swedish Food Agency) were collected at two separate time points, which is why a preliminary analysis was first conducted based on the initial smaller sample of correspondences. This analysis was then refined through a complete analysis of the entire sample. During the first data collection sequence, the first author gained a primary understanding of the data while gathering (copy and paste) digital correspondences from the Swedish Food Agency database. In this preliminary phase, the focus was on identifying the types of concerns expressed by writers. All correspondences in the initial sample were then read through and sorted, to be included or excluded, as described in the Data subsection. After a second reading of the included posts, the first author developed initial codes, based on the concerns expressed in the correspondences and how they were framed. The initial codes demonstrated that a considerable number of the correspondences expressed discontent with advice in the form of questioning or disputing the Swedish Food Agency. Through a framework of trust and distrust in the authority, the first author then returned to the initial codes to categorize the findings into two initial themes. The qualitative Software package NVivo 11 was used for organizing the work of coding the data. Preliminary themes, which represented trust and distrust, were then put together and presented together with example excerpts to be discussed with one of the co-authors. They reached agreement on the themes, and the first author returned to collect the total sample of correspondences. All correspondences were then analyzed and the themes elaborated further to categorize the different ways in which trust and distrust were expressed, through discussion with three of the co-authors. Finally, the themes were revised and agreed upon by all co-authors, forming four thematic categories of ways in which lay corresponders expressed trust and distrust in the authority.

Discourse and discourse analysis informed by Foucauldian theory

To explore the construction and content of texts while acknowledging their context and history, discourse analysis was chosen as the approach to guide the analysis in Paper III and IV (Cheek, 2004). Interrogating discourses in these texts offered a way to investigate the possibilities for individuals to act and to understand ways of making sense of the world (Wright, 2004). More than a pure and specific method, discourse analysis is an approach based on a
theoretical framework with certain underpinnings (Cheek/Potter & Wetherell 1987). I have applied two versions of discourse analysis based on Foucauldian theory – Critical discourse analysis as conceptualized by Fairclough (1992) (Paper III), and Bacchi’s (2009) poststructural policy analysis called “Whatsth-problem-represented-to-be?” (Paper IV) – both will be presented below.

Paper III: Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis and Halliday’s functional grammar

In Paper III, we have drawn on principles of Fairclough’s (1992) critical discourse analysis to study the linguistic features of nutritionistic discourse in lay writings. Our main focus was on analyzing the concept of healthy eating as a social object in a system of knowledge and belief. We have specifically analyzed how “food” is constructed in scientific terms by lay people in correspondences with a Swedish authority on healthy eating. Fairclough’s (1992) critical discourse analysis is a textually oriented discourse analysis that also links language to social and cultural processes as a whole. This entails discourses having constitutive effects, which contribute to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief. Language use is thus seen as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis has been used as a guide for the analysis on three levels (1992). The first level is the text, which is the smallest grammatically constructed unit that always relates to discursive and social practices. Second, we have the discursive practice that is concerned with the setting around the text, where and how it is produced and how it builds on other texts. And third, on a general level, we have social practices that can be related to social sciences theories. Our analysis was mainly linguistically oriented, focusing on the first (textual) level of analysis. The texts were read through carefully and repeatedly, looking for systematic patterns in language and use of terms. Recurring terms and main features concerning food and eating were therefore collected in categories for closer examination of the way in which discursive resources were used to construct “food” in scientific terms. When certain patterns were identified, some concepts from functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) were used to explain the construction of the main features of the discourse. In the analysis, we made use of sentence structure, quantification techniques, modality (auxiliary verbs) and transitivity (nominalization) to characterize the nutritionist discourse used in the utterances. These features were often used in the texts related to scientific reasoning about healthy eating. To illustrate the linguistic traits that were typical in the analysis of the whole data set, we chose four texts from the digital correspondences with the Swedish Food Agency. We used these examples to describe our findings, giving the reader a sense of the whole context reading the whole utterance. However, instances in which the four main examples were not sufficient, fragments from other correspondences
were used to explain. The utterances varied both in length and style, as the people writing them had free space and format for writing. We conducted our analysis of the texts in the original language (Swedish), and later translated the excerpts in the findings for the purpose of using them in the article.

**Paper IV: Discursive problematizations and the “What’s-the-problem-represented-to-be” (WPR) approach**

In Paper IV, we used Bacchi’s (2009) “What’s-the-problem-represented-to-be” (WPR) approach as an analytic and theoretical guide (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) to discursively examine the Swedish Food Agency’s dietary guidelines. This approach offers a way to interrogate policy as discourse and stresses the way in which language limits or enables what can be said and how social or policy problems are created by discourse (Bacchi, 2000, 2009). For this purpose, we applied Bacchi’s use of the concept “problematizations,” which refers to how issues are constituted and problematized by discourse. Problematizations has been referred to by Foucault (1988) as “discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought.” By focusing on problematizations, or ways of governing certain “problems,” we interrogate how “problems” are constituted by official discourse, rather than assuming that there are “real” problems out there waiting to be solved (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

The analysis is based on a set of questions (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 1-21), of which we applied four to the Swedish dietary guidelines.

Q1. What’s the problem represented to be?
Q2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the “problem” (problem representation)?
Q4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?
Q5. What effects are produced by this representation of the “problem”?

As this study focused on critically exploring the biopedagogies implicated in Sweden’s dietary guidelines, the WPR approach facilitated interrogation of how practices and lifestyles are problematized, such that the dietary guidelines’ “healthy whole” emerges as a solution to the problem. The WPR approach enables the analysis of objects (e.g., food and health) and subjects (people) produced by the guidelines, with attention to how this discursive production might affect those targeted by the policy (the subjects). This approach also enabled us to imagine how “problems” could be conceptualized differently, thereby highlighting silences in the construction of problems, and challenging underlying assumptions.

During the first phase of the analysis, each of the questions was answered separately. Then, problems were identified in the answer to Q1. We reported
these problems as themes in the findings section. We then used the answer to Q2 to contextualize these themes within the underlying assumptions in the guidelines, paying particular attention to binaries (e.g., varied-unbalanced), concepts (e.g., whole, health, real food) and categories (e.g., demographic risk groups), as well as to their content and construction in the data. The answers to Q4 and Q5 were then used in the interpretation of these findings. We did not address two of Bacchi’s six questions in this paper (Q3 “How has this representation come about?”, and Q6 “How and where has this representation of the “problem” been produced, disseminated and defended?”).

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Board in Uppsala 2015-09-16. The data consist of public documents that are accessible for everyone. Therefore, no contact is taken with the persons or organizations behind the responses or correspondences and consent to participate in the research is not required. To protect the confidentiality of the lay correspondents, all excerpts are presented anonymously and all identifying details have been omitted from the quotes. The original quotes in Swedish have been translated by the authors and reviewed in Paper II by a bilingual researcher.

Reflections on doing qualitative constructionist research

As a qualitative researcher doing “reflexive empirical research” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), I make no claims of presenting an “objective truth,” but rather acknowledge how the process of knowledge production is interlinked with the knowledge that is produced. In this approach, the role of the researcher is important to the claims made, as his/her background, experiences and social identity affect what will be studied and how (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Bryman, 2018; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Therefore, I will provide some reflections on the circumstances in which this thesis has been produced as well as some notes on my earlier experiences and perspectives that may contributed to an understanding of how I came to write this particular thesis (Tracy, 2010).

I was brought up in a working-class environment in a small village close to Uppsala, but far from the world of academia. However, I was interested in studying and later admitted to the university, where dietetics became my main subject. I completed my Bachelor of Science in dietetics and Master of Social Science in food science and nutrition, both of which have a strong nutritional/medical perspective. After graduation and before returning to the academy, I worked for some years with information and education projects on public health as well as on environmental perspectives on food consumption.
The perspective I brought into my PhD project included the taken-for-granted ideal of healthy eating and the importance of good communication to help people change their habits. However, by reflecting on the fact that dietary guidelines are not mirrored in population consumption patterns and on the public’s limited ambitions to follow such guidelines, my interest soon shifted to what position and possible impacts official dietary guidelines could have from other perspectives. Here, some of my early readings had a great impact on the way my research interest developed. First, I would like to mention the book “Good nutrition?: fact and fashion in dietary advice” written by the Australian nutritionist Patricia Crotty (1995), which introduced me to perspectives on how social, cultural and scientific ideals meet in dietary advice. Second, I read critical analyses of dietary advice and healthy eating discourses in “Nutritionism: the science and politics of dietary advice” by food policy scholar Gyorgy Scrinis (2013) and “Measured Meals: Nutrition in America” by communication scholar Jessica Mudry (2009). These two books influenced my thinking and area of interest, leading me to explore the discourses of dietary guidance and healthy eating in the Swedish context.

I have conducted the studies included in the thesis in an academic interdisciplinary setting at the Department of Food Studies, Nutrition and Dietetics, where medical as well as sociological perspectives are used in research concerning food. The analyses and manuscripts have been elaborated in close collaboration with my supervisors (at the same department) and one co-author (a medical anthropologist), who have discussed and agreed on the findings and conclusions. When presenting the findings, we have aimed to provide rich quotes and “thick” descriptions to give the readers enough detail to agree with our conclusions, inspired by ethnographic methods (Tracy, 2010). Also, striving for “meaningful coherence” (Tracy, 2010) in the research, I have taken a constructionist perspective throughout the four papers, but this perspective has become more pronounced as the work progressed.

Coming from what I would call a positivist background, I have shifted to another scientific paradigm during my PhD studies. This has entailed quite a journey for me in terms of the challenge of taking on a new perspective on healthy eating and making use of this perspective to explore these issues further. By combining a constructionist perspective with my earlier dietetic perspective on dietary guidance in this thesis, I hope I can contribute to further reflection on official healthy eating discourses and their potential discursive consequences.
Results

Paper I

The thematic analysis of stakeholder responses to the updated Swedish dietary guidelines (to be published in 2015) resulted in two main themes: the centrality of anchoring advice scientifically and modes of getting the message across to the public. These themes illustrate how stakeholders (industrial actors, interest organizations, authorities and private actors) construct and conceptualize national dietary advice. In particular, we show how the stakeholders’ expressed and used these two emphases on what should form the basis for dietary advice, and how dietary advice should be framed to develop sound advice and promote specific (interest group) agendas.

Anchoring advice scientifically

Throughout the responses, stakeholders returned to the importance of the scientific foundation for the advice formulated in the guidelines. They emphasized the evidence behind the advice, transparency concerning how the advice had come to be formulated and proper use of terms. Some provided their interpretation of the background information provided by the Swedish Food Agency to ensure correct conclusions when formulating “objective” advice. Stakeholders provided additional scientific references in some cases, or corrected or questioned advice and statements based on their own expertise. Scientific reasoning was also used to argue that a certain food or category of products should have a more prominent place in the guidelines. Besides referring to scientific reports, stakeholders provided their own calculations of nutrient content or climate gas emissions for the food in question. Based on these calculations, foods were compared and the selected food was claimed to be superior to other foods. At the same time as scientific arguments were used to promote foods or criticize statements in the guidelines, stakeholders stressed the importance of a rigorous scientific basis for dietary advice.

Getting the message across

The second theme in the responses was how recipients would perceive the guidelines. Stakeholders shared views about important aspects of communication – that the guidelines should be positive, easy to understand and use,
inclusive and respectful, so that readers do not feel excluded from or alienated by the advice. The focus here was on the tone and choice of wording in formulations of advice, finding clear expressions and avoiding unfamiliar or subjective words. Advice should clearly guide the reader to make correct choices and to compose healthy meals. At the same time, stakeholders emphasized readers’ competence, knowledge and consciousness about healthy eating. In some instances, the communicative aspects were also used to promote stakeholders’ own agendas, for example when economical or practical aspects were mentioned in favor of a certain food, or when arguing for naming a wider variety of products as examples of “good choices.” Of central interest, however, was to ensure that the language and tone would facilitate understanding and encourage people to incorporate the advice into their healthy eating practices.

In sum, stakeholders argued for changes in the guidelines using nutritional and quantitative logics, attending to the scientific basis for each piece of advice. They expressed the view that sound dietary guidelines should be clearly formulated and optimize individuals’ ability to act in the best way to promote their personal health. Alternative framings of how healthy eating could be practiced were not prominent. Rather, stakeholders reinforced the logics of the guidelines as practiced by the Swedish Food Agency.

Paper II

Our thematic analysis of digital correspondences sent to the Swedish Food Agency led to a presentation of four distinctive ways in which writers related to the agency: confirming and clarifying, seeking support and arbitration, questioning and scrutinizing, and protesting and fighting. We conceptualized these as ways of expressing trust and distrust; the correspondences were quite polarized, either asking for reliable answers or disputing the Swedish Food Agency.

Expressions of trust – Confirming and clarifying, Seeking support and arbitration

Correspondences conveying short straightforward questions to ascertain correct eating and food preparation choices tacitly expressed trust in the Swedish Food Agency. Writers voiced concern about getting enough nutrients from foods and asked about ways to handle foods to preserve as many vitamins and minerals as possible. Some writers also demanded clarifications for specific advice. These kinds of correspondences acknowledged the authority of the Swedish Food Agency and official advice without questioning their trustworthiness. The other type of trusting correspondences, conveying a multifaceted
understanding of healthy eating advice and sources, turned to the Swedish Food Agency as a reliable authority among many competing voices. The writers sought help to distinguish between reliable and questionable information, often presenting a food-related scenario and asking, “is this correct/true?” Concerns also included perceived food-related risks, reflecting society-wide discussions about potential harms. Writers expected the Swedish Food Agency to have the competence to provide reliable answers to a wide range of food-related issues, including “new” foods. In some cases, writers contacted the agency as a discussion partner, even inviting them to give an opinion about questions of morality.

Expressions of distrust – Questioning and scrutinizing, protesting and fighting

Correspondences questioning the work of the Swedish Food Agency expressed critique of the agency’s work and advice, often including references to scientific sources. These writers wanted to see the original source and evidence for the advice given, or openly contradicted advice by attaching references to “new” scientific papers or providing their own interpretation after reading such reports. Even though they were questioning the basis of the advice to see whether the Swedish Food Agency would stand behind what they considered faulty advice, their tone was respectful. Some writers also urged the agency to update their advice so as to not totally lose the public trust. In these correspondences, official advice was framed as out of date and lacking current evidence, and therefore also as a potential danger to public health. More advanced disapproval was expressed in the other type of distrusting correspondences. These writers used harsh, emotional language when objecting to the advice and practices of the Swedish Food Agency. They accused the agency of being ignorant and lazy, of holding on to old flawed advice even though they ought to know better. These writers also referred to the lack of scientific evidence, seemingly convinced that all sources are insufficient in nature and out of date. As counter-evidence to the official advice, writers referred to blogs, articles and YouTube clips, often produced by public opponents of the Swedish Food Agency, such as proponents of the LCHF diet. However, citing scientific reports or demanding to see the scientific evidence behind that advice was also found in the correspondences, parallel to personal accounts of how the writer had achieved better health by eating in a manner opposite to official recommendations. In addition, moral accusations were aimed at agency personnel, as were suspicions about the Swedish Food Agency being corrupt and manipulated by the interests of industry. They demanded action on the part of the Swedish Food Agency to warn against, forbid and regulate the consumption of “dangerous” foods and, thus, to save the population from illness. These writers did not approve of the kind of advice given
by the Swedish Food Agency, nevertheless they used similar arguments about healthy nutrients and scientific rigor, but to opposite ends. Remarkably, through this opposition, they framed the Swedish Food Agency as ultimately responsible for the nation’s nutritional health.

Paper III

Through our linguistically oriented critical discourse analysis of digital correspondences sent to the Swedish Food Agency, we could characterize a nutrient-centered discourse that made use of terms that indicated preciseness, such as numbers and amounts. The implications of rules and restrictions were shaped through use of verbs that express obligation, and the practice of eating was instrumentalized through use of nominalizations and passive verb constructions.

Nutrient-centered discourse

The direct focus in many correspondences was a nutrient or a nutrient group, which was grammatically positioned as an object in the utterances; “This question concerns carbohydrates...”. Food items are also frequently mentioned together with their “key nutrient,” implying their role as nutrient sources. Nutrients and food items were sometimes also positioned as subjects and objects in utterances, or described as agents capable of achieving things; “all these carbohydrates... that make people fat and sick.” Writers referred to food and nutrients using numbers, calculations and quantitative restrictions, framing food as something to be quantitatively controlled and eating as an calculated act of ingesting nutrients. Amounts were also referred to in relative terms, such as “high” or “too high” intakes, which presupposes a desired amount to which improper consumption can be compared. Discursively specified amounts may contribute to perceived control over food and nutrient intake that can be quantitatively modified (Mudry, 2009). Writers also expressed the consequences of eating by nominalizing the term “intake,” in this way mirroring authoritative dietary guideline formulations, but also by using other passive verb constructions. These constructions instrumentalized the activity of eating and drinking. Writers also implicated the rules and restrictions surrounding eating by using modal auxiliary verbs (can/shall/should/would) that express positive obligation: You shall do something.

Paper IV

In Paper IV, we used Bacchi’s WPR approach to examine how the Swedish Food Agency’s official dietary guidelines construct a problem for which “a
“Finding your way” to responsible food choices through cultivated taste

The guidelines focus on how individuals can realize changes by providing concrete examples of “how to make it work.” for example how to identify good choices or how to vary cooking methods. The problem of food choice is represented as a problem of everyday practice, the underlying assumption being that individuals are responsible for their own health and largely know what constitutes healthy food. Individuals are presumed to have “working” or “non-

Sustainable food constructed as varied and primarily of good nutritional quality

Expressions of a “whole” in the guidelines appear to primarily concern nutritional and energy balance, the secondary concern being the environment. The main focus in the guidelines is the message that food patterns need to be changed by increasing or decreasing certain food components, and ensuring that vitamins, minerals and macro-nutrients are included in appropriate proportions. The centrality of foods’ physiological functions implies the taken-for-granted nature of physical health as a primary concern, thus silencing social and emotional perspectives on health. Environmental concerns are constructed as secondary to physical health; they are presented after nutritional concerns and never used as the primary rational for how to choose foods. It is also implied that nutritional logics justify environmental concerns, the argument being that “climate-smarter eating” can more easily achieve the nutritional requirements for a “good diet” compared to a diet put together without environmental considerations. The suggested method of achieving a sustainable diet is to ensure that the diet is varied and thereby provides a balance of nutrients. Variety is encouraged in relation to food choice, preparation styles, and seasoning, implying that the implicit problem with diet is that it is non-diversified. Through the concept of varied diet, the guidelines also differentiate between “food” as a carrier of healthy nutrients and other eatables that only provide “empty calories.”

healthy whole” is the solution. As dietary guidelines aim to achieve changes in diet on the population level, we named the problem represented in the guidelines “the unsustainable diet,” which is linked both to bodily health and to the environmental consequences of food consumption. The problem of the “unsustainable diet” is closely linked to a second problem, which focuses on how to make individual food practices work toward a sustainable diet. We named the second problem “food choice,” and the results of this study present the components and discursive constructions of these two problems found in the guidelines.
working” practices that the guidelines aim to improve. In addition, and sec-
ondary to nutritional concerns, individuals are presumed to be ready to assume
responsibility for the environmental consequences of their food consumption
and have capacity to incorporate these concerns into their everyday reasoning
and practice. Through this advice, the guidelines invoke an implied eco-habi-
tus (Carfagna et al., 2014), whereby ethical concerns are incorporated into the
body through conscious consumption, conferring on the eater high cultural
capital and social distinction. Although the eco-habitus was originally associ-
ated with middle-class lifestyles, the guidelines imply that everyone should
pursue it as an ideal.

Further, values associated with middle-classness and distinction are em-
phasized in the guidelines’ biopedagogics through educating the subjects
about the “right tastes” (with the goal of achieving the “right” diet). Nutritious
and freshly seasoned foods are described as delicious and tasty, using appe-
tizing wordings such as “fast, simple and tasty” or “You season it easily with
garlic, lime, chili, curry or herbs.” If people wish to enjoy food and appreciate
its taste, the guidelines also encourage them to practice mindful eating; sub-
jects should be attentive to what they consume. Hence, while the guidelines
encourage cultivating the right tastes and practicing mindful eating as being
key to dietary change, built into this advice are assumptions about what fea-
tures and lifestyles characterize the advice recipients. Advice concerning how
to season and prepare foods at home reveals the underlying assumption that
subjects have the time and resources to dedicate to food preparation, and that
they highly value and prioritize daily preparation of fresh food.
Discussion

Coproduction of a reductive conceptualization of healthy eating

This thesis addressed the concept of official dietary guidance and healthy eating as constructed and negotiated by stakeholders, lay people and the Swedish Food Agency in Sweden. When I mention lay people here, I am referring to people who sent messages to the Swedish Food Agency with their private concerns (to be distinguished from professional or educational inquires). The scientific and nutrient-centered discourse used in the arguments, statements, instructions and questions related to dietary guidance was a pervading finding across the three datasets (stakeholder responses, lay correspondences and the official dietary guidelines) and appeared in all four studies (Paper I-IV). The shared discourse, building on the condition of evidence-based advice, demonstrated the dominance of the scientific discourse in communication related to diet and health, in Sweden as well. Stakeholders centered their arguments around the evidence for specific recommendations, mainly regarding nutrients and their health effects, but also evidence concerning the environmental impacts of the food production chain. Scientific references and scientific reasoning were used to construct a “good diet” not only by stakeholders and the Swedish Food Agency, but also by lay people in communication with the authority. A broader range of discourses on healthy eating might have been expected, especially in the lay correspondences (Paper II-III), considering the many meanings of healthy eating found in previous studies on lay discourse (Bisogni et al., 2012). However, to the best of my knowledge, this specific context of lay communication on healthy eating with an authority such as the Swedish Food Agency has not been studied previously.

Despite social scientists’ recurrent and long-standing critique of official dietary guidance for being too far removed from everyday experiences of daily food practices (see, e.g., Baum & Fisher, 2014; Crotty, 1995; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Lupton, 1994), representations of healthy eating in scientific terms are still more or less the standard way of formulating official dietary guidelines (see, e.g., Rachul, 2019; Thanem, 2009). Despite intentions to present a “healthy whole” in the Swedish official dietary guidelines (Paper IV), justifications for why a certain food or food group is recommended often refer to specific nutrient content and even more frequently – to having a good balance
of all the nutrients that different foods can provide. This exemplifies the reductive conceptualization of dietary health described by Scrinis (2013), who also argued that this kind of presentation of the impact of nutrients on human health also gives the impression that it is the only truth about dietary health. Moreover, in stakeholders’ comments on updated guidelines submitted to the Swedish Food Agency, a reductive focus on specific nutrients and their implications for health was found to be prominent, particularly in their argumentation for specific foods or food groups having a more prominent place in the guidelines (Paper I). Thus, industrial actors reinforced the focus on nutrients and scientific endeavor by promoting their products within the dominating discourse (Nestle, 2013). The co-construction of what is considered healthy diets in American and Australian contexts was conceptualized by Dixon and Banwell (2004) as a “diets making complex” – a structured interaction between industry, researchers and health professionals (including authorities). They argued that this “diets making complex,” dominated by industry, has paved the way for nutritionism – a reductive understanding of food mainly in terms of nutrients (Dixon & Banwell, 2004; Scrinis, 2013).

Interestingly, a reductive focus on nutrients – how to ensure intake of enough of some nutrients and how to avoid others – was found to be prominent in lay communications with the Swedish Food Agency as well (Paper III). Linguistically, this nutrient-centeredness was created by positioning nutrients as the direct subject or object in utterances, together with using verbs that signal obligation and nominalizations that together instrumentalize the practice of eating. This discourse delimits the concept and practice of healthy eating to an act of ingesting nutrients in a controlled manner, and other ways of conceptualizing healthy eating are not legitimized. The reductive nutrient-centered discourse dominated the correspondences sent from lay people to the Swedish Food Agency, implying that this is what the public understands to be legitimate knowledge about healthy eating in an official context. However, although we do not have any information about the demographic characteristics of the senders of these correspondences, they cannot in any way be taken as representative of the entire Swedish population. It is more plausible that this is a group of relatively privileged people with a special interest in health and the capacity to access the information they require. Interest in, and internalization of, healthy eating advice has been associated with higher socioeconomic status groups (Fielding-Singh, 2019; Prättälä et al., 2009; Smith & Holm, 2010).

Resistance to official dietary guidance

This thesis has confirmed the dominance of the scientific and nutrient-centered discourse in healthy eating communication and guidance, as well as the individualization of health responsibilities in a Swedish setting. The analyses
presented in this thesis show that lay people, in their communications with the Swedish Food Agency, actively employed these discourses, but at the same time, some people resisted the messages of healthy eating embedded in these discourses (Paper II). Similar parallel employment and resistance of a health promotional and illness preventative discourse was found in an Danish study with participants of both high and low social class (Merrild, Andersen, Risør, & Vedsted, 2017). Although within the scientific discourse, lay people in this thesis refuted the specific advice promoted by the Swedish Food Agency by providing counterevidence through the use of scientific reports or scientific arguments drawn from secondary sources. These message writers assumed the subject position of the responsible citizen caring for their health by seeking the “best” eating advice through “accurate science.” These findings counter the findings from a previous Australian study showing that resistance to dietary advice was expressed through distrust of scientific evidence, which was rendered contradictory and inadequate as a guarantee for good dietary advice (Madden & Chamberlain, 2010). In the case of the data in this Swedish context, in correspondence with the Swedish Food Agency, lay people rather assumed the position of experts themselves, by giving their interpretation of scientific evidence, or referring to evidence in the form of personal experiences, to present a subsequent construction of how sound advice should be constructed. This discourse is very similar to how Swedish proponents, as well as Finnish followers, of LCHF diets have been arguing for their ideas. The two main strategies described by Gunnarsson and Elam (2012) as well as Jauho (2016) are personal testimonies or stories of success and engagement in scientific debate over scientific “facts.” Jauho (2016) added that this argumentation leads to a devaluing of traditional expertise, without devaluing the importance of science. Further, he also suggested that these LCHF followers engage in identity building by participating in such debates (Jauho, 2016). The notion of lay expertise or “expert patients” has been used in sociological research since the 1990s, thus acknowledging lay people’s knowledge about health and illness (Prior, 2003). An important aspect of this knowledge is individual experiences of health and illness (Prior, 2003), and sharing of experiential knowledge has been shown to give women engaged in Facebook groups support and confirmation that official care-providing institutions cannot provide (Maslen & Lupton, 2019). Digital media have facilitated access to “experiential authority,” and as Maslen and Lupton argued (2019), digital media now play an important role in the development of lay knowledge on health and illness. The “expert patient” now not only evaluates health information, but also, and foremost, navigates the social context and “affective forces” when engaging in digital platforms (Maslen & Lupton, 2019). In their study on lay engagement in social media discussions following a Belgian infotainment show, Declerq, Tulkens and Van Leuven (2018) analyzed how lay people contribute to the co-construction of nutritional knowledge by actively adding “new” information and perspectives to discussions on healthy eating.
These examples emphasize a participatory dimension of “knowledge” of health and illness, a dimension that does not exist in the Swedish Food Agency’s general dietary advice.

People are thus not only internalizing official advice to live healthier, but also resisting this advice. Lilja and Vinthagen (2014) identified reiteration of dominant discourses, or “reversed discourses” – use of dominant discourses with a somewhat altered meaning – as a crucial method of exercising resistance to Foucauldian disciplinary power. They also identified “mimicry” as a resistance strategy that incorporates imitation of dominant practices (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Individuals who provided data for the present thesis and assumed the role of experts judged the quality of scientific research, employed this strategy and imitated expert practices and statements (Paper II). Thus, as McClean and Shaw (2005) suggest, expert and lay knowledge are not two separate positions, but rather points along a continuum, and lay people who engage with biomedical and scientific knowledge on health both adopt, critique and modify expert positions. A third main strategy of resistance seen in the data was the use of expressive and emotional language. Through their strong, scorning language, they displayed feelings of disappointment, frustration and disdain over the seemingly careless enactments of the Swedish Food Agency. It is rather uncommon for this kind of “everyday resistance”, challenging the power of discipline, to be enacted in such an expressive and direct way (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Notably, in contrast to resistance within the dominating discourse described in this thesis, resistance to official dietary advice and public health messages often takes shape through other discourses or alternative practices. Occurring examples are discourses on locally or organically produced food (Dixon & Banwell, 2004; McPhail, 2013) or by referring to common sense or experiences of taste and esthetic qualities (Dixon & Banwell, 2004; Parker, 2012).

Discursive consequences of normative constructions in dietary guidance communication

The responsibilization of individuals

In all of the studies, individual responsibility for health is constructed through similar means: focusing on clear information to enable healthy choices (Paper I), emphasizing finding one’s own way to sustainable eating by suggesting numerous alternatives (Paper IV), and using a reductive, nutrient-centered discourse that also aligns with individual management of nutrient composition in the diet (Paper I-IV). In their analysis of nutritionism and public health strategies, Mayes and Thompson (2015) suggested that a reductive understanding of healthy eating paves the way for the individual responsibilization of health
outcomes. When nutrients are constructed as quantifiable and manageable in isolation, they argued, it seems easy to “make the right choices” to achieve a healthy composition of food and, thereby, to safeguard health (Mayes & Thompson, 2015). The premise of individual responsibility for health pervades all of the perspectives (stakeholder, lay people and policy) studied in this thesis, and confirms the dominant discourse on health. In their communications with the Swedish Food Agency (Paper II-III), lay people exercised this individual responsibility and assumed the subject position of the knowledgeable and responsible citizen through the scientific and nutritionist discourse, seeking to confirm their good choices. Women in Canada and Australia similarly employed a nutritionist discourse in their communications about healthy eating, positioning themselves as responsible citizens and at the same time differentiating themselves from those who are not (Parker, 2012).

Normality, morality and the construction of an “ideal eater”

By drawing on notions of risk, the official dietary guidelines encourage individuals to take action (by making the “right choices”) to decrease their personal risk. For example, risk is constructed in the guidelines in relation to overconsumption of certain foods as well as through constructions of certain demographic risk groups that individuals can identify themselves with. Acting to decrease these risks is framed as the rational, logical thing to do (Paper IV). By analyzing dietary guidance discursively, we can examine how the discourse shapes ways of being through “subjectification processes” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). A risk-conscious subject position is offered by this discourse, and this position is also voluntarily assumed by some individuals who contacted the Swedish Food Agency for advice on how to avoid risks related to certain nutrients or foods (Paper II). Risk as a governmental strategy is said to be an example of enacting control by moralizing particular behaviors (Crawford, 2004). The consequence of not engaging to avoid stated risks is that one is considered irrational and as having failed to take the opportunity to behave optimally (Dean, 2010; Lupton, 1999). According to Dean (2010), by setting standards and norms regarding which actual behaviors can be judged, policies (such as dietary guidelines) define which behaviors are best and most responsible.

Governing, thus, in the Foucauldian sense, happens through people’s desire to feel normal, and therefore discursive constructions of normality and deviation are of importance (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Although publishers of official dietary guidelines (e.g., the Swedish Food Agency) state the perspectives they work with (e.g., scientific evidence and population food habits) to formulate sound advice, guidelines always have moral implications (regarding what is good or bad) and other discursive effects colored by the time and historical context (Coveney, 2006; Foucault, 1991). In the case of Sweden’s dietary guidelines, they construct the subject position of an ‘ideal eater’ as having
a certain taste for food cooked from scratch and served with fresh herbs and elaborate seasonings. By arguing for certain seasonings and at the same time pointing out their positive attributes, the guidelines reveal an assumption about what people (should) like or want: exciting, simple, spicy and fresh food. The ideal eater is additionally expected to be concerned about the environment and achieve a varied diet (through good taste), thus meeting the criteria for both health and environmental aspects of food consumption. These kinds of values, practices and tastes emphasized by the guidelines are closely tied to a middle-class lifestyle and aspirations (see, e.g., Beagan, Power, & Chapman, 2015; Carfagna et al., 2014; Earl, 2019; Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney, 2011; Woolhouse, Day, & Rickett, 2019). For instance, in a Canadian study of food dispositions and class, the notion of “food as pleasure” associated with joy, discovery and flavors was expressed by families with middle-class attributes (in relation to education, employment and ethnicity) (Beagan et al., 2015). In another study from Canada, Johnston, Szabo and Rodney (2011) showed that middle-class families (distinguished by employment) – more often than working-class families – engaged in discourses on food and environment that elicited the values of organic foods, locally produced foods and replacing meat with vegetables in the diet. The middle-class families in their study also talked about their food habits as healthy and of good quality (i.e., made from scratch), thus framing their habits as “good.” In that way, they could also position themselves in relation to “others” (Johnston et al., 2011). The ideal of cooking from scratch, implying that time and effort are put into meal preparation, was also articulated by mothers in a recent study from the UK (Woolhouse et al., 2019). However, some mothers – mainly from working-class backgrounds – resisted this ideal, as it appeared out of reach for them and more closely associated with privileged groups. Thus, the working-class mothers expressed feelings of alienation in relation to these kinds of practices (Woolhouse et al., 2019). The increased focus on cooking skills in diverse fields, including public policies and health, was discussed from a moral perspective by Coveney, Beagley and Gallegos (2012). They argued that “Good food,” and the person who provides such food, is judged not only by nutritional qualities but also by how food is cooked, which can be an extra burden for less privileged families (mothers) (Coveney et al., 2012). They also argued that this is an additional arena in which conscious choices regarding action are now expected, and in which there was previously “no choice” – in that tradition and the socioeconomic context primarily determined what should be served and how (Coveney et al., 2012). Thus, by constructing an ideal eater based on middle-class ideals and resources, the discourse of Swedish official dietary guidelines potentially excludes other (less privileged) groups in the society from engaging with the advice.
What is not there?

When the idea of “good eating habits” is reductively constructed primarily in terms of nutritional balances, and as the result of individual choices (Paper I-IV), and as dependent on having the “right” tastes and environmental awareness (Paper IV), a range of other perspectives and values important for people’s eating practices are silenced by the discourse. First and foremost, food and eating are presented outside any social context. Individual food habits are entangled with social relationships and social meanings of food and eating that include the family context (Delormier, Frohlich, & Potvin, 2009). Therefore, family relations affect the food served and eaten, and building relationships with others can be the main function of shared meals (Johansson & Ossiassson, 2012; Wright, Maher, & Tanner, 2015). Additionally, structural and emotional aspects, such as time constraints and stress in relation to eating in the family, are also not acknowledged in the official dietary guidelines (Locher, Yoels, Maurer, & Van Ells, 2005; Mehta, Booth, Coveney, & Strazdins, 2019). Along the same line, food habits are related to the meaning foods have for emotional wellbeing and comfort, where consumption is premised on grounds other than nutritional logics or cultivated taste (Locher et al., 2005).

Second, by focusing on making good consumption choices as a sustainable eater (Paper IV), other ways of being an environmentally friendly human being are silenced in the discourse. For example, being sparing with resources, minimizing food waste or recycling food packing materials – things one can engage in regardless of one’s economic resources or that one already practices out of necessity – are not mentioned in the guidelines. Johnston, Szabo and Rodney (2011) showed how these kinds of engagements were framed as ethical food practices by Canadian consumers with lower levels of economic capital. Focusing solely on consumption as the only way to achieve a sustainable lifestyle strengthens the relative responsibility placed on individuals as being dependent on them making good consumption choices, thus appealing to consumerist values (see, e.g., Derkatch & Spoel, 2017). Things that are not actively chosen, but perhaps done out of necessity, are likewise not counted as “good” in the educational sustainability discourse in Sweden, for example not having material properties compared to making the sustainable choice (Ideland, 2018). The sustainability framing around good food habits in the Swedish dietary guidelines speaks to people from the middle class whose lifestyles can be assumed to align with more environmentally considered food consumption (Beagan et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2011). But, at the same time, the guidelines silence a broader perspective on the sustainability of a middle-class life (e.g., living in bigger houses, having a car/s or flying more often). Less privileged groups might have a lower impact on the environment in total, even if their fail to make the “right” food choices. In addition, those who do not live up to a healthy diet, as prescribed by the guidelines, fail by
definition to eat in a sustainable manner, as the two perspectives are presented as united in the guidelines (Paper IV).

A third topic that is silenced in the guidelines (Paper IV) concerns the gendered division of food work in Swedish families. To whom do the dietary guidelines most possibly speak? Even though Sweden sees itself as gender equal and Swedish men as increasingly taking responsibility for cooking and care of the family, the major part of food work is done by women (Neuman, 2019; SOU 2014:28; Statistics Sweden, 2012). Women’s share of the everyday housework such as cooking, cleaning and washing has decreased from over 90% in the 1970s to roughly 65% in 2010, but when children arrive the numbers change and women’s share increases. Women in Sweden do on average 60% of the food work, and women with higher status jobs have the greatest chances of experiencing equality in this regard (SOU 2014:28). Discourses that position practices like growing herbs and cooking from scratch as imperative to healthy eating and feeding children may end up alienating mothers, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who do not have the time and resources to enact these idealized practices (Paper IV) (Woolhouse et al., 2019). Mothers interviewed about family food work have shared their experiences of struggling and feeling responsible for their children eating healthily, while having primary responsibility for providing nutritious meals and simultaneously negotiating time, activities and family relations during meals (Johansson & Ossiansson, 2012; Mehta et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2015). In constructing a vision of ‘ideal eating’ that requires time and social resources, the guidelines do not account for how social class or the gendered division of labor in the home might impact on people’s capacity to follow the advice given (Paper IV).

The “whole” or a piece – The position of environmental concerns in dietary guidance communication

A new set of values was added to the Swedish dietary guidelines with the incorporation of environmental perspectives meant to guide “good food habits” under the concept of “a healthy whole.” However, in the dietary guidelines this “healthy whole” is constructed as primarily being based on nutritional concerns, with the addition of environmental aspects of the recommended choices (Paper IV). Likewise, and even more polarized, the lay correspondences sent to the Swedish Food Agency focus more narrowly on “good” and “bad” nutrients and the foods that contain them, while the environment is scarcely ever mentioned (Paper II-III). The approach of including environmental perspectives in the official guidelines based on available scientific evidence (Paper IV) limits concerns to those assessable by science. Likewise, environmental arguments in the stakeholder responses (Paper I) were based
on measurable scientific aspects of environmental impacts (i.e., climate gas emissions), contributing to a reductive perspective on foods but through environmental means. This is also in contrast to what other studies have found on lay conceptualizations of sustainable eating, which often refer to food characteristics such as local, well-known and organic (see, e.g., Carfagna et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2011; Parker, 2012).

In lay communications about healthy eating with the Swedish Food Agency, nutritional concerns predominated and very few mentioned environmental concerns (Paper II), which indicates that there is little overlap between health and environment discourses in what could be called an “integrated sustainability discourse.” The environment has a weak position in discourses of dietary guidance, and in the digital correspondences from lay people (Paper II and III), the dominance of the nutrient-centered and scientific discourse “silences” this perspective. Similar difficulties in challenging dominant discourses of healthy eating have been shown by educational scholar O’Flynn (2015), who offered the example of silenced environmental discourse in an Australian health initiative called “Munch and move.” The absence of environmental concerns in lay communications could also be due to difficulties in incorporating this perspective into everyday practices (see, e.g., Aro, 2016; Evans, 2011). Or, as Ditlevsen (2019) recently found in her study on Danish consumers’ negotiation of healthy food choices, that individual preferences, rather than holistic concerns, motivate people to make sustainable choices, such as buying organic products (Ditlevsen et al., 2019).

The biopedagogies of sustainable eating in the Swedish official dietary guidelines have some similarities with discourses of environmental and sustainable education in Swedish schooling, which was studied by the Swedish ethnologist and educational scholar Malin Ideland (2018). Focusing on children’s “action competence” in making good choices, Ideland (2018) showed how sustainability is framed as an individual responsibility. Similar to the Swedish dietary guidelines, the solution to complex questions concerning a sustainable society has been discursively transformed into individual consumption choices (Ideland, 2018).

Methodological considerations

In this thesis, I have been working with written texts as data, that is, documents of different kinds. The texts are produced by stakeholders, lay people and the Swedish Food Agency for purposes other than research and without any intervention by the research process. Thus, the data were not influenced by researcher preconceptions or study design, which is an advantage (Bowen, 2009), as the data potentially reflect the situated meanings of food and eating as well as broader currents in the societal discourse. On the other hand, there was no way to ask supplementary questions or ask for elaboration on areas of
interest. All lay correspondences (as well as stakeholder responses), however, were written in Swedish, indicating that the issues represent concerns actualized in the Swedish food and nutrition context. When working with documents, it is important to acknowledge that they are social products and to consider the circumstances in which they were produced as well as who the intended reader was (Prior, 2012). I will offer some reflection on the three datasets used for this thesis in relation to context and sample choice.

Stakeholder responses to the suggested 2015 updated official dietary guidelines were analyzed in Paper I. Even though the stakeholder responses were not affected by the research process or research questions, they were “responses” formulated to address a certain question posed by the Swedish Food Agency. The invitation was very short and open to interpretation, asking broadly for feedback on “standpoints taken and considerations made” that led up to the suggested formulation of advice. The invitation additionally informs readers that the updated advice is meant to target a broad group of consumers, and is based on the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations, which builds on current research on food and health (Nordström & Brugård Konde, 2014). In light of this invitation, the focus found in the responses on scientific rigor and consumer understandings was of course no surprise. However, the responses were not restricted to giving feedback only on these two points. The scope of responses to the invitation was limited in variation, dominated by industrial actors and included only a few responses from organizations representing special interests. Interestingly, no responses came from proponents of LCHF diets, given the critique these people have directed at the Swedish Food Agency’s dietary advice through other channels (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012).

Lay written correspondences with the Swedish Food Agency comprised the data for Paper II and III. These data were produced in a specific context: people writing to an authority with their concerns about healthy eating. Because the correspondences were digital, the senders had access to the ubiquitous information provided through the Internet (see, e.g., Maslen & Lupton, 2019) and, thus, choose to contact the official authorities. Writing letters, Prior (2012) argued, is usually a practice in which the sender has a reader in mind and has an idea about what the reader would like to hear. In the context of correspondences sent to the Swedish Food Agency, this correspondence can be expected to reflect images of what topics are possible to take up with the agency and in what way. This has implications for how we could interpret the findings. Thus, the findings say something in particular about imaginings of official dietary guidance. On the other hand, the findings could not be connected to the senders’ sociodemographic characteristic, such as gender, age, educational level, income, family situation or place of residence. The act of writing to an authoritative body, however, indicates that these senders had a particular interest in healthy eating and official management of food habits, which in previous research has been linked to people with more privileged life situations (see, e.g., Smith & Holm, 2010). In this case, I operationalized the
concept of “lay people” as senders who wrote to the agency about their private interests (marked by the absence of professional titles, affiliations or subject issues), and without stating any special conditions (e.g., questions concerning eating in relation to pregnancy or diseases). The aim was to capture correspondences from the public that the official dietary guidelines aimed to reach. This of course affected the sample and the possible discourses found.

The database in which incoming correspondences are stored and categorized at the Swedish Food Agency is extensive. Questions are categorized based on the judgement of individual employees at the agency, according to their interpretation of the content. This means that correspondences found, for example, in the category “General dietary advice” also reflect the concept of general dietary advice held by the employee categorizing them. This procedure also affects the concept that sustainable eating involves both health and environmental concerns. Because there was no separate category for these kinds of questions, they could be categorized as “general dietary advice,” but it is also possible they have been categorized elsewhere. I have broadly investigated all categories in the database and, to the best of my ability, chosen categories to represent dietary advice in general. Nevertheless, the data included are affected by those choices (and my preunderstandings of the concept) as well.

It is possible that lay people writing to the Swedish Food Agency were not familiar with the principle according to which correspondences submitted to Swedish authorities are made into public documents. Senders may therefore have believed they were expressing their concerns in a more personal sphere, and they may have expressed themselves differently if they had known their correspondences would be made public and included in a research project. Excerpts from the lay people’s writing have, however, been presented anonymously, thus protecting their privacy.

The discourses of the official dietary guidelines, which we explored in Paper IV, were analyzed in two printed booklets “Find your way to eat greener, not too much and be active” and “A healthy whole.” These two data sources were also available online, and were chosen for analysis among similar texts because they were framed as considering healthy eating as “a whole” (including the sustainability perspective). However, dietary advice has also been issued for special groups, such as pregnant women and the elderly, but these texts were not included in the sample. The official dietary guidelines are issued through a rigorous process of evaluating evidence, interpreting dietary habits and prioritizing main messages (Brugård Konde et al., 2015), the goal being to create a final product for a broad public. As such, many people and probably many different standpoints are involved in publishing such documents.

Because the findings I have presented in this thesis (Paper I-IV) are based on situated interpretations, they are related to the context and the people who were involved in the process of “knowledge production” (Alvesson &
Sköldberg, 2018). In all of the analyses (Paper I-IV), I have presented and discussed the findings with my coauthors at different stages of the analysis. This means that the findings have been discussed and agreed on by several researchers, and also that the interpretation of data is not only from my perspective, but also affected by the other authors’ experiences, positions and theoretical stances.
Conclusions and future perspectives

This thesis has helped to illuminate current discourses of healthy eating and dietary guidance. The four papers have demonstrated the dominance of a nutrient-centered and scientific discourse in communications related to official dietary advice in the Swedish context and particularly also among non-professionals. In lay people’s communications with the Swedish Food Agency, both resistance to and internalization of official dietary advice are expressed within this dominating discourse. Resistance is additionally expressed through emotional language and by referring to alternative authoritative sources, including personal experiences. The nutrient-centered and scientific discourse used in arguments, statements, instructions and questions related to official dietary advice builds on the basic assumption that the individual is responsible for his/her own health and the taken-for-granted nature of the primacy of physical health. Environmental perspectives are secondary to nutrition, which is demonstrated in their subordinate status in the official dietary guidelines and invisibility in lay people’s correspondences. Most social-cultural, emotional and structural aspects of eating are made invisible by these discourses, where food figures as scientifically quantifiable or functional in relation to physical health. However, in the 2015 official dietary guidelines, an additional discourse of cultivating certain tastes as a key to a sustainable diet constructs an ‘ideal eater’ who has ‘middle-class’ aspirations.

By illuminating the discourses used in communications concerning the official dietary guidance, and the possible consequences of certain discursive constructions, this thesis was also able to advance reflections on what we take for granted regarding dietary advice as well as to create opportunities to think in different ways. “Naturalized,” basic assumptions and norms have implications for how we understand “good food habits” as well as for how we view ourselves and others. I would like to put forward two perspectives that have implications for future dietary guidelines: What values and expectations should permeate the dietary guidance? How can we balance the perspectives of individual responsibility with broader societal explanatory models? The need for greater structural/ideological change is easily silenced when the focus is on individual strategies for change – change that remains on a smaller scale. Could we broaden the notion of whom or what to target with dietary advice to include more societal actors or create advice that encourages action on a collective level and not only on an individual level?
By introducing environmental perspectives into dietary advice, issuers of official dietary guidelines have now opened up to broadening the underlying logics of such guidelines. Future research is therefore needed that follows the discursive entanglements of human and environmental health and the associated norms and values. In the case of Sweden, negotiating environmental concerns along with nutrition could be further studied in the context of direct oral communication between the Swedish Food Agency and lay people through the agency’s telephone information service. On a broader level, the introduced integration of environmental discourse and nutrition could also be explored in traditional and social media representations as well as discussion on best eating practices. Additionally, how these discourses are negotiated in lay people’s everyday life needs to be further studied in the Swedish context, as examining everyday eating practices in the Swedish setting could provide valuable insights.
Svensk sammanfattning

I den här avhandlingen har jag studerat de svenska officiella kostråden från 2015, samt kommunikation om kostråd och hälsosamt ätande i remissvar och skriftlig korrespondens mellan lekmän och Livsmedelsverket. Avhandlingen utgår från ett perspektiv på kostråd som socialt och kulturellt fenomen format av sin tids ideal och vedertagen kunskap. Den teoretiska utgångspunkten innebär att språket blir viktigt för hur vi upplever omvärlden, och att de diskurser vi använder anses forma hur vi kan förhålla oss till sådant som mat och hälsa.

Diskurser som bygger på individuellt ansvar för hälsa, hälsa som ett självklart mål i vardagen, samt koncept som livsstil, val och risk är vanliga i hälsosamt råd generellt. Kostråd mer specifikt, och särskilt Amerikanska kostråd, har i kritiska analyser funnits vara snävt fokuserade på näringsämnen tagna ur sin kontext och med stort fokus på kvantifierbara mängder. Liknande diskurser används av Amerikanska livsmedelsföretag i reklam för sina produkter, och har även noterats i allmänna tal om hälsosamt ätande. Lekmän har dock generellt funnits ha en bredare idé om hälsosamt ätande som ofta innefattar kroppliga erfarenheter, liksom socialt, känslomässigt och fysiskt välmående, jämfört med experters definitioner.


Kostråd bygger alltså på olika diskurser, vilket för med sig vissa situerade betydelser, till exempel om giltig kunskap och hur vi kan förstå oss själva och andra. Detta innebär att det sätt som goda matvanor presenteras på, för med sig särskilda värderingar och grundläggande antaganden som ofta tas förgivet. Diskurserna kan därför också medföra oavsedda konsekvenser. Det övergripande syftet med den här avhandlingen är att undersöka hur officiella kostråd och hälsosamt ätande konstrueras och förhandlas av lekmän, samhällsintressensenter och myndigheten Livsmedelsverket.


och referenser till forskningsresultat. Alla meddelanden placerade Livsmedelsverket i rollen som ytterst ansvarig för att förse befolkningen med korrekt information om att äta hälsoamt.

I den tredje artikeln analyserades lekmäns användning av nutritionistisk diskurs i skriftlig kommunikation med Livsmedelsverket. Ett mindre antal (60) digitala meddelanden ur samma dataset som användes i artikel II, analyserades med stöd av Faircloughs kritiska diskursanalys. Därtill användes några begrepp från Hallidays funktionella grammatik för analysens särskilda fokus på termer och grammatic. Analysen visade att meddelandena diskursivt satt näringsämnen i centrum och frekvent använde termer som signalerar exakthet, till exempel antal och mängd. Detta förstärktes grammatiskt av modala konstruktioner (hjälpverb) och transitiva konstruktioner (nominalisering). Den näringscentrerade diskursen implicerar en syn på mat som något man kan reglera och kontrollera, vilket reducerar ätande till att inta näringsämnen tagna ur sin kontext och hanterade isolerat – som enheter man kan öka eller minska separat.


eller strukturella) osynliggörs av dessa diskurser där mat konstrueras i termer av näringsämnen som vetenskapligt kvantifierbar och med funktionella egenskaper för hälsan. I de officiella kostråden från 2015 förekommer dock också en diskurs med fokus på att utveckla en viss smak som nyckel till hållbara matvanor. En smak som förefaller tillhöra medelklassens ideal och praktiker.

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